

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

Appellant: [appellant]

Agency classification: Office Automation Assistant
GS-326-6

Organization: Public Affairs Staff
[state] State Conservationist's Office
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Department of Agriculture
[location]

OPM decision: Office Automation Assistant
GS-326-5

OPM decision number: C-0326-05-03

/s/ Judith L. Frenzel

Judith L. Frenzel
Classification Appeals Officer

November 12, 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).

Since this decision lowers the grade of the appealed position, 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 511.702. 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 appellant is entitled to grade or pay retention, or both, under 5 U.S.C. 5362 and 5363 and 5 CFR 536. If the appellant is entitled to grade retention, the two-year retention period begins on the date this decision is implemented.

Decision sent to:

[appellant's name and address]

Human Resources Officer
[state] State Conservationist's Office
Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
[address]

Director
Human Resources Management Division
[name] Regional Office
Natural Resources Conservation Service
U. S. Department of Agriculture
[address]

Director
Office of Human Resources Management
Natural Resources Conservation Service
U. S. Department of Agriculture
14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Room 6210-S
Washington, DC 20250

Acting Director of Human Resources Management
USDA-OHRM-PPPD
U.S. Department of Agriculture
J.L. Whitten Building, Room 302-W

1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Introduction

On August 11, 2003, the Dallas Field Services Group accepted a classification appeal from [appellant]. The appellant's position is currently classified as Office Automation Assistant (OAA), GS-326-6, and is assigned to the Public Affairs Staff, [state] State Conservationist's Office, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Department of Agriculture, in [city and state]. She believes the position should be classified as Visual Information Specialist, GS-1084-7/9. We received the agency's administrative report on September 10, 2003. We have accepted and decided this appeal under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.).

Background information

On November 2, 1999, the appellant's supervisor requested a desk audit of her position to determine the correct series. There is some question as to whether an actual desk audit was conducted. The appellant and her supervisor say there was a desk audit and the Human Resources Office's (HRO) says that it evaluated a statement of duties provided to it. The HRO's May 23, 2001, correspondence to the supervisor states that the supervisor provided the HRO with a revised statement of duties on June 20, 2000. The memorandum to the appellant from the supervisor, also dated June 20, 2000, states that the appellant prepared the proposed position description. The HRO advised the supervisor on May 23, 2001, that it had determined that the revised statement of duties was covered by the Visual Information Series, GS-1084. Since this series is two-grade interval and the OAA series is one-grade interval, the position would need to be filled competitively, under agency procedures. The position was not announced and on August 5, 2003, the appellant submitted an appeal to us.

To help decide this appeal, we conducted a telephone audit of the position with the appellant on September 18, 2003, and a follow-up discussion on September 25. We also conducted telephone interviews with the appellant's supervisor on September 18, with a follow-up discussion on September 25. Additionally, on September 25, we spoke via telephone with an individual on the Conservation Communications Staff of the NRCS [name] Regional Office in [city and state]. We conducted an on-site audit with the appellant on October 9, 2003. In reaching our decision, we have carefully reviewed the audit and interview findings and all other information of record provided by the appellant and her agency, including her official position description (PD), number [number]. Both the appellant and her supervisor agreed the PD is accurate as written, but believe the duties describe the work of a Visual Information Specialist rather than an OAA.

General issues

The appellant provided a proposed PD with her request for appeal. A position description 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. Classification appeal regulations permit OPM to investigate or audit a position and decide an appeal on the basis of the duties assigned by management and performed by the employee. We classify a real operating position, not simply the PD. We base our appeal decisions on the actual duties and responsibilities assigned by management and performed by the appellant. We found the PD of

record contains the major duties of the position and meets the standards of adequacy for classification of the position. Those duties have been incorporated by reference into our decision. We have considered the proposed PD only as it is relevant to further explain the appellant's work.

Additionally, the appellant believes that the work she does is similar to that performed by other positions within NRCS that have been placed in the GS-1084 series. By law, we must classify positions solely by comparing the appellant's current duties and responsibilities to OPM position classification standards and guidelines (5 U.S.C. 5106, 5107, and 5112). Since comparison to the standards is the exclusive method for classifying positions, we cannot compare the appellant's current duties to other positions, which may or may not be classified correctly, as a basis for deciding an appeal.

Like OPM, the appellant's agency must classify positions based on comparison to OPM standards and guidelines. However, the agency has primary responsibility for ensuring its positions are classified consistently with OPM appeal decisions. If the appellant considers her position so similar to others that they all warrant the same classification, she may pursue the matter by writing to her agency's human resources headquarters. In doing so, she 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 the appellant's position, the agency must correct the classification of the positions to be consistent with this appeal decision. Otherwise, the agency should explain to the appellant the differences between her position and the others.

Position information

The appellant's primary responsibility is to provide support to the Public Affairs Office. This office is comprised of six positions: the appellant; her supervisor, a Public Affairs Specialist, GS-1035-12; a Secretary, GS-318-6; and three Public Affairs Specialist, GS-1035-11, positions (two of which are vacant.) The three GS-1035 positions are out stationed in three different cities. The appellant's work involves desktop publishing of internal and external NRCS newsletters, brochures, publications, and other written/visual media.

The office produces a variety of annual reports, informational materials related to soil conservation programs, plant information, and graphics for the various Resource Conservation and Development Areas and other USDA partner offices. These products include a variety of photographic, computer graphic, and narrative reports, as well as informational brochures and flyers. A pocket-size conservation planning calendar and small conservation-theme graphics used to produce small temporary tattoos for childrens' handouts are other examples. The Public Affairs staff or other field staff clients prepare a draft of the material needed. The appellant reviews the various texts provided to her and may suggest changes to format, design, or placement of material based on her knowledge of standard formats and instructions and the software capabilities. The appellant applies her knowledge of desktop publishing software such as PageMaker, Adobe Illustrator, Corel Draw, and Photo Shop, word processing, and graphic applications, as well as scanners and printers to produce publications in camera-ready form. These electronic files are then sent to another office for printing. Her duties also require her to

apply a working knowledge of the publication styles, procedures, and printing methods used by the agency. She also maintains automated storage of repetitive written/visual media.

Series and standard determination

The Visual Information Series, GS-1084, is a two-grade interval series that involves work in communicating information through visual means, including the design and display of various visual materials. Visual Information Specialists select the necessary visual materials, design the placement and appearance of the materials and plan type styles, color schemes and textures. The work in this series requires a broad knowledge of the principles and techniques of visual design. Excluded from coverage by this series is work involving the use of computer graphics software packages to produce illustrations, charts, or graphs, or to lay out printed material, where established formats and ready made images in the software offer little opportunity for the exercise of artistic judgment or skill beyond deciding the proportions and placement. Such positions are to be classified in the GS-326 Office Automation Series.

We have also considered the GS-1087 Editorial Assistance Series. Positions in this series involve editorial support in preparing manuscripts for publication and verifying factual information. Such support work includes editing manuscripts for basic grammar and clarity of expression as well as marking copy for format. Editorial clerks and assistants edit for punctuation, syllabification, spelling, capitalization, accepted English usage, and grammatical structure. They also determine publication format and may place tables, charts, and other graphics in text.

The appellant is responsible for formatting various general-purpose informational documents, including brochures, flyers, posters and newsletters. The supervisor stated that the position requires a qualified typist because word processing is an integral part of the position. Her duties also require knowledge of desktop publishing. Much of the work she does must be formatted according to nation-wide guidelines. The appellant accomplishes her duties based on the application of established precedents or guidelines. She does not select photographs or produce original artwork, typical of the GS-1084 occupation, nor does the work requires the high degree of analytical ability as well as intensive knowledge of the principles and practices of visual design. The appellant receives drafts of materials from the Public Affairs staff or field office clients. While she may correct any obvious spelling or grammatical errors she finds, she is not responsible for the level of editing of text and/or drafting of text typical of positions in the GS-1087 occupational series. The primary knowledge and skill requirements to perform the duties of the position are the keyboard skills and knowledge of OA systems, including desktop publishing. These requirements are included in the GS-326 Office Automation and Clerical Assistance Series and are properly evaluated by use of the Office Automation Grade Evaluation Guide (OAGEG).

Title determination

Position titles in the GS-326 series are linked to the grade of the position. Office Automation Clerk is the title for positions at GS-4 and below. Office Automation Assistant is the title for positions at GS-5 and above.

Grade level determination

The GS-326 standard directs that office automation work be evaluated by application of the OAGEG. This guide is written in the Factor Evaluation System format and contains nine factors for use in making a grade level determination. A point value is assigned to each factor based on comparison with the position and the factor level descriptions in the guide. In order for a point value to be assigned, it must be fully equivalent to the overall intent of the selected factor level description. The total points assigned are converted to a grade by use of the grade conversion table in the guide.

Factor 1, Knowledge required by the position

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

At Level 1-3, the employee must apply knowledge of varied and advanced functions of one software type; varied functions of more than one software type; or other equivalent knowledge of automated systems. The employee applies this knowledge to produce a wide range of documents that often require complex formats, such as graphics or tables within text, to edit and reformat electronic drafts, and to bring photographs up to publishing standards.

Level 1-4, the highest level described in the standard, requires knowledge of the capabilities, operating characteristics, and advanced functions of a variety of types of office automation software and knowledge of the similarities, differences, and integration of the different software types. This level of knowledge is applied to select the most appropriate software type for a specific office need, to integrate different software types into a single document, e.g., to retrieve data, convert it into graphic form, and incorporate it into the text of a report; to devise new methods of automated office support; to resolve problems with current automated office support methods; or to complete other nonstandard assignments using varied office automation technologies.

The appellant applies knowledge comparable to Level 1-4. She performs a substantial range of operations, such as importing graphics and pictures, and to produce complex formats. She must be knowledgeable of the similarities and differences of the different software types, and the procedures pertinent to their integration, such as integrating maps, graphs, and charts into a report. She must be knowledgeable of the incompatibilities typically encountered when integrating pictures into text; and can set the parameters correctly without extensive trial and error. Word processing software (Word) is used for preparing and editing textual documents.

Graphics software (PowerPoint) is used to prepare charts, presentations, and flyers. Desktop publishing software (Photoshop, Corel Draw, and Adobe Illustrator) is used to publish newsletters and reports, including color correcting, cropping, and cleaning up photographs used in these publications. The appellant must communicate effectively with clients and staff on a wide range of subjects pertaining to graphic arts, desktop publishing and printing procedures.

This factor is evaluated at Level 1-4 and is credited with 550 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 review of completed work.

At Level 2-3, assignments are given with information on general administrative changes, deadlines, and priorities. The employee works independently to plan and carry out steps for completing assignments in accordance with established office instructions and practices for office automation. When current practices or deviations in an assignment cause problems, the incumbent initiates resolution and coordinates efforts with other employees involved in or affected by the nonstandard procedures. Completed work is evaluated for technical soundness, usefulness, and conformance with office operating requirements and needs. The methods used to produce work normally are not reviewed.

The position meets Level 2-3, which is the highest level described in the guide. The appellant completes routine assignments without guidance or instructions from the supervisor, often receiving work directly from staff throughout the State Office and its field offices. She works independently in completing assignments in accordance with established procedures and is expected to resolve problems on her own initiative.

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

Factor 3, Guidelines

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

At Level 3-2, guidelines include both detailed step-by-step instructions for specific office automation tasks and more general procedural guidelines in the form of manufacturer's manuals and tutorials for users, agency correspondence procedures, style manuals, technical dictionaries, sample work products, etc. Employees must select and apply detailed instructions for each office automation task or function, when available. For tasks not covered by specific guidelines, they must search more general guidelines to determine the specific steps to apply. Judgment is required because of the number and similarity of guidelines or the availability of alternative procedures for accomplishing a function. Situations in which guidelines cannot be applied are referred to the supervisor or an automation specialist.

At Level 3-3, much of the work requires adaptation of available guides, such as user's manuals, to meet requirements for new tasks or to solve processing problems either encountered in the

employee's own work or referred by others. Judgment is required to search manuals for methods that can be applied and to adapt those methods to specific requirements. Employees also exercise initiative and judgment in deviating from existing instructions or practices to resolve operating problems or to develop more efficient processing procedures. Frequently, the methods developed become guidelines for other employees in the unit. Problems that cannot be resolved by adapting existing guidelines are referred to automation specialists.

The appellant's position compares most closely to Level 3-2. The guidelines used by her for desktop publishing assignments primarily include manufacturer's manuals and tutorials, and agency publication procedures. When specific guidelines are unavailable, the appellant searches general guidelines to determine the specific steps to apply in using office automation. Situations not covered by the guidelines are referred to an automation specialist or other systems' support personnel. Judgment is used in selecting from alternative procedures to accomplish a function. The content of the visual product is usually specified, but the formats are not always provided in detail. Guidelines in this area consist primarily of similar visual projects previously done for the organization, instructions from originators, and instructions from the supervisor.

The full extent of Level 3-3 is not met in that she is not required to regularly adapt available guidelines to meet requirements for new tasks or to solve processing problems. The appellant does not regularly deviate from existing instructions or practices to resolve operating problems or to develop more efficient processing procedures that may become guidelines for other employees.

This factor is properly evaluated at Level 3-2 and is credited with 125 points.

Factor 4, Complexity

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.

At Level 4-2, the documents, formats, and specific processing functions involved require a varying number and sequence of steps and use of different functions from one assignment to another. Assignments at this level involve using one type of software to create or edit a variety of standard documents; or using two or more types of software, e.g., word processing and database management, to process different types of documents, paragraphs, tables, reports, etc. Processing steps and procedures required to complete assignments are varied and numerous, differing in terms of the type of software used, the type of document or specific report to be produced or edited, the specific formatting required for a document, the existence of pre-recorded formats, and other differences of a factual nature. In addition, employees at this level are expected to recognize discrepancies and correct or question originators in such matters as improper formatting; errors in spelling, grammar, or punctuation; missing information; or discrepancies between the nature of the material and the processing instructions.

Work at Level 4-3 involves using several types of software packages for different office needs. In deciding how to proceed, the employee considers many factors that are varied and that are not

always clearly established. In performing the work, the employee applies judgment in considering and selecting from among many different software types in light of the range and peculiarities of the unit's information processing capabilities and requirements. The employee regularly develops methods and procedures for office automation tasks, and identifies and solves problems in existing methods or procedures.

The complexity of the appellant's work matches Level 4-2. The appellant uses different steps and functions from one assignment to another, creating different types of documents using more than one type of software. For instance, she uses word processing software, graphics software, and desktop publishing software to produce various newsletters and reports. She also uses different types of software to process different types of documents. For instance, she uses PowerPoint to produce charts, graphs, and presentations and Word to produce textual documents. The appellant determines the specific software package to use and the specific format for different types of documents. The steps used differ depending on the type of software used, type of document desired, and the formatting requirements for each document.

Level 4-3 is not fully met. While the appellant selects from among a variety of software types, she does not perform assignments that require her to develop methods and procedures for office automation tasks nor does she identify and solve problems in existing methods or procedures. The appellant does not regularly perform duties of comparable complexity to those illustrated at Level 4-3. For instance, she does not identify automation requirements, select the software types, and develop the procedures and functions needed to meet desktop publishing requirements, identify office automation duties that can be done faster by using macros, and create macros that execute a sequence of functions automatically.

This factor is properly evaluated at Level 4-2 and is credited with 75 points.

Factor 5, Scope and effect

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

At Level 5-1, the purpose of the work is to perform specific, recurring tasks required to maintain electronic records, and/or to produce various items in draft or final form. Production usually includes steps such as: selecting and adhering to the proper format; determining the spacing and arrangement of material; making entries to and retrieving data from electronic records; and checking references, distribution requirements, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The services performed facilitate the work of the originators of the documents or the users of the data maintained.

The purpose of work at Level 5-2 is to collect, select, organize, and provide information in oral or written form. The work is performed in accordance with established rules, regulations, procedures, and office automation practices. The work affects the way in which other employees document, store, receive, or transmit information, and increases the availability and usefulness of the information involved.

As at Level 5-1, the appellant performs office automation duties that involve the production of a variety of items such as newsletters, brochures, flyers, charts, presentations, and reports. She selects the proper format, determines proper arrangement of material, enters, and retrieves data from electronic records, and checks grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The purpose of the work is to produce visual layouts that encourage reader attention and enhance readability and comprehension. The work facilitates the work of the originators and the users.

Level 5-2 is not fully met. While the work products affect the quality of the publications produced by the organization, the appellant's work does not affect the way other employees document, store, receive, or transmit information. This level is appropriate for positions that are primarily concerned with developing methods and procedures for office automation tasks and solving problems in existing methods and procedures.

This factor is properly evaluated at Level 5-1 and is credited with 25 points.

Factor 6, Personal contacts and Factor 7, Purpose of contacts

Factor 6 and Factor 7 are evaluated relative to each other. The nature of the contacts, credited under Factor 6, and the purpose of those contacts, credited under Factor 7, must be based on the same contacts. Credit for Factor 6 and Factor 7 is determined by reference to the chart contained in the guide.

Factor 6 includes contacts with persons not in the supervisory chain. Levels described under this factor are based on what is required to make the initial contact, the difficulty of communicating with those contacted, and the setting in which the contacts take place. Credit under this factor is allowed only for contacts that are essential for successful performance of the work and that have a demonstrable impact on the difficulty and responsibility of the work performed.

Level 1 is credited when contacts are with employees within the immediate work unit or related support units such as points-of-contact and document originators. Level 2 is credited when contacts are with employees at various levels throughout the agency who are involved in or affected by integrating or changing automated office procedures.

As at Level 1, the appellant's contacts for office automation tasks are primarily with employees of the State Office. While she has some contacts with counterparts at other State Offices, the National Publication Service Center staff, and staff of the agencies represented in NRCS Service Center's combined offices to provide services, she does not have regular and recurring contacts with employees under the settings described in Level 2.

This factor is evaluated at Level 1.

Factor 7 measures the purpose of the personal contacts. The purpose may range from factual exchanges of information to situations involving significant or controversial issues and differing viewpoints, goals, and objectives.

Level A is credited when the purpose of contacts is to exchange information about the assignment or methods to be used to complete the assignment. Level B is credited when the purpose of contacts is to plan, coordinate, and integrate work processes or work methods for office automation between and among related work units.

As at Level A, the purpose of the appellant's contacts is to exchange information about the assignment or methods to be used to complete the assignment, e.g., to provide information on desktop publishing capabilities, determine priorities of projects, or to discuss additions or revisions. These contacts are with document originators, with points-of-contact to receive data to update files, or with others to distribute electronic messages. The appellant does not engage in contacts that require the level of planning and coordination specified in Level B.

Factors 6 and 7 are evaluated at Level 1A and credited with 30 points.

Factor 8, Physical Demands

This factor covers the requirements and physical demands placed on the employee by the work assignment, including the physical characteristics and abilities required.

Level 8-1 is the highest level specified in the guide. At this level, the work is basically sedentary and requires no special physical demands. The appellant's position is properly evaluated at Level 8-1 and credited with 5 points.

Factor 9, Work Environment

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

Level 9-1 is the highest level specified in the guide. At this level, the work involves minimal risks and observance of safety precautions typical of office settings. The appellant's position is properly evaluated at Level 9-1 and credited with 5 points.

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	3-2	125
4. Complexity	4-2	75
5. Scope and effect	5-1	25
6. & 7. Personal contacts and Purpose of contacts	1-A	30
8. Physical demands	8-1	5
9. Work environment	9-1	5
<i>Total</i>		1090

1090 points fall within the grade point range for the GS-5 level (855 to 1100).

Decision

The appellant's position is properly classified as Office Automation Assistant, GS-325-5.