COMMON TERMS IN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HIRING

COMPETITIVE SERVICE: The competitive service includes all civilian positions in the Federal Government that are not specifically excepted from the civil service laws by or pursuant to statute, by the President, or by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) under Rule VI (5 Code of Federal Regulations Part 6), and that are not in the Senior Executive Service (SES). Search USAJOBS.gov for jobs in the competitive service.

EXCEPTED SERVICE: Excepted service positions are any federal or civil service positions, which are not in the competitive service or the SES. Excepted service agencies set their own qualification requirements and are not subject to the appointment, pay, and classification rules in title 5, US Code. However, they are subject to veterans' preference. Some Federal agencies, such as the FBI and the CIA, only have excepted service positions. In other instances, certain organizations or even specific positions within an agency may be excepted service. Positions may be in the excepted service by law, by executive order, or by action of OPM.

If you are a first-timer seeking federal employment, you may find it easier to enter a federal career through the excepted service, as excepted service positions tend to be open and advertised publically to more applicants. Conversely, many excepted positions within certain agencies of offices may have lengthy hiring processes (e.g., background checks for positions in the CIA can take up to or as long as a year). Even though there can be some challenges in transferring from the excepted service, you may still find it easier to move into a competitive service job later on.

Excepted Service Agencies are not required to post their job opportunity announcements on USAJOBS.gov. Excepted Service Agencies having an established merit system may have an Interchange Agreement with the Office of Personnel Management, which allows employees of such agencies to move to the competitive service without further competition. View a current list of such agreements here: [http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/hiring-authorities/competitive-hiring/#url=Types-of-Appointments](http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/hiring-authorities/competitive-hiring/#url=Types-of-Appointments)

- **Schedule A**: Used when there are special jobs or situations where it is impractical to use the standard qualification requirements associated with competitive procedures. Schedule A can be used to hire people in all professions from clerical staff to attorneys. Other instances where this appointment is used include: A critical hiring need, a temporary or term-job in a remote location, when a commission must be rapidly established or when only non-citizens are available to fill the position and to hire candidates with a qualifying disability.

- **Schedule B**: Used for candidates that fit the qualification requirements for the position, but are not required to go through the regular application process. For example, students participating in the Pathways Programs are eligible for this appointment type.

- **Schedule C**: Used for the hiring of political appointees when deemed appropriate by OPM.

- **Agencies commonly hiring all or most of their employees under this appointment include**: The US Postal Service, USAID, CIA, DIA, FBI, Federal Reserve Board, GAO, NGIA, NSA, NRC, TSA, State Dept. Foreign Service, Patent and Trademarks Office, Secret Service Uniformed Division. A more complete list can be found here: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Excepted_service](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Excepted_service)

SENIOR EXECUTIVE SERVICE (SES): Refers to positions beyond the highest level of the General Schedule (GS-15). Such positions involve heightened managerial and Policymaking skills and responsibilities, and are set apart from most other positions within the competitive service. Members of the SES serve in the key positions just below the top Presidential appointees. SES members are the major link between these appointees and the rest of the Federal workforce.
DIRECT HIRE: This occurs when hiring managers are able to make job offers to applicants without having to go through the traditional hiring process. Direct hire authority can be used for permanent, non-permanent or group positions which fall within grades one to fifteen of the General Schedule.

VETERANS' PREFERENCE: A special hiring authority established for veterans who served on active duty for at least two years during a time of war or who were disabled as a result of their time in service. Candidates receive an additional five to ten points on their total application score; 5 points for preference-eligible veterans and 10 points for veterans who were disabled as a result of their service. Note: veterans’ preference does not guarantee federal employment.

KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND ABILITIES (KSAs): A set of questions designed to establish a job candidate’s combination of knowledge, skills and abilities related to the job for which she or he is applying. KSAs require applicants to submit several short-answer responses to assess both soft and technical skills, which help agencies to select top candidates. Due to federal hiring reform changes, KSAs have been eliminated from the initial stage of the hiring process.

APPLICATION QUESTIONNAIRES: Replacing the KSAs in the initial hiring stage, these multiple choice questions seek to ascertain a candidate’s readiness to fulfill the duties of the job. Typically there will be five options A, B, C, D & E ranging from “I have no experience...” to “I am an expert and frequently sought out by my colleagues...” followed by a series of statements listing Knowledge, Skills or Abilities sought in candidates for the position. It is very important to be truthful but also not to underestimate your KSAs when answering the questions. A good rule of thumb is that if you are not selecting the highest two levels of qualification at least 80% of the time, you may want to consider other positions.

BEST QUALIFIED/WELL QUALIFIED/QUALIFIED (aka Gold, Silver, Bronze): Federal applications are rated and ranked by “points” (see also Veterans’ Preference above). While it is not always the case, the top category (Best Qualified or Gold) is generally achieved only by candidates earning 90-100 points on their application materials.

RULE OF THREE: A strategy within the federal hiring process where only the top three candidates with the highest number of application points are considered for employment. A candidate below the top three scoring applicants may not be selected for the position unless a higher scoring applicant declines or is appointed to the position.

CATEGORY RATING: A method of categorizing job applicants and selecting the most qualified individuals based on their combined set of knowledge, skills and abilities. This alternative system does not rely on a numerical rating method and does not have to follow the Rule of Three, thus increasing the number of top candidates an agency has to choose from.

CAREER TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PLAN (CTAP): A program intended for federal employees who are being laid off and have been given special preference to find another position in a different part of their agency.

INTERAGENCY CAREER TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PLAN (ICTAP): A program for current federal employees who are being laid off and have been given special preference to find the same type of position at an agency that is not downsizing.

STATUS ELIGIBLE: Indicates current or former federal employees who have held a permanent, competitive appointment. These personnel are eligible for non-competitive movement within the competitive service, and can receive an appointment by promotion, reassignment, transfer or reinstatement.

MERIT PROMOTION: This is a process by which the federal government promotes and hires employees based on their ability to perform a specific job, rather than their political affiliation. The system is designed to recruit a competent workforce and provide equal opportunity for employment.

REDUCTION IN FORCE: A personnel action that moves an employee to a position of a lower grade and pay rate. This may be necessary due to a lack of work, shortage of funds, reorganization or a reclassification of an employee’s position.

APPOINTMENTS: Detailed descriptions of the types of appointments common in federal service can be found here: https://help.usajobs.gov/index.php>Type_of_Work. The most common are Permanent, Term, Temporary, Recent Graduates, and Internship. All of these can be either full or part time.