

12 Biggest Mistakes Made by New Federal Job Applicants

BY KATHRYN TROUTMAN

If you are a first-time federal jobseeker, a casualty of Base Realignment and Closure, or just a fed looking to change positions, read on. Because what follows is a list of the most common mistakes new federal job-seekers make—and the ways to avoid them.

The fact is, you will maximize your job search time—and feel more energized and enthusiastic about your efforts—if you plan a smart, focused federal job search campaign. Especially in this current job market, it is important to slow down, read the announcements for the qualifications, carefully review the questionnaires, and write good questionnaire essays and Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSA) narratives. Consider the federal job search to be your “job.” And that job is to get a good job.

Here is a collection of the biggest mistakes I see over and over again when reviewing and critiquing resumes or coaching people in their federal job searches.

MISTAKE 1

“I only apply for jobs on USAJOBS.”

If you limit your search to USAJOBS only, you are limiting your federal job search.

There are at least five major sites where you can create a profile, set up a resume builder, answer questions and apply for a federal job:

- www.usajobs.gov – the official government jobs Web site, it includes Air Force civilian positions;
- www.cpol.army.mil – the Web site where all Army jobs are posted and where you would apply for an Army position;
- www.avuecentral.com – a commercial site that manages recruitment, resumes and announcements for about 14 agencies, including the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Peace Corps, and others;
- www.donhr.navy.mil – the Web site for Navy and Marine Corps civilian positions; and
- www.whs.mil – DoD civilian jobs are posted here, as well as the resume builder and application.

MISTAKE 2

“I only apply for jobs without KSA narratives.”

If you limit your search to applications that do not required KSAs, you will be cutting out many job opportunities with the Departments of Health and Human Services, Interior, Commerce, Justice, Labor, Transportation, Veterans Affairs and others. You will need to learn how to write KSA narratives and questionnaire essays for a successful federal job search. KSAs are just examples that demonstrate you have a certain knowledge, skill or ability.

MISTAKE 3

“I have been using my regular resume, but I’m not getting referred to any jobs.”

Since the instructions say you can apply with a “resume,” you may have used your existing resume, but haven’t gotten referred to any jobs. But what the job announcement really means is that you should apply with a federal resume—a resume that includes more information than a private-industry version. The average private-industry resume is two pages. The federal resume should be three or four pages, and include more details about your duties, accomplishments and areas of responsibility. If you apply with a private-sector resume that contains corporate language and terms unfamiliar to the federal human resources reviewer, they will not be able to understand why you are a good candidate for the job. Read the announcement and incorporate language from the announcement into your resume as it applies to your experience.

MISTAKE 4

“The announcement I applied to had specialized experience requirements. I applied anyway, but was not referred to the hiring official.”

You MUST be sure that you have the job experience covered in the required One Year Specialized Experience in the Qualifications section of the announcement.

MISTAKE 5

“I’m not used to bragging, so I usually don’t select the highest level in the questionnaire.”

A federal human resources specialist said this about the questionnaires and your choices: “Give yourself all of the credit you can in selecting the answers in a questionnaire.” The questionnaires are scored like an examination, so your skills at the highest level will be important to get referred for a position.

MISTAKE 6

“I apply for all jobs in my salary range and geographic location, even if I don’t have the specific qualifications, just to get my name out there.”

This is a waste of your time and the time of the human resources specialist in the federal agency. You should study the Qualifications section of the position to determine that you have the qualifications required for the job before you submit a federal resume or questionnaire for a position. If you apply for 100 positions and don’t get referred to any of them, then your “apply for everything” strategy isn’t working.

continued on page 5

Your Federal Career

continued from page 4

MISTAKE 7

"I prefer a functional resume because I am a career changer. So I don't write long descriptions of my jobs—instead, I write lengthy details of my skills in the Additional Information field in USAJOBS."

The USAJOBS builder and ALL of the federal builders are designed for a reverse chronological resume with each job description described with duties and accomplishments. The most important positions will be those in the last five years, then in the prior five years. Go back 15 years on average, if you have valid experience.

MISTAKE 8

"USAJOBS is searchable—so I put my resume in USAJOBS a couple of months ago, but no one has contacted me."

That's because the USAJOBS resume database isn't being used as a search site right now. The USA JOBS resume builder is a place to submit your resume. Then you have to do a few more things to actually apply for a position. You will probably have to complete a questionnaire, or write KSAs, or fax additional information (such as a college transcript, evaluation or DD-214). The USAJOBS resume builder site is NOT set up for people to search for YOU. You have to hit an "Apply" or "Submit" button to actually apply for a position.

MISTAKE 9

"The multiple choice questionnaires are easy; I fly through those. And I just write a couple of quick sentences for the narratives—I can apply for 10 jobs per day this way!"

If you "fly" through the questions and answers, you may not choose the right responses, and you could be losing points. Lots of points. You need to carefully read the questionnaires, slow down in selecting your answers and write an example that demonstrates the level of your skill.

MISTAKE 10

"I'll take anything, because I'm flexible, I learn quickly and I have great skills."

Slow down! With federal applications, you have to prove that you have the One Year Specialized Experience, education, or combination of experience and education to be best qualified for a position. You have to read the Qualifications tab in USAJOBS to find out what qualifications the federal agency is looking for. Then you should adjust your resume to make sure this experience is clear to the HR specialist.

MISTAKE 11

"I cannot understand the announcements. They are intimidating and seem to be almost in another language."

True. But they are what they are. If you find an announcement that seems to fit your salary, geographic location, and

a few of your skills, then you should read further. Read the Duties to see if you can understand the job. If you can't understand the duties, then go to the agency and office Web site to read about their mission and services. Then read the Duties in the context of the mission. Then read the Qualifications to see what they would like to see in an applicant. Most of the time, it will be One Year Specialized Experience similar to the announcement Duties. And if you have that experience, then the announcement could be a GO. The federal vacancy announcements are legal documents explaining all about the position, so they are lengthy. But they can help you write a great federal resume if you do take the time to research the position thoroughly and make sure you are a good match.

MISTAKE 12

"I applied for a federal job because I liked it and I knew I could do the job, even though I didn't have comparable experience. I wasn't able to answer all the KSAs, so I just answered the ones I could."

You will increase your chances of success if you apply for positions that are a good match to your private-sector experience. Again, read the Duties, Specialized Experience and the KSAs. Make a list of key skills and experience. Make sure you have the One Year of Specialized Experience. If you can write one excellent example for each KSA, then it is probably a good announcement for you. Be realistic with your federal job search. If you are an administrative assistant, you probably will not qualify for a position as an FBI agent. Do your homework—research federal jobs to determine which are the best ones for you.

TAKE ACTION

The government has on average 100,000 jobs everyday posted on its main employment Web site, USAJOBS.GOV. Consider these positions seriously. They are worth your time and patience. There are good books on federal resume writing and federal job search strategies. Samples of federal resumes and KSAs can help you master the federal job search process and result in a career that can change your life.

Kathryn Troutman owns and manages www.resume-place.com, a leading global federal job search consulting firm. These 12 mistakes are the most frequently quoted by first-time clients who are seeking federal jobs. Kathryn's books are "Ten Steps to a Federal Job," 2nd Ed. (available as an eBook Dec. 10, 2008, and as a print book Jan. 10, 2008); "Federal Resume Guidebook," 4th Ed., and the "Military to Federal Career Guide," both available now at all booksellers. Kathryn is a government agency trainer for federal human resources, teaching federal employees how to get promoted and change agencies in government. She is a frequent writer and columnist on the challenges of breaking into federal government, and on strategies for writing an outstanding application.