



United States Office of Personnel Management

Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness
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Standard: Factor Evaluation System Standards
Factor: Work environment
Issue: Applicability of Level 9-3 (50 points) in similar work settings

Identification of the Classification Issue

Can positions in the same hospital ward be rated differently with respect to Factor 9, Work Environment? This question arose in evaluating a Medical Clerk, GS-0679, position in a psychiatric ward. Level 9-3 (50 points) was credited to a position of Psychiatric Nursing Assistant, GS-0621, in the same ward for the element of unpredictability in the behavior of patients that might lead to physical attack. Should the Medical Clerk position that comes in daily contact with the same patients then also be credited with Level 9-3 on Factor 9?

Resolution

In this situation the Office of Personnel Management considered that the treatment team knows the psychiatric history and prognoses of the patients in their assigned areas and is aware of their moods and attitudes on a day-to-day basis. If a patient is unusually restless, hostile, or abusive, appropriate precautions are taken, e.g., medication, seclusion, etc. In the event that a patient loses control despite these precautions, it is generally the responsibility of nursing assistants or guards who have had special training to subdue the patient and apply restraints to prevent the patient from hurting himself or herself, other patients, hospital staff, or Government property.

The Medical Clerk works in a controlled environment, e.g., restricted range of personal contacts with patients. Therefore, it was determined that Level 9-3 is inappropriate for that position. However, in recognition of the additional stress in working in the ward office and special precautions taken (e.g., avoiding topics that might rile patients and taking measures to lock secure areas), Factor 9 in the Medical Clerk position was evaluated at Level 9-2, rather than Level 9-1.

This illustration emphasizes that it is not appropriate to apply, automatically, Level 9-3 to work environments (particularly to mines, correctional institutions, nuclear plants and vessels, and treatment facilities for contagious diseases). Instead, Factor 9 should be considered in relation to the requirements of an individual position:

- What is the hazard or physical discomfort?
- Must the employee exercise control to eliminate the hazard?
- What knowledges must the employee have to exercise this control?
- What safety training is required?
- Is the exposure to danger or discomfort on a regular and recurring basis?

Regulations pertaining to hazard pay differential for intermittent or irregular work (Federal Personnel Manual, Chapter 550) also provide insights into the interpretation of what is a hazard and when special precautions substantially eliminate hazards.