



United States Office of Personnel Management

Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness
Digest of Significant Classification Decisions and Opinions
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Standard: [Research Grade-Evaluation Guide](#)
Factor: N/A
Issue: Borderline point values

Identification of the Classification Issue

The issue arose when an agency asked the Office of Personnel Management to reconsider an OPM region's appeal decision which had resulted in an upgrade of a research scientist. The Research Grade-Evaluation Guide grade-determination chart indicates the grades to be assigned for various ranges of point totals. There are gaps between the point ranges, however, and a position that is credited with a point total in a gap is considered borderline. The Research Grade-Evaluation Guide states that a judgment determination should be made to assign the borderline position to either the higher or the lower of the two grades between which it falls. The judgment determination is to be based on aspects of the position that may not have been fully considered in arriving at the point values, and in consideration of best alignment with other properly classified positions.

The region's evaluation of the scientist's position according to the four factors in the Research Grade-Evaluation Guide credited a total of 44 points, which is considered borderline because it falls in the gap between GS-14 and GS-15. The region resolved the borderline determination by upgrading the position to GS-15, based on strengthening aspects that had not been credited under any of the four factors.

The agency objected, stating that its policy was to resolve all borderline point totals by assigning the lower grade, even when an employee downgrade would result.

Resolution

The Office of Personnel Management sustained the region's decision to upgrade the employee and determined that the agency's suggestion to resolve all borderline positions downward was contrary to the Research Grade-Evaluation Guide. If judgment were not to be exercised in such situations, the point conversion scale would not have provided gaps between grades. The effect of the agency's policy was to extend the point range for each grade by three points in order to eliminate the gap. For example, while the Research Grade-Evaluation specifies that the range for GS-14 is 36-42 points, the agency policy required that any score in the range 36-45 be converted to GS-14. Such a policy resulted in a substitution of an agency standard for an OPM published standard. This violated a provision of section 5107 of title 5, United States Code, which states in part that positions shall be classified "in conformance with standards published by the Office of Personnel Management"