

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, CA 94105-0001

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

Appellant: [The appellant]

Agency classification: Computer Assistant
GS-335-7

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

OPM decision: Computer Assistant
GS-335-7

OPM decision number: C-0335-07-04

Carlos A. Torrico
Classification Appeals Officer

March 12, 2002
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]

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Introduction

On August 31, 2001, the San Francisco Oversight Division of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a classification appeal from [the appellant]. On September 28, 2001, the Division received the agency's administrative report concerning his appeal. His position is currently classified as Computer Assistant, GS-335-7. However, although the appellant specifies no title, he believes his position should be classified at the GS-9 level under the Information Technology Management Series, GS-2210. The appellant works in the [appellant's organization and duty location], U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). We have accepted and decided his appeal under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.)

General issues

The appellant believes that the classification standard for the Computer Clerk and Assistant Series, GS-335, is outdated. However, the adequacy of grade-level criteria in OPM standards is not appealable (section 511.607 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations).

The appellant compares his position to other positions and 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 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 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.

Like OPM, 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 the appellant considers his position so similar to others that they all warrant the same classification, he may pursue the matter by writing to his agency's personnel headquarters. In doing so, he should specify the precise organizational location, classification, duties, and responsibilities of the positions in question. If the positions are found to be basically the same as his, the agency must correct their classification to be consistent with this appeal decision. Otherwise, the agency should explain to him the differences between his position and the others.

Despite having had his official position description (PD) [number] revised, the appellant does not believe it accurately reflects his duties and responsibilities. The position to which he normally reports is vacant; his second-level supervisor, acting as his first-level supervisor, states that he is insufficiently familiar with the appellant's work to assess the accuracy of his PD. They have been unable to resolve the issue within the agency. In such cases it is OPM policy to decide the appeal based on the actual duties assigned by management and performed by the appellant.

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, his supervisor, and an Information Management Specialist, GS-301-13, who manages the Geographic Information System (GIS) and Remote Sensing programs for [appellant's region] and is familiar with both the appellant's work and the information technology he uses.

Position information

The appellant is a GIS Specialist servicing the south zone (Zone 2), consisting of the [names of areas serviced]. Ninety percent of his time is spent on GIS-related duties. He is responsible for GIS database management, document management, and map, chart, and report generation in support primarily of Forest Resource Specialists. The work requires operation of various computer systems and peripherals.

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

Series, title and standard determination

The agency has assigned the appellant's position to the Computer Clerk and Assistant Series, GS-335, and titled it as Computer Assistant. We concur with the agency's series and title determination. As stated in the GS-335 standard (dated February 1980, reissued in HRCD-7, July 1999) positions in that series cover work involving performance or supervision of data processing support and services functions for users of digital computer systems. This work requires knowledge of external data processing sequences, controls, procedures, or user and programming languages, rather than in-depth knowledge of computer requirements or techniques associated with development and design of data processing systems.

Employees whose jobs are classified in the GS-335 series perform work in one or a mix of functional areas to support or assist computer specialists, subject matter specialists, or others who design, operate, or use automatic data processing systems applications and products. Some computer assistants at full performance levels perform duties similar to those assigned to entry and trainee level computer specialist positions. Many positions include work requiring knowledge of programming languages (e.g., COBOL, FORTRAN, PL/1), job control languages for coding and program testing duties, and user-access languages. Some employees use higher level languages extensively. Work may require knowledge of system hardware such as the number and kind of devices, operating speeds, and the amount of core and other equipment characteristics. Work involving support to subject matter users varies in difficulty ranging for example, from highly structured input and retrieval methods and procedures for recurring production jobs to tailored search and manipulation strategies for special purpose products. Some employees discuss product requirements with users and give advice on how to structure job requests to obtain data required.

We find the work situation described above best captures the appellant's. The appellant services Forest Research Specialists and a variety of other customers including members of the public by developing and managing GIS databases and responding to requests for tailored digital map products and data. His work requires knowledge of the ARC Macro Language (AML), based on

Visual Basic. AML is an integral part of ARC-GIS, the complex yet commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) suite of software with which the appellant also must be proficient. Work products require tailored approaches to meet unique data needs or requests.

The appellant believes his position should be classified in the Information Technology Management Series, GS-2210, covered by the Job Family Standard (JFS) for Administrative Work in the Information Technology Group, GS-2200, dated May 2001. We find that it cannot for the following reasons:

First, the GS-2210 series covers only those positions for which the paramount requirement is knowledge of information technology principles, concepts, and methods necessary to manage, supervise, lead, administer, plan, design, analyze, develop and implement information technology systems and services. In contrast, the paramount requirement for the appellant's position is practical knowledge of ARC-GIS. The appellant does not perform any information technology management functions except for occasional troubleshooting, backup, recovery, and other systems maintenance of the GIS in his assigned area, which he is not *required* to do. Instead, he may rely on higher level assistance from the software vendor or other Forest Service employees.

Second, the GS-2210 series envisions a scope of responsibility not met by the appellant's position. Positions in the GS-2210 series are responsible for *systems*, such as GIS, on which multiple organizations or users, *including the appellant*, may depend to do their work. In contrast, the appellant's position is responsible for system *outputs*—maps, charts, databases, etc.—resulting from his *use* of the system.

Third, the GS-2210 series covers two-grade interval administrative positions established as developmental jobs with clear progression to higher grade levels as the specialist receives progressively more difficult assignments. We found no evidence that management established, recruited for, or filled the appellant's position with such intent. The appellant has performed higher level duties as needed under temporary promotions, but such duties have not been permanent much less progressively more difficult. Further, the appellant's primary duties do not require either a broad knowledge of information technology or an understanding of the interrelationships between the different information technology specialties. The section on "Distinguishing Between Specialist Work and Assistant Work" in the JFS lists these requirements among those that must be satisfied for an information technology position to be considered developmental.

The appellant believes that the GS-335 standard cannot apply because it makes no specific reference to GIS work. However, for practical reasons, there is no requirement that standards explicitly address every conceivable scenario. Indeed, were we to apply such a requirement in the appellant's case, the GS-2210 standard could not apply regardless of whether it might on the basis of other criteria.

The appellant also believes that the GS-335 standard applies only to positions that assist computer specialists. There also is no such limitation. As noted above, computer assistants and clerks may support subject matter specialists and other employees. The Occupational

Information section of the JFS specifically discusses aspects of work involved in positions that support subject matter users, including subject matter specialists like Forest Resource Specialists.

The GS-335 standard prescribes the title Computer Clerk for nonsupervisory positions in grades GS-1 through GS-4. The title Computer Assistant is used for nonsupervisory positions at the GS-5 level and above. As described below, we find the appellant's position is properly graded at the GS-7 level and titled Computer Assistant. Our evaluation by reference to the grading criteria in the GS-335 standard follows.

Grade determination

The GS-335 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, unless an equally important aspect that meets a higher level balances the deficiency. Conversely, the position may exceed those criteria in some aspects and still not be credited at a higher level. Under FES, positions which significantly exceed the highest factor level or fail to meet the lowest factor level described in a classification standard may be evaluated by reference to the applicable factor level in the Primary Standard, contained in Appendix 3 of the Introduction to the Position Classification Standards. The Primary Standard is the "standard for standards" for the FES.

Each factor level has a corresponding point value. The total points assigned are converted to a grade by use of the grade conversion table in the standard.

Factor 1, Knowledge required by the position, Level 1-4, 550 points

This factor measures the nature and extent of information or facts which the employee must understand to do acceptable work and the nature and extent of the skills needed to apply those knowledges. To be used as a basis for selecting a level under this factor, a knowledge must be required and applied.

At Level 1-4, employees perform a wide range of duties including preparing, advising, assisting, coding, and procedure-related problem solving duties using a knowledge of computer procedures and processing methods. Work at this level involves knowledge used to assist programmers or other users or in scheduling, controlling, and problem-solving work. Similar to assistants at Level 1-4, the appellant performs a wide variety of duties associated with his GIS responsibilities, requiring a practical knowledge of computer hardware, software, peripherals, and operating systems as well as ARC-GIS to produce a variety of digital map products and to input and retrieve GIS data. The appellant assists Forest Resource Specialists and occasionally other customers in their analytical work by preparing such products and advising them on system capabilities and how best to meet their data needs. The work requires the appellant to code programs and resolve procedural errors using the software's user-oriented access, command, and control language based on Visual Basic.

The appellant's position does not meet Level 1-5. Although the duties and responsibilities performed by the appellant require an understanding of GIS software, the work does not require the in-depth knowledge of systems and programs indicative at Level 1-5. Assistants at Level 1-5 carry out limited specialized projects using knowledge of fundamental data processing methods, practices, and techniques in work involving the development, test, implementation and modification of computer programs and operating procedures. Assistants prepare programs or write new program documentation and operating procedures. In contrast, the appellant is required to use a COTS software program that requires no modification. At Level 1-5, employees use their knowledge as the basis for analysis and decision making in several functional settings. In contrast, the appellant does not make any significant substantive determinations regarding the content of digital map products or related databases. The content is determined largely by the preferences of Forest Resource Specialists and other customers.

This factor is evaluated at Level 1-4 and 550 points are credited.

Factor 2, Supervisory controls, Level 2-3, 275 points

This factor covers the nature and extent of direct or indirect controls exercised by the supervisor, the responsibility of the employee, and the degree to which work is reviewed by the supervisor.

The appellant's position meets Level 2-3, the highest level for this factor described in the standard. At this level, the supervisor provides direction on objectives and priorities for new work, deadlines, and deadline changes for new and established work. The employee identifies the work to be done, plans and carries out the steps required, and submits completed work without supervisory review. At this level, employees commonly adapt or develop new work procedures and instructions for application by themselves and others. Consistent with Level 2-3, the appellant's supervisor sets overall objectives and priorities, the appellant is responsible for planning and carrying out projects and resolving technical problems, and the appellant submits completed work to customers without supervisory review. The appellant's work methods are not normally reviewed unless a recurring, common pattern of problems develop.

At Level 2-4 of the Primary Standard, the supervisor sets the overall objectives and resources available. The employee and supervisor, in consultation, develop the deadlines, projects, and work to be done. The assistant, having developed expertise in the line of work, is responsible for planning and carrying out the assignment, resolving most of the conflicts that arise, coordinating the work with others as necessary, and interpreting policy on own initiative in terms of established objectives. In some assignments, the employee also determines the approach to be taken and the methodology to be used. The appellant's position does not fully meet Level 2-4. With independence from his supervisor, the appellant determines projects, deadlines, and work to be done, and plans and carries out assignments. However, he refers work conflicts to the supervisor, has little need to work with others or interpret work objectives, and is not required to interpret policies in terms of established objectives or methodologies as intended for positions at this level.

This factor is evaluated at Level 2-3 and 275 points are credited.

Factor 3, Guidelines, Level 3-3, 275 points

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

At Level 3-3, the highest level for this factor described in the standard, assistants work with new requirements or new applications for which only general guidelines are available. Assistants use judgment in adjusting the most appropriate guidelines to fit new processing requirements or develop new methods for accomplishing the work. Assistants adapt guidelines when their judgment is based on an understanding of the intent of the guidelines. Similar to assistants at Level 3-3, the appellant plans and carries out his work with reference to general guidelines established by written policy and direction. He exercises judgment in their application and adaptation to respond to user requests for digital map products or related data.

At Level 3-4 of the Primary Standard, administrative policies and precedents are applicable but stated in general terms. Guidelines for performing the work are scarce or of limited use. Assistants use initiative and resourcefulness in deviating from traditional methods or researching trends and patterns to develop new methods, criteria, or proposed new policies. In contrast, the appellant has access to numerous reference sources, e.g., Forest Service Manuals, software/hardware manuals, technical manuals, project work plans, procedure directives, supplemental guides, and written and verbal directives. He does not deviate substantially from established methods or develop novel work approaches. His position does not meet Level 3-4.

This factor is evaluated at Level 3-3 and 275 points are credited.

Factor 4, Complexity, Level 4-3, 150 points

This factor covers the nature, number, variety and intricacy of tasks, steps, processes or methods in the work performed; the difficulty in identifying what needs to be done; and the difficulty and originality involved in performing the work.

The appellant's position is comparable to Level 4-3 where assistants perform a variety of tasks involving discrete methods and procedures or a variety of related tasks that require a sequence of actions involving differing methods and procedures. The decision regarding what is to be done results from studying each job order, assignment or processing problem situation. Consistent with this level, the appellant engages in a variety of complex technical steps associated with the manual and digital creation of maps, overlays and their spatial relationships in response to customer requests. This requires extreme precision in applying existing and evolving spatial analysis procedures. The appellant examines written requests, consulting directly with the customer if necessary, and devises and implements a plan of action based on negotiation and his understanding of the customer's needs.

At Level 4-4, assistants perform problem solving duties involving a wide range of problem or error conditions in equipment, program data and processing methods and procedures. The assistant makes decisions and devises solutions based on program, equipment and systems knowledge. The appellant's position does not require him to perform the kind and level of problem-solving contemplated at this level. The appellant is not required generally to solve

hardware, software, or systems problems. The complexity of the appellant's duties do not equate to Level 4-4.

This factor is evaluated at Level 4-3 and 150 points are credited.

Factor 5, Scope and effect, Level 5-3, 150 points

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

The appellant's position meets Level 5-3, the highest level for this factor described in the standard, where work is distinguished from the next lower level by solving problems conventional to data processing although solutions are not always covered by established or standardized procedures. Results of the work affect the efficiency of processing services, adequacy of products used in subsequent activities, and processing procedures and methods. Although it lacks systems maintenance and operational duties, the appellant's position is comparable to the first of four work examples cited at Level 5-3. The appellant explains to customers the capabilities of ARC-GIS software and works with them to define work products he is able to produce using the software. Using AML, the appellant writes and edits automated procedures which are then available for use by other GIS specialists and potentially by users of ARC-VIEW, a version of the software available to many Forest Service employees at their desktops. The appellant also establishes and maintains data related to the digital map products he produces. These data are used as a significant basis for research and analysis of forest resource issues in Zone 2.

At Level 5-4 of the Primary Standard, work involves establishing criteria; formulating projects; assessing program effectiveness; or investigating or analyzing a variety of unusual conditions, problems, or questions. The work product or service affects a wide range of agency activities, major activities or industrial concerns, or the operation of other agencies. The appellant's position does not meet Level 5-4 either in scope or effect. It does not involve the program management and direction envisioned, nor does it affect the significant portions of governmental or industrial enterprise contemplated at this level.

This factor is evaluated at Level 5-3 and 150 points are credited.

Factor 6, Personal contacts, Level 6-2, 25 points

Factor 6 includes face-to-face and telephone contacts with persons not in the supervisory chain.

The appellant's contacts meet Level 6-2, the highest level for this factor described in the standard, where contacts are with employees in the same agency who are outside the data processing organization, employees outside the agency, or contractor's representatives. The appellant has regular contact with Forest Resource Specialists in Zone 2, as well as contact with employees of other agencies and members of the public. As at Level 6-2, these contacts are structured and routine and the role of each participant is readily determined.

The appellant's position does not meet Level 6-3 of the Primary Standard. At that level, contacts are with individuals or groups from outside the employing agency in a moderately unstructured setting. For example, the contacts are not established on a routine basis, the purpose and extent of each contact is different, and the role and authority of each party is identified and developed during the course of the contact. Typical of contacts at this level are those with people in their capacities as attorneys; contractors; or representatives of professional organizations, the news media, or public action groups. The appellant's contacts are not normally with the types of individuals described at Level 6-3, and the contacts do not involve the variety of issues intended at this level.

This factor is evaluated at Level 6-2 and 25 points are assigned.

Factor 7, Purpose of contacts, Level 7-2, 50 points

This factor covers the purpose of personal contacts, which ranges from factual exchanges of information to situations involving significant or controversial issues and differing viewpoints, goals, or objectives.

The purpose of the appellant's contacts meets Level 7-2, the highest level for this factor described in the standard. At this level, the purpose of personal contacts is to plan or coordinate changes in scheduling requirements or priorities as a result of data or equipment related problems; to participate with users in planning and coordinating new or modified requirements when the work fits generally within system options, schedules, etc.; or to plan user participation, methodology, and deadlines for new projects. Comparable to this level, the appellant meets with Forest Resource Specialists to discuss work objectives within the scope of the GIS and reach agreement on project deadlines.

Level 7-3 is not met. As described in the Primary Standard, the purpose of contacts at this level is to influence, motivate, interrogate, or control people or groups. The people contacted may be fearful, skeptical, uncooperative, or dangerous. The appellant's contacts are not for the purposes described at this level.

This factor is evaluated at Level 7-2 and 50 points are assigned.

Factor 8, Physical demands, Level 8-1, 5 points

This factor covers the requirements and physical demands placed on the employee by the work assignment. This includes physical characteristics and abilities and physical exertion involved in the work.

At Level 8-1, the work is generally sedentary, although there may be some nominal walking or standing for short periods of time or carrying of light loads (e.g., paper, books, and reports) that require only moderate physical ability and physical stress. The appellant's position fully meets Level 8-1.

The appellant's position does not meet Level 8-2, which requires extended periods of standing, walking, stretching, bending, and stooping or carrying of loads that may weigh as much as 45 pounds. Except for occasional field trips involving moderate walking, the majority of the appellant's time is spent sitting at a workstation. This factor is evaluated at Level 8-1 and 5 points are credited.

Factor 9, Work environment, Level 9-1, 5 points

This factor considers the risks and discomforts in the employee's physical surroundings or the nature of the work assigned and the safety and occupational health regulations required.

At Level 9-1, the work involves common risks or discomforts requiring normal safety precautions typical of offices, meeting rooms, libraries, etc. The work area is adequately lighted, heated, and ventilated. The appellant's work environment consists of the everyday risks and discomforts of offices and similar work sites, warranting evaluation at Level 9-1.

The appellant's position does not meet Level 9-2, which involves moderate risk requiring exercise of safety precautions. At this level, special clothing or protective equipment is not normally required although there is moderate risk of bodily injury. The appellant's work environment is an office, with occasional field trips exposing him to normal everyday outdoor hazards. The appellant's position does not require the exercise of safety precautions typical for positions at Level 9-2. This factor is evaluated at Level 9-1 and 5 points are credited.

Summary

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Points</i>
1. Knowledge required by the position	1-4	550
2. Supervisory controls	2-3	275
3. Guidelines	3-3	275
4. Complexity	4-3	150
5. Scope and effect	5-3	150
6. Personal contacts	6-2	25
7. Purpose of contacts	7-2	50
8. Physical demands	8-1	5
9. Work environment	9-1	<u>5</u>
<i>Total</i>		1485

The appellant's position totals 1485 points which falls in the GS-7 range (1355-1600). Therefore, in accordance with the grade conversion table in the GS-335 standard, his position is properly graded at GS-7.

Decision

The appellant's position is properly classified as Computer Assistant, GS-335-7.