

U.S. Office of Personnel Management
Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness
Classification Appeals and FLSA Programs

Dallas Oversight Division
1100 Commerce Street, Room 4C22
Dallas, TX 75242-1027

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

Appellant: [appellant's name]

Agency classification: Computer Assistant
GS-335-6

Organization: [National Forests and National Grasslands]
[Region]
U.S. Forest Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
[location]

OPM decision: Computer Assistant
GS-335-6

OPM decision number: C-0335-06-04

/s/ Bonnie J. Brandon

Bonnie J. Brandon
Classification Appeals Officer

February 8, 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's name and address]

[appellant's Human Resources Office]

USDA-OHRM-OD
U.S. Department of Agriculture
J.L. Whitten Building, Room 402 W
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Washington, DC 20250

Introduction

On October 16, 2001, the Dallas Oversight Division of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a classification appeal from [the appellant]. We received his agency's administrative report on November 5, 2001. The appellant's position is currently classified as Computer Assistant, GS-335-6. The appellant believes that his duties warrant classification as Information Technology Specialist (Internet), GS-2210-11. His position is assigned to the [National Forests, National Grasslands, Region], U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, in [location]. Before filing with OPM, the appellant received a decision, issued September 25, 2001, on the appeal he filed with Forest Service's [Region]. That office sustained the classification of his position as Computer Assistant, GS-335-6. We have accepted and decided this appeal under section 5112(b) of title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.).

We conducted telephone audits with the appellant on December 7, 2001, and January 4, 2002. We also interviewed his first-level supervisor by telephone on December 14, 2001. In deciding this appeal, we fully considered the information obtained by telephone and all information in the appeal record provided by the appellant and his agency, including his current work assignments and position description (PD), [number].

General issues

The immediate supervisor certified that the appellant's PD is current and accurate. The appellant believes that his PD accurately reflects the major duties and responsibilities of his position. However, he believes that minor clarifications should be made to Factors 1 and 3 of the PD. OPM decides appeals based on the actual duties and responsibilities assigned by management and performed by the employee. Therefore, we have evaluated the work actually assigned to and performed by the appellant in determining the appropriate series and grade for his position.

The appellant indicated that his assignments should be evaluated at a higher grade, in part, because of his personal qualifications. According to information provided by the appellant, he owns a computer business where he designs and maintains Web sites for others, and he is a certified IBM repair technician. His immediate supervisor also stated that the appellant's personal qualifications exceed those required for a GS-6 Computer Assistant. The qualifications considered in classifying positions are those required to perform the work of the position. Therefore, we will consider the appellant's personal qualifications only insofar as they are required to perform current duties and responsibilities.

According to information provided by the appellant, he performs duties from time to time that are not explicitly included in his PD. For example, the appellant participated on a regional World Wide Web design team, led by the Deputy Regional Forester, to develop the technical aspects of a template. The template was developed so that the region's various Web sites would be visually consistent with one another. Contractors created a picture for the template and the appellant developed the template, which took about four days. After the testing phase is completed, the appellant anticipates going to various work sites to educate users on the proper use of the template. He indicated that it will take approximately a month of his time to ensure the success of the template. When appellants perform one-time only or temporary duties, we

refer to the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards* for guidance on considering that work when determining the grade of the position. The *Introduction* states that duties that are not regular and recurring cannot affect the grade of a position. It further states that such duties should be reevaluated if they become a regular part of a position by extending over a long period of time (for example, several months) and it is reasonable to assume that the duties will continue to recur. Since there is no evidence that the appellant performs work such as the template project on a continuing basis, we cannot consider those duties in determining the grade of his position.

In support of his appeal for a higher grade, the appellant also provided the results of an informal survey he conducted of Forest Service employees with Web responsibilities that shows most of those positions are at grades higher than the appellant's. He did not provide any information to indicate that those duties control the grades of the positions. By law, we must classify positions solely by comparing their 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 position to others as a basis for deciding his appeal.

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 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 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 difference between his position and the others.

The appellant believes that the standard, dated February 1980, 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). While grade level criteria do not cover all possible combinations of work, careful application of the appropriate position classification standard to the work that the appellant performs should yield the correct grade of his position. Any of his duties not specifically referenced in the standard can still be evaluated by comparison with similar or related duties described in the standard and with the entire pattern of grade level characteristics.

The appellant also discusses the large amount of work that he performs. However, volume of work cannot be considered in determining the grade of a position (*The Classifier's Handbook*, Chapter 5).

Position information

The appellant is a member of the administrative staff unit that provides technical advice and services to users regarding computer systems and telecommunications. The unit, which also

includes computer specialists and telecommunications specialists, is supervised by a GS-301-12 Information Systems Manager.

The unit provides support to approximately 633 users. The appellant supports the unit by providing computer support and advisory services to users and maintaining the unit's inventory of about 1,400 computers. He sets up and maintains personal computers for the following six [Ranger Districts]. He also provides services to two work centers, one in [location], and one in [location]; the [National Grassland] which has one Ranger District; and the [National Grassland] which has two Ranger Districts. Sharing these responsibilities with two computer specialists, the appellant travels to the various work sites to set up personal computers and provide informal training to users on the maintenance of computer hardware and software. The appellant also shares responsibility with other employees for troubleshooting hardware and software problems, identifying the origin of the problem, and ensuring the problem is resolved. Troubleshooting user problems sometimes requires the appellant to travel to the different work sites. Server-related problems are typically referred to the computer specialists within his unit. The appellant occasionally attends training, such as Microsoft FrontPage 2002, provided by vendors and then he passes on the information to users during informal training sessions.

The appellant's responsibilities also include management and maintenance of the public and restricted Web sites, making certain that they meet the established policy and guidelines regarding Web pages. With the exception of the [Ranger Districts], the content of the Web page is completed by another employee. The appellant is responsible for editing and posting the information on the Web site. Before posting to the site, the appellant ensures that the information is in compliance with section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires that electronic and information technology developed, maintained, or used by the Federal government be accessible to people with disabilities. When appropriate, the appellant posts formatted data to the site using a File Transfer Protocol program. He also fields inquiries in the Webmaster mailbox by responding to the inquiries himself or forwarding them to appropriate officials for reply.

The appellant's PD and other material of record furnish much more information about his duties and responsibilities and how they are performed.

Series, title, and standard determination

The appellant disagrees with his agency's assignment of his position to the GS-335 series, which covers one-grade interval positions involving performance or supervision of data processing support and service functions for users of digital computer systems. Employees in this occupation support or assist other employees who design, operate, or use automatic data processing systems applications and products by performing work in one or a mix of functional areas. The standard identifies one of the functional areas as providing direct support to computer specialist positions. Such support work typically requires knowledge of the scope, contents, and purposes of program documentation. The duties may also require a working knowledge of programming languages. Some 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. This knowledge may also be supplemented by knowledge of internal software routines.

The appellant believes the work he performs meets the criteria in the GS-2210 series as described in the GS-2200 Job Family Standard. The GS-2210 series is a two-grade interval series for positions with responsibility to plan, design, develop, acquire, document, test, implement, integrate, maintain, or modify computer systems. Equipment work in the GS-2210 series focuses on system architecture, including defining system hardware requirements. This work exceeds the level of work assigned to and performed by the appellant. The GS-2200 standard discusses how to distinguish between specialist and assistant work. It states that positions responsible for monitoring the operation of small networked systems, adding network users, updating passwords, installing or assisting users in installing commercial off-the-shelf software, configuring hardware and software according to instructions, troubleshooting minor problems, and responding to less complex user questions are excluded from the GS-2210 series. These functions and similar ones do not require regular and recurring application of a full range of knowledge of information technology principles, concepts, and methods. The appellant's position is a direct match to this exclusion. Therefore, the GS-2200 standard may not be used to evaluate the appellant's position.

The duties and responsibilities of the appellant's position are characteristic of the kind of work described as "support to computer specialists" in the occupational information section of the GS-335 standard. The standard also states that some computer assistants perform duties much like those assigned to entry and trainee level computer specialists. They assist computer specialists in work that requires knowledge of hardware, peripheral devices, and memory storage. The appellant's position also contains aspects of work described in the standard as "support to subject-matter specialists" where computer clerks and assistants provide computer support to users through networks. Work varies in difficulty ranging from highly structured and recurring tasks to very specialized tasks. Some employees discuss information requirements with users and give advice on how to access the data. The work assigned to the appellant's position and the knowledge required to perform that work warrant assignment to the GS-335 series.

Based on the grade level analysis that follows, we find that the position is properly titled *Computer Assistant*. We used the GS-335 standard to determine the grade of the appellant's position.

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 aspects, it must be credited at a lower level. Conversely, the position may exceed those criteria in some aspects and still not be credited at a higher level.

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

The appellant does not disagree with his agency's evaluation of Factors 4 through 9. We have reviewed the agency's determination for these factors and concur with its findings. We will therefore discuss those factors briefly, while discussing Factors 1, 2, and 3 more thoroughly. Our evaluation with respect to the nine factors follows.

Factor 1, Knowledge required by the position

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.

The appellant's position meets Level 1-4 where employees perform a wide range of duties including preparing, advising, assisting, coding, and procedure related problem solving using a knowledge of computer procedures and processing methods. Consistent with positions at this level, the appellant advises, assists, and solves problems requiring knowledge of hardware, software, and program capabilities and limitations. In providing this assistance, he troubleshoots problems that users are experiencing. The appellant determines the cause of the problem (software, hardware, or user), then takes corrective action. Troubleshooting the more complex problems is the responsibility of computer specialists within the unit. If necessary, the appellant contacts vendors to order replacement parts. As at Level 1-4, he must possess knowledge of computer components, applications, and operating systems to install standard software and equipment and provide basic training for users.

Comparable to positions at Level 1-4, the appellant uses knowledge of Web scripting and programming languages such as Hypertext Markup Language and Cascading Style Sheets to develop and maintain the public and restricted Web sites. He uses a variety of commercial off-the-shelf software programs and applications to enhance or create a visually appealing Web page. The appellant must have knowledge of Web browser capabilities to check spelling and grammar of material on the Web sites and ensure they comply with handicap accessibility requirements. He uses a downloadable tool to help identify changes needed to the Web pages so that users with disabilities can more easily use the Web pages. He also makes certain that security requirements are met to safeguard the Web sites against attacks from viruses, worms, etc. Consistent with positions at Level 1-4, the appellant maintains and reviews Web statistics; for example, he gathers information on the number of visitors to a Web site and makes adjustments to revamp a site to attract more visitors. The appellant applies knowledge of operating characteristics, software, and hardware to respond to inquiries from Web site visitors or to refer the inquiries to appropriate individuals for response. Overall, the knowledge required for the appellant's position is consistent with Level 1-4.

Although the appellant's duties and responsibilities require an understanding of Web software, the work does not require the in-depth knowledge of systems and programs indicative of Level 1-5. Assistants at that level carry out limited specialized projects and assignments using knowledge of fundamental data processing methods, practices, and techniques in work involving development, test, implementation, and modification of computer programs and operating

procedures. Assistants at Level 1-5 prepare programs or write new program documentation and operating procedures. In contrast, the appellant is required to use commercial off-the-shelf software programs that require no modification. He applies knowledge and abilities to achieve a tangible end product, for example, a visually appealing Web page or the solution to a customer problem. The appellant does not make any substantive determinations regarding the content of the Web pages. Such decisions are made by higher grade specialists who have responsibility for creating the content of Web pages. Problems that he troubleshoots include finding misplaced shortcuts, reinstalling software programs, and replacing defunct hardware. Unlike the appellant, assistants at Level 1-5 use their knowledge as the basis for analysis and decision making in several functional settings. For example, they accept, reject, or modify work requests in developing new or projected schedules; explain to and advise users about codes, operating variations, and product options; and maintain, interpret, and write portions of program and operational manuals for programming, scheduling, and production control functions. In summary, the appellant's position does not require the level of knowledge for decision making or modifying or developing new program or operating procedures commensurate with Level 1-5.

We assign Level 1-4 (550 points).

Factor 2, Supervisory controls

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 and does not exceed Level 2-3, the highest level 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 to users without supervisory review. Employees at this level commonly adapt or develop new work procedures and instructions for application by themselves or others. Consistent with Level 2-3, the appellant works with a great deal of independence in performing Web site functions. For example, he walks users through the "fix" for their hardware and software problems, or he resolves the problem by remotely taking control of their personal computers. He updates the Web pages when notified by the persons who are responsible for the content of the Web pages. The appellant also independently sets up personal computers and installs software. He works with little intervention from his immediate supervisor in the technical aspects of his position, confronting and resolving day-to-day problems in accordance with existing laws, regulations, policies, and precedents. However, the appellant's supervisor is vested with the responsibility to independently plan and carry out projects and analyses of the organization's information technology requirements, interpret policy, and coordinate the work of others. Any work equivalent to the development and modification of programs and procedures, or analogous decisions on system hardware, are the responsibility of higher graded specialists within the unit or the supervisor. Comparable to Level 2-3, the appellant's immediate supervisor spot checks the Web pages to ensure that they meet specifications. Similar to assistants at this level, the appellant's work methods are not normally reviewed unless a recurring, common pattern of problems develops, made known to the supervisor from customer comments.

We assign Level 2-3 (275 points).

Factor 3, Guidelines

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

At Level 3-2, procedures for doing the work have been established and a number of specific guidelines are available. The number and similarity of guidelines and work situations require the assistant to use judgment in selecting appropriate guidelines. The appellant's position is similar to Level 3-2 in that guidelines are available, selection of an appropriate guideline is relatively clear, and some judgment is needed in selecting from a number of guidelines that include general procedural guidelines in the form of equipment and software package manuals. Among the guidelines available for the appellant's use is the agency's Washington Office Internet Policy which contains policies, procedures, and instructions governing Web site technology. The recurring nature of the appellant's assignments and user problems permits considerable additional reliance on established procedures and previous experience. To assist Intranet users, the appellant prepared a document that contains Internet and Intranet guidelines and policies found in other sources, such as the Washington Office Internet Policy. He also included some "tips of the trade" advice and general "do's and don'ts" for Web page design. There is no evidence that the appellant developed new guidelines for the document or that employees with Web page responsibilities are held accountable for following the guidance in that document. Development of the Intranet document is commensurate with the intent of Level 3-2.

The appellant's position does not meet Level 3-3 where assistants work with new requirements or new applications for which only general guidance is available. Assistants at this level adapt guidelines when their judgment is based on an understanding of the intent of the guidelines. For example, they use judgment to adjust the most appropriate guidelines to fit new processing requirements or to develop new methods for accomplishing the tasks at hand. In contrast, the appellant is not expected to exercise independent judgment in applying general guidelines for working with new applications. When the appellant encounters problems running new software, hardware, or systems for which guidelines are not clear, he looks to the computer specialists or the supervisor to recommend solutions based on their experience and understanding of computer software, hardware, and networks. While the appellant must ensure that the Web sites meet the criteria established by Regional and Washington Office levels, his immediate supervisor is responsible for exercising judgment in developing, adapting, and interpreting policies as needed. Although the appellant faces an evolving technology that requires frequent changes and modifications, the fundamental nature of the guidelines remains unchanged. Guidelines are available for nearly all areas of the appellant's work and do not require the appellant to modify, adapt, or adjust guidelines as envisioned at Level 3-3.

We assign Level 3-2 (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.

The appellant's position is comparable to Level 4-3 in that he assists and supports the unit by setting up and maintaining users' software and hardware components, also providing one-on-one or group training to system users. The appellant is "on call" when users require assistance with various computer problems. Consistent with Level 4-3, the appellant is involved throughout the problem definition stage and the problem resolution stage. Resolving operating problems requires the appellant to exercise some initiative in decision making on how to proceed. Initially, some problems may have unclear aspects, and the appellant is called upon to interpret and identify the sequence of actions necessary. The appellant also uses various software packages and applications to maintain the Web site. This requires some decision-making in achieving optimal results in terms of visual appearance, with the appellant determining what needs to be done and identifying the best course of action.

We assign Level 4-3 (150 points).

Factor 5, Scope and effect

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 scope and effect of the appellant's position is best evaluated at Level 5-2. The purpose of work at this level is to obtain and provide customers with information or solutions, with the results of the work representing a complete product. The appellant works in a customer-focus, service-oriented environment, with work directly affecting the reliability and acceptability of future services. Comparable to Level 5-2, the appellant obtains, organizes, and presents information in formats that serve the needs of other employees and the general public.

The appellant's position does not meet Level 5-3 where solutions to problems are not always covered by established or standardized procedures. Work at this level includes explaining to and assisting customers in the application of system capabilities when the customer has unusual or unique processing requirements that are difficult to formulate. The appellant's position does not involve the unusual or unique processing requirements as envisioned at Level 5-3. The computer specialists in the appellant's unit are responsible for resolving problems and handling technical issues that are typical of Level 5-3.

We assign Level 5-2 (75 points).

Factor 6, Personal contacts

This factor considers face-to-face and telephone contacts with persons not in the supervisory chain.

The appellant's contacts fully meet and do not exceed Level 6-2, the highest level described in the standard. Contacts at this level are usually structured and routine with the role of each participant readily determined. Similar to Level 6-2, the appellant has regular contacts with employees in his immediate organization and the users for which his unit provides services. He occasionally has contact with counterparts in Forest Service installations and the general public.

We assign Level 6-2 (25 points).

Factor 7, Purpose of contacts

This factor deals with the purpose of the contacts selected in Factor 6.

The purpose of the appellant's contacts meets and does not exceed Level 7-2, the highest level described in the standard. Similar to positions at Level 7-2, the purpose of the appellant's contacts is usually to provide technical advice, discussing hardware or software related problems and providing a satisfactory resolution to operating problems. Contact with counterparts in other installations within the Forest Service may be made to exchange technical information. The appellant is also responsible for training end users through on-site demonstrations.

We assign Level 7-2 (50 points).

Factor 8, Physical demands

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.

The physical demands placed upon the appellant do not exceed Level 8-1 where the work is primarily sedentary in nature and requires no special demands.

We assign Level 8-1 (5 points).

Factor 9, Work environment

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.

The appellant's work environment is best evaluated at Level 9-1 where the work is typically performed in an office environment with no unusual risk or discomfort and requires only normal safety precautions.

We assign Level 9-1 (5 points).

Summary

We have evaluated the appellant's position as follows:

<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	4-3	150
5. Scope and effect	5-2	75
6. Personal contacts	6-2	25
7. Purpose of contacts	7-2	50
8. Physical demands	8-1	5
9. Work environment	9-1	5
<i>Total</i>		1,260

The appellant's position warrants 1,260 points, which falls within the range for the GS-6 grade level (1,105-1,350 points). Therefore, in accordance with the grade conversion table in the standard, the position is properly graded at the GS-6 level.

Decision

The appellant's position is properly classified as Computer Assistant, GS-335-6.