



HARVARD Kennedy School
JOHN F. KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

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Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Johnson, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am honored to be here before you today. My name is David Ellwood. I am the Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. The Harvard Kennedy School is a graduate school educating students of many ages for public service.

Today our nation is understandably focused on the large fiscal deficit of our federal government. My message is simple: We face an even greater potential peril from a government people deficit.

The challenges facing this nation are indeed daunting. The budget, terrorism, the economy, health care, the rising political and economic competition from other nations, pandemics, and a dozen other concerns all require governmental leadership, often in close collaboration with business and civil society. Meeting those challenges, and taking advantage of new opportunities created by technology and innovation requires an exceptional cadre of people in government—people of integrity, insight, capacity, and creativity who are committed to serving the needs and desires of the American people and making the world a better place. And at precisely this time of unique peril and complexity and limited resources, many of the best civil servants, those who responded to President Kennedy’s iconic call to service, are reaching retirement age.

The good news is that sensational people of all ages stand ready and willing to serve. I see them every day at colleges and universities across this nation. People of all ages have again been seized by a patriotic idealism and a desire to give back. At the Kennedy School, we have hundreds of masters and doctoral students eager to make a difference.

The bad news is that our system of federal government hiring will drive most of them away and is unlikely to find and select the most able among them. Any sizable private business that hired employees in the way the federal government does would have gone out of business long ago.

One Student, Two Employers

Sayce Falk is graduating from the Kennedy School this year. Before coming to the School, he served in the Marines as a platoon commander and company executive officer, and was twice deployed in Iraq.

In October each year, McKinsey & Co, a private management consulting firm, brings a team which includes senior leaders and recently hired graduates to the Kennedy School to interview students selected from initial applications submitted a few weeks earlier. They push the applicants hard. They talk about real projects they have worked on, conveying the excitement and the demands of the work. They flatter and challenge the most promising candidates. Then they make lucrative job offers in early November. The entire process takes seven weeks. Sayce Falk received such an offer.

In October, Falk also applied to work in the federal government under the Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) program. The PMF is billed as the “flagship leadership development program at the professional level” which is designed to develop “a cadre of professional government leaders”. To make a very long, and often frustrating, story short, on March 31st he finally heard he was one of the lucky applicants selected to be a PMF. That meant that federal agencies could hire him with limited red tape, but he still had to find and be offered a specific job. Indeed PMF finalists are given another year to find a job. Falk attended a PMF job fair in late April, was interviewed by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and has a second interview scheduled for early May. Seven months and still counting—for the flagship program. Falk, a top student and former Marine, reported, “I’ve worked twice as hard to find a government job as I did to find one in the private sector; if I weren’t so dedicated to the ideals of public service I would have given up already” – and he is one of the lucky ones.

Unlike the timeframe of weeks it takes for many private employers to extend job offers, our students commonly report that it takes a year to get a job with the federal government – 18 months to 2 years for the diplomatic service. Students who apply through USAJOBS have to do lots of work, but rarely hear anything substantive after they submit their electronic application. The onus is usually on the student to find the job openings, seek out some link to the agency, and fight through the system. They typically go months with no idea where they are in the process. Most give up. Our midcareer students find the system even more frustrating. Many are highly accomplished in fields outside of government, but lack the government experience often required for entry at that stage. Here is another example of a veteran who sought to work in government.

Sloan Gibson graduated West Point, earning both Airborne and Ranger qualifications, and served as an infantry officer in the U.S. Army. He went on to a highly successful career in banking, becoming vice-chairman and chief financial officer at AmSouth Bancorporation. He was deeply involved in his community. Then he came to the Harvard Kennedy School to get a masters degree in 2007 because he wanted to serve his country in government. After graduating, he spent a year trying to get in the door. Eventually, he gave up. Then a recruiter found him. Since September 2008, he has been President of the USO. He was good enough to lead the USO, but he could not find his way into our government.

The nation’s largest employer is also one of the most passive, opaque, detached, and exhausting.

In October 2009, I helped convene an “Inspiring Federal Service” roundtable in Washington D.C. It included senior administration officials, the presidents of the major government employee organizations, members of Congress and their staff, leading scholars, and vitally, the leaders in human resources or recruiting from successful organizations like Google and General Electric and IBM and Teach For America (TFA). The message of the private sector firms and

TFA was simple. *They treat recruiting like their future depends on it.* A few key lessons from that day:

- Top managers from the CEO on down, not just HR folks, focus on recruitment. One leader reported that the most senior people at the firm spend 4-8 hours on hiring per week.
- What attracts great people is other great people. People who do the real work of the organization share the excitement and the realities much better than personnel professionals ever could. Often the best talent finders are existing employees. And great companies also make sure their contact with applicants is personal and professional—never bureaucratic.
- Top organizations look for multiple ways to recruit. They form long term relationships with universities, they use internships, they sponsor projects, and they go out of their way to make their organization visible on campus.
- The organizations also emphasized that they looked just as hard for talent from within their organization as from without. People need to know that effective workers inside the organization will be rewarded just as much as talented outsiders are.

Why can't the United States Government treat hiring like the nation's future literally depends on it?

No one from our government really helps students understand the variety of activities that exist in government or how to navigate options and roadblocks they face. Few federal agencies even send out recruiters to college and university campuses. A tiny handful have ongoing relationships with colleges and universities. Fewer still send senior officials who really can describe what it is like to work at that agency. In some respects, it is a testament to the idealism and perseverance of so many Americans that government has the quality of people that it does.

A few agencies have broken through and are finding ways to find attract the very best. The FBI and CIA have established increasingly close relationships at a number of schools including my own. The Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Veterans Affairs have become leaders and dramatically shortened the time between the posting of jobs and their being filled, and have transformed their hiring and recruiting process. So too has the Government Accountability Office. In every case of real change, leadership at the top, including political leadership, has been central. The Director of the Secret Service makes a recruiting visit to my school every year, though sadly he is the only one of such seniority who comes regularly. Our roundtable concluded that the real impediment to getting superb people into government was not rules caused by legislation or demanded by unions nor was it limited resources. It was a lack of leadership.

To their credit, the Obama administration and the Office of Personnel Management have worked hard to improve the federal hiring system. A 2010 Presidential Memorandum to all executive departments and agencies included some welcome reductions in the paperwork burden on applicants, a somewhat less restrictive selections system, expectations that managers and supervisors be more involved in the hiring process, and the collection of data on the speed of the hiring process with a goal toward increasing it. The December 2010 executive order establishing the internship program and the recent graduates program holds promise as well, though much depends on the shape of the final regulations under the order.

Still, my message to this committee is that the most important answers will not come from redesigned internship programs or special programs for recent graduates—though these are potentially helpful and important.

- First, our leaders in departments and agencies, in the White House, in unions and in the Congress must take government hiring just as seriously as the finest organizations in the private and non-profit sector do. It may be hard to ask an inherently time-limited political appointee to worry about the quality of the permanent employees that his or her successors will inherit, but there may be no more important legacy.
- Second, the federal government must move from a passive bureaucratic hiring model to one that is active, forming relationships with schools in multiple ways, telling students about the variety of opportunities in the government, sending people who do the compelling work in the agency to excite and to help screen applicants, offering jobs on the same cycle as private firms, streamlining the endless sign-offs, creating models where applicants understand the process and the best feel energized, engaged, and excited by it. We need to train those who do the hiring to think very differently.
- Finally, to make these things happen, we must find ways to hold senior leaders along with managers and supervisors accountable for their human resources performance, from the time it takes to hire people, to the quality of people selected, to the quality of the experience of applicants and staff members. We need reliable and mandatory measures of hiring and recruitment effectiveness. We should celebrate the successes, share best practices, encourage collaboration in hiring, and challenge those who fail to act.

Many will fear that these things are too hard or that they will be expensive. Nonsense. An effective and efficient hiring process will not only give the taxpayers better value and save money in the long run; it may actually save in the short run, as we replace layer upon layer of forms and sign offs with streamlined systems favored by our most efficient employers.

Much of the work can and must be done in the executive branch. But the Congress can and must also play a role.

First this committee and agency oversight committees should ask agencies to develop energetic new hiring strategies that are state of the art. Moreover, the Congress can insist that senior government officials collect clear and consistent data on hiring processes, from the time it takes to the number of people involved, to the types of candidates hired, and even the impressions of applicants. Ideally one would engage leaders from the best agencies and the leading organizations in the private and non-profit sectors to help derive and highlight effective practices and to develop proven accountability measures.

Then this committee and others should use this information as well as the hearing and oversight process to stimulate real change. As a former Assistant Secretary, few things got my attention quicker than a request from the Congress to discuss how my agency was performing on some matter. But be careful: we need to use the oversight process to stimulate innovation not stifle it. I encourage you to periodically call upon private as well as public leaders to discuss how well the system is working.

Finally, Congress can work collaboratively with the administration and the various departments when they come forward with new strategies that require legislative changes or exceptions. Be willing to allow agencies to shift resources, and in unique cases to temporarily expand them to get new state of the art hiring processes in place.

I believe the nation is on something of a knife edge. If we continue to fail to replace those leaving government with our most talented citizens, the government will weaken, fewer will want to serve, crises will grow, and a vicious circle of decline can set in. Or we can take advantage of the best America has to offer, finding a way, as we have so often in the past, to create a government of solutions and innovation and collaboration who will help us craft a future worthy of this nation.

I thank you for your time.