

U.S. Office of Personnel Management  
Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness  
Classification Appeals and FLSA Programs

San Francisco Oversight Division  
120 Howard Street, Room 760  
San Francisco, California 94105-0001

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

**Appellant:** [The appellant]

**Agency classification:** Electronics Technician  
GS-856-11

**Organization:** [Appellant's organization/location]  
U.S. Forest Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture

**OPM decision:** Electronics Technician  
GS-856-11

**OPM decision number:** C- 0856-11-03

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Carlos A. Torrico  
Classification Appeals Officer

January 30, 2003  
Date

As provided in section 511.612 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, this decision constitutes a 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 conditions and time limits specified in the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards*, appendix 4, section G (address provided in appendix 4, section H).

**Decision sent to:**

**Appellant:** [Appellant's address]

**Agency:** [Appellant's servicing personnel office]  
U.S. Forest Service

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## **Introduction**

On September 26, 2002, the San Francisco Oversight Division of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a classification appeal from [the appellant]. On October 16, 2002, the Division received the agency's complete administrative report concerning the appeal. The appellant's position is currently classified as Electronics Technician, GS-856-11. However, he believes his position should be classified as Electronics Technician, GS-856-12. Prior to appealing to OPM, [the appellant] filed a request to review the classification of his position with his servicing Human Resources Office of the U.S. Forest Service. In an evaluation statement dated September 3, 2002, the bureau sustained the current classification. The position is assigned to the [appellant's organization/location] U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. We have accepted and decided his appeal under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.).

This appeal decision is based on a careful review of all information furnished by the appellant and his agency. In addition, to help decide the appeal an Oversight Division representative conducted separate telephone interviews with the appellant and his supervisors. Both the appellant and his supervisor have certified to the accuracy of the appellant's official position description (PD) [number].

## **General issues**

The appellant compares his position to other Electronics Technician, GS-856-12, positions in other agencies; therefore, he believes his position should be higher graded. He also makes various statements about his agency and its evaluation of his position. In adjudicating this appeal, our only concern is to make our own independent decision on the proper classification of his position. By law, we must make that decision solely by comparing his current duties and responsibilities to OPM standards and guidelines (5 U.S.C. 5106, 5107, and 5112). Since comparison to standards is the exclusive method for classifying positions, we cannot compare the appellant's position to others as a basis for deciding his appeal and have considered his statements only insofar as they are relevant to making that comparison.

The appellant believes that the GS-856 standard is outdated. However, the adequacy of grade-level criteria in OPM standards cannot be appealed (section 511.607 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations).

## **Position information**

The appellant serves as the electronics technician responsible for designing, developing and managing radio communication systems. He determines design and technical needs to meet forest, fire, law enforcement, recreation and backcountry needs. This work includes the planning, implementation, and optimizing of communication networks. His responsibilities include acting as lead person to the Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and other State and local government agencies and forest regions in the area to coordinate interagency communication needs. He also provides technical advice and assistance on special use permits and in emergency situations.

The appellant states that since the beginning of year 2001, he has spent over 70 percent of his time working on the design of the simply named “New Radio System” for the [appellant's installation]. The New Radio System is designed to (1) increase radio coverage in the wilderness backcountry areas and (2) provide separate networks for backcountry and fire disciplines so the two disciplines do not have to compete simultaneously for radio time especially during emergency situations. The appellant spends 10 percent of his time supervising two personnel. The appellant spends the remaining 20 percent of his time performing miscellaneous electronics support functions.

The results of our interviews, the appellant's position description, and other material of record provide more information about his duties and responsibilities and how they are performed.

### **Series, title and standard determination**

The appellant's bureau has classified his position to the Electronics Technician Series, GS-856, and titled it as Electronics Technician. The appellant does not disagree, and we concur.

We used the GS-856 standard to evaluate the appellant's position. The standard does not cover grades above the GS-11 level and explains that this does not mean that there are no exceptional circumstances where a position may justify classification above GS-11. The GS-856 standard further notes that the majority of those few nonsupervisory positions above GS-11 involve the performance of what are normally professional engineering duties and that such positions are classified in the GS-856 series, but they are graded by comparison with the appropriate engineering series. Although the appellant's work does not require applying the full scope of professional engineering knowledge, we also compared his work by cross reference to the grading criteria in the standard for the Electronics Engineering Series, GS-855, to demonstrate that the use of the professional engineering standard does not result in a different grade for the position. In applying the GS-855 standard, we considered any significant differences in the required scope and intensity of theoretical and practical knowledge and insight.

As noted above, the appellant performs supervisory work occupying no more than 10 percent of his time. However, to be evaluated by reference to the General Schedule Supervisory Guide (GSSG), a position must spend at least 25 percent of the time providing administrative and technical direction to others. Therefore, the appellant's position cannot be evaluated by reference to the GSSG.

### **Grade determination**

#### ***Evaluation using the GS-856 standard***

The GS-856 standard uses the following criteria to evaluate the grade-level differences in the electronics technician occupation: (1) knowledge of electronics, (2) operational setting, and (3) kind and degree of technical responsibility exercised. Our evaluation with respect to those factors follows.

To meet the GS-11 level a position must meet either the first or second development function paragraph discussed at that level. The duties of the appellant's position most closely resemble the description of the second development function paragraph. As described in that paragraph, GS-11 electronics technicians plan, organize and execute a limited project involved in the development of a system with performance characteristics which require the solution of both design and operational problems. Project responsibility involves consideration of time, materials, cost, safety and performance requirements. Typical of the scope of a system are the external and internal development of general purpose transmitters for fixed plant installation with a wide range of power output, and accessory equipment such as power supplies, receiver-converters, exciters, antennas, terminal and special test equipment; rocket instrumentation systems used for direct probing of the high atmosphere including remote control unit for operating and monitoring the systems and associated telemetering devices; etc.

The appellant's position description indicates that he has technical and management responsibility for the design, planning, development, installation and maintenance of the radio communications systems. The duties of the position favorably compare to the development functions described above. Like that function, he is responsible for planning and organizing a limited project (i.e., New Radio System) where he must solve both design and operational problems. Using specialized equipment, he designs, configures, and integrates a variety of electronic components to cover a highly diverse geographic area. His radio system designs serve the logistical problems of the deep canyons and mountainous terrain of the [appellant's installation]. In planning the New Radio System, the appellant resolved operational problems such as the move of the supervisor's office and those caused by the extreme variation of elevations which characterize the Forest. Design problems have included the need to maintain simplex capability and the need for three UHF frequency pairs when only one existed at the [name of station] Ranger station. The development of the new [name of site] site was necessary because of the safety problems during adverse weather conditions at the existing [name of site] site. The cost of reaching high altitudes by a helicopter was decreased by the appellant's modular construction design to minimize equipment and repair costs at radio stations. In his radio system design the appellant must also consider that standardized items are less costly and more easily replaceable, and the amount of time and limited technical qualifications of individuals (i.e., helicopter pilots) who may put the radios in place.

The standard indicates that GS-11 electronic technicians typically confer with engineers or scientists and engage in a general discussion of the overall objectives desired. They are responsible for visualizing, suggesting, and working out a solution to design or operational problems, and selecting a practical approach. Development work at the GS-11 level requires a high degree of adaptability and the injection of original ideas in completing the project leader's concept of new equipment. Like the GS-11 level, the appellant confers with technicians at other forests or with specialists at the regional office or headquarters levels.

The appellant is considered the technical expert in the organization and his recommendations are generally accepted without change. Like the GS-11 level he visualizes and works out solutions to design and operational problems and performs many of the typical design, testing, redesign, and implementation processes and tasks listed in the standard at that level. He is responsible for determining the overall requirements of the equipment and system design from the needs and

mission of the various forest disciplines. For instance, he has adapted his knowledge of electronics to develop his original idea of the extender/repeater device that extends the coverage of a radio repeater. In order to allow transmitting and receiving on one frequency, the appellant's design uses existing electronic components and principles in ways original to the Forest Service. Using electronic principles and components he designed, he created and tested a prototype of an extender/repeater device. The appellant designed and made recommendations to add equipment and integrate the new device with the existing radio system. Equipment is tested for operational efficiency. The appellant is responsible for dealing with contract manufacturers to assure contractor parts comply and operate with his design specifications and system. Measurement techniques are standardized and conducted to assure operational performance. Written reports are prepared to present system recommendations, requirements and functions. The appellant prepares reports to describe technical requirements and designs. Like the GS-11 level, supervisory assistance is available to solve unusual problems and completed work is reviewed for compliance with overall project objectives.

Like GS-11 technicians the appellant is responsible for the work of one or more complete electronic systems. Individual radio sites vary in components and are geographically dispersed and subject to a wide variety of terrain and weather conditions forming a "backbone" radio system throughout 1.9 million acres of the [appellant's installation]. Similar to the GS-11 level, the system is crucial to the safety of personnel and mission accomplishment in all disciplines (i.e., law enforcement, wilderness, fire fighting and recreation) at the installation. The supervisor stated that without proper radio contact personnel could not be made available in the wilderness areas to conduct the bureau mission.

The appellant's position meets, but does not exceed, the GS-11 level.

### ***Evaluation using the GS-855 standard***

The standard for the GS-855 series evaluates positions by application of two classification factors: (1) Nature of assignment, and (2) Level of responsibility.

#### *Nature of assignment*

GS-12 engineers apply a deep and diversified knowledge to atypical or highly difficult assignments, in a subject-matter or functional area, e.g., unusual problems that arise during the rework of major systems for which they have technical responsibility. Precedents for their assignments are sometimes absent, but more commonly their relationship to the particular assignment is obscure. The design of the New Radio System builds on the existing radio system that is currently used in the [appellant's installation]. The appellant indicated that the replacement cycle of radio systems in the Forest Service is every 10-15 years. While he has technical responsibility for design of the project, improving the existing radio system is not an atypical assignment of the appellant's, but rather is part of a scheduled replacement cycle of the radio system. Although precedents may not exist for the appellant's design projects, the relationship to the problems that face the appellant and the knowledge needed for the appellant to address the problems in this project are not atypical or obscure. The need to accommodate environmental factors, remote sites, and traffic density are clearly definable issues and evident in the appellant's

project. The required knowledge of the work is directly and specifically related to radio communication system in a national forest. Although the appellant incumbent has been able to devise solutions to the unique backcountry areas of the [appellant's installation], the assignment does not require the deep and diversified knowledge typical of GS-12 level professional electronics engineers.

Conflicting issues often characterize GS-12 assignments. GS-12 engineers are required to comprehend fully the relationships between their assigned and related areas and branches of engineering. For example, installation or overhaul engineers may recommend structural changes to naval architects, civil engineers or aerospace engineers. Also, many items involve mechanical as well as electrical or electronics technology for GS-12 electronics engineers. The scope of the appellant's projects is limited to the technical aspects of electronics. Rather than applying knowledge to related professional engineering disciplines (e.g., mechanical), his work requires application of related technical and skilled mechanical crafts, e.g., laying out circuits, checking out component failures. For instance, the appellant described his mechanical work on the radio system as figuring out appropriate box equipment and mountings to fit the major components of an individual radio into a prefabricated design. The appellant's work clearly does not require knowledge of related areas of professional engineering.

GS-12 engineers usually perform preliminary analyses on large and complicated projects, incorporating into their assignments knowledge of research and developmental activities and technological advances. The approaches and procedures which GS-12 engineers adapt or develop are followed by less experienced engineers on subsequent assignments of similar nature. They are relied upon heavily for studies in which they thoroughly evaluate the various alternatives for meeting an objective, and with adequate consideration of peripheral as well as technical factors, recommend the best one. The appellant's preliminary approaches on assignments do not involve professional engineering or knowledge of research and development activities. His preliminary approach to designing projects includes interviewing various forest staff (i.e., recreation, law enforcement and fire) to assess their needs. The approaches he uses are not adapted by others. Some GS-12 engineers coordinate and direct the work of other engineers and technicians who are assigned to them for accomplishment of portions of broad tasks. In contrast, the appellant's direction of the work of subordinate technicians is to authorize and provide guidance on specific maintenance of equipment.

The assignments of GS-12 engineers are frequently further complicated by the many operations which the equipment or systems must perform and the many variables which the engineers must consider. The appellant is responsible for the radio communication system which includes the "backbone" radio system, Interagency Packet Radio Network, and snowmobile radio helmets. The appellant's New Radio System performs multiple radio operation tasks. The "backbone" radio equipment allows personnel in the backcountry to talk with one another or with a dispatcher. He also is continuing work on a snowmobile radio helmet. The appellant also designed a tracking system to transmit the location of craft and personnel and designed an alarm system connected to a weather station sensor. Although there are numerous users, the appellant's equipment essentially performs the function of a single communications network, whereas equipment utilized by GS-12 engineer is expected to perform many operations with numerous variables.

Coordination with related groups and integration of many design changes or major equipment alterations characterize GS-12 assignments. Contacts with other engineering personnel in order to reach compromises and agreements on work projects are not required of the appellant. He assists counterparts involved on communications networks in other Federal agencies and occasionally provides assistance and advice to electronics technicians in other forests. However, his work with others does not involve discussions on the collaboration of equipment or design. Rather he coordinates work to assure the communications systems of agencies are able to assist one another, especially during emergencies.

The appellant's assignments do not meet the scope and complexity of those typical of GS-12 level electronics engineers.

#### *Level of responsibility*

Supervisors of GS-12 engineers inform them of objectives and operational requirements and prioritize assignments. GS-12 engineers analyze problems and develop approaches and work plans with little technical advice or guidance. They coordinate their assignments with those of engineers in other disciplines or engineers who are specialists in other subject-matter areas. They represent their offices and exchange data at technical meetings. Technical manuals or specifications regarding assignments are frequently inadequate. The completed work of GS-12 engineers is reviewed for technical soundness and for compliance with broad local or agency policy. Supervisors are consulted when assignments will have significant unforeseen impact or they depart from policy.

Similar to GS-12 engineers, the appellant's supervisor indicates the objectives and relative priority of assignments, but the appellant develops approaches and work plans with little technical advice. Approaches and operational needs are determined through contact with the various forest disciplines, and sometimes technical references are inadequate in resolving particular problems. The supervisor accepts technical recommendations and decisions of the appellant as basis for action. The appellant's technical recommendations on system designs and special permit uses are accepted as authoritative. The appellant must advise management on special use permit requests of the Forest Service and thus have knowledge of Federal Communications Commission and National Environmental Protection Act regulations.

While the appellant's level of responsibility is similar to the GS-12 level in that he functions independently with minimal supervisory assistance and guidance, he does not deal with other engineers or specialists in related subject-matter areas to coordinate or collaborate on assignments or exchange data. Although the appellant's position appears to meet some aspects of GS-12 responsibility, careful reading of the standard and other OPM guidelines indicates that for a person's level of responsibility to truly meet GS-12 criteria, the responsibilities should be exercised within the context of GS-12 assignments; in this case those typical of professional GS-12 level electronics engineers. As discussed under *Nature of assignment*, the appellant's assignments do not meet the scope and complexity of those performed by GS-12 level electronics engineers.



## ***Summary***

By application of the grading criteria in the GS-856 standard, the appellant's position fully meets, but does not exceed, the GS-11 level. By cross-reference to the grading criteria in the GS-855 standard, the appellant's assignments are not comparable to those performed by GS-12 level professional electronics engineers. The appellant's position is properly evaluated at the GS-level.

## ***Impact of the person on the job***

The appellant raised the additional issue of "impact of the person on the job." The appellant states that his design skills gained from a private sector position he held immediately prior to his current position, impacts the job. The *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards* describes "impact" as occurring when the unique capabilities, experience, or knowledge a particular employee brings to the job has an effect on the work performed and therefore on the classification of the position. In such cases, the performance of the employee broadens the nature or scope and effect of the work being performed. For example, exceptional ability of the employee may lead to the attraction of especially difficult work assignments, unusual freedom from supervision, special authority to speak for and commit the agency, continuing contribution to organizational efficiency and economy, recognition as an expert sought by peers, or similar considerations. Such changes affect the difficulty of the work or the responsibility and authority given the employee and can be recognized in the position classification decision.

In our review of record information and during telephone interviews with the appellant and his immediate supervisor, we explored ways in which the appellant may have made the job materially different. The appellant stated that before he entered the position in the early 1970's, his work as a manager of electrical engineering enabled him to design and devise items such as circuit, analog, and digital boards in the days when the Forest Service did not have such equipment. He states that otherwise the duties of the position would have been to maintain the radios in working order. The appellant indicates that he is recognized as an expert in his field since he receives awards from management, provides technical advice to his peers, and has provided presentations to other agencies on his designs at their request. The supervisor indicates the appellant's creativeness has provided the Forest with radio coverage in difficult landscape, has increased employee safety, and made the radio system economical and efficient. Work the appellant has completed over the years with other agencies has provided the [appellant's installation] with many advances and gained the bureau recognition, i.e., the ability for rangers and fire fighters to communicate in backcountry areas, increased efficiency of recreation management. The appellant asserts that his design background enables him to perform his assigned duties beyond the normal scope of the job, and the supervisor states that the appellant does provide a technically more efficient system for the Forest's unique topography.

The fact that an individual in a position provides services of higher quality, makes a greater contribution to the organization, or stands out from other individuals, is not sufficient reason by itself to classify the position to a higher grade, and does not meet the intent of the concept of "impact of the person on the job." Despite the high quality of performance, the duties of the appellant's position have not been materially enhanced due to his stature within his occupation or his personal qualifications and experience.

Furthermore, the standard for the Electronics Technician Series, GS-856, recognizes that knowledge and skill in design is typical of jobs at the higher levels. One defining requirement in the GS-856 standard at the GS-11 level is the ability to apply a knowledge of techniques and theories characteristic of electronics to duties involved in engineering functions such as *design*, development, evaluation, testing, installation and maintenance of electronic equipment and a knowledge of the capabilities, limitations, operations, *design characteristics*, and functional use of a variety of types and models of electronic equipment and systems. The supervisor and appellant both certified that the GS-11 PD is accurate, and it indicates the position has technical and program management responsibility for the *design*, planning, installation and maintenance of complicated extensive radio communications systems. Therefore, the appellant's design skills and expertise are characteristic of positions at the GS-11 grade level within his installation.

The appellant, as his supporting statements note, carried out (albeit in a distinguished manner) all assignments and projects given to him. All information presented indicates that these assignments were within the parameters of his PD and that the appellant's capabilities did not "create or change," fundamentally, either the job itself or the operations of the organization. Additionally, we found no indication that the appellant's performance broadened the nature or scope and effect of the work to the extent described in the examples of "impact" listed previously. The appellant's contributions are properly recognized through the performance evaluation and recognition system, and they do not materially affect the classification of his position.

### **Decision**

The appellant's position is properly classified as Electronics Technician, GS-856-11.