

OPM makes development of future managers priority in new regulations

WASHINGTON — As federal retirements stack up and vacancies abound, the spotlight is on succession planning, particularly for managers. Now agencies will likely have to work more closely with the Office of Personnel Management on this endeavor.

According to a proposed rule in Tuesday's Federal Register, the OPM wants to make some "significant changes" to improve training and succession planning. The rule would require agencies to consult OPM on succession planning programs for managers and to provide performance management training to help current supervisors address poor performance, conduct employee appraisals, and improve employee productivity and mentoring. The rule would also require agencies to annually assess and modify training based on performance plans and strategic goals.

OPM said the regulations will likely be implemented in mid-2009. The comment period ends Nov. 3.

The proposed regulation would amend 5 USC 1103 and 5 CFR parts 410 and 412. It is designed to make language consistent between the regulation and provisions of the Chief Human Capital Officers Act of 2002.

In the proposed rule, OPM said the changes are designed to ensure:

- Agencies have effective and cost-efficient training programs linked to strategic plans.
- Agencies provide training within one year of an employee's appointment to a supervisory position and follow up at least once every three years.
- Managers develop strategies to mentor others and to improve employee performance and productivity.
- Agency heads establish policies on employee training, including a statement on the alignment of employee training with strategic plans.
- Employee development plans identify

mission-critical competencies and workforce competency gaps and strategies to close them.

The regulation would require OPM to approve Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Programs and recertify them every five years. Four-month developmental assignments would have to include one assignment of 92 continuous days outside of the candidate's normal position, possibly in the private sector. Senior executives' performance would have to be assessed through executive development plans.

OPM said tight budgets shouldn't preclude agencies from getting the ball rolling on these initiatives, as it offers e-training and tools in the form of the HR Line of Business/Human Resources Development and Human Capital Assessment and Accountability Framework.

"Aligning training programs with the mission and strategic plan is not a new concept for agencies. OPM's Human Capital Leadership and Merit System Accountability Division works closely with agencies advising and guiding them on aligning programs with their strategic plans," OPM said.

More responsibilities

Experts concur that succession planning will improve federal recruitment and development. However, they wonder if OPM is overstepping its role.

"It's a good idea for OPM Qto set standards for succession programs, because so much of the federal government is retiring and there's nothing formal in place to replace people, particularly supervisors," Gary Koca, a consultant with the consulting firm GRA, told cyberFEDS®. "But I don't think it's a good idea for OPM to get involved in approving agency plans. Those are really agencies' decisions. I don't think OPM has the resources for that."

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The Performance Institute's Jon Desenberg agreed agencies should take the lead on strategic planning.

"They need to develop this for themselves," he said. "They've got to understand how to do it. If we continue to treat them like children, [strategic planning] is going to become a make-work exercise."

Consultant Barbara Haga said the proposed rule suggests OPM doesn't think agencies have been doing an "adequate job" in training managers and supervisors to deal with performance issues.

"Or [the proposed regulations] is a forerunner to pay for performance across the board for everybody," she said.

Current pay-for-performance systems as well as legislation introduced by Sen. George Voinovich, R-Ohio, emphasize the management training piece, she said. Voinovich's bill, S.1045, would require supervisory training and prohibit employees without a fully successful performance rating from receiving the government-wide pay raise.

The measure has been referred to the federal workforce subcommittee, but no action is expected this year.

"It's part of the same symphony," Haga said.