

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

Chicago Oversight Division
230 South Dearborn Street, DPN 30-6
Chicago, Illinois 60604

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

Appellant: [appellant]

Representative: [representative]

Agency classification: Computer Assistant
GS-335-7

Organization: Department of Veterans Affairs
Medical Center
[division]
[city and state]

OPM decision: **Computer Assistant**
GS-335-7

OPM decision number: C-0335-07-01

/s/

Douglas K. Schauer
Classification Appeals Officer

June 6, 2001

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 name
and address]

[representative]

Agency:

[agency]
Chief, Human Resources Office
Department of Veterans Affairs
Medical Center
[address]
[city and state]

Ms. Ventris C. Gibson
Deputy Assistant Secretary for
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Introduction

On May 5, 2000, the Chicago Oversight Division of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a classification appeal from [appellant]. The appellant contests the agency's classification of her position as Computer Assistant, GS-335-7. The position is located in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), Veterans Health Administration Medical Center (VAMC), [division] section, [city and state]. The appellant believes her position should be classified as Computer Specialist GS-334-9. We have accepted and decided this appeal under section 5112 of Title 5, United States Code.

General Issues

The appellant's primary duty is to install software upgrade patches into the VAMC's automation system in order to update a variety of information and procedures. The appellant stated that in all the other VAMCs she contacted, this is accomplished by computer specialists. The appellant's agency must classify positions based on comparison to OPM standards and guidelines. However, the agency also has primary responsibility for ensuring that its positions are classified consistently with OPM appeal decisions. If positions are found to be basically the same as hers, the agency must correct their classification to be consistent with this appeal decision. Otherwise, the agency should explain to her the differences between her position and the others.

The position description under which the employee works was prepared using an automated position description writing program in use by the DVA. Although both the appellant and her supervisor have attested to the accuracy of the position description, we have found inconsistencies between what is recorded in the position description and what we discovered via a position audit. We request that the agency re-write the position description to conform to the findings of this appeal decision.

In her initial appeal letter the appellant did not identify specific factors or elements of the position description which she felt were given insufficient weight in the grading process or graded inaccurately. Therefore, we will evaluate her position and all the grading factors which have potential impact on the grade of her position.

Position Information

Approximately 50 percent of the appellant's time is occupied in downloading, testing and installing upgrade patches to the VAMC's mainframe computers. The two machines working in tandem operate the medical center's Veterans Information Systems Technical Administration (VISTA) program, formerly called the Decentralized Hospital Computer Program (DHCP). This DVA system-wide program interfaces with the various departments within the VAMC, and the appellant works with Automated Data Packages Application Coordinators (ADPACs) in each using department in the VAMC to ensure proper testing, installation and use of upgrade patches. She performs this work with independence, referring to one of the Computer Specialists in the organization or the supervisor only complex and difficult problems.

In addition to the primary duty of the position, the incumbent has other regular duties. About 25 percent of her time is occupied in new automation accounts including in-processing new employees, giving them instruction in unique systems, and developing and updating operating manuals. Approximately 15 percent of the appellant's time is utilized in a relatively new duty, that of assisting the VAMC's Chief Information Officer (CIO) in tasks related to the center's intranet and web site. The remaining 10 percent of time is spent in maintaining files and documentation, updating procedures, and coordinating changes with ADPACs.

Series and Title Determination

The primary reason for the existence of the appellant's position is to provide assistance to both computer specialists within the IRM's Software section and to software users throughout the VAMC. To accomplish this she possesses and utilizes knowledge of the facility-wide VISTA automation system and its programming language, data processing sequences, user information requirements, and other automated information system technical requirements. This type of work and the knowledges required to perform it are typical of the Computer Clerk and Assistant Series, GS-335. This series includes all positions whose work involves the performance of data processing support and services functions for users of digital computer systems. Although some of the tasks incidental to her support work are similar to work performed by employees assigned to the Computer Specialist Series, GS-334, there is no evidence that the appellant utilizes the level of knowledge of information processing methodology/technology, computer capabilities and processing techniques typical of GS-334 positions. The GS-334 series includes positions which analyze, manage, or perform work necessary to plan, design, develop, acquire, document, test, implement, integrate, maintain, or modify systems for solving problems or accomplishing work using computers. The proper title for positions in GS-335 at GS-5 and higher is Computer Assistant.

Grade Determination

The GS-335 is a Factor Evaluation System (FES) position classification standard where nine different classification factors are identified for evaluation. Each one has several levels that equate to higher degrees of difficulty or complexity, and each has a corresponding point value assigned. The total of points for all nine factors is compared to a grade conversion chart in the standard to arrive at a final grade.

Factor 1, Knowledge Required by the Position

There were some inconsistencies between what was stated in the appellant's position description and the performance standards written for her by management. We conclude that the actual knowledges required to perform the work are not accurately stated in the position description and are in need of correction.

At the Level 1-5, employees carry out limited specialized projects and assignments using knowledge of fundamental data processing methods, practices, and techniques in work involving development, test, implementation, and modification of computer programs and operating procedures. In addition, the employee uses knowledge of data content and output options for a

variety of program applications processed on multi-program operating systems. Employees use knowledge of time sharing, remote job entry, batch and demand processing for work such as allocating core or writing new program documentation and operating procedures. Knowledges at this level are used as the basis for analysis and decision making in several functional settings.

In addition to the knowledge described at Level 1-5, employees at Level 1-6 use extensive knowledge of at least one multi, and typically several single, processor computer systems. They monitor processing work flow and diagnose and resolve error and problem conditions involving many program interrelationships and interlocking computer systems. This work requires extensive knowledge of computer equipment, internal computer processes, applications and utility programs, and magnetic media. It requires knowledge of a wide range of analytical and diagnostic methods, procedures, and principles. Knowledge is required of some elements of programming, systems analysis, and equipment operations. These knowledges are used to identify the nature and source of problems occurring during processing and to plan and implement solutions. Employees use these knowledges to advise specialists in setting up run instructions and developing effective operating methods. Work at this level commonly involves taking action to order and interpret system dumps, order and implement back-up recovery procedures to replace faulty tapes or disks, reallocating equipment usage to work around equipment malfunctions, etc.

The VISTA system utilized by the DVA is an agency-wide system that is institutionally self-contained. That is, even though it is mandated for use throughout the agency, the installed systems are for the most part used within one VAMC and are incapable of communicating with other VAMCs. The system vendor provides quarterly updates to upgrade the system in response to user requirements. Between quarterly updates the vendor sends patches to update the system in increments of one or a few data elements or procedures at a time. These are overridden by the next quarterly update. System upgrades are not instantaneous or timely; indeed they are many months behind. In the interim between quarterly updates and system patches, the VAMC IRM staffs write and install modifications to meet the peculiar needs of the VAMC until the next update or patch.

The appellant's primary responsibility is to install the patches received from the vendor between the quarterly updates. When she receives a new patch she has to follow the instructions exactly in order for the patch to install. She first determines whether there is a local modification in danger of being overridden by the patch. She then analyzes the system software to ascertain the impact of the patch and whether the modification will have to be re-installed. She works with ADPAC in the VAMC department that will be affected by the new patch to coordinate implementation. When implemented, she tests the patch with the ADPAC. When a problem is discovered with the patch itself or its impact on other system operations, the appellant troubleshoots the problem to discover the cause and to devise a solution if within her scope of knowledge. For example, unbeknownst to the appellant a new patch might override a local modification of an application that would cause a procedure not to happen. She and the ADPAC analyze the operation to find the problem area. The appellant would then evaluate the software to see if the modification can be re-installed; if she cannot re-install it or if it requires more skill to write the modification, she seeks assistance from a specialist. She also assists the ADPACs in identifying for the Computer Specialists procedures that need or can be automated.

In addition to installing VISTA software patches, the appellant in-processes new employees in the VAMC, instructs them in the operation of purchased and local systems, and develops and updates local operating manuals. When new, changed or updated software systems are received, she evaluates the differences, develops local implementing instructions (if necessary), provides instructions to users, and writes local system operating manuals. She responds to user problems within the VAMC having to do with the software or user problems with the applications systems. She determines what the problem is, and corrects it on the spot and/or instructs the user to preclude its repetition.

Although the knowledge possessed and utilized by the appellant is different from that described for assistants in this occupational standard, valid analogous comparison can be made. Similar to Level 1-6, the appellant uses extensive knowledge of the VISTA computer system, and knowledge of several other applications software systems operated on personal computers in the VAMC. In order to successfully install Vista system patches she monitors processing work flow and diagnoses and resolves routine error and problem conditions involving many program interrelationships and interlocking computer systems. The appellant's work requires some knowledge of internal computer processes and applications, and knowledge of some elements of programming, systems analysis and equipment operations. This gets potentially more complex as time goes by and when local modifications are not adopted for use throughout the DVA. She utilizes her knowledges to identify the nature and source of problems and to plan and implement solutions. She resolves most problems that occur, referring difficult or unprecedented problems to a specialist for resolution.

However, the knowledges required by the appellant's work do not fully meet the intent of Level 1-6. The nature of VISTA problems encountered and independently resolved by the appellant are those of a routine type. When more difficult problems are encountered or those for which no precedents exist, she contacts one of three specialists in her work unit who resolve the problem or provide assistance. The knowledge required to assist users in overcoming software problems on their PC applications systems requires only some knowledge of the internal operations of the system as indicated at Level 1-6. The fact that the patches are accompanied with rather explicit albeit complicated instructions also mitigates against her being able to apply the level of knowledge characteristic of Level 1-6. Assistants at this level typically perform more independent problem analysis and decision making than is evident in the appellant's position.

Although some of the tasks performed by the appellant exceed Level 1-5 as shown in the standard, they do not fully meet the intent of Level 1-6 therefore, Level 1-5 is assigned.

Factor 2, Supervisory Controls

The agency assigned Level 2-3 for this factor, and our audit of the appellant and answers to questions asked of management officials confirmed that this level is appropriate. Consistent with this level the appellant receives direction on work objectives, receives assistance in the case of unusual or complex problems, and her routine work normally receives non-technical review. She independently downloads new patches and installs and tests them, and works out implementation procedures, modifications and routine problems with the ADPACs.

Factor 3, Guidelines

The appellant confirmed with us that the guidelines attendant with each system patch are relatively explicit, and selection and application of the appropriate manual, instructions, etc., to her work is relatively clear. Also, the general rules covering her other tasks such as applications system software are clear enough so that an experienced assistant can follow them effectively. This is a match to Level 3-2 where guidelines are available, selection of the appropriate guideline is relatively clear, and some selective judgment is called for. It does not meet Level 3-3 where the work consists of new requirements or new applications for which only general guidelines are available.

Factor 4, Complexity

The position description for this factor states that “the work primarily consists of various duties concerning aspects of computer equipment usage at an installation.” This is not totally accurate. We understand that there were limitations with utilizing the position description preparation software program, called Coho, and this misstatement is a result of the system limitations. The logic used by the agency to assign Level 4-3 for this factor is, nonetheless, in all other respects correct. Consistent with Level 4-3 the appellant performs a variety of tasks involving different methods and procedures; decisions regarding what needs to be done evolve from studying each different patch, and actions to be taken differ according to the nature of the patch, the implementing instructions, and the other processes impacted.

Factor 5, Scope and Effect

The narrative for this factor also misstates what we found during the course of the position audit. The factor level description needs to be re-written to eliminate or de-emphasize references to peripheral devices and equipment and to show the software support work performed by the appellant.

Level 5-2 is appropriate for positions whose work involves a range of duties in scheduling, production control, library or other computer support work according to established procedures and methods. At this level the work typically impacts the accuracy, timeliness, reliability and acceptability of subsequent work processes in the organization. Level 5-3 is distinguished from the level by the addition of requirements for solving problems and answering technical questions. Problems and error conditions encountered are conventional although solutions are not always covered by established or standardized procedures. Results of the work affect the efficiency of processing services, the adequacy of products used in subsequent activities, and processing procedures and methods.

In our evaluation of this factor we find that the appellant's position is a match for Level 5-3. The work consists of installing system upgrade patches, installing or re-installing local system modifications, resolving routine problems for or in conjunction with the VAMC ADPACs, assisting other software users in resolving operation problems, writing user operating instructions for applications programs, instructing new employees, and working as part of a group in

designing intranet web pages. The results of this work affect further processing services and the products used by computer specialists and subject-matter specialists in making informed decisions concerning the operation of the VAMC.

Factor 6, Personal Contacts

The appellant's contacts include computer specialists within the IRM, with customers throughout the VAMC, with colleagues at other DVA/VAMC locations, and with VISTA software upgrade patch developers. This is a match to Level 6-2 in the standard at which level contacts typically include specialists and users from within the agency and contractor representatives.

Factor 7, Purpose of Contacts

The purpose of work is to obtain and provide information concerning software-related work efforts or problems and to coordinate operations with proponents and users. This is a match to Level 7-2.

Factor 8, Physical Demands

There are no indications that the physical demands placed on the appellant exceed the normal level. This matches Level 8-1.

Factor 9, Work Environment

The work involves normal hazards typical in an office environment. This is a match to Level 9-1.

Factor Level Point Summary

Factor	Level	Points
1	1-5	750
2	2-3	275
3	3-2	125
4	4-3	150
5	5-3	150
6	6-2	25
7	7-2	50
8	8-1	5
9	9-1	5
	Total:	1535

Conclusion

The sum of points assigned to all nine factors is 1535. In accordance with the grade conversion chart in the standard, 1535 points falls in the range for GS-7 (1365-1600).

Decision

We find that the appellant's position is properly classified as Computer Assistant, GS-335-7.