

Landing a Legal Job in the Federal Government

By Dawn L. Oliver

Did you know that the federal government employs more than 93,000 attorneys? Many of these positions are legal counsel for federal agencies such as the Department of Justice (DOJ), the Social Security Administration (SSA), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Education (DOE), and the National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA). And despite the recent recession, the number of federal workers is generally on the rise. According to a September 3, 2009, *Washington Post* article, the “Justice Department is expecting 4,000 new positions among law enforcement personnel, correctional officers and attorneys in the 2010 budget.”

Federal government attorneys enjoy many benefits and great rewards. Generally, attorneys are provided opportunities to immediately develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities. They practice in many areas and may advise on agency legal or policy matters. Because federal agencies do not have a billable hour requirement, attorneys can focus on deriving the best legal answer without the additional stress of “making their hours.”

An additional benefit of working for the federal government is the opportunity to achieve a manageable work/life balance. Attorneys have a reasonable work week and enjoy the benefit of federal holidays and ample vacation and sick leave. As federal government employees, attorneys have access to health and retirement benefits and loan repayment programs. Specifically, the federal government can be accommodating for attorneys in terms of geographical location and movement between agencies as most agencies require a J.D. and attorneys to be members of the bar in good standing in any jurisdiction (which does not have to be the one where they are employed).

If you are interested in landing a job with the federal government, check out the following tips from the *2008–2009 Federal Legal Employment Opportunities Guide* (http://76.12.222.174/uploads/2008-2009_FLEOG_FINAL_PDF.pdf), produced by The Association for Legal Career Professionals (NALP) in cooperation with the Partnership for Public Service and the American Bar Association’s Government and Public Sector Lawyers Division.

1. **Take advantage of an unprecedented opportunity.** One third of the full-time, permanent federal workforce is expected to leave the government in the next five years. The majority of those employees will be leaving their positions by retiring. The result is that the government will be aggressively recruiting talented and committed candidates to replace their public servants.
2. **Know where to look.** Although most federal job opportunities are posted on www.usajobs.opm.gov, a Web site run by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), you should also visit the Web sites of those agencies that interest you. Also, be sure to check out federal job fairs.
3. **Target your search.** There are many career opportunities in all three branches of the federal government. The executive branch is the largest employer, with more than seventy individual departments and agencies. The U.S. Government Manual (www.gpoaccess.gov/gmanual/index.html) is a great resource to help narrow your search.
4. **Be prepared.** Update your résumé, locate your transcript, and verify contact information for your references. Applications that are incomplete or not received by the closing date of a job announcement may not be considered.
5. **Consider a short-term service opportunity.** Many agencies offer term positions, which provide short-term opportunities that may lead to permanent employment.
6. **Be patient.** The federal hiring process moves more slowly than hiring in the private sector. You should not be

American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division
The Young Lawyer

concerned if you submit applications and do not receive immediate responses.

When applying for jobs with the federal government, you may submit an existing résumé, create a résumé online at www.usajobs.opm.gov, or complete the Optional Application for Federal Employment (OF 612) available at www.opm.gov/forms/pdf_fill/of612.pdf. Be sure to check job announcements for résumé requirements and application instructions. Required information includes the job announcement number, the position title and grade, personal information, education, job-related work experience, and other job qualifications (e.g., member of the bar in good standing in any jurisdiction).

Dawn L. Oliver is assistant chief counsel with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) at Kennedy Space Center in Florida. She can be contacted at dawn.l.oliver@nasa.gov.
