

U.S. Office of Personnel Management
Division for Human Capital Leadership & Merit System Accountability
Classification Appeals Program

Dallas Field Services Group
1100 Commerce Street, Room 441
Dallas, TX 75242

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

Appellants: [names of six appellants]

Agency classification: Telephone Operator
GS-382-4

Organization: Facility Communications Section
Information Resource Management
Service
[state] VA Health Care System
Veterans Health Administration
Department of Veterans Affairs
[location]

OPM decision: Telephone Operator
GS-382-4

OPM decision number: C-0382-04-01

Judith Frenzel
Classification Appeals Officer

June 11, 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's name and address]

to share correspondence with:

[names of 5 appellants]

Chief, Human Resources Management Service (05)

[state] VA Health Care System

[address]

Chief, Compensation and Classification Division (051)

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Introduction

On February 14, 2003, the Dallas Oversight Division, now the Dallas Field Services Group, of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a classification appeal from [appellant] and five other employees: [names of five appellants]. The six appellants occupy identical additional positions that are classified as Telephone Operator, GS-382-4. The appellants believe their position should be classified as Communications Attendant/Emergency Dispatcher, GS-5. The agency's administrative report was received March 21, 2003. Their positions are assigned to the Facility Communications Section, Information Resources Management Service, [state] VA Health Care System, Department of Veterans Affairs in [location]. We have accepted and decided the appeal under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.).

Background information

An OPM representative conducted a telephone audit of the appellants' position to help decide the appeal. [name] was chosen by her co-appellants to be the spokesperson for the group and was interviewed on April 7, 2003. The immediate supervisor was interviewed on April 11, 2003. In reaching our classification decision, we have reviewed the audit findings and all information of record furnished by the appellants and their agency, including their official position description (PD) 2095A. Although the appellants question the title and grade level of their position, they agree that the major duties, as described in the PD, are correct.

General Issues

The appellants compare their position to a Communications Attendant/Emergency Dispatcher, GS-5, which they say is in use at other federal facilities, but provided no further information. By law, we must classify positions solely by comparing their 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 appellants' position to others which may or may not be classified properly as a basis for deciding this appeal.

Position information

The primary purpose of the position is the operation of the hospital telephone system, providing information and emergency response, along with a variety of administrative support duties. The incumbents must have knowledge of the functions of the medical center's 40 different organizational components, e.g., medical, surgical, nursing, engineering services, etc. The major function of the position is the operation of a telephone console with 48 two-way trunks, 24 long distance (FTS) trunks, 10 direct in-dial trunks and approximately 3,100 stations. The primary receiver for all incoming calls is the "auto attendant" which is an automated answering system that directs calls by providing menu options and the opportunity to dial known extensions. This system handles most of the incoming calls while the rest are dealt with by the appellants.

The appellants' major duties include placing and receiving local, in-house, outside operator assistance, international and FTS long distance calls and arranging for and connecting

conference calls. They respond to a variety of calls from persons unable or unwilling to use the automatic answering system regarding hospitalized patients, physicians and other employees at the facility. These two duties occupy approximately 50 percent of the appellants' work time.

The appellants are responsible for monitoring the alarm systems at approximately 200 locations throughout the facility. A computer gives specific information on the kind of alarm, its location, and the steps to follow. They maintain the on-call schedules and contact personnel in cases of after hour emergencies. They are also responsible for the paging services, using the overhead paging system, two-way radio for police and engineering, or individually issued pagers. These duties require a total of 30 percent of the time.

The appellants' other duties include activating a cascade calling list used for disaster situations and dispatching hospital police and/or crisis teams to the scene of all accidents/incidents. They are responsible for maintaining records of all long distance or international assisted calls; updating the computer with staff information; logging in and issuing keys to authorized personnel; and handling incoming calls on the TDD instrument. Appellants may also provide switchboard training to new employees.

The switchboard is operated 24 hours per day, 7 days a week. The incumbents rotate through day, evening, and night shifts. Two employees are assigned to work during the day shift while individuals work alone for the remaining shifts, weekends, and holidays. As a result the individuals serve as the sole operator for more than 55 percent of the time. The position is supervised by a Support Service Supervisor, GS-342-8, who is also responsible for the mail processing functions. The appellants' position description and the record material provide much more information about the duties and responsibilities and how they are performed.

Series, title, and standard determination

The GS-382 series includes one grade interval work that involves operating or supervising the operation of telephone switchboard equipment to connect incoming and outgoing calls. The work involves routing the calls to their proper destinations and providing telephone and organizational information to callers. It requires the use of telephone courtesy and tact in dealing with a diversity of callers, sometimes under very difficult and stressful circumstances. In addition to the regular operation of the switchboard equipment, the work may typically require other duties such as providing organization information to callers using computerized or printed directories; keeping statistics on system use to inform managers of trends concerning capacity and utilization; and operating associated equipment, such as radios, alarms, paging systems, and secure voice equipment.

The appellants' duties are appropriately allocated to the GS-382 series. The appellants do not specifically indicate that they disagree with the assigned series, but they do question the title and grade level assigned. While the agency must use the prescribed title for classification purposes, they may also choose to use an organizational title. The position is properly titled Telephone Operator. The GS-382 Position Classification Standard contains grade level criteria and is used to determine the grade level.

Grade Determination

The GS-382 standard uses the Factor Evaluation System (FES), which employs nine factors. Under the FES, each factor level description in a standard describes the minimum characteristics needed to receive credit for the described level. Therefore, if a position fails to meet the criteria in a factor level description in any significant aspect, it must be credited at a lower level. Conversely, the position may exceed those criteria in some aspects and still not be credited at a higher level. Our evaluation of the factors follows.

Factor 1, Knowledge Required by the Position

This factor measures the nature and extent of information or facts that the technician must understand to do acceptable work (e.g., steps, procedures, practices, rules, policies, regulations and principles) and the nature and extent of the skills needed to apply those knowledges.

Level 1-3 states the work requires a thorough knowledge of large, frequently changing organizations with complex subdivisions to direct incoming calls; skill in dealing calmly and courteously with people who are extremely upset or irate; skill in questioning callers, who often can provide only sketchy information, in order to direct them to the proper organizational component; knowledge of alternative routing options and procedures to make efficient outgoing connections and to connect high priority or emergency calls when ordinary methods fail; and knowledge of the capabilities of the telephone system and skill in the procedures necessary to connect a number of parties on one or both ends of complicated conference calls, and to arrange two-party or conference calls by appointment.

The appellants' work meets, but does not exceed, Level 1-3, the highest level described in the standard. As in Level 1-3, the appellants' operate a telephone switchboard for a large hospital. The callers that are unable to use the auto answering system are those handled by the appellants. These callers may be unable to have their calls completed by the automatic system or who find the menu system confusing. Many may be seeking information on patients, appointments, or specialty clinics and do not know the specific extensions. As at Level 1-3, the appellants must know how to screen each call to determine the proper locations where the call is to be directed and to provide answers to a variety of inquiries regarding hospitalized patients, physicians, and other employees of the facility. The appellants have access to the patient locator portion of the VA's VISTA computer system. They must also be able to handle various calls simultaneously. They must be knowledgeable in handling all emergency calls such as cardiac arrest, fire alarms, etc., and notify all appropriate personnel immediately of the emergency. As in Level 1-3, the appellants also must be able to arrange and set up conference calls by appointment.

Level 1-3 is credited for 350 points.

Factor 2, Supervisory Controls

This factor covers the nature and extent of direct or indirect controls exercised by the supervisor, the employee's responsibility, and the extent of review of completed work.

Level 2-2 states that the supervisor provides general instructions concerning established practices and policies, oral or written instructions concerning special circumstances, and changing priorities. The supervisor provides more specific instructions on new procedures, usually in training sessions, and as necessary, on unusual assignments. Employees work independently, carrying out recurring duties without specific instructions, especially when serving as sole operator without a supervisor readily available. Employees consult the supervisor when normal approaches and procedures do not solve problems. The supervisor reviews the work by occasional monitoring for quality and by spot-checking logs for adherence to established procedures.

The appellants' work meets, but does not exceed, Level 2-2, the highest level described in the standard. As at Level 2-2, the supervisor provides general instructions concerning established practices and policies and oral or written instructions for special situations and changing priorities. The supervisor also provides more specific instructions on new procedures and processes, usually face-to-face in a training-session type setting if needed. The appellants are expected to work independently, receiving calls and independently providing answers to a variety of complex inquiries regarding hospitalized patients, physicians, and other employees of the facility. When serving as the sole attendant, it is necessary for the appellants to be able to carry out these duties without specific instructions. The supervisor is available for unusual or unprecedented situations or inquiries. Also typical of this level, the supervisor reviews the work by occasional monitoring of calls, following up on customer complaints and comments, and by spot-checking the various logs for adherence to established procedures.

Level 2-2 is credited for 125 points.

Factor 3, Guidelines

This factor covers the nature of guidelines and the judgment needed to apply them.

Level 3-2 states that employees use established procedures, a variety of manuals concerning operating the telephone system, and directories that cover individual organizational components and/or names. Employees must choose the appropriate manual or directory and may make minor adaptations in established procedures. Employees recognize and refer to the supervisor unprecedented problems not covered by the guidelines, such as inability to access through normal procedures telephone trunks needed for high priority calls.

The appellants' work meets, but does not exceed, Level 3-2, the highest level described in the standard. As at Level 3-2, the appellants' position requires the use of established procedures, attendant guidebook, and directories that cover individual organizational components and/or names. The appellants must choose the appropriate manual or directory and make minor adaptations in established procedures. The appellants have several points of references to choose from: the General Reference Manual; Emergency Preparation Plan; Radiation Accident Plan; Occupational Health, Fire Protection, and Safety Manual; On-Call Manual and After Hours/On-Call Memos. The references provide step-by-step instructions, depending on the nature of call. The appellants also have step-by-step procedures posted beside their computer for Code Blue

and Code Red emergencies. Employees recognize and refer to the supervisor unprecedented problems not covered by the instructions.

Level 3-2 is credited for 125 points.

Factor 4, Complexity

This factor covers the nature of assignment; what the employee considers when deciding what must be done; and how difficult and original are the employee's actions or responses.

Level 4-2 states employees operate a telephone system to direct local and routine or complicated long-distance calls of various precedence and security levels using related sets of procedures. Employees may also monitor alarm systems and use radios to transmit information in emergency situations. Employees frequently must interview callers to determine where to route the calls. Decisions depend on such things as the destinations and priority levels of calls, security levels, and system capabilities.

The appellants' work meets, but does not exceed, Level 4-2, the highest level described in the standard. As at Level 4-2, the appellants' perform a variety of duties or tasks that involve related steps, processes, or methods. The appellants' operate a telephone system to direct local and routine or complicated long-distance calls, using procedures to deal with questions of precedence and security levels. Like Level 4-2, the appellants also monitor alarm systems and use two-way radios to transmit information in emergency situations. The appellants must frequently interview the callers to determine where to route calls. Their decisions depend on such things as the destinations and priority levels of calls, security levels, and system capabilities.

Level 4-2 is credited for 75 points.

Factor 5, Scope and Effect

This factor covers the relationship between the nature of the work, i.e., the purpose, breadth, and the depth of the assignment, and the effect of work products or services both within and outside the organization.

Level 5-2 of the standard indicates that the purpose of work is to operate a telephone system to connect the more complicated calls in accordance with established procedures. The work affects the accurate and reliable transmission of national defense, medical, or other important messages.

The appellants' work meets, but does not exceed, Level 5-2, the highest level described in the standard. As at Level 5-2, the primary purpose of the appellants' position is to operate a telephone system to provide and assist in routine and complex calling situations. The appellants set up and place conference calls to provide service for medical and other personnel. They monitor the alarm and security systems and respond in accordance with established procedures.

Level 5-2 is credited for 75 points.

Factor 6 & 7, Personal Contacts and Purpose of Contacts

This combined factor addresses the nature and purpose of personal contacts regularly required to perform the work of the position. Contacts credited under Factor 6 must be the same contacts credited under Factor 7.

Level 2 of Factor 6, the highest level described, describes contacts with users of the telephone system, with Government and commercial operators in other locations, and sometimes with contractors for repairs. Some of the contacts occur regularly and others only as problems occur, such as failure of calls to go through the system. Some of the callers may be distraught or abusive.

The appellants' personal contacts meet but do not exceed Level 2. As at Level 2, the appellants have regular contact with the general public, patients, medical center personnel, and staff at other medical facilities, agencies, and organizations. Although the automated attendant is the primary receiver for all incoming calls to the VA, some of these contacts occur regularly such as those arranging conference calls, responding to alarms and emergency services, pager requests, etc. Other contacts may happen only as problems occur and some callers may be distraught, irate, or abusive.

Level b of Factor 7, the highest level described, states that the purpose of the contacts is to work with others in solving problems, such as with telephone operators in other locations to make difficult connections or with repair technicians to locate telephone equipment and line problems.

The purpose of contacts meets but does not exceed Level b. Some of the appellants' contacts are for the purpose of exchanging information needed to connect callers. As at Level b, other contacts involve resolving problems with the phone or alarm systems, paging requests, key control, or more complex inquiries from the staff or public.

Level 6-2 and 7-b are credited for a total of 75 points for the combined factor.

Factor 8, Physical Demands

This factor describes the nature of physical demands placed on the employee.

Level 8-1, the highest described in the standard, states that the work is usually sedentary but may involve some standing and walking to consult directories and manuals.

The appellants' physical demands fully meet and do not exceed Level 8-1. As at Level 8-1, the appellants' work requires them to sit for prolonged periods except when it is necessary for them to stand to log keys in and out to various personnel or to get information from the alarm computer, approximately four steps away from the telephone switchboard.

Level 8-1 is credited for 5 points.

Factor 9, Work Environment

This factor describes the physical surroundings in which the employee works and any special safety regulations or precautions that the employee must observe to avoid mishaps or discomfort.

Level 9-1, of the standard, the highest level described, indicates that the work is normally performed in a well-lighted, temperature controlled room. Normal safety precautions are required.

The appellants work environment meets, but does not exceed Level 9-1. As at Level 9-1, the appellants' work is performed in a well-lighted, temperature-controlled room. The room is supplied with conveniences such as refrigerator, microwave, couch, and tables. There is a restroom in immediate area. These conveniences are provided because when working non-regular duty shifts alone, they are not able to leave the office area.

Level 9-1 is credited for 5 points.

Summary

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Points</i>
1. Knowledge required by the position	1-3	350
2. Supervisory controls	2-2	125
3. Guidelines	3-2	125
4. Complexity	4-2	75
5. Scope and effect	5-2	75
6.and 7 Personal contacts and Purpose of contacts	6-2, 7-b	75
8. Physical demands	8-1	5
9. Work environment	9-1	5

Total: 835

The appellants' position is credited with 835 points, which falls within the point range for GS-4, (655-850).

Decision

The position is properly classified as Telephone Operator, GS-382-4.