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Fired up about a new system for hiring

By Joe Davidson

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The Obama administration's plan to redo a federal hiring process that has long been mired in the muck of bureaucracy and redundancy is nearing completion. The overhaul effort itself has moved like a slow boat to China, but it appears at last ready to reach its final port of call.

That would be the White House.

Saying he is at "a critical juncture," John Berry, director of the Office of Personnel Management, told government supervisors Monday that hiring reform will launch soon.

Speaking to delegates at the Federal Managers Association conference, he said a plan to greatly simplify the current convoluted hiring scheme is working its way through federal departments for their review. He expects the plan to go to President Obama for his approval by April, followed by a possible executive order implementing a new hiring system.

"If I do nothing else, this will be a dramatic shift that will help us," he said.

The first thing he mentioned is the main thing lots of applicants find onerous about trying to get a federal gig. That's the dreaded KSA essays they must write to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and abilities for the positions they seek.

Berry wants to scuttle that and move to a résumé-based system like the private sector uses. Doing so, he said, will allow the government to employ the assessment and selection tools, based on résumés, that businesses have long used.

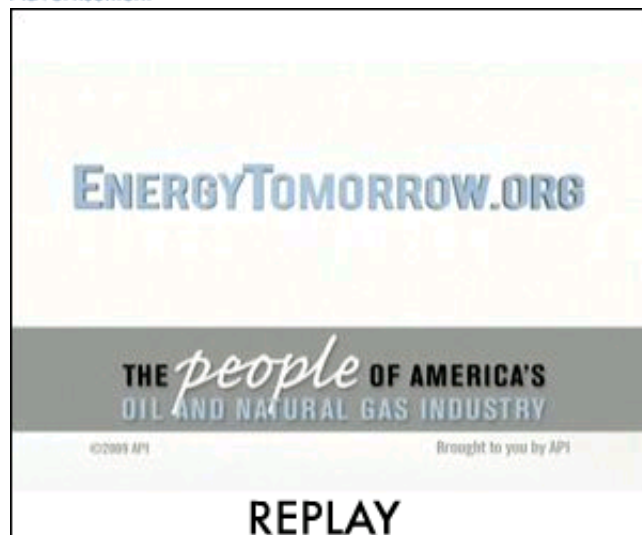
"Having been a manager myself, I know one of the royal pains in the rear end is hiring," he said. Using résumés instead of KSAs apparently will have the effect of Preparation H where it's needed most.

Berry's remarks were well-received by the managers. "I was thrilled with John Berry's speech," said Patricia Niehaus, FMA's new president.

One change that hiring managers certainly welcome is Berry's push for legislation to abolish the "rule of three." Experts on hiring in and out of OPM consider it an antiquated rule that doesn't provide agencies with the maximum number of well-qualified job candidates. For many hiring decisions, this rule requires hiring managers to pick someone from the top three job candidates on a list provided by an agency's personnel office. Berry said he'd like to "just wipe it out."

In its place, OPM would like agencies to use a category ranking process. That allows a hiring manager to choose

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"from all the well-qualified people and determine who is the best fit," said Max Stier, president of the Partnership for Public Service, a nonprofit that focuses on federal personnel issues.

Berry also advocates an executive order that would facilitate the hiring of college students and recent graduates, through programs that use part-time interns and allow agencies to bypass certain regulations and "direct hire" applicants with critical skills. He also wants to significantly increase, at least triple, the Presidential Management Fellows program. The program, which had 500 fellows last year, is designed to recruit master's and doctoral students to the federal government.

These plans are "in the final stages, that is a hard proposal," Berry said after his speech.

Developing "sweeping change" to the hiring process is the first strategic goal listed in the strategic plan OPM recently released. The other goals include investing in the training, benefits and work-life balance for employees, holding employees accountable for their duties and fairly evaluating them, and rewarding their exemplary performance.

Berry also gave a strong boost to teleworking as he pushed a "results only work environment" that he said would be a "cultural shift" for the federal government. It doesn't matter where or when people work as long as they get the job done, he said. His emphasis on that to the supervisors was significant because federal workers sometimes complain that managers who think they can't manage those they can't see is a major impediment to expanding telework in the federal government.

Just before Berry finished his speech, his upbeat tone grew more somber, just after he spoke of making federal pay comparable to that of the private sector. He acknowledged "sailing against pretty stiff winds, most of them generated by the hot air of the Cato Institute," which has long argued that "the high level of federal pay is problematic in and of itself," as [a paper on its Web site contends](#).

He also cited recent articles with a negative slant toward federal workers in USA Today and the Washington Times. "We're all going to have to stand up to this in our community," he said, with decidedly more emotion than discussions of hiring and personnel evaluation could generate.

Since 1996, 2,800 civil servants lost their lives in the line of duty, Berry reported.

"If we continue to denigrate public service," he said to applause, "how are we going to attract the next generation?"

Good question.

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