



United States
Office of Personnel Management

Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness
Digest of Significant Classification Decisions and Opinions
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No. 21-07

Standards: [Boiler Plant Operator, 5402](#)
[Utility Systems Operator, 5406](#)
[Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, 5415](#)

Factor: N/A

Issue: Crediting of “Operator in charge”

Identification of the Classification Issue

This issue arose in three appeal decisions from two separate OPM oversight divisions and a later reconsideration of one of the initial appeals. The appellants were given or had requested an additional grade credit for functioning as the “operator in charge” on an assigned shift. The same criteria also appear in the job grading standards for Electric Power Controller, 5407; Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator, 5408; Water Treatment Plant Operator, 5409; and Fuel Distribution System Operator, 5413.

Resolution

The job grading standards describe five specific conditions under which one additional grade may be credited for responsibility as “operator in charge.” The standards state that only those positions which clearly meet the conditions may be granted the additional grade credit. The Classification Programs Division issued an advisory opinion confirming that the conditions defined in the standards represent the minimum requirement and that all the requirements must be clearly met before the additional grade credit can be awarded. Those conditions, and the OPM decision on each condition, are:

1. The operator at the full performance level must be assigned shift responsibility on a regular and recurring basis. Only one operator on a shift can be assigned this responsibility.

OPM found that this condition could be met if the operator worked alone on a shift on a regular and recurring basis for the systems involved. However, at one location, both utility systems operators and air conditioning equipment operators were given the additional grade credit although the agency recognized that the utility systems operator controlled the air conditioning equipment by remote monitoring equipment. In that situation, only the utility systems operator could be given the additional grade credit.

2. The operator follows written instructions supplied by the supervisor or by the “operator in charge” on the previous shift.

OPM found that this condition was met when the operators received written and oral instructions and operating information from the supervisor or the operator on the previous shift.

3. The “operator in charge” typically performs duties which are more responsible and require a slightly higher level of skill and knowledge than the full performance level operators who are on duty where a supervisor is available. This includes a thorough knowledge of the entire utility system and the user requirements to locate problems and initiate immediate corrective action.

OPM found that this condition could be met when the operator was required to possess knowledge of the entire utility systems of the facility (e.g., heating, air conditioning, electrical distribution, water, and sewer systems) and was required to apply this knowledge in locating problems in those systems in the absence of a supervisor. In requesting reconsideration of one of the appeal decisions, the agency argued that responsibility to respond to “after hours” problems within the facility to make minor repairs or notify appropriate personnel was sufficient to meet this condition. Examples of this work included resetting tripped circuit breakers and unplugging stopped commodes. However, OPM determined that this condition covered only the operation of the utility systems and did not cover collateral responsibility for other equipment within the facility on an irregular basis, especially when the work performed was typically lower graded work.

OPM found some confusion about whether the terms “full performance level” and “journey level” were synonymous. They are not. The term “full performance level” as used in this context refers to the highest level of work performed at a facility above the worker or intermediate level. The term “journey level” as used in the trades and craft occupations denotes an experienced worker capable of independent performance and does not necessarily equate to the term “full performance level.” For example, Grade 10 and Grade 11 are both journey levels in the Electronics Mechanic, 2604 occupation. Depending on the work performed in an activity, either of these levels could be the full performance level for that activity.

4. In the absence of written contingency procedures, the “operator in charge” has responsibility to decide whether to shut down the operation or attempt to bypass problems until corrective action has been completed if the equipment still in operation can handle the load.

OPM found that most utility plants have written operating procedures available to guide the operator. These procedures may specify the circumstances under which the operator will shut down equipment, thereby limiting the discretion of the operator. In one of the appealed cases, OPM found that the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations required that written contingency plans be in place for all utility systems and equipment, which precluded the appealed positions from meeting this condition.

In one appeal, the employee operated a system with a single boiler. The decisions available were limited to determining whether the system should be brought down. If that action had to be taken, the building affected was closed. OPM found the situation fell short of the intent of the standard which requires deciding whether to shut down a boiler and, if so, whether to fire up another boiler and attempt to bypass the trouble until corrective action is completed.

5. Typically, the “operator in charge” has responsibility to determine what work must be done and has the authority to approve overtime or call in necessary maintenance personnel. The operator is responsible for relaying instructions to the next shift operator including problems encountered and actions taken.

OPM found that this condition also related only to the utility systems in the facility and did not relate to any collateral responsibility for “after hours” emergency repairs to other equipment (see the discussion under item 3 above). The operator must have the authority to determine the scope of work to be accomplished and to either approve overtime for personnel already on site or recall personnel to perform the work without obtaining approval of a supervisor. In one of the appeal cases, OPM found that recall of employees was the responsibility of an “administrative officer of the day” at the facility and not within the authority of the position designated as “operator in charge.” In the other appeal case, OPM found that the supervisor was notified by telephone of all significant problems, including those necessitating the recall of employees. These situations preclude crediting this condition.

The guidance in the job grading standards indicates that additional grade credit for “operator in charge” should not be granted routinely but should be reserved for those situations where the conditions set forth in the job grading standards are clearly met.