

U.S. Office of Personnel Management
Division for Human Capital Leadership and Merit System Accountability
Classification Appeals and FLSA Programs

Merit System Compliance Group
1900 E Street, NW., Room 7675
Washington, DC 20415-6000

Classification Appeal Decision
Under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code

Appellant: [name]

Agency classification: Supervisory Information Technology
Specialist
GS-2210-14

Organization: Database Management Unit
[Laboratory]
[Institute]
[Area]
Agricultural Research Service
Department of Agriculture
[city and State]

OPM decision: Supervisory Information Technology
Specialist
GS-2210-15

OPM decision number: C-2210-15-01

/s/ Linda Kazinetz
Linda J. Kazinetz
Classification Appeals Officer

May 12, 2003
Date

As provided in section 511.612 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, this decision constitutes a classification certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials of the Government. The agency is responsible for reviewing its classification decisions for identical, similar, or related positions to ensure consistency with this decision. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under the conditions and time limits specified in title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, sections 511.605, 511.613, and 511.614, as cited in the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards*, appendix 4, section G (address provided in appendix 4, section H).

Since this decision changes the grade of the appealed position, it is to be effective no earlier than the date of the decision and not later than the beginning of the fourth pay period after the date of the decision. The servicing personnel office must submit a compliance report containing the corrected position description and a Standard Form 50 showing the personnel action taken. The report must be submitted within 30 days from the effective date of the personnel action.

Decision sent to:

[appellant]

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Introduction

On October 17, 2002, the Merit System Compliance Group (formerly the Washington Oversight Division) of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a position classification appeal from [appellant], who is employed as a Supervisory Information Technology Specialist, GS-2210-14, in the Database Management Unit of the [laboratory], [institute], at the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) in [city and State]. The appellant requested that his position be classified at the GS-15 level. This appeal was accepted and decided under the provisions of section 5112 of title 5, United States Code.

An on-site position audit was conducted by a Merit System Compliance Group representative on April 1, 2003, and a subsequent telephone interview with the appellant's supervisor, [name]. This appeal was decided by considering the audit findings and all information of record furnished by the appellant and his agency, including his official position description, [number], and other material submitted in the agency administrative report on December 3, 2002.

Position Information

The appellant is responsible for the design, development, operation, maintenance, and continuing expansion of the Germplasm Resources Information Network (GRIN) database. This database contains extensive information on the genetic resources preserved throughout the United States by the National Plant Germplasm System. These collections of seeds and other genetic material are housed at approximately two dozen sites nationwide (including Federal, State, and private organizations and research units) and include over 500,000 varieties of agriculturally important species. The purpose of GRIN is to catalog information on the germplasm contained in the national collections, to facilitate its management, and to make the information and resources available to scientists worldwide. The primary database operates on a minicomputer and is accessible to users over the Internet. The appellant's unit has also developed a scaled-down, PC-based version of the database that has been given to over 30 countries to manage their own germplasm collections. His unit has been tasked with expanding the system to encompass comparable information on the animal, invertebrate, microbial, and forest tree germplasm programs.

Series Determination

The appellant's position is properly assigned to the Information Technology Management Series, GS-2210, which covers two-grade interval positions that manage, supervise, administer, develop, deliver, and support information technology (IT) systems and services. Neither the appellant nor the agency disagrees.

Title Determination

The authorized title for supervisory positions in this series is Supervisory Information Technology Specialist. Neither the appellant nor the agency disagrees.

Grade Determination

The position was evaluated by application of the criteria contained in the job family position classification standard for Administrative Work in the Information Technology Group, GS-2200. This standard is written in the Factor Evaluation System (FES) format, under which factor levels and accompanying point values are to be assigned for each of nine factors, with the total then being converted to a grade level by use of a grade conversion table provided in the standard. The factor point values mark the lower end of the ranges for the indicated factor levels. For a position to warrant a given point value, it must be fully equivalent to the overall intent of the selected factor level description. If the position fails in any significant aspect to meet a particular factor level description, the point value for the next lower factor level must be assigned, unless the deficiency is balanced by an equally important aspect that meets a higher level.

The appellant supervises a staff of ten employees, including two GS-14 IT Specialists, four GS-13 IT Specialists, one GS-12 IT Specialist, one GS-12 Plant Germplasm Program Specialist, one GS-7/9 IT Specialist, and one GS-5 Secretary. However, as a first-level supervisor with a GS-13 base level of work supervised, we agree with the bureau that the appellant's position would be evaluated at the GS-14 level under the General Schedule Supervisory Guide (GSSG). Therefore, the GSSG is not addressed in this evaluation.

The appellant contests the bureau's evaluation of factor 1 in the GS-2210 standard. We concur with the bureau's evaluation of Factors 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9, but disagree with their evaluation of Factors 1, 5, and 6.

Factor 1, Knowledge required by the position

This factor measures the nature and extent of information an employee must understand in order to do the work, and the skills needed to apply that knowledge.

The bureau credited Level 1-8 under this factor. This was based on their presumption that the references to "agency" (which generally refers to Departments, independent agencies, and certain very large bureaus) under Level 1-9 restrict its use to Department-level positions.

At Level 1-8, work requires mastery of advanced IT principles, concepts, methods, standards, and practices sufficient to accomplish assignments such as:

- develop and interpret policies, procedures, and strategies governing the planning and delivery of services throughout the agency;
- provide expert technical advice, guidance, and recommendations to management and other technical specialists on critical IT issues;
- apply new developments to previously unsolvable problems; and
- make decisions or recommendations that significantly influence important IT policies or programs.

At Level 1-9, work similarly requires mastery of IT theories, principles, concepts, standards, and practices sufficient to:

- develop new theories, concepts, principles, standards, and methods in the specialty area;
- advise other IT experts throughout the agency or in other agencies on a variety of situations and issues that involve applying or adapting new theories, concepts, standards, methods, or practices, that are developed by the employee or result from the employee's leadership; and
- serve as senior expert and consultant to top agency management officials to advise on integrating IT programs with other programs of equivalent scope and difficulty.

Although both Levels 1-8 and 1-9 reference “agency” IT services, this does not restrict bureau-level positions to Levels 1-7 and below. Factor level criteria in OPM classification standards are designed to depict the most common characteristics of work at the varying levels of difficulty to provide broad coverage across agencies. They are not intended to be all-inclusive. Within this context, at the higher factor levels under factor 1, certain competencies are required to perform work that is *normally* found at Departmental level, e.g., developing policies for the delivery of IT services (Level 1-8). However, this does not preclude crediting these factor levels to bureau-level positions where, for example, full responsibility for a major IT system or service has been delegated to the bureau to the extent that the Department exercises virtually no control over the design, architecture, or operation of the system. The main determinant is whether the position is operating in a manner *fully comparable* to that described at the given level, i.e., whether it otherwise meets the *intent* of the standard at that level. In addition, within certain contexts in the factor level criteria, “agency” is used in the broad sense of referring to the Department (or independent agency) and its subordinate organizations as a single entity. For example, in making decisions that significantly influence important “agency IT policies or programs” (Level 1-8), or in advising “top agency management officials” on IT issues (Level 1-9), the term “agency” does not necessarily connote *agency-level*. An IT system may be an important agency program without being assigned to the Department level itself, and a top agency management official may include, for example, a bureau head or the head of a major, bureau-level program. For purposes of this factor, the organizational level at which an IT position resides is not as significant as the knowledges and skills required to perform the type of work described at each factor level. Otherwise, some very broad, difficult, and complex IT assignments would be erroneously limited to Level 1-7.

One of the illustrations provided at Level 1-8 is a data management assignment requiring mastery of data management concepts and methodologies sufficient to lead a project to develop and implement new data storage and retrieval systems. From a general perspective, this represents the basic function (albeit not the overall knowledge requirements) of the appellant's position. There is no corresponding illustration provided for Level 1-9. However, given that “data management” is listed as an available specialty under that level, the absence of an illustration does not preclude crediting of this level to database management positions, if the Level 1-9 criteria are otherwise met. These are addressed individually as follows:

Develop new theories, principles, concepts, standards, and methods in the specialty area

This reference to “theories, concepts, and principles” must be viewed within the context of the GS-2210 occupation. This is an *administrative* rather than a scientific occupation. Positions involved in advancing the theoretical and conceptual foundations of computer systems from a

mathematical, research, or development standpoint are classified to such occupations as the Computer Science Series, GS-1550, or the Computer Engineering Series, GS-854. “Theories and concepts” within an administrative field do not have the same connotations as they would within a research environment. However, they would be expected to have certain common characteristics in the sense of representing new approaches to problems that may take years to establish or validate.

The Germplasm Resources Information Network is a large-scale, long-term project that has evolved from its conceptual beginnings in the late 1970’s through four major subsequent versions. The plant component of the database (by far the largest) is completed and has entered the maintenance phase. It contains over half a million individual records, with about one thousand data elements available for each record. Additional components for the animal, invertebrate, microbial, and forest tree germplasm programs are currently in the planning or development stages.

The development of GRIN as a database tying together the national plant germplasm system represented the first effort to utilize IT in the management of large genetic resources collections. Prior to GRIN, access to genetic resources data in an electronic format did not exist. GRIN established an international standard and precedent in its design allowing universal access to the database, first by dial-up modem and later via the Internet. The success of GRIN led to the subsequent development of the pcGRIN system, which was envisioned as a means for small and developing countries to manage their genetic resource collections without incurring the costs associated with the development of a genetic management system. A public web portal has been developed that enables users worldwide to dump their pcGRIN data onto the GRIN server, allowing it to be viewed by others over the Internet. The invertebrate database has the additional capability to allow scientists worldwide to submit data for inclusion into GRIN after review by ARS scientists, and the unit is considering means to link GRIN to other genomic and spatial databases and to permit simultaneous access to genetic resources databases in different countries with a single query. These unique features have contributed to the achievement of an unprecedented level of accessibility and sharing of genetic resources data and embody the types of “new theories, principles, concepts, standards, and methods” expected at this level.

Advise other IT experts throughout the agency or in other agencies on a variety of situations and issues that involve applying or adapting new theories, concepts, principles, standards, methods, or practices that are developed by the employee or result from the employee’s leadership

The basic intent of this element is that the work have a broader applicability beyond the organization whereby the employee advises other IT experts on its application. It addresses the *technical* consultation performed directly related to the employee’s assigned IT responsibilities.

GRIN has become widely recognized throughout ARS, USDA, other Federal Departments, universities, industry, foreign governments, and international organizations as the global standard for genetic resources information systems. As a result, numerous foreign national and international programs have sought to adopt GRIN or have patterned their information management systems on GRIN. For example, Canada attempted for ten years to develop a

corresponding system before choosing to adopt GRIN for their national program. The appellant's unit now sends all new software that they develop to their Canadian counterparts for inclusion in their system. Discussions have been ongoing with Mexican officials to establish a similar arrangement. In addition to the primary GRIN, the appellant's unit developed a version of software that operates on a personal computer (pcGRIN), specifically to help germplasm programs in developing countries document and manage their collections. This software has been requested by programs in over 30 Central and South American, Caribbean, and African countries, and the unit has trained a number of their computer specialists in its use. Because of the interest in pcGRIN and its impact to date, the International Plant Genetics Resources Institute (one of the major international centers under the auspices of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) is actively publicizing and promoting global use of the software. The Institute also provides training in the use of pcGRIN in exchange for ARS commitment of long-term system support and maintenance with user countries. IT professionals from Italy, Colombia, and Argentina have requested collaboration with the unit to update pcGRIN to utilize new technology, i.e., to transition from a DOS- to Windows-based system and ultimately to open-source software. The appellant's unit will perform all systems design work, but will utilize these foreign IT specialists for such other purposes as researching available shareware, programming, translation, and training. These international consultations are fully comparable to "IT experts throughout the agency or in other agencies."

Serve as senior expert and consultant to top agency management officials to advise on integrating IT programs with other programs of equivalent scope and complexity

This element addresses the *management* consultation performed. In most situations, this would consist of internal agency consultations, but this does not preclude comparable external consultations.

The appellant has advised or collaborated with top IT professionals in other USDA agencies on the design of their genomic databases, including the Agricultural Marketing Service (Plant Variety Protection Office Database); the Animal Plant Health and Inspection Service (Release of Beneficial Organisms Database); the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (Animal Genome Database); the Natural Resources Conservation Service (Plants Database); and the Forest Service (Forest Tree Database). The appellant's unit subsequently took ownership of the Beneficial Organisms Database and integrated it into GRIN, and the appellant has had ongoing discussions on likewise absorbing the Plants Database into GRIN. He has been asked to make presentations to the National Genetics Resources Council, comprised of the USDA Under Secretary for Science, Education, and Economics; the Director of the National Institute of Health; the Director of the National Science Foundation; the Secretary of Energy; and the Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy or their designates. His assistance has been requested by the National Research Council, Board of Agriculture, on the development of criteria for establishing an animal feed information system, and by the Association of Official Analytical Chemists to assess procedures for creation of a global database for officially recognized analytical procedures and to screen and interview possible contractors. The governing body for the latter project includes senior management officials from several government Departments.

The appellant has personally advised IT professionals and senior officials from numerous foreign governments and from international organizations. Specific examples include: (1) the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations requested the appellant's participation with IT professionals from FAO and other countries in the development and review of a World Information and Early Warning System Database, which will link with other germplasm databases and track endangered species; (2) India's National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources requested the appellant's assistance in designing a computer facility for their headquarters in New Delhi and a comprehensive information system, and after accepting his recommendations, they asked him to return to assist with interviews and selection of a company to implement them; (3) the appellant spent several weeks in Brazil consulting with the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation to help them design an information management system.

These consultations are not of the same nature as described under this element, but they are of equivalent scope and impact and they corroborate that the appellant is called upon to provide high-level management advisory services on matters beyond the confines of the system administered by his organization. The appellant has provided expert advice to a continuing stream of international visitors, not only IT specialists but also top administrators seeking guidance on the broader aspects and requirements of developing and maintaining comprehensive information management systems for genetic resources. This level of impact and influence is not necessarily inherent to the position, but derives to some degree from the appellant's long association and reputation in the genetics resources community.

Level 1-9 is credited (1850 points)

Factor 5, Scope and effect

This factor covers the relationship between the nature of the work, and the effect of the work products or services both within and outside the organization.

The bureau credited Level 5-5 under this factor because "the work projects of the appellant do not expand to many agencies."

At Level 5-5, work involves isolating and defining unprecedented conditions; resolving critical problems; and/or developing, testing, and implementing new technologies. The work affects the work of other technical experts or the development of major aspects of agencywide IT programs.

At Level 5-6, work involves planning, developing, and carrying out broad and extensive assignments (e.g., involving several agencies) of significant interest to the public and the Government. Projects typically cut across or strongly influence a number of agencies. The work often leads to recommendations for realigning IT responsibilities among agencies or to expansion or contraction of key governmental functions or equally significant changes in the future direction of IT programs; and/or affects large numbers of people on a long-term or continuing basis.

The primary distinction between Levels 5-5 and 5-6 is whether the coverage and impact of the work is confined to the agency or whether it has a broader applicability to, *for example*, several

other agencies. In the appellant's case, what was originally conceived as a national database linking the various U.S. germplasm repositories has expanded in a conceptual sense to allow not only universal access but also to serve as the foundation for an international sharing of genetic resources data. This is fully equivalent to the cross-agency influence described at Level 5-6.

In terms of effect, Level 5-6 describes work that impacts broad governmental IT responsibilities, *or* that affects large numbers of people. The GRIN database has become a major reference tool on an international level, registering about 4 million Internet accesses from over 100 countries each year with a total of 40 million hits on all GRIN web servers. This represents a degree of interest and impact that extends beyond "other technical experts" to researchers, commercial and agricultural interests, and the general public on a broad scale, comparable to the "large numbers of people" expected at Level 5-6.

Level 5-6 is credited (450 points)

Factor 6, Personal contacts

The bureau credited Level 4 under this factor, citing the appellant's contacts with "scientists worldwide from various disciplines, many high-level agency officials, other Federal agencies, State Experiment Stations, private sector firms and computer professionals."

At Level 3, contacts are with individuals or groups from outside the agency, including consultants, contractors, representatives of professional associations, and public interest groups. This level may also include contacts with agency officials who are several managerial levels removed from the employee.

At Level 4, contacts are with high-ranking officials from outside the agency at national or international levels, such as heads of other agencies and Presidential advisors; Members of Congress; State governors or mayors of large cities; leading representatives of foreign governments; executives of comparable private sector organizations; leaders of national stakeholder and/or interest groups; and nationally recognized representatives of the news media on IT matters of national importance.

The appellant has direct dealings with high-level officials both within USDA and occasionally other Departments, and with scientific and IT officials engaged in the management of genetic resources in other countries. However, these contacts do not normally extend to the *heads* of other agencies or *leading representatives* of foreign governments.

Level 3 is credited.

Summary

<u>Factors</u>	<u>Level</u>	<u>Points</u>
Knowledge required	1-9	1850
Supervisory controls	2-5	650
Guidelines	3-5	650
Complexity	4-5	325
Scope and effect	5-6	450
Personal contacts/ Purpose of contacts	3D	280
Physical demands	8-1	5
Work environment	9-1	<u>5</u>
Total		4215

The total of 4215 points falls within the GS-15 range (4055-up) on the grade conversion table provided in the GSSG.

Decision

The appealed position is properly classified as Supervisory Information Technology Specialist, GS-2210-15.