

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



Dallas Oversight Division
1100 Commerce Street, Room 4C22
Dallas, TX 75242

**Job Grading Appeal Decision
Under Section 5346 of Title 5, United States Code**

Appellant: [lead appellant's name] et al.

Agency classification: Air Conditioning Equipment Operator
WG-5415-10

Organization: [appellants' organization]
Veterans Affairs Medical Center
Department of Veterans Affairs
[city, state]

OPM decision: Air Conditioning Equipment Operator
WG-5415-10

OPM Decision Number: C-5415-10-01

/s/ Bonnie J. Brandon
Bonnie J. Brandon
Classification Appeals Officer

1/20/99
Date

As provided in section S7-8 of the Operating Manual, Federal Wage System, this decision constitutes a certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials of the government. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under conditions specified in section 532.705(f) of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations (address provided in the Introduction to the Position Classification Standards, appendix 4, section H).

Decision sent to:

[appellants' names and addresses]

Chief, Human Resources Management Service
Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center
Department of Veterans Affairs
[servicing personnel office's address]
[city, state]

Deputy Assistant Secretary for Personnel and
Labor Relations
Department of Veterans Affairs
Washington, DC 20420

Introduction

On September 8, 1998, the Dallas Oversight Division of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) received a job grading appeal from Messrs. [appellant's name] and [appellant's name]. Their jobs currently are graded as Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, WG-5415-10. However, they believe their jobs should be evaluated at a higher grade. They work in the [appellants' organization], Veterans Affairs Medical Center, in [city, state]. We have accepted and decided their appeal under section 5346 of title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.).

General issues

The appellants occupy identical position descriptions (PD's) and in their appeal they maintain that their jobs were downgraded improperly. They previously held a position classified as Utility Systems Repairer-Operator, WG-4742-11, PD number 4073. On May 12, 1998, this position was redescribed by omitting reference to system "repairs" and classified at the WG-10 grade. The appellants appealed this classification to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and, as a result, the VA reviewed the position and reclassified it as Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, WG-5415-10.

The record shows that the appellants do not disagree with the basic accuracy of the PD of record, but they claim that the duties and responsibilities they perform have not been evaluated properly. They stress that they perform "repairs" of pumps, valves, boilers, chiller equipment, evaporative coolers, and other related equipment in the plant. They claim complete responsibility for the Energy Plant, including boilers and chillers and the fire alarm system on the weekend, on the night shifts, and whenever there is no one on duty to make repairs.

We have evaluated the work assigned by management and performed by the appellants according to the job grading requirements. In reaching our decision, we carefully reviewed the information provided by both the appellants and the VA, including the appellants' PD of record, which the appellants and their supervisor agree is basically accurate. In addition, we conducted telephone interviews with the appellants and their immediate supervisor. Our interviews found the PD contains the major duties and responsibilities assigned by management and performed by the appellants.

Job information

The appellants stated that their job description is accurate except that it does not adequately capture the nature of the work they perform in repairing the air conditioning, refrigeration, heating, ventilation, fire protection, and other equipment and functions controlled by a computer system. The appellants monitor, troubleshoot, and reset the systems through the computer system. According to the appellants, they perform repairs on the different systems when assigned plumbers, electricians, or other specialized personnel are absent or otherwise unavailable.

The appellants are required to work different shifts as the Unit must be maintained 24 hours per day, seven days a week. They are responsible for manning the plant and being in control of all operations, air conditioning, refrigeration, heating, ventilation, fire protection, and all other functions that are incorporated and/or controlled through the complex computer, requiring the appellants to monitor

all systems and troubleshoot and reset through the computer system. The plant uses two 500-ton chillers, one 600-ton chiller, two 600-ton cooling towers, one 700-ton cooling tower, and a 200-ton air conditioner in a basement mechanical room; three 500 horse power oil or gas fired boilers; and other auxiliary components for each system.

The appellants are required to inspect, adjust, and maintain the boiler or air conditioning equipment, along with associated equipment. They are responsible for monitoring and logging pertinent information from gauges and other technical measuring devices. This information is used to diagnose and troubleshoot operational problems and make necessary corrections. When needed repairs are identified, the appellants are required to notify the supervisor or in the absence of a supervisor, such as on a weekend or night shift, they are authorized as journeyman operators to make independent decisions concerning needed repairs. Station policies are clear that operators are required to make independent decisions determining the need for emergency repairs and calling the appropriate personnel after normal working hours or during weekends or holidays.

Occupation, title, and standards determination

The appellants' jobs are mixed jobs, entailing shift responsibility for the operations and maintenance of the air conditioning and boiler plant. Such jobs are graded in keeping with the duties that involve the highest skill and qualifications requirements of the job and are a regular and recurring part of the job.

The WG-5406 job grading standard (JGS) for Utility Systems Operator covers nonsupervisory work concerned primarily with operating two or more utility systems such as boiler plants, air conditioning, wastewater treatment, water treatment, and natural gas distribution systems for large buildings or small complexes, on a continuing basis. Operators must be familiar with and have the ability to adjust and regulate a variety of automatic or manually controlled auxiliary equipment to insure maximum operating efficiency of the systems. This standard covers those jobs that entail operation of two or more utility systems, evaluated at the same grade level, when no single skill or knowledge of a single utility is predominant for recruitment, promotion, reduction-in-force, pay setting, and other personnel processes. This JGS states that the job should be titled, coded, and graded according to the JGS for the single occupation that represents the highest skill and qualification requirements of the predominant line of work if the highest level of work represents a single occupation. The appellants' work is evaluated by application of the JGS's for Boiler Plant Operator, WG-5402, and Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, WG-5415, to determine if the highest level of work represents a single occupation or if the work meets the criteria for assignment as Utility Systems Operator, WG-5406.

The appellants' operator duties for the boiler plant are covered fully by the JGS for Boiler Plant Operator, WG-5402. This JGS covers positions concerned primarily with the operation and operational maintenance of single and multiple fuel water or fire tube boilers and associated auxiliary and pollution control equipment. These boilers operate at various pressures and temperatures in automatic or manual modes to produce steam or high temperature hot water to provide heat for

buildings, to operate industrial and institutional facilities and equipment, and to generate electricity. The WG-5402 JGS recognizes that technological advancement in the areas of electronic industrial controls and computerization of boiler facilities' work within this occupation at the full performance level may require familiarity or a basic knowledge of electronic control equipment.

The WG-5415 JGS is used to evaluate the appellants' air conditioning system operation work. This JGS covers work concerned primarily with operating air conditioning systems for large buildings or complexes of buildings. The work requires the ability to adjust equipment to maintain desired temperatures and humidity; start, operate, and stop the air handling equipment and centrifugal compressors or absorbers; and detect and diagnose malfunctions in equipment. Operators must know the purposes and locations of all equipment in the systems and the auxiliary equipment such as cooling towers, water pumps, air compressors, liquid circulating pumps, and fans. The appellants' responsibilities for operator functions of the Medical Center's air conditioning system are fully covered by the grading criteria of the JGS for Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, WG-5415.

Based on the grade level determination that follows, we find the appellants' position is allocated properly as Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, WG-5415.

Grade determination

Having determined that the position contains regular and recurring duties of two different standards, the grade is determined by evaluating each of them in order to arrive at the proper grade for the position.

Evaluation using the WG-5402 JGS

The WG-5402 JGS uses four factors for grade determination: *Skill and Knowledge, Responsibility, Physical Effort, and Working Conditions*. These factors serve to provide both the framework within which the occupation is structured and specifically applicable criteria for the appraisal of levels of work. Typical of many trades and crafts jobs at higher grade levels in the Federal Wage System (FWS), *Physical Effort* and *Working Conditions* are the same at all levels defined in the JGS. These two factors have grade level significance only in lower graded jobs. They are not grade determining. Therefore, they will not be addressed in detail.

Skill and Knowledge

At the WG-8 level, boiler plant workers require a working knowledge of the structure and operating characteristics of boilers and associated auxiliary equipment. They know the location and function of numerous pumps, valves, regulators, gauges, recording instruments, controls, power operated dampers, conveyors, and other equipment associated with clean, safe, and efficient boiler operation. They have knowledge of fuel handling and distribution equipment and systems, fuel firing mechanisms, feedwater treatment systems, electrostatic precipitators, flue gas scrubbers, and lime slurry systems. They have a basic knowledge of the chemical and physical characteristics of fuels and

principles of combustion, steam generation, and heat transfer. They have a working knowledge of water tending, analysis, and basic chemical treatments, and they have a general understanding of the individual and combined effects of chemical additives. They are knowledgeable of basic operations necessary in start-up, shutdown, and restart procedures and in casualty control. They have skill in adjusting various conditions such as air temperature, draft, and other furnace conditions, and in interpretation of meter and gauge readings. They are able to recognize malfunctioning equipment and systems. They have skill in the use of hand tools, electric and pneumatic power tools, and specialized tools of the trade. They have skill in applying preventive maintenance procedures and performing limited operational repairs.

At the WG-10 level, boiler plant operators start, operate, adjust, stop, maintain, and perform various operational repairs on single or multiple fuel power boilers and associated auxiliary and pollution control equipment. Boilers operated at this level require constant attention to maintain efficiency and control the formation of pollutants. Grade 10 operators apply a comprehensive knowledge of all operational phases of power boiler plant operations, such as water treatment, fuel systems, steam generation, and pollution control, and their interrelationships for efficient and economical generation of steam or high temperature water. They apply knowledge of the principles and theories pertaining to combustion, heat transfer, and steam generation in the operation of power boilers and associated auxiliary and pollution control equipment or systems. They have a thorough knowledge of water treatment equipment and system. They have a thorough knowledge of chemical and physical aspects of sulfur-containing fuels, (e.g., oil, coal, and lignite), the chemical reactions involved in combustion, and the relationship between fuel quality and combustion efficiency. WG-10 boiler plant operators have a practical knowledge of environmental law and a thorough knowledge of procedures or adjustments during combustion to control pollutants in flue emissions, such as control combustion time, stack temperature, and excess air flow.

Responsibility

At the WG-8 level, plant workers receive work assignments from a supervisor or a higher grade worker. Workers at this level are responsible for observing meters and gauges to insure proper combustion and prescribed temperatures, pressures, and emissions and for performing routine operator maintenance of equipment. They are responsible for understanding and responding to a variety of conditions indicated by meters and gauges. Problems are reported to a higher grade worker or supervisor. Work at this level is checked through observation of work methods and procedures. A higher grade worker or supervisor is available for advice and assistance on any work problem encountered.

Grade 10 boiler plant operators receive work assignments from a supervisor or a higher grade operator who is in charge of the facility or work shift. They are familiar with the total plant layout including drawings and circuit diagrams of the boilers and auxiliary and pollution control equipment. Boiler plant operators at this grade make independent decisions and judgments regarding boiler plant operations, such as combustion and pollution control adjustments, troubleshooting techniques, and equipment maintenance and repair procedures. The supervisor or a higher grade operator with shift

level responsibility is usually available to provide technical assistance on difficult or unusual problems. Work is checked through occasional observation of operational efficiency, production reports, and adherence to established operating techniques and procedures.

Physical effort

This factor has no effect on the grading of the appellants' position. There are no differences in physical effort required at grades 8 and 10. The work requires working indoors and occasionally working outside for short periods where workers are subject to prevailing weather conditions. Workers at these grades are subject to high temperatures, constant noise, rotating machinery, soot, dirt, grease, chemicals, oil and fumes in the work area. They are subject to cuts and abrasions from the use of tools and equipment and burns from acids, caustics, hot water, steam, and contact with piping and boilers, and they work on catwalks and ladders.

Working conditions

There are no differences in the working conditions described at grades 8 and 10. Workers work indoors and occasionally work outside for short periods where they are subject to prevailing weather conditions. Workers are subject to high temperatures, constant noise, rotating machinery, wood, dirt, grease, chemicals, oil, and fumes.

Summary

The appellants' responsibilities include those duties described at the WG-8 level. They operate systems that require only one type of fuel, natural gas. As such, their pollution control equipment responsibilities are very limited and less complex. The job requires continuous attention to maintaining efficiency, however, the methods are predetermined and seldom vary from the plant operating procedures.

The appellants stressed their responsibility for repairs and maintenance to the systems. These operator positions are more involved with the monitoring and occasional troubleshooting of the boilers. They have no repair responsibility on a regular and recurring basis. Repair responsibility may occur infrequently, e.g., when electricians are not available after hours, but such repairs seldom exceed the requirements of preventive maintenance. The appellants' responsibilities meet, and do not exceed, the WG-8 duties described in the JGS.

Evaluation using the WG-5415 JGS

The JGS for Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, WG-5415, covers nonsupervisory work concerned primarily with operating air conditioning systems for large buildings or complexes of buildings. The work requires the ability to adjust equipment to maintain desired temperatures and humidity; start, operate, and stop the air handling equipment and centrifugal compressors or absorbers; and detect and diagnose malfunctions in equipment. Operators must know the purposes

and locations of all equipment in the systems and the auxiliary equipment such as cooling towers, water pumps, air compressors, liquid circulating pumps, and fans. The WG-5415 JGS uses the four standard FWS factors for grade determination: *Skill and Knowledge*, *Responsibility*, *Physical Effort*, and *Working Conditions*.

Skill and Knowledge

At the WG-9 level, air conditioning equipment operators know the function, purpose, and location of all equipment in the system operated. They know the principles of the functioning of refrigeration and air conditioning equipment and component systems as well as the principles underlying the electrical or steam feeder distribution system to the chiller plant. Operators at this level know how to operate and perform minor repairs on the air conditioning equipment with a minimum of guidance from the supervisor. WG-9 operators have skill in controlling plant operations from the control center without causing damage to plant equipment. They detect malfunctions on equipment and locate and diagnose operational problems to determine the probable cause of trouble and make necessary adjustments or minor repairs.

Grade 10 operators operate a centralized, multiple zone system similar to the grade 9 level and also check temperature sensing points in the buildings; adjust controls; start, regulate, and stop air handling equipment; and reset temperature controls and steam spray valves for humidity control. At the WG-10 level equipment operators have a thorough knowledge of the functions and procedures necessary to run a centralized, multiple zone air conditioning system that contains more components, controls, gauges, and auxiliary equipment than the standard type. They know the operating principles of a variety of steam, gas, diesel, and electrically driven compressors and absorbers, including steam driven centrifugal compressors and the safety considerations involved in use of steam. They can troubleshoot the more unusual malfunctions in advanced equipment and systems by using numerous testing techniques and items of test equipment; they can quickly and expertly pinpoint sources of trouble, whether in the controls or equipment itself and determine the nature and extent of repairs or adjustments needed.

Responsibility

Operators at the WG-9 level maintain continuous observation of all operating equipment to recognize dangerous operating conditions. They utilize drawings and circuit diagrams of the plant and auxiliary equipment to locate defects in equipment. When unusual problems occur, the supervisor provides technical advice and assistance. The supervisor occasionally spot checks work for adherence to operating techniques and established practices and directives.

WG-10 operators require supervisory review normally only in emergency situations or of actions taken to resolve unique malfunctions. At the grade 10 level, the unusual complexity of the system, combined with the variety of air conditioning requirements and greater amount of auxiliary equipment, requires constant attention by the operator and a higher degree of responsibility at this grade level than at the next lower grade. Greater judgment and independent action is required on

such matters as how to make interim repairs, when to shut down or activate equipment, and how to balance the more complicated systems found at this level.

Physical Effort

This factor has no effect on the grading of the appellants' position. The physical effort required at grades 9 and 10 is identical. Prolonged physical effort is not routine. Operators at both grades occasionally lift objects weighing up to 50 pounds. Lifting equipment, such as chain hoists, is available to move heavier objects. Some standing stooping, bending, and work on ladders is required.

Working Conditions

There are no differences in the working conditions described at grades 9 and 10. Work is usually performed indoors with adequate light and ventilation. Operators occasionally work in areas of temperature extremes in the plant or are exposed to changes in temperature while working on outside cooling towers, roof exhausts, and ventilating fans. Noise level is often high, sometimes to the point of requiring ear plugs. Other protective devices, such as goggles, masks, and gloves, may be needed periodically. Workers are exposed to the possibility of burns when working on steam and hot water lines and are subject to noxious gases, cuts, bruises, and scrapes.

Summary

The appellants are responsible for a system that extends throughout the Medical Center complex. They work independently during their shift responsibilities, controlling all operations and functions through a complex computer. Their responsibilities extend to the monitoring of all systems and troubleshooting and resetting through the computer system. Operators control the energy management system which controls all the airhandlers. The systems have the responsibility of controlling the air conditioning to the different medical departments such as radiology, nuclear medicine, data processing and other critical areas. Operators are required to maintain temperatures within 1.2 of one degree and humidity to 5 percent. These complicated systems and the tolerances with which the operators must work in maintaining the temperatures and environment of a large medical facility are typical of the WG-10 criteria spelled out in the JGS.

Based on the factors described in the JGS for Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, WG- 5415, the appellants' position meets the WG-10 level.

Decision

Applying FWS mixed occupations and grading principles, the appellants' position is graded properly as Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, WG-5415-10.