

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

**Philadelphia Oversight Division
600 Arch Street, Room 3400
Philadelphia, PA 19106-1596**

**Job Grading Appeal Decision
Under section 5346 of title 5, United States Code**

Appellant: [appellants names]

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

Organization: Air Conditioning Plant
Maintenance and Repair Section
Facility Management Service
[name] Campus
[name] Health Care System
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
[location]

OPM decision: Air Conditioning Equipment Operator
WG-5415-9

OPM decision number: C-5415-09-01

Robert D. Hendler
Classification Appeals Officer

/s/ 5/16/00

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 and time limits specified in section 532.705(f) of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) (address provided in the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards*, appendix 4, section H).

Since this decision lowers the grade of the appealed job, it is to be effective no later than the beginning of the sixth pay period after the date of this decision, as permitted by 5 CFR 532.705(d). 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.

The personnel office must also determine if the appellants are entitled to grade or pay retention, or both, under title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.) 5362 and 5363 and 5 CFR 536. If the appellants are entitled to grade retention, the two-year retention period begins on the date this decision is implemented.

Decision sent to:

PERSONAL

[appellants' names]
 Maintenance and Repair Section
 Facility Management Service
 [name] Campus
 [name] Health Care System
 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
 [address]
 [location]

[name]
 Personnel Officer
 [name] Campus
 [name] Health Care System
 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
 [address]
 [location]

Mr. Ronald E. Cowles
 Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human
 Resources Management
 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
 Washington, DC 20420

Introduction

On November 9, 1999, the Philadelphia Oversight Division of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a job grading appeal from [two appellants]. They occupy two of five identical additional jobs graded as Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, WG-5415-10. They believe the job should be graded as Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, WG-5415-11. They work in the Air Conditioning Plant, Maintenance and Repair Section, Facility Management Service, [name] Campus, [name] Health Care System, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, [location]. We accepted and decided this appeal under section 5346 of title 5 U.S.C.

General issues

As a result of an agency wide job grading consistency review, the activity downgraded the appellants' jobs from grade 11 to grade 10 because they could not be credited with the additional grade for "operator-in-charge/shift responsibility." The agency sustained the downgrading in its October 14, 1999, appeal decision.

The appellants believe that their activity did not review their jobs properly when it conducted the local portion of the consistency review. They said management warned them that appealing to OPM could result in downgrading to WG-9. They provided a copy of a vacancy announcement, opening May 24, 1999, for an Air Conditioning Operator, WG-5415-11 job at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Atlanta to support their case.

The law requires our job grading decisions be based solely upon a comparison between the actual duties and responsibilities of the job and the appropriate job grading standards (JGS's). Other methods or factors of evaluation may not be used in the job grading process, e.g., comparison to other jobs that may or may not be graded correctly, such as the WG-5415-11 job cited by the appellants in their letters to us.

The vacancy announcement for the WG-5415-11 job the appellants sent to us contains many duties that parallel those performed by the appellants. The vacancy announcement states that it "is not intended to cover all aspects of the duties, responsibilities or qualifications of this position." It describes a work environment that is materially different from the appellants' work environment. For example, the Atlanta job includes work in a steam generating plant, while the New York Campus receives steam generated by a local utility. Like OPM, the appellants' agency must classify jobs based on comparison to OPM's JGS's and guidelines. If the appellants consider the appealed job so similar to others that they warrant the same grading, they may pursue this matter by writing to their agency's human resources management headquarters. They should specify the precise organizational location, classification, duties and responsibilities of the jobs in question. If the jobs are found to be basically the same as the appealed job, or warrant similar application of the controlling JGS's, the agency must correct their grading to be consistent with this appeal decision. Otherwise, the agency should explain to the appellants the differences between the appealed job and the others.

The appellants stated that local management opposed updating their position description (PD) of record. They restricted their comments on the agency appeal administrative report to providing

an updated version of their PD and clarifying their "operator in charge" responsibilities. A PD is the official record of the major duties and responsibilities assigned to a position by a responsible management official; i.e., a person with authority to assign work to a position. A position is the duties and responsibilities that make up the work performed by an employee. Job grading appeal regulations permit OPM to investigate or audit a job, and decide an appeal on the basis of the actual duties and responsibilities assigned by management and performed by the employee. An OPM appeal decision grades a real operating job, and not simply the PD. Therefore, this decision is based on the actual work assigned to and performed by the appellants, sets aside any previous agency decision, and resolves the issue of PD accuracy.

On April 17, 2000, we conducted an on-site audit with the appellants and interviews with their immediate supervisor, [name], and the Service Chief, [name]. In deciding this appeal, we fully considered the audit findings and all information of record furnished by the appellants and their activity. Based on the analysis that follows, we find that the PD of record contains the major duties and responsibilities assigned to and performed by the appellants and we incorporate it by reference into this decision.

Job information

The appellants operate a large central air conditioning (A/C) plant with a 4,000-ton capacity. The plant consists of 4 electrical centrifugal freon chillers, 6 cooling towers with a 4,000 ton capacity, 5 condenser water pumps with a capacity of 15,000 gpm, 5 chiller water recirculating pumps with a capacity of 10,000 gpm, and 4 primary chilled water pumps with a capacity of 14,000 gpm. The appellants use computerized control systems (Johnson Control Metasystem, TSBA/Johnson Thomas Brown, and Barber Coleman) to control system equipment that distributes chilled water and related system functions.

The A/C system services the main hospital that has 18 occupied floors and 3 floors of machine rooms, a 7 story clinic, a 7 story staff annex, a 3 story engineering building, the A/C plant, and a building with transformer rooms and switch gears. During the winter, auxiliary chillers and equipment on the seventh floor of the clinic supply A/C to the operating rooms and other parts of the hospital. This equipment supplies supplemental cooling during the peak summer season. All major supplemental units can be controlled from the plant. Some smaller units that support the Magnetic Resonance Imaging suite, 2 West computer room, and 12 West cathode are not controlled from the plant. During the winter, the hospital uses steam supplied by a local utility to supply hot water to perimeter hot water heating units and heat glycol that is used to produce and distribute heated air.

During the winter, the appellants perform maintenance and repair work throughout the facility. This includes cleaning and repairing chiller tubes, packing valves, replacing seals, changing belts, and repairing or replacing chilling and heating coils. Contractors perform major system repair and installation work. The A/C chillers are covered by a service contract.

The appellants change work shifts during the cooling season, and at night, on weekends and holidays are the only operator on duty. The supervisor works on the day shift, but expects the appellants to work independently when he is present.

Series, title, and standard determination

The agency allocated the job as Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, WG-5415. The appellants agree. Based on our analysis of the record, we agree. The job is covered by the Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, 5415 JGS.

Grade determination

This JGS covers nonsupervisory work concerned primarily with operating A/C systems for large buildings or complexes of buildings. The JGS uses four factors to determine grade level: Skill and Knowledge; Responsibility; Physical Effort; and, Working Conditions.

Skill and Knowledge

The appellants' work meets the grade 9 level. As at that level, they use knowledge of the principles of the functioning of refrigeration and A/C equipment and component systems, and the principles underlying the electrical distribution system to the chiller plant, to run a centralized, multiple zone A/C plant that serves a complex of buildings. Typical of the grade 9 level, the appellants run an A/C plant that consists of multiple large capacity chillers that, in addition to cooling, perform such functions as heating, humidifying, dehumidifying, and filtering. They control the separate zones from a master control panel, select the operating temperatures, minimum fresh air, start and stop fans, and check zone temperatures. The appellants must know when to take compressors, pumps, air handlers, and cooling tower fans off line, or to place additional ones on line to meet load requirements, and to log readings for the various zones. They have skill in controlling plant operations from the control center without damaging plant equipment.

Typical of grade 9 level operators, the appellants detect malfunctions on equipment and locate and diagnose operational problems to determine the probable cause of trouble and make necessary adjustments or minor repairs. They read and interpret blueprints, diagrams, schematic drawings, water flow charts, and specifications regarding servicing and operation of the refrigeration and A/C equipment. The appellants perform operator maintenance like changing filters in air handlers, cleaning strainers, replacing broken or worn drive belts on motors, lubricating the various compressors, fans, shafts and steam glands of pumps, and moving parts of other operating and standby equipment. They also perform typical operator repairs like replacing valves, broken flares and copper tubing, repacking glands, adjusting expansion valves, and making limited repairs to pipes. As at the grade 9 level, they have skill in using various hand and power tools including those associated with pipefitting, measuring instruments, and testing equipment such.

In comparison to the grade 9 level, the A/C systems found at the grade 10 level are larger and more complex. The equipment is more complicated and difficult to operate because of the unusual equipment configuration requirements and exceptional size of the buildings serviced and the various needs of the users. These systems are extremely large in capacity and flexibility and typically are located at facilities like major industrial installations with many large shops,

laboratories, offices, support, and other buildings. The wide variety of specialized work activities that generate diverse A/C requirements are carried out in the buildings and are served from the central system, creating added difficulty. These diverse areas require such precise control of temperature and humidity that temperatures cannot vary by more than plus or minus one degree. Permissible humidity variation is similarly strict.

Grade 10 operators must also 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. This requires the operator to regulate pressure reducing valves that feed steam to absorbers. 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.

The appellants do not operate a system of the size and complexity typical of the grade 10 level, i.e., equivalent to a large industrial military base with a wide diversity of A/C needs. The central system, which the appellants are responsible for, is the sole source of A/C to most units within the hospital. However, some areas with special A/C needs have supplemental systems that can be operated from local controls by hospital unit staff. Other supplemental units can be operated either from local control panels or from the central plant. Therefore, the appellants' work situation does not meet the basic grade 10 skill and knowledge demands of operating a facility-wide, extremely large and complex A/C system that must support diverse and exacting A/C requirements from a single central plant.

The appellants do service some campus areas that have specific cooling requirements, e.g., ten operating rooms, the surgical intensive care unit, the eleventh floor intensive care unit, the eighteenth floor animal laboratory, and the telephone and computer rooms. However, they are limited in number. The temperature ranges for these areas, e.g., 65 to 68 degrees in the operating rooms, fall short of the plus or minus one degree requirement and therefore, does not require the precise controls found at the grade 10 level. As discussed previously, hospital staff in these areas can use local controls to operate dedicated supplemental auxiliary A/C equipment to control the temperature of the units in these areas. This limits the impact of reduced or inadequate A/C plant support that the appellants provide.

The appellant's A/C plant electrical compressors also do not have the steam system complexities typical of that level; i.e., large scale steam driven absorbers and steam driven compressors, their pressure regulation demands, and the difficulty of supporting those diverse demands from a very large scale central plant. In addition, the appellants are not responsible for major repairs or for troubleshooting the more unusual malfunctions in the A/C system. These activities are performed by contract staff, e.g., emergency chiller repair. Therefore, we find the appellants' operating environment and demands fall short of grade 10 and must be credited at the grade 9 level.

Responsibility

As at the grade 9 level, the appellants receive work assignments from their supervisor, who may occasionally spot check the work for adherence to operating techniques and established practices and directives. The appellants continuously observe 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 can be contacted to provide technical advice and assistance.

Because the appellants do not operate a system of grade 10 complexity, they do not deal with the variety and critical A/C requirements and greater amount of auxiliary equipment of that type of system. The appellants' work does not involve the constant attention and a higher degree of responsibility exercised to operate that type of system. Similarly, they do not exercise the greater judgment and independent action 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. Therefore, this factor is credited at the grade 9 level.

Working Conditions and *Physical Effort* are the same at both grades level. Because they do not distinguish between grade levels, and the appellants' work meets the levels described in the JGS, we will credit both factors as being met and will not address them further.

Special Additional Responsibilities

The JGS describes special circumstances that warrant additional grade credit for functioning as the "operator in charge" on second and third shifts and on weekends. These conditions must be clearly met to warrant the crediting of an additional grade. The "operator in charge": (1) is responsible for following written instructions from a supervisor or the "operator in charge" on the previous shift; (2) performs additional duties that are more responsible and require a slightly higher level of skill and knowledge than full performance level operators with a supervisor available to provide specific guidance and assistance, and must have a thorough knowledge of the entire A/C system and user requirements in order to locate problems and initiate immediate corrective action to maintain adequate temperatures and humidity; (3) in the absence of written contingency procedures, has the responsibility to decide whether to shut down an A/C system and, if so, whether equipment still in operation can handle the load or whether to bypass the trouble until corrective action has been completed; (4) determines what work must be done and has the authority to approve overtime or call in off-duty maintenance personnel; and, (5) relays instructions to the next shift operator, including problems encountered and action taken. "Operator in charge" shift responsibility must be assigned on a regular and recurring basis; only one operator on a shift can be assigned this responsibility.

The appellants' work meets some of the conditions listed in the JGS. They have full shift responsibility on a regular and recurring basis. In this capacity, they function on the basis of instructions from the supervisor and the previous shift operator (#1), and provide instructions to the next shift operator, including problems encountered and action taken (#5). The appellants have thorough knowledge of the entire system, but there is no evidence that they regularly perform above the full performance level. As discussed at the grade 9 level in the JGS, this

includes the skill necessary to take compressors and other equipment off line or to place additional ones on line to meet load requirements. Therefore, condition #2 is not fully met.

Contingency plans and procedures for the A/C plant, emergency procedures for the operating rooms, heating, ventilating, and A/C system (HVAC), and other local procedures provide specific instruction on how the appellants and other Service personnel are to handle emergencies. Oral procedures also exist. For example, the A/C plant supervisor expects to be called if there is a chiller pump or cooling tower catastrophe; less severe issues are to be referred to the service contractor. Because of extensive system capacity, loss of one major chiller or pump would not present a serious problem and typically would not require emergency repair. The appellants are expected to use cross over valves from the primary system to the operating room air handlers so that operating rooms are ready at all times. While we did not find procedures for every possible contingency, both oral and written procedures in place limit the extent of judgment needed. Procedures in place for calling the A/C supervisor, the Refrigeration Shop Supervisor, the Section Chief, and the Service Chief in the event of an operating room system failure further shows that the appellants do not have the authority or opportunity to take or direct action dealing with the emergencies as intended in the JGS. Therefore, we conclude that condition #3 is not fully met.

The appellants contact contractors for emergency chiller repair. However, the Refrigeration Shop has shared responsibility for operating room HVAC system and computer room emergency repairs, including calling in specified vendors if in-house employees cannot fix the malfunction. Facility Management Service Policy No. 4-03EM (February 25, 1997) states that if the "night engineer" (a member of the Refrigeration Shop) cannot make the necessary emergency repair, they are to call the A/C supervisor, the Refrigeration Shop Supervisor, the Section Chief, and the Service Chief. The instruction lists emergency service contractor names and telephone numbers for major system components and equipment. While the appellants participate in the emergency recall and authorization of overtime process discussed in the JGS, they are not delegated the full scope of authority intended in condition #4.

In summary, we find that because all the conditions are not clearly met, the job cannot be granted additional grade credit for shift responsibility.

Decision

The appealed job is properly graded as Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, WG-5415-9.