



The Best Jobs: Government Employee or Government Contractor?

By Tranette Ledford for ClearanceJobs.com

There's good news on both sides. Government agencies and contractors alike have plenty of jobs to offer and good salaries to go with them. Both are looking for qualified, well trained, security-cleared candidates. So what's the better choice when you're in the market for a new defense industry career?

Federal agencies and contractors actively target the best match for the job. But they shouldn't be the only ones doing that. The most successful transitions are made by those who take into account their own ideas about job satisfaction – which means everything from salary to skill match, geographic location to professional goals.

Civil service careers

Despite the headlines about government outsourcing, the federal government continues to be the largest employer in the nation, hiring an estimated 300,000 new employees every year. When considering a government job, there are plenty of agencies out there. But they don't all operate the same way. Some have different pay scales, others have a higher proportion of professional opportunities, and some have higher rates of employee satisfaction, all indicators that can help you find the best fit.

Just as an employee can help you learn more about a company, civil servants can tell an agency's story. In April, the Partnership for Public Service released the 2007 rankings of federal agencies, a report based on an Office of Personnel Management survey of 221,000 federal workers. They rated each agency on issues of pay, benefits, job satisfaction, work/life balance and agency leadership.

"Basically we looked at whether the employees recommended the agency as a good place to work, how satisfied they were in their jobs and how satisfied they were with the organization," said John Palguta, the partnership's vice president of policy. "The reason people go to work for the government is because they want to do something meaningful and make a difference. They want to make good use of their skills and be engaged in mission accomplishment."

A snapshot of the findings shows that when it comes to skill and mission match, employees of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and Department of Veterans Affairs give the highest scores. Those who work for the NRC, NASA and the State Department give the highest ratings for their supervisors and leadership. On the issue of work/life balance, the NRC is still on top, along with the Securities and Exchange Commission and

Top Federal Agencies for Job Satisfaction

- #1 Nuclear Regulatory Commission
- #2 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
- #3 Department of Veterans Affairs

General Services Administration. On pay and benefits, those working for the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, NRC and the Securities and Exchange Commission are the most satisfied.

“Many people don’t know that FDIC, for example, doesn’t use appropriated funds,” said Palguta. “Instead, they charge fees to banks. Self funding agencies can generally pay more.”

As a rule, government pay scales operate on grade levels and a bit by geography. A GS-14 or 15 in Los Angeles can earn an annual salary of \$127,000 to \$145,000, while in Phoenix, that position pays from \$116,000 to \$137,000. Mid to upper-career level GS-10s and 12s can earn \$67,000 to \$88,000 in San Diego, and about \$5,000 a year less in the Dayton area.

The bottom line? People don’t enter civil service to get wealthy. They want good pay but they want their work to matter. They’re not looking for easy jobs – in fact, those with a lot of demands placed on them are the most satisfied workers. In general, government workers want to use their skills and make a difference while they use them. These are all reasons for choosing civil service and for the growing number of contract employees who retire, then return to work as civil servants.

“Most candidates interested in working for the government fully understand three clear benefits,” said Evan Lesser, co-founder and director of ClearanceJobs.com, a secure website designed to match security-cleared job candidates with top defense industry employers. “First, is the issue of job security. Compared to contractors, Federal agencies are less subject to budget funding shortfalls and cancelled or re-bid contracts. Second, job seekers see a more structured promotion ladder. And third, working for the nation’s largest employer means excellent health and retirement benefits.”

Contractor Careers

Just as the government is the biggest employer, it is also the biggest buyer of products, purchasing everything from high information technology to insect repellent, and everything in between. Government outsourcing and new technologies drive the contractor industry – the sellers of the products the government buys. In fact, outsourcing will be one of the fastest-growing segments of the federal information technology budget alone over the next five years. According to INPUT, a Virginia based company that provides market analysis of government and business, the information technology budget for government outsourcing will grow to more than \$17 billion by FY 2009.

So what does this mean for would-be contract employees? Job availability, good starting salaries and promotion potential are key.

Mike Borgia served 10 years in the Marine Corps as a flight engineer. He opted for the contract industry when he separated from the service, and is now a C-130 Production Operations Manager for Boeing, based in San Antonio. His skills and military service afforded him the chance to step immediately into a job with McDonnell Douglas in 1990, and he stayed on when the company merged with Boeing.

Top Federal Contracting Careers on ClearanceJobs.com

- #1 Information Technology
- #2 Systems Engineering
- #3 Intelligence and Security
- #4 Program and Project Management
- #5 Help Desk Technical Support

“A career with a defense contractor was my preference,” said Borgia. “First of all, they’ll hire you on the spot if you have what they want. No paperwork, no waiting. The salaries are also higher in contracting. And you have more control of your own destiny.”

Borgia’s career path with Boeing has included travel to Japan for training and certification in lean management, the opportunity to serve as the Boeing consultant with El-Al Airlines, and

promotion to a senior management position. In addition to earning a six figure income, Borgia cites other indicators that make the contracting industry appealing.

“Your performance is the single thing that moves you through your career path,” he said. “It can never be stifled by pay grade levels. You’re also always on the cutting edge of the newest technologies. Most of the research and development of these technologies is done in the contractor industry then sold later for government use.”

As for job security in contracting compared to civil service, Borgia doesn’t think there’s too much difference.

“The government has gotten tighter and we’ve seen base closures which affected civilian jobs. If you’re good at what you do, the contract industry is going to have a job for you.”

Other indicators to consider

Comparison data between government and contracting careers is largely anecdotal. Organizations that assist in placing job seekers often see the junior to mid-level talent pool leaning toward defense contracting jobs for the higher salaries.

“As contractors offer more competitive benefits, job seekers (particularly those with security clearances) are looking more at base salaries,” said Lesser. “On ClearanceJobs.com, contractors pay top dollar for security-cleared candidates because they know that if they can’t staff their projects within government mandates, their funding will go away.”

Another factor often cited when comparing government and contract industry jobs is difference in mission - federal agencies have always been a great fit for those with administrative, policy and institutional skills, while those with hard skills have been more drawn to contractor jobs. However, according to Lesser, that may be changing.

“The number of open, high level subject matter expert, policy and senior analyst positions at contracting companies has doubled in the past two years,” he said.

That information backs up another trend industry watchers are seeing - the increase in the movement of workers going back and forth between government agencies and contractors. Benefits are becoming more portable, those with contracting backgrounds make easy transitions into federal jobs, and likewise, civil servants have a knowledge base to take with them into contractor positions. The prediction – a healthy infusion of talent on both sides.

To view and apply for thousands of open defense industry jobs requiring a security clearance, see ClearanceJobs.com.