SOCIAL SECURITY

Office of the Inspector General

MEMORANDUM

Date: June 19, 2001

Refer To:
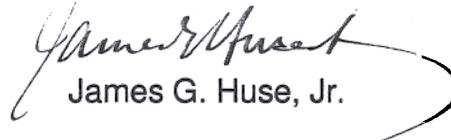
To: Larry G. Massanari
Acting Commissioner
 of Social Security

Inspector General

Subject: Assessment of the Hearings Process Improvement Plan Phase 1 (A-06-00-20051)

The attached final report presents the results of our evaluation. Our objective was to obtain employee assessments of the results of the Office of Hearings and Appeals implementation of Phase 1 of the Hearings Process Improvement Plan.

Please comment within 60 days from the date of this memorandum on corrective action taken or planned on each recommendation. If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Steven L. Schaeffer, Assistant Inspector General for Audit, at (410) 965-9700.

James G. Huse, Jr.

Attachment

OFFICE OF
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

ASSESSMENT OF THE
HEARINGS PROCESS
IMPROVEMENT PLAN
PHASE 1

June 2001　　　　　**A-06-00-20051**

EVALUATION REPORT

Mission

We improve SSA programs and operations and protect them against fraud, waste, and abuse by conducting independent and objective audits, evaluations, and investigations. We provide timely, useful, and reliable information and advice to Administration officials, the Congress, and the public.

Authority

The Inspector General Act created independent audit and investigative units, called the Office of Inspector General (OIG). The mission of the OIG, as spelled out in the Act, is to:

- O Conduct and supervise independent and objective audits and investigations relating to agency programs and operations.
- O Promote economy, effectiveness, and efficiency within the agency.
- O Prevent and detect fraud, waste, and abuse in agency programs and operations.
- O Review and make recommendations regarding existing and proposed legislation and regulations relating to agency programs and operations.
- O Keep the agency head and the Congress fully and currently informed of problems in agency programs and operations.

To ensure objectivity, the IG Act empowers the IG with:

- O Independence to determine what reviews to perform.
- O Access to all information necessary for the reviews.
- O Authority to publish findings and recommendations based on the reviews.

Vision

By conducting independent and objective audits, investigations, and evaluations, we are agents of positive change striving for continuous improvement in the Social Security Administration's programs, operations, and management and in our own office.

Executive Summary

OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to obtain employee assessments of the results of the Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA) implementation of Phase 1 of the Hearings Process Improvement Plan (HPI).

BACKGROUND

OHA expects that requests for hearings will increase markedly starting in Fiscal Year 2001 due to the elimination of reconsideration determinations, the growing Medicare workload, and an aging population. The HPI initiative is a plan to make OHA more productive by reducing the amount of processing time for hearings. HPI also seeks to increase quality and productivity, promote individualized case management, and increase employee job satisfaction. To this end, OHA is changing the structure and operations of its hearing offices (HO) with a New Hearings Office Process (New Process). HPI was rolled out to OHA's HOs in three phases. Thirty-seven of the 139 offices were selected to participate in Phase 1, which began on January 3, 2000. Approximately one-half of the remaining HOs implemented HPI in Phase 2 in October 2000. Phase 3 included all remaining HOs and was implemented in November 2000.

The New Process results from findings made by an interdisciplinary workgroup, a study by Booz-Allen & Hamilton, Inc., and from HO suggestions and best practices. This combined process revealed lengthy delays at the front end of case processing— between the date a hearing is requested and the date it is held. Obstacles hindering efficient case processing include: sub-optimal case screening and tracking systems; inadequate pre-hearing analysis and development; lack of accountability; duplication of effort; and uneven workloads among staff.

The New Process is intended to represent a permanent solution to OHA's workload issues. It includes the establishment of new positions, workgroups, new and enhanced reports, and features such as development and locator calendars and benchmarks for how long cases should stay at each step of the process. A major change is the establishment of processing groups into manageable, self-contained working units. Each processing group staff would work and coordinate support to approximately four Administrative Law Judges (ALJ). This would allow work performed by ALJs to be shared by the processing group staff.

For September 2000, OHA reported that processing time in HPI offices for all cases, including Social Security Administration (SSA) and Medicare cases, was down by 47 days or 15 percent from the processing time reported in September 1999. For the same month in non-HPI offices, OHA reported a decrease in processing time of 46 days or 14 percent during the same period. For the period May through September 2000, OHA reported a decrease in processing time of 26 days or 8 percent when compared to

the cumulative figures for May through September 1999. For the same time period for non-HPI offices, processing time was down 35 days. We did not verify the accuracy or evaluate the significance of numbers reported by OHA.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

Our survey results show that OHA has an experienced workforce that was trained before and after the HPI Phase 1 implementation, and that employees have an understanding of what is expected of them. Our survey results also show that employees expressed some concerns with the transition:

- about one third of the non-managers did not consider the training helpful;

- some HOs started Phase 1 later than January which delayed their use of the new processes;

- employees expressed a need for additional staff; some HOs had not adopted all parts of the HPI plan;

- the use of standing orders or instructions from ALJs was not consistent; and

- some employees expressed a concern that the new process was not being used effectively.

Efforts to achieve the goals established by HPI, that is, improve quality and productivity, increase employee job satisfaction, and promote case processing, have begun but need time to be realized. During Phase 1, our survey found that employees expressed a view that the quality of service was worse than before and that processing efficiency was suffering. Also, employees were generally dissatisfied with the HPI plan and felt that job satisfaction was low.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The survey results and employee comments highlighted areas that may need improvement during full implementation of the HPI plan. These areas include staffing, training, and ALJ instructions. Improvements are also needed in the staff's perception of quality of service, processing efficiency and job satisfaction. To make HPI successful, staff have to believe that the New Process will bring about improvements. To promote improvements, we recommend that SSA:

- Establish a timeframe by which HOs should implement all parts of the HPI Plan.

- Reassess training needs for non-managers and ensure they have an adequate understanding of OHA's expectations under HPI.

- Re-evaluate the staffing needs for technicians and clerical staff within each HO to maximize productivity.

- Perform an evaluation of standing orders, or the lack of standing orders, in each office to ensure employees have clear and uniform instructions from ALJs within each processing group.

AGENCY COMMENTS

In response to our draft report, SSA agreed with our recommendations. (See Appendix H for SSA's comments.)

Table of Contents

Acronyms

AA	Attorney Adviser
ALJ	Administrative Law Judge
CT	Case Technician
FY	Fiscal Year
GS	Group Supervisor
HO	Hearing Office
HOCALJ	Hearing Office Chief Administrative Law Judge
HOD	Hearing Office Director
HOSA	Hearing Office Systems Administrator
HOTS	Hearing Office Tracking System
HPI	Hearings Process Improvement
LCT	Lead Case Technician
MSA	Management Services Assistant
OHA	Office of Hearings and Appeals
OTR	On-the-Record
PA	Paralegal Analyst
SAA	Senior Attorney Adviser
SSA	Social Security Administration
SCT	Senior Case Technician

Introduction

OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to obtain employee assessments of the results of the Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA) implementation of Phase 1 of the Hearings Process Improvement Plan (HPI).

BACKGROUND

OHA expects that requests for hearings will increase markedly starting in Fiscal Year (FY) 2001 due to the elimination of reconsideration determinations, the growing Medicare workload, and an aging population. The HPI initiative is a plan to make OHA more productive by reducing the amount of processing time for hearings. It also seeks to increase quality and productivity, promote individualized case management, and increase employee job satisfaction. To this end, OHA is changing the structure and operations of its Hearing Offices (HO) with a New Hearings Office Process (New Process).

The New Process results from findings made by an interdisciplinary workgroup, a study by Booz-Allen & Hamilton, Inc.,[1] and from HO suggestions and best practices. This combined process revealed lengthy delays at the front end of case processing— between the date a hearing is requested and the date it is held. Obstacles hindering efficient case processing include: sub-optimal case screening and tracking systems; inadequate pre-hearing analysis and development; lack of accountability; duplication of effort; and uneven workloads among staff.

The New Process includes the establishment of new positions, workgroups, new and enhanced reports, and features, such as development and locator calendars and benchmarks for how long cases should stay at each step of the process. A major change in the New Process is the establishment of processing groups into manageable, self-contained working units. See Appendix A for the New Process Office Structure. The staff of each processing group will work and coordinate support to approximately four Administrative Law Judges (ALJ). Processing groups will allow work performed by ALJs to be shared by the processing group staff. Processing groups consist of Attorney Advisers (AA), Paralegal Analysts (PA), Lead Case Technicians (LCT), Senior Case Technicians (SCT), and Case Technicians (CT). At least one Senior Attorney Adviser (SAA) is attached to the processing group.

HPI was rolled out to OHA's HOs in three phases. Thirty-seven of the 139 offices were selected to participate in Phase 1, which began on January 3, 2000. Approximately

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[1] The findings of the interdisciplinary workgroup and Booz-Allen & Hamilton, Inc. were included in the commissioner's report: *The Hearing Process Improvement Initiative Delivering Better Service for the 21st Century,* August 1999.

one-half of the remaining HOs implemented HPI in Phase 2 in October 2000. Phase 3 included all remaining HOs and was implemented in November 2000.

For September 2000, OHA reported that processing time in HPI offices for all cases, including Social Security Administration (SSA) and Medicare cases, was down by 47 days or 15 percent from the processing time reported in September 1999. For the same month in non-HPI offices, OHA reported a decrease in processing time of 46 days or 14 percent during the same period. For the period May through September 2000, OHA reported a decrease in processing time of 26 days or 8 percent when compared to the cumulative figures for May through September 1999. For the same period for non-HPI offices, processing time was down 35 days. We did not verify the accuracy or evaluate the significance of numbers reported by OHA.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

We surveyed all 37 offices included in Phase 1*.* See Appendix B for the list of Phase 1 offices*.* The surveys consisted of 17 questions common to all employees plus additional questions directed to the following positions: Hearing Office Chief Administrative Law Judges (HOCALJ); Hearing Office Directors (HOD); Group Supervisors (GS); ALJs; AAs; LCTs; SCTs; and CTs. Our questionnaire is included as Appendix C*.*

To distribute our surveys, we requested that OHA's central office email the surveys to the 37 offices. We submitted our survey request at the end of July 2000 and submitted a follow-up request 3 weeks later to employees who had not responded. Our surveys were sent to 1,326 employees in the 37 Phase 1 HOs. Of this number, 609 completed and returned the surveys to us (a 45.93 percent response rate). We received responses from each of the 37 offices. See Appendix D for the number of responses by position*.* The information contained in this report is based on the responses from managers and non-managers who completed and returned the survey questionnaires. Because the surveys were submitted anonymously, we could not verify that surveys were completed by individuals associated with their respective positions.

To augment our understanding of HPI, we attended the New Process Orientation in Dallas, Texas during June 2000. We also reviewed a SSA report,[2] the *Hearing Process Improvement Plan April 2000*, and OHA's New Process Office Structure, HPI Process Flowchart, and HPI Training Guides.

We conducted our review between July and December 2000. The entity reviewed was OHA under the Deputy Commissioner for Disability and Income Security Programs. We performed our evaluation in accordance with the Quality Standards for Inspections issued by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency.

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[2] *The Hearing Process Improvement Initiative Delivering Better Service for the 21st Century,* August 1999*.*

Results of Review

Our survey results show that OHA has an experienced workforce that was trained before and after the HPI Phase 1 implementation, and that employees have an understanding of what is expected of them. Our results also show that employees expressed some concerns with the transition:

- about one-third of the non-managers did not consider the training helpful;

- due to outside barriers, some HOs started Phase 1 later than January, which delayed their use of the new processes;

- employees expressed a need for additional staff; some HOs had not adopted all parts of the HPI plan;

- the use of standing orders or instructions from ALJs was not consistent; and

- some employees expressed a concern that the new process was not being used effectively.

Efforts to achieve the goals established by HPI, that is, improve quality and productivity, increase employee job satisfaction and promote case processing, have begun but need time to be realized. During Phase 1, employees expressed a view that the quality of service was worse than before and that processing efficiency was suffering. Also, employees were generally dissatisfied with the HPI plan and felt that job satisfaction was low. Appendix E summarizes the responses for the first 17 questions*.*

ORGANIZATIONAL EFFICIENCY AND PRODUCTIVITY

Workforce

OHA has an experienced workforce and 97.5 percent of the employees were with OHA since the beginning of HPI. Of the managers (HOCALJs, HODs, and GSs), 81.2 percent had at least 5 years of experience. Of the non-managers, 75.7 percent had at least 5 years of experience (see Appendix F, page F-1).

Training

Most employees received HPI training before HPI was implemented. In all, 96.4 percent of the respondents received HPI training; 89.7 percent completed the training before HPI was implemented in their offices. Managers found the training more helpful than non-managers. While 63.1 percent of the managers considered the training helpful or very helpful, only 30.5 percent of the non-managers agreed. More managers

(96.3 percent) than non-managers (88.6 percent) received the training before HPI started in their offices. Of the non-managers, 37.2 percent stated that the training was not helpful (see Appendix F, page F-2).

Forty-one percent of all respondents said they needed other types of training as follows:

- 26 percent need software training;

- 15 percent need training related to their position description; and

- 9 percent need Hearing Office Tracking System training.

More than 11 percent of the respondents replied that they needed training in other areas. We tallied the count of "other" training by category for the type of training cited most often. Based on this tally, the categories most frequently identified under "other" were:

- Document Generation System,

- Customer Identification Control System,

- Case Development,

- Workflow,

- Master Docket and Management/Leadership training, and

- Fee Petition and additional HPI training.

Understanding of Expectations

Employees generally expressed an understanding of OHA's expectations for the HO under HPI. Additionally, the percentage of non-managers who rated their understanding as high was substantially lower than the response rate for managers. Of the managers, 86.9 percent rated their understanding as high. Of the non-managers, 53.5 percent rated their understanding as high. In addition, 18.2 percent of the non-managers rated their understanding of OHA's expectations as low (see Appendix F, page F-3).

Target Date Implementation

Although the scheduled date for implementing Phase 1 of the HPI plan was January 3, 2000, only 22 offices stated that they started HPI in January. Ten HOs started after

January. Several regions were not able to implement HPI as scheduled due to labor/management-relation agreements. We were unable to determine when the remaining 5 HOs implemented HPI.

Table 1: Phase 1 Implementation

Month Phase 1 Started	January	February	March	April	July
Number of HOs	22	3	2	4	1

Perceived Needs with Which to Meet Production Goals

We asked employees to tell us what would be needed if production goals were not met. Most frequently, a need for additional staff was cited as the greatest need. Case pulling assistance was the second most frequent response, and a need for overtime was the third most frequent expressed need (see Appendix F, page F-4*)*.

The two top staffing positions listed as most needed were CTs (including LTs and SCTs), 64.9 percent; and clerical, 41.7 percent. Managers and non-managers provided consistent responses concerning staff needs although more managers cited a need for ALJs (see Appendix F, page F-5*)*. Some employees provided written comments describing situations within their respective offices that may explain the need for additional staff (see Appendix G, page G-1).

GS Assistance to Staff as Part of the HPI Plan

According to the HPI Plan, the GS is expected to perform all AA and PA functions as necessary and supervise all members of the group, except the SAA. Over half (51 percent) of the GSs stated that they perform duties of the AAs or the PAs. In addition, 58 percent responded that they perform duties of the LCT, SCT, or CT. As shown in Table 2, GSs felt that performing these duties does hinder their day-to-day management and operation of the group.

Table 2: Degree of Hindrance in Performing Other Duties

Position Work was Performed	Hindered or Very Hindered	Not Very Hindered or Not Hindered At All
AA or PA	8 (40 percent)	6 (30 percent)
LCT, SCT or CT	12 (55 percent)	4 (18 percent)

Although hindered, several GSs stated that helping the employees in their group resulted in a positive effect on their offices. Such assistance helped to meet their production goals. The primary reason given for helping to complete the work of members of the group was a shortage in staff. The LCT, SCT and/or CT positions were specifically mentioned. Again, this supports the employee opinion that if production goals are not met, increased staffing levels are needed especially for technicians and clerical staff.

Full Implementation of HPI Plan

Fifteen (63 percent) of the 24 HOCALJs that responded said all parts of the HPI plan had been adopted. Six (25 percent) HOCALJs said the following parts of the plan had not been adopted or were not fully implemented:

Not Adopted
- Pre-hearing conferences[3]
- Scheduling component
- Centralized scheduling unit
- Office-wide rotation on the master docket
- ALJ case review before scheduling a hearing

Not Fully Implemented
- Pre-analysis certification
- Some of the pre-hearing development

Standing Orders

General standing orders are instructions developed by the consensus of all the ALJs in an office or a cadre of ALJs within a given processing group. These instructions are provided to the staff to standardize the development of a case. Specific standing orders are instructions to the staff that meet the particular preference of an individual ALJ in developing a case. Specific standing orders may be developed in place of, or in addition to, general standing orders. With respect to the use of standing orders, 19 of the 24 HOCALJs who responded (79 percent) stated that their offices used general standing orders, and 15 used specific standing orders (63 percent). Thirteen HOs follow both general and specific orders and three HOs do not have standing orders.

Concerning the helpfulness of standing orders, 24 of 38 GSs (63 percent) stated that the standing orders were helpful or very helpful. About one-third of LCTs, SCTs and CTs combined considered the standing orders helpful or very helpful. With respect to those who did not find the standing orders helpful, the AAs and CTs had the highest percentages with 23 percent and 21 percent, respectively.

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[3] Regulations allowing SAAs to conduct a formal pre-hearing conference are not expected to be effective until later this year.

Helpfulness of Standing Orders (Percentages)				
Position	Helpful or Very Helpful	Neutral	Not Helpful or Very Helpful	Not Applicable
GS	63	18	11	8
AA	20	23	23	35
LCT	34	30	13	23
SCT	38	22	16	24
CT	25	17	21	38

Except for the GSs, from 23 to 38 percent of the employees said that standing orders were not applicable. We were unable to determine whether the response "not applicable" meant that employees did not have standing orders or if it meant that they had standing orders but did not follow them. Some employees expressed frustration relative to the use of standing orders in comments returned with the questionnaire (see Appendix G, page G-1 for employee comments).

QUALITY AND PRODUCTIVITY

Quality of Service

Employees were split on whether the quality of service was better or worse than before. Non-managers generally felt that the quality of service was worse (46.3 percent) while 35.7 percent of the managers felt that the quality of service was better. Still, 23.8 percent of the managers also considered the quality of service as worse while only 14.9 percent of the non-managers considered the quality of service as better (see Appendix F, page F-6).

Efficiency of Processing

As with quality of service, more non-managers (69 percent) than managers (40.2 percent) viewed the efficiency of processing as worse. However, even among managers, more managers felt that the efficiency of processing was worse compared to the 34.2 percent who considered it better (see Appendix F, page F-7).

Benchmarks are Used to Manage Workload

The HPI Process Training Guide includes FY 2000 target benchmarks for four stages of the process (receipt and master docket; case development; scheduling and ALJ review; and post-development, decision writing and disposition). Twenty-one of the 22 HODs responded that their HOs use processing-time benchmarks to manage the

hearing workload. Of the 21 applicable HOs, benchmarks used in 19 HOs are the same as the national benchmarks. The remaining 2 HOs use their own benchmarks or other benchmarks.

EMPLOYEE JOB SATISFACTION

Overall Satisfaction with the HPI Plan

Fifty percent of the managers were satisfied with the HPI plan. Another 33.3 percent stated they were not satisfied. The non-managers were largely dissatisfied with the HPI plan. Here, 67.7 percent stated they were not satisfied and only 11.3 percent stated they were satisfied. The others remained neutral (see Appendix F, page F-8).

Perceived Job Satisfaction Within HOs

Forty-three percent of the managers viewed the job satisfaction level within the HO as worse, while 34.5 percent viewed job satisfaction as better. Of the non-managers, 73.3 percent viewed the job satisfaction as worse, while only 9.3 percent viewed it as better (see Appendix F, page F-9).

Individual Morale under HPI

The managers were split with respect to their own morale because of HPI. While 42.2 percent stated that their morale was high, 25.3 percent considered it low. The majority of non-managers, 61.6 percent, stated that their morale was low while 10.8 percent considered it high. The rest considered their morale as moderate (see Appendix F, page F-10).

CASE PROCESSING

Receipt, Case Assignment, and Screening

<u>Distribution of Incoming Mail to Processing Group</u> - The revised mail process involves including the claimant's name and code for the assigned group on each page of every document generated and mailed. This is intended to promote efficiency and accountability by each group. The receipt and distribution of incoming mail may be assigned to the LCT, SCT or CT (Technicians). When the documents are returned to the HO, the claimant's name and code allow the Technicians to associate the documents with the file even if they are separated from the cover page. We asked the Technicians to rate the revised mail process on a scale of one to five with five being the highest rating. Twenty-four percent of the Technicians gave the revised mail process a rating of one. The revised mail process was viewed as not effective in routing mail to the proper processing group. More than one-fourth of the Technicians said that the revised mail process is not used in their offices.

On-the-Record Decisions - SAAs are responsible for reviewing and recommending possible On-The-Record (OTR) decisions. The ALJs make the final OTR decisions. Forty-six percent of the HOCALJs and 65 percent of the ALJs said the number of OTR decisions is the same in comparison to pre-HPI. Although the SAA recommends possible OTR decisions, 55 percent of the ALJs said that they sometimes disagree with the proposed OTR decisions in comparison to pre-HPI.

Pre-Hearing Analysis and Development

Pre-hearing Development - Pre-hearing development has changed under HPI. The HPI plan moves analytical and screening tasks to the front end of the process to maximize the ALJ's judicial functions: hearings and decision-making. Fifty-eight percent responded that before HPI was implemented, cases were not fully developed before assigning the case to ALJs. The other 42 percent of the respondents said that before HPI was implemented, their office developed a case fully before assigning it to an ALJ. However, HPI procedures for pre-hearing development are different from pre-HPI procedures.

Development Questionnaire - The development questionnaire is the first step in certifying a case as "Ready-to-Hear" before assigning it to an ALJ. "Ready-to-Hear" means the required evidentiary development is complete. SCTs and CTs mail the development questionnaire to the claimant or appointed representative using the automated Pre-hearing Development Notice program and diary the case for 2 weeks. Forty-seven percent of the SCTs and 37 percent of the CTs said that the claimants and representatives frequently do not respond within the allotted 2-week period. It was thought that the development questionnaire would eliminate postponements. However, 31 percent of the SCTs and 54 percent of the CTs do not know if the development questionnaire eliminates postponements.

Scheduling Hearings

Rotation of Office-Wide Coordinator - Thirty-two percent of the Technicians said that the office-wide scheduling coordinator was not helpful and a little more than one-third said assigning an office-wide scheduling coordinator is not used in their HO. The coordinator is responsible for:

- Scheduling formal pre-hearing conferences;

- Scheduling informal development conferences; and

- Arranging individual appearances at hearings.

Automated Hearing Room Calendar - The automated hearing room calendar is used to keep track of individual appearances at hearings and is expected to eliminate scheduling conflicts, delays, postponements, confusion, and overbooking. Based on the survey response, the majority of the Technicians said that the automated hearing room calendar is not used.

Post Hearing Activity

Hand-offs are on the Increase - Seventy-four percent of the LCTs stated that the number of hand-offs (work handed to another person) under HPI were higher or much higher in comparison to pre-HPI. Sixteen percent said that the number of hand-offs was the same, while 10 percent stated that there were fewer hand-offs under HPI than before HPI. Some employees other than LCTs provided comments concerning hand-offs. Selected comments from these employees are included in Appendix G.

Decision Writing - To maximize the benefit of the AA and PA's familiarity with the facts and issues of a case, HPI provides that the GS will generally assign cases for decision writing to the same AA or PA who certified the case as "Ready-to-Hear." Only 3 percent of the AAs said that they *always* received the same cases for decision writing they had previously certified as "Ready-to-Hear," while 27 percent said that they *never* write decisions for cases they personally certified as "Ready-to-Hear." Other AAs said that they *frequently* (13 percent) or *sometimes* (57 percent) received cases for decision writing that they certified as "Ready-to-Hear."

Conclusions and Recommendations

The survey results and employee comments highlighted areas that may need improvement during full implementation of the HPI plan. These areas include staffing, training, and ALJ instructions. Improvements are also needed in the staff's perception of quality of service, processing efficiency, and job satisfaction. To make HPI successful, staff have to believe that the New Process will bring about improvements. To promote improvements, we recommend that the SSA:

1. Establish a timeframe by which HOs should implement all parts of the HPI Plan.

2. Reassess training needs for non-managers and ensure they have an adequate understanding of OHA's expectations under HPI.

3. Re-evaluate the staffing needs for technicians and clerical staff within each HO to maximize productivity.

4. Perform an evaluation of standing orders, or the lack of standing orders, in each office to ensure employees have clear and uniform instructions from ALJs within each processing group.

AGENCY COMMENTS

In response to our draft report, SSA agreed with our recommendations. (See Appendix H for SSA's comments.)

Appendices

Appendix A

NEW PROCESS OFFICE STRUCTURE

Hearing Office Chief Administrative Law Judge

ALJ ALJ ALJ ALJ ALJ ALJ ALJ ALJ ALJ ALJ

Hearing Office Director

Senior Attorney Adviser

Senior Attorney Adviser

Group Supervisor

Group Supervisor

Attorney Advisers
Paralegal Analysts

Lead Case Technician
Senior Case Technicians
Case Technicians

Lead Case Technician
Senior Case Technicians
Case Technicians

Attorney Advisers
Paralegal Analysts

Hearing Office System Administrator

Management Services Assistant

Permanent Positions

Rotational Assignments from Ranks of Case Technicians

Master Docket
Mail Clerk
Receptionist
Scheduling Coordinator

= Supervisor

= Bargaining Unit Position

= Non-bargaining Position

April 2000

LIST OF THE 37 HEARING OFFICES INCLUDED IN PHASE 1	
Boston Region Manchester, NH Providence, RI	**Dallas Region** Alexandria, LA Fort Worth, TX New Orleans, LA Metairie, LA Shreveport, LA
New York Region Albany, NY Brooklyn, NY Syracuse, NY	**Kansas City Region** Springfield, MO St Louis, MO Creve Coeur, MO
Philadelphia Region Elkins Park, PA Harrisburg, PA Johnstown, PA Philadelphia, PA Pittsburgh, PA Wilkes-Barre, PA	**Denver Region** Denver, CO
Atlanta Region Birmingham, AL Charleston, SC Florence, AL Jackson, MS Lexington, KY Mobile, AL Montgomery, AL	**San Francisco Region** Downey, CA Los Angeles, CA (Downtown) Los Angeles, CA (West) Pasadena, CA
Chicago Region Detroit, MI Flint, MI Grand Rapids, MI Lansing, MI Oak Park, MI	**Seattle Region** Seattle, WA

Survey Questions

Questions We Asked All Employees in the Survey

1. How long have you been working in the Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA)?

2. Have you been working at this hearing office since your office began Hearing Process Improvement (HPI)?

3. Did you receive the HPI Process Orientation Training?

4. Relative to when your office started HPI, when was your HPI Process Orientation Training completed?

5. Was your training conducted in one day?

6. In general, how helpful was the HPI Process Orientation Training?

7. Did you receive training to supplement the HPI Process Orientation Training?

8. Do *you* need further training?

9. Did your responsibilities change under HPI?

10. Prior to HPI, did your office fully develop the case before assigning it to an Administrative Law Judge (ALJ)?

11. If your office does not meet the production goals, which of the following would be needed? **Check all that apply**: Increased staffing at the hearing office (Judicial, management, clerical, attorney/paralegal, case technicians); overtime; decision writing assistance; contribution from employees outside OHA; case pulling assistance; other; none.

12. Overall, how would you rate the *quality of service* for the claimants under HPI compared to pre-HPI?

13. Compared to pre-HPI, how would you rate the overall *job satisfaction* in this hearing office?

14. How would you rate the overall *efficiency of processing* under HPI compared to pre-HPI?

15. Overall, how would you rate *your morale* as a result of the HPI Plan?

16. How would you rate *your understanding* of OHA's expectations for the hearing office under HPI?

17. Overall, how satisfied are you with the HPI Plan?

Additional Questions We Asked Hearing Office Chief Administrative Law Judges

1. What date did your hearing office begin HPI? **Please provide the month/day/year.**

2. What were your expectations for your hearing office? Please be specific and provide quantitative data when applicable.

3. Of your expectations for this hearing office, which were fulfilled? Please provide an explanation if necessary.

4. What parts of the HPI Plan have you adopted?

5. What parts of the HPI Plan have you **not** adopted?

6. In the implementation of the parts of HPI that your office has adopted, how much is completed?

7. Has a formalized transition plan been implemented in your hearing office?

8. Does your hearing office follow general standing orders?

9. Does your hearing office follow specific standing orders?

10. Are you receiving either new or expanded Management Information reports that you did not receive prior to HPI?

11. Under HPI, did your office modify existing reports/databases or create any new reports/data bases? **If yes, please explain what was created or modified.**

12. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how effective do you feel the formal pre-hearing conferences are in clarifying the issues specific to your request?

13. Overall, how heavy is your *office caseload* under HPI in comparison to before HPI?

14. Overall, how would you rate the *decisional accuracy* under HPI compared to pre-HPI?

15. *Prior* to scheduling a hearing, how often do you find it necessary to further develop a case?

16. *After* the hearing is held, how often do you find it necessary to further develop the case?

17. How frequently are On-The-Record (OTR) decisions used in comparison to before HPI?

Additional Questions We Asked ALJs

1. *Prior* to scheduling a hearing, how often do you find it necessary to further develop a case?

2. *After* the hearing is held, how often do you find it necessary to further develop the case?

3. Overall, how would you rate the *decisional accuracy* under HPI compared to pre-HPI?

4. Of the following, who signs the OTR decisions? Check all that apply.

5. How frequently are OTR decisions used in comparison to before HPI?

6. How often do you disagree with the proposed OTR decision in comparison to before HPI?

7. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how effective do you feel the formal pre-hearing conferences are in clarifying the issues specific to your request?

Additional Questions We Asked the Hearing Office Directors

1. Does your hearing office use processing time benchmarks to manage the hearing workload?

2. Are the benchmarks used in your hearing office the same as the national benchmarks?

3. If you are not using national benchmarks, then what type of benchmarks are you using?

4. How many union officials work at your hearing office?

For the following chart, please fill in the corresponding position and amount of time the individual uses for union business (100 percent, 75 percent, 50 percent, 25 percent, etc.). Please *do not* give the individual's name.

Union Official #	Position	Time Used
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
Other		

1. Of the following, who makes *changes* to the information in the Hearing Office Tracking System? **Check all that apply:** Hearing Office Chief Administrative Law Judge (HOCALJ), ALJ, Hearing Office Director (HOD), Group Supervisor (GS), Senior Attorney Advisor (SAA), Lead Case Technician (LCT), Senior Case Technician (SCT), Case Technician (CT), Attorney Advisor (AA), Paralegal Analyst (PA), Hearing Office Systems Administrator (HOSA), Management Services Assistant (MSA), Other, All of the above.

2. What portion of the local management labor issues was resolved prior to your office implementing HPI?

3. How has HPI affected your office's use of overtime?

4. What date did your hearing office begin HPI? **Please provide the month/day/year.**

5. From the date that your hearing office started HPI to June 30, 2000, what percentage of the office dispositions were Medicare?

6. How do you feel the Medicare cases affect your hearing office? **Check all that apply.**

7. From the date that you started HPI to June 30, 2000, what percentage of your caseload involved a claimant who is not English speaking?

8. Are you receiving prototype cases from Disability Determination Services?

9. Due to the implementation of Phase 1, how many pre-HPI cases were crosswalked for HPI?

10. From the date that you started HPI to June 30, 2000, what percentage of the cases heard was pre-HPI?

11. Is your hearing office monitoring the dispositions issued? **If yes**: How frequently is the disposition rate assessed? Weekly, Monthly, Randomly, or Other.

12. How would you rate the employees' *understanding* of the expectations for the hearing office under HPI?

13. How would you rate the *morale* of the employees concerning the HPI Plan?

Additional Questions We Asked the GSs

1. Do you complete any of the work for either the AA or the PA? **If yes:** What extent has performing the duties of the AA or PA hindered you from doing your job?

2. Do you complete any of the work for either the LCT, SCT, or CT? **If yes:** What extent has performing the duties of the LCT, SCT, or CT hindered you from doing your job?

3. If you do assist individuals in completing their work, what is the effect on your office?

4. If you do assist individuals in completing their work, what do you see as the cause?

5. How helpful are the "Standing Orders" (general or specific) for your group?

6. How often do you request a listing of cases in each stage, sorted by the number of days in that particular stage and the age of the case?

7. If you regularly request a listing of cases in each stage, how helpful has it been for you in distributing the workload and regulating the pace of the case?

8. How frequently do you run an O3 report?

Additional Questions We Asked AAs

1. When assessing whether the medical history is complete, how often do you find that there is missing information?

2. What medical source does not provide adequate information when you first request the evidence? **Check all that apply:** Treating Sources; Sources of Record; Consultative Examiners; or None.

3. Of the medical records, which is most *frequently* missing information? **Choose only one:** Medical History; Clinical Findings; Laboratory Findings; Diagnosis; Treatment and/or Progress; Statement of Abilities; or None.

4. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how strong of an effect do you feel the language difference has on a case in which the claimant is not English speaking?

5. How frequently is there difficulty assigning a translator for a non-English speaking claimant?

6. Of the following, who signs the OTR decisions? Check all that apply: ALJ; SAA; AA; PA; and/or Other.

7. How helpful are the "Standing Orders" (general or specific) for you?

8. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how effective do you feel the formal pre-hearing conferences are in clarifying the issues specific to the ALJ request?

9. Approximately how long does it take for you to conduct a pre-hearing analysis (early screening)?

10. When receiving cases for decision writing, how often are they cases that you have previously certified as ready-to-hear?

Additional Questions We Asked Lead CTs

1. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how effective do you feel that the automated hearing room calendar has been in eliminating *scheduling conflicts*?

2. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how effective do you feel that the automated hearing room calendar has been in eliminating *delays*?

3. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how effective do you feel that the automated hearing room calendar has been in eliminating *postponements*?

4. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how effective do you feel that the automated hearing room calendar has been in eliminating *confusion*?

5. On a scale of 1-5, (5 being the highest) how effective is the revised mail process in routing mail to the intended processing group?

6. How helpful has the rotation of the office-wide scheduling coordinator assignment been in reducing conflicts, delays, postponements, and confusion?

7. Compared to pre-HPI, how much post-hearing development do you conduct?

8. How often do you perform the duties of the SCT or the CT?

9. To what extent has performing the duties for the SCT or CT hindered you from doing your job?

10. Are you required to have the GS pull specific reports you request?

11. As you have observed, how has the amount of "hand-offs" (work handed to another person) changed in comparison to pre-HPI?

12. How helpful are the "Standing Orders" (general and specific) for you?

13. How *efficient* is the new hearing process in comparison to pre-HPI?
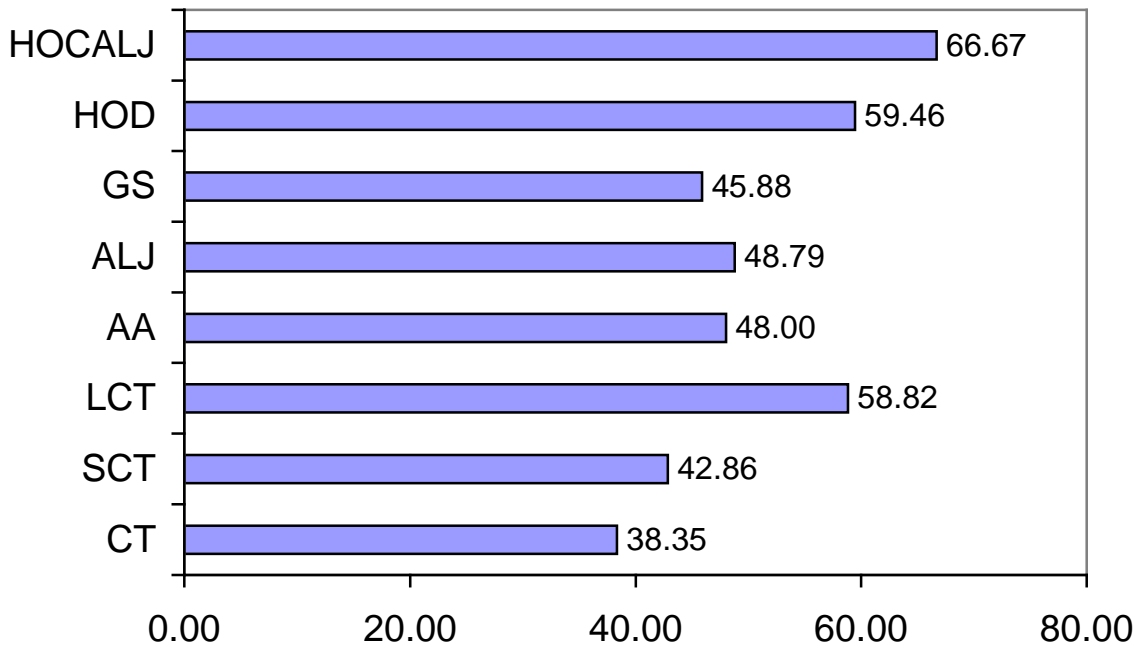
Additional Questions We Asked SCTs

1. On a scale of 1-5, (5 being the highest) how effective do you feel the automated hearing room calendar has been in eliminating *scheduling conflicts*?

2. On a scale of 1-5, (5 being the highest) how effective do you feel the automated hearing room calendar has been in eliminating *delays*?

3. On a scale of 1-5, (5 being the highest) how effective do you feel the automated hearing room calendar has been in eliminating *postponements*?

4. On a scale of 1-5, (5 being the highest) how effective do you feel the automated hearing room calendar has been in eliminating *confusion*?

5. On a scale of 1-5, (5 being the highest) how effective do you feel the formal pre-hearing conferences are in clarifying the issues specific to the ALJ request?

6. On a scale of 1-5, (5 being the highest) how effective is the revised mail process in routing mail to the intended processing group?

7. When/if you are unsure of how to proceed with the case, how often are you able to obtain information to assist you?

8. How often does a claimant or representative *not* respond to the Pre-Hearing Development Notice/Development Questionnaire in the allotted two weeks?

9. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how effective is the Development Questionnaire in eliminating postponements?

10. Do you verify the information in the Hearing Office Tracking System (HOTS)? **If yes:** How often do you find a discrepancy with HOTS and the information found in the case file?

11. How helpful are the "Standing Orders" (general or specific) for you?

12. In comparison to pre-HPI, how much pre-hearing development do you conduct?

13. To what extent has the additional technical and clerical duties in your position description under HPI hindered you from developing cases (i.e., reviewing cases, analyzing cases, marking exhibits and ensuring that the case is ready for hearing)?

Additional Questions We Asked CTs

1. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how effective do you feel the automated hearing room calendar has been in eliminating *scheduling conflicts*?

2. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how effective do you feel the automated hearing room calendar has been in eliminating *delays*?

3. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how effective do you feel the automated hearing room calendar has been in eliminating *postponements*?

4. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how effective do you feel the automated hearing room calendar has been in eliminating *confusion*?

5. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how effective is the revised mail process in routing mail to the intended processing group?

6. When/if you are unsure of how to proceed with the case, how often are you able to obtain information to assist you?

7. How helpful has the rotation of the office-wide scheduling coordinator assignment been in reducing conflicts, delays, postponements, and confusion?

8. How often does a claimant or representative *not* respond to the Pre-Hearing Development Notice/Development Questionnaire in the allotted two weeks?

9. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest), how effective is the Development Questionnaire in eliminating postponements?

10. How frequently is there difficulty assigning a translator for a non-English speaking claimant?

11. Compared to pre-HPI, how much post-hearing development do you conduct?

12. Do you verify the information in HOTS? **If yes:** How often do you find a discrepancy with HOTS and the information found in the case file?

13. How helpful are the "Standing Orders"(general or specific) for you?

Number of Employees by Position Type Who Responded to Our Survey			
Position	**Universe[1]**	**Number of Responses**	**Percent Responding**
HOCALJ	36 [2]	24	66.67
HOD	37	22	59.46
GS	85	39	45.88
ALJ	248	121	48.79
AA	150	72	48.00
LCT	85	50	58.82
SCT	406	174	42.86
CT	279	107	38.35
Totals	**1,326**	**609**	**45.93**

[1] The HO or OHA Regional Office provided the figures used in the universe.

[2] One HOCALJ serves in this capacity in two HOs. He is the Acting HOCALJ for one of the two HOs.

Survey Results for the First 17 Questions (Percentages)

	Managers	Non-Managers	All Employees
OHA Employment			
1. Length of time working in OHA			
Less than one year	9.4	1.5	2.6
1 year to less than 5	9.4	22.8	20.9
5 years to less than 10	27.1	32.7	31.9
10 years to less than 20	29.4	31.7	31.4
20 years or more	24.7	11.3	13.2
2. Worked in HO since beginning of HPI			
Yes	97.6	97.5	97.5
No	2.4	2.5	2.5
Training			
3. Received HPI Process Orientation Training (Orientation Training)			
Yes	97.6	96.2	96.4
No	2.4	3.8	3.6
4. When was the Orientation Training completed relative to the HO starting HPI?			
2 months or more prior	22.2	39.3	36.9
1 to 2 months prior	53.1	39.3	41.3
Less than 1 month prior	21.0	10.0	11.5
Less than 1 month after	0.0	2.4	2.1
1 to 2 months after	0.0	3.3	2.8
Other	3.7	5.7	5.4
5a. Length of Orientation Training			
1 day	3.7	7.1	6.6
More than a day	96.3	92.9	93.4
5b. If more than a day, number of days to complete Orientation Training: (Note1)			
2 days	23.7	30.9	29.8
3 days	59.2	29.9	34.5
4 days	13.2	12.2	12.3
5 days	3.9	19.0	16.6
Other	0.0	8.0	6.8

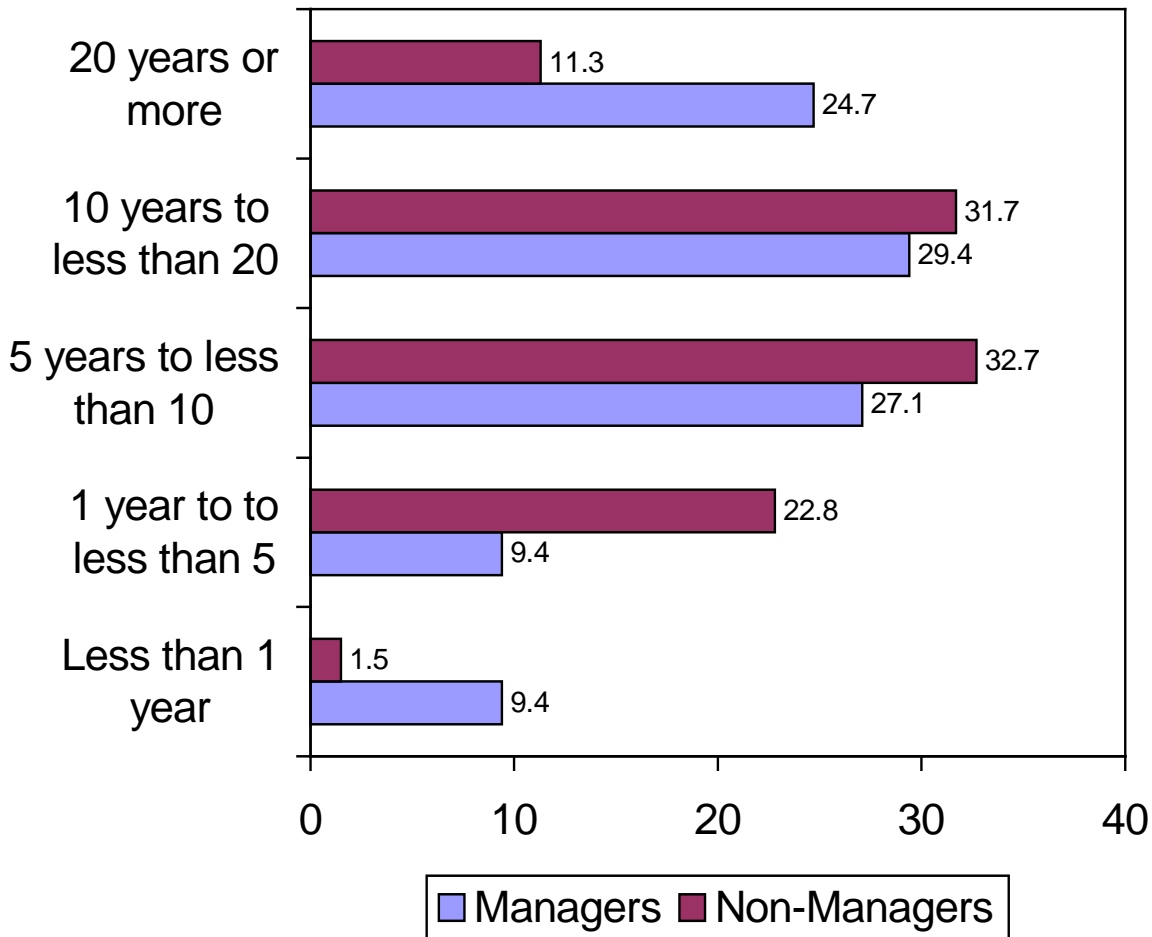|	Managers	Non-Managers	All Employees
6. How helpful was HPI Orientation Training			
Helpful or Very Helpful	63.1	30.5	35.1
Neutral	11.9	28.5	26.1
Not Helpful	23.8	37.2	35.4
Not Applicable	1.2	3.8	3.4
7a. Received training to supplement HPI Orientation Training			
Yes	71.1	44.4	48.1
No	28.9	55.6	51.9
7b. If yes, type of training provided (Note 1)			
Local (or Group)	44.7	34.9	36.3
Personalized (One on One)	9.4	4.8	5.4
Other	32.9	7.4	11.0
8a. Need additional training			
Yes	36.9	41.7	41.0
No	63.1	58.3	59.0
8b. If yes, type of training needed (Note 1)			
Position Description	9.4	16.0	15.1
HOTS	15.3	8.4	9.4
Software	21.2	26.9	26.1
Other	14.1	11.1	11.5
Case Processing			
9a. Responsibilities changed under HPI			
Yes	80.5	76.1	76.7
No	19.5	23.9	23.3
9b. If responsibilities *did not* change, how much work do you have under HPI in comparison to pre-HPI: (Note 1)			
More	25.0	39.7	37.8
Same	66.7	44.9	47.8
Less	8.3	15.4	14.4
10a. Case development prior to HPI			
The case was *not* fully developed before assigning it to an ALJ	69.5	56.5	58.3
The case was fully developed before assigning it to an ALJ	30.5	43.5	41.7

	Managers	Non-Managers	All Employees
10b. If case was fully developed before assigning it to the ALJ, how different were early development procedures in comparison with pre-HPI: (Note 1)			
Different	52.1	71.3	69.3
Same	13.0	14.1	14.0
Not different	34.7	14.6	16.7
11a. If production goals are not met, what is needed? (Note 2)			
Increased staffing	80.0	83.4	82.9
Overtime	25.9	35.7	34.3
Decision writing assistance	23.5	18.7	19.4
Contribution from employees outside OHA	4.7	4.0	4.1
Case pulling assistance	56.5	40.5	42.7
Other	16.5	18.7	18.4
None	8.2	1.0	2.0
11b. Type of staffing most needed (Note 2)			
Judicial	22.4	7.1	9.2
Management	2.4	2.5	2.5
Clerical	36.5	42.6	41.7
Attorney/Paralegal	34.1	23.9	25.3
Case Technicians (LCT, SCT or CT)	60.0	65.6	64.9
Comparative Conditions: HPI versus Pre-HPI			
12. Quality of service for claimants			
Better	35.7	14.9	17.8
Same	34.5	32.1	32.4
Worse	23.8	46.3	43.2
Don't know	6.0	6.7	6.6
13. Job Satisfaction			
Better	34.5	9.3	12.8
Same	19.8	15.3	15.8
Worse	43.2	73.3	69.2
Don't Know	2.5	2.1	2.2
14. Efficiency of Processing			
Better	34.2	8.4	12.0
Same	20.7	17.3	17.7
Worse	40.2	69.0	65.1
Don't Know	4.9	5.3	5.2

	Managers	Non-Managers	All Employees
Morale, Expectations, & Satisfaction			
15. One's own morale as a result of HPI			
High	42.2	10.8	15.2
Moderate	32.5	27.6	28.3
Low	25.3	61.6	56.5
16. Understanding of OHA's expectation for hearing office under HPI			
High	86.9	53.5	58.3
Moderate	10.7	28.3	25.8
Low	2.4	18.2	15.9
17. Overall satisfaction with HPI Plan			
Satisfied	50.0	11.3	16.7
Neutral	16.7	21.0	20.4
Not Satisfied	33.3	67.7	62.9

Note 1: Responses were predicated on the response to the preceding question; therefore, the percentages will not total 100 percent.

Note 2: Employees could select more than one answer; therefore, the percentages will not total 100 percent.
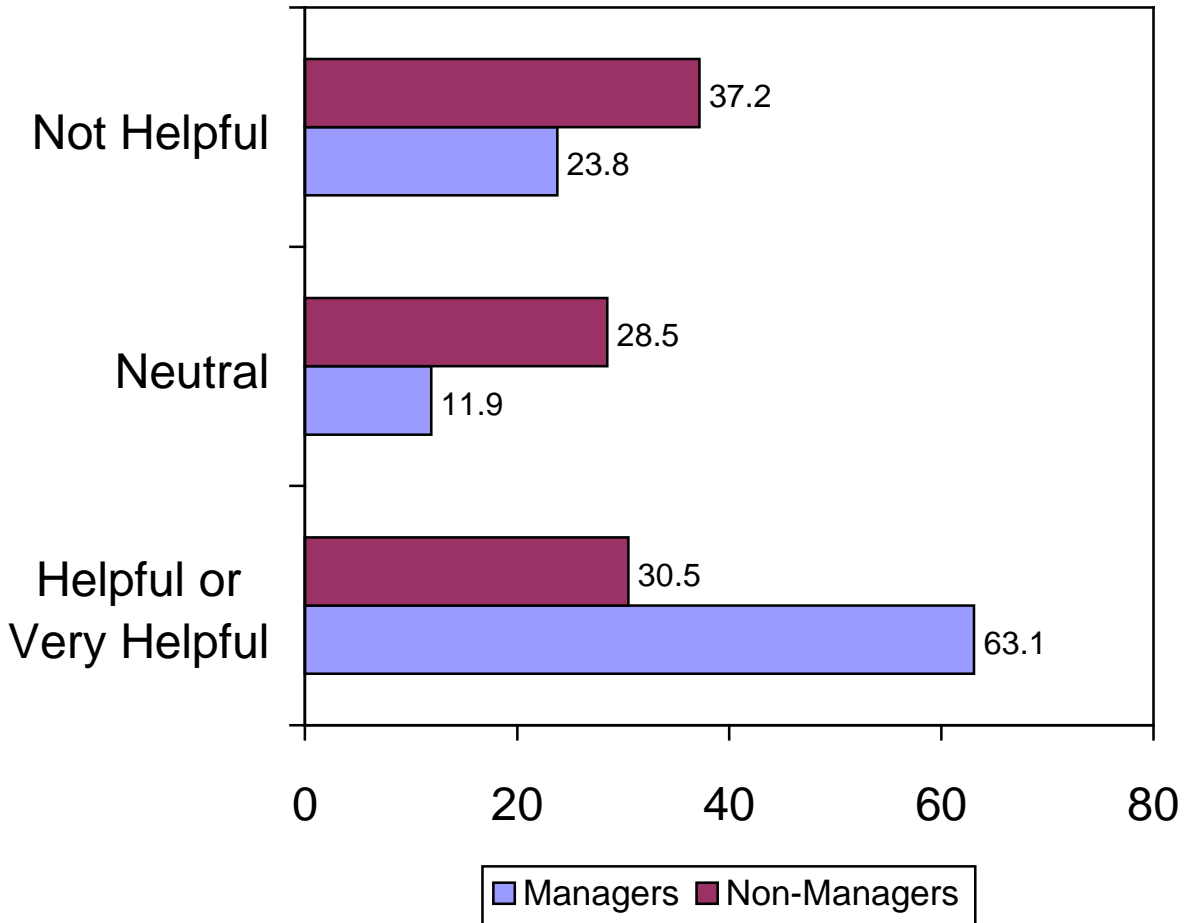
Percentage of OHA Phase 1 Work Force
Years of Experience

Years of Experience	Managers	Non-Managers
20 years or more	24.7	11.3
10 years to less than 20	29.4	31.7
5 years to less than 10	27.1	32.7
1 year to to less than 5	9.4	22.8
Less than 1 year	9.4	1.5

■ Managers ■ Non-Managers

Percentage of staff with at least 5 years of experience:

Managers (HOCALJs, HODs, and GSs)   81.2 percent
Non-managers (ALJs, AAs, SCTs, LCTs, CTs)   75.7 percent

How Helpful was the HPI Training?
(Percentages)

Chart data:

| Category	Managers	Non-Managers
Not Helpful	23.8	37.2
Neutral	11.9	28.5
Helpful or Very Helpful	63.1	30.5

Note: Percentages will not add to 100 percent because those answering "not applicable" were not included in the chart.

How Would You Rate Your Understanding of OHA's Expectations for the Hearing Office under HPI? (Percentages)
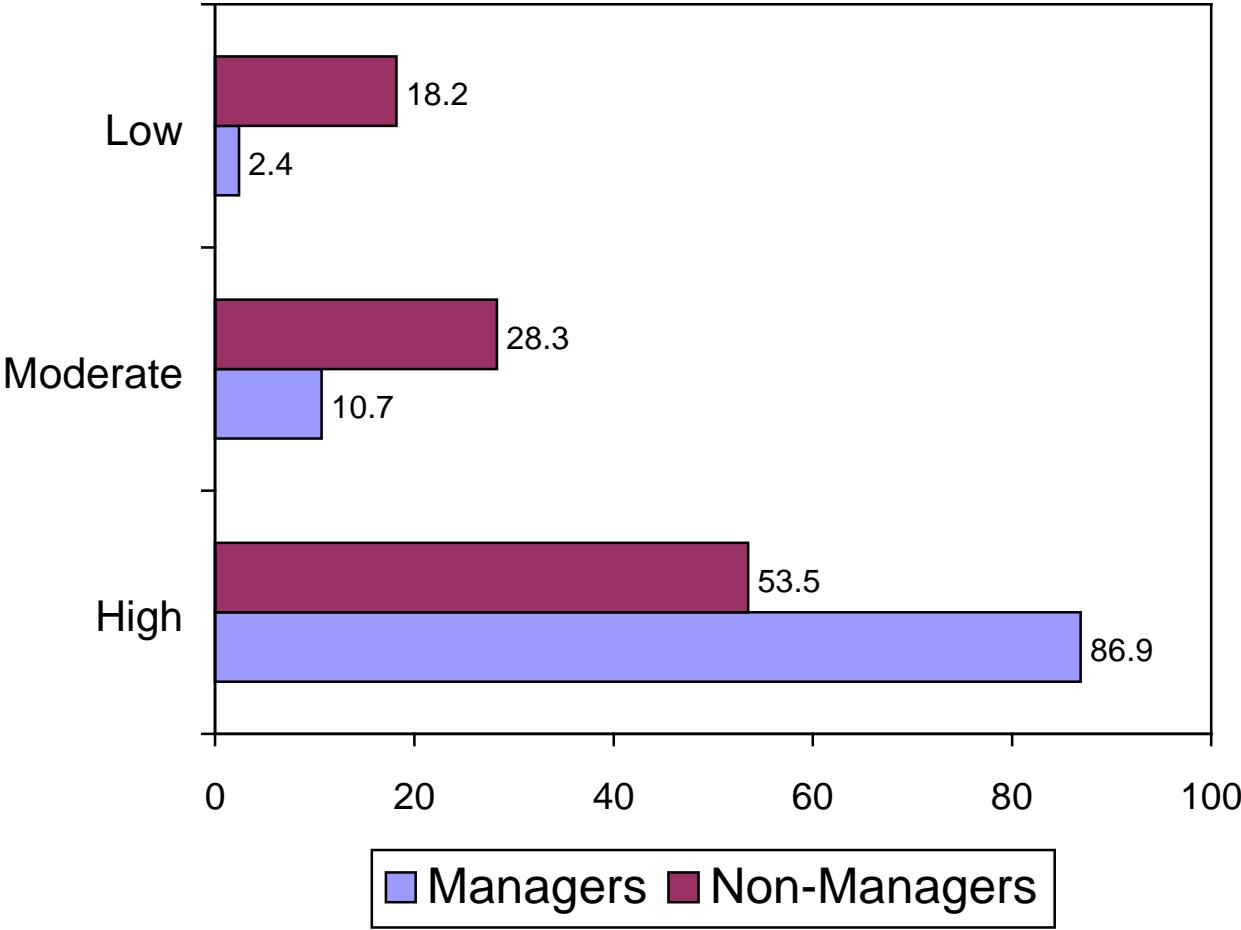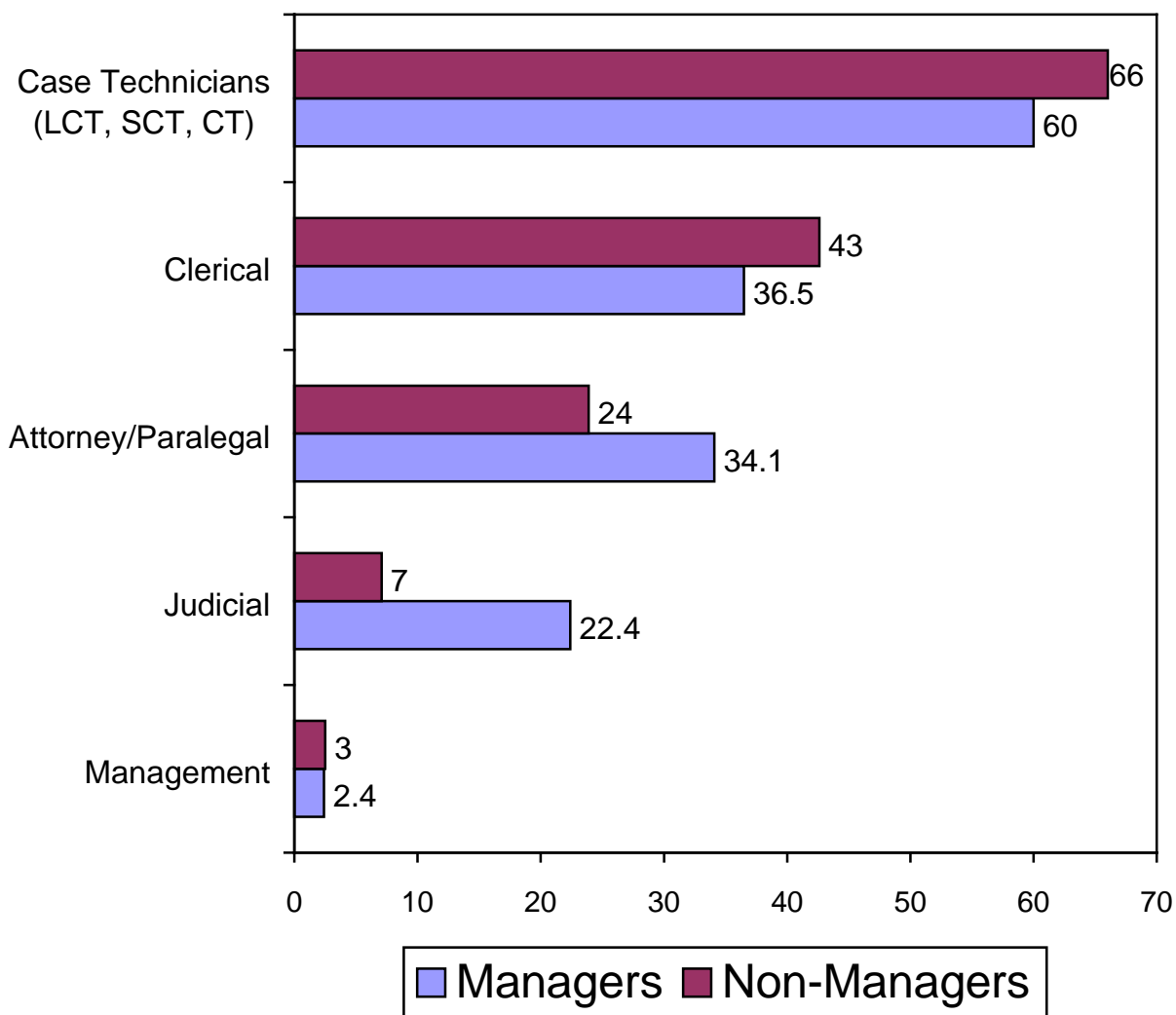
If your office does not meet the production goals, which of the following would be needed? (Percentages)
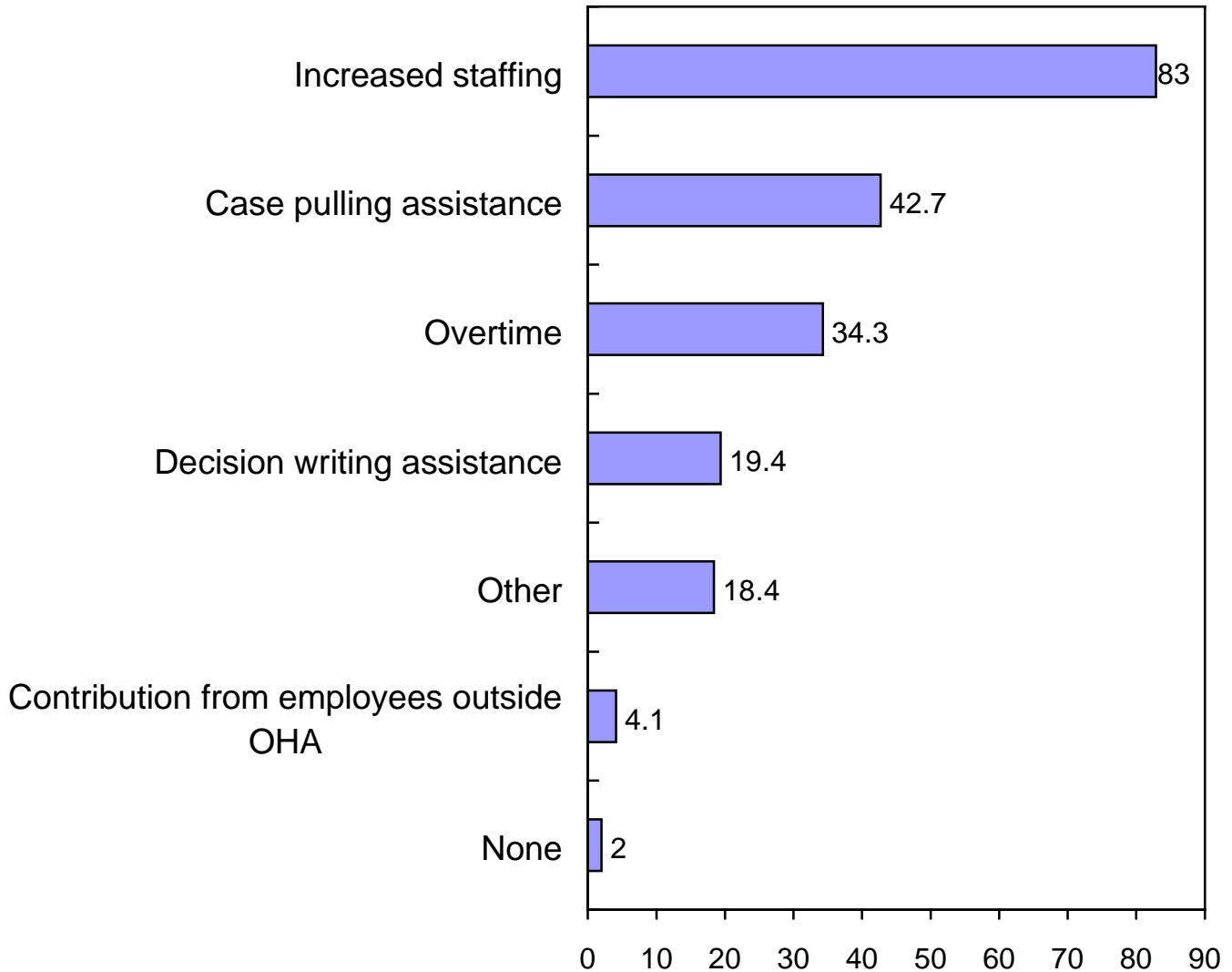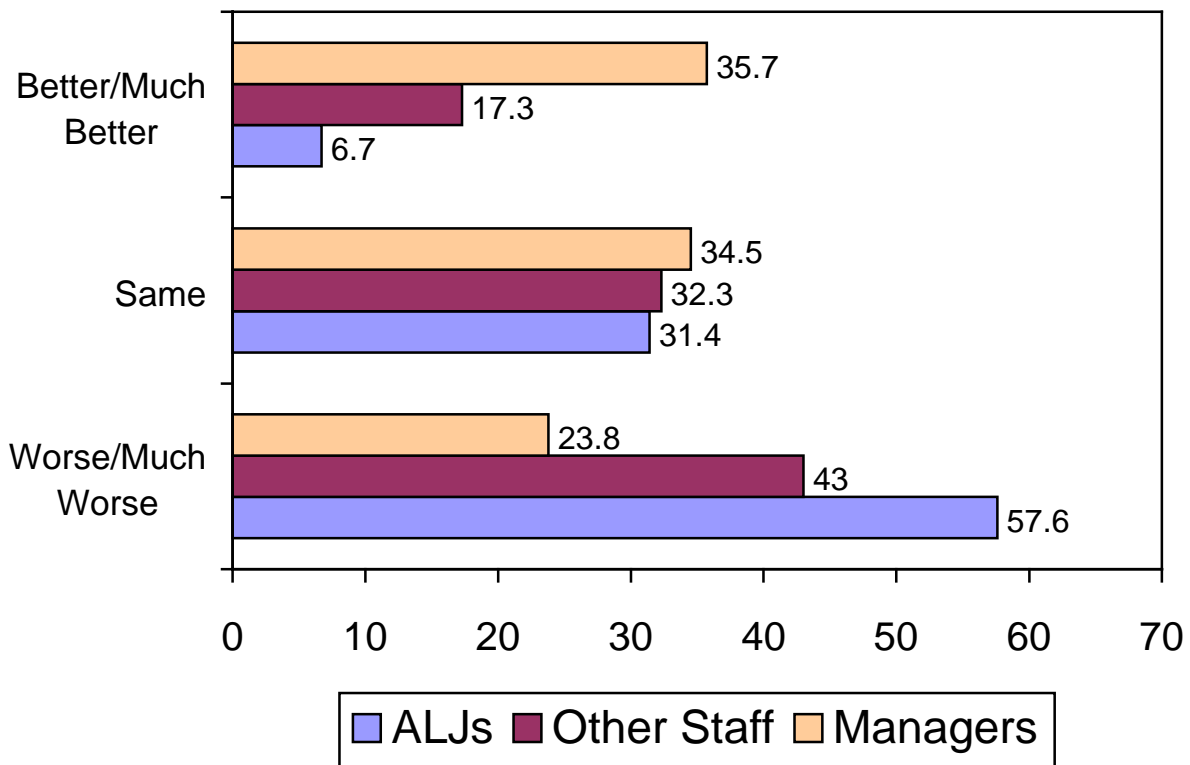

Note: Employees could select more than one answer; therefore, the percentages will not total 100 percent

Hearing Office Positions Cited as Most Needed to Meet Production Goals (Percentages)

Horizontal bar chart comparing Managers and Non-Managers:

Position	Non-Managers	Managers
Case Technicians (LCT, SCT, CT)	66	60
Clerical	43	36.5
Attorney/Paralegal	24	34.1
Judicial	7	22.4
Management	3	2.4

Legend: ☐ Managers ■ Non-Managers

Note: Employees could select more than one answer; therefore, the percentages will not total 100 percent

# How Would You Rate the Quality of Service for the Claimants Under HPI Compared to Pre-HPI? (Percentages)

Category	ALJs	Other Staff	Managers
Better/Much Better	6.7	17.3	35.7
Same	31.4	32.3	34.5
Worse/Much Worse	57.6	43	23.8

Legend: ALJs, Other Staff, Managers

Note: Percentages will not add to 100 percent because those answering "don't know" were not included in the chart.

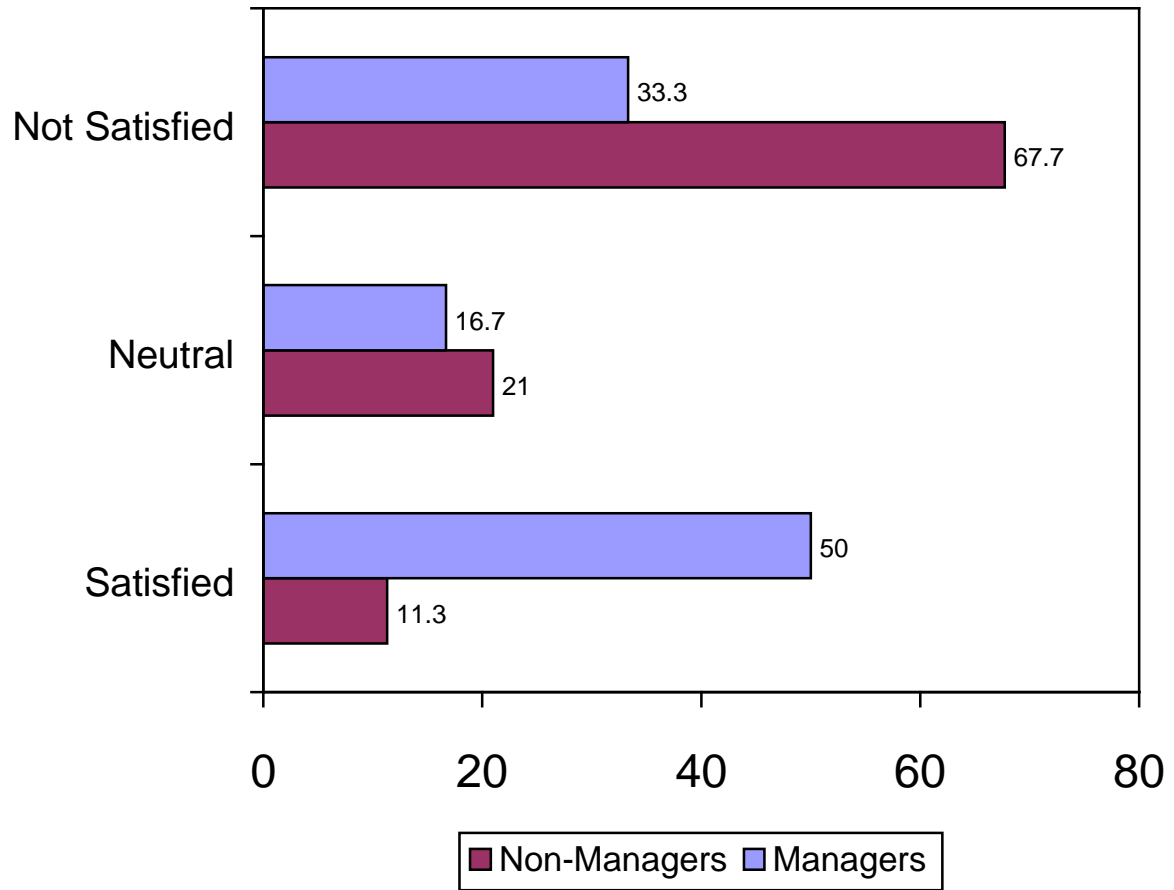|	Universe Total (Phase 1 Offices)	Number Who Returned the Survey	Number Who Rated the Quality of Service
ALJs	248	121	113
Other Staff (AA, LCT, SCT, CT)	920	403	364
Managers (HOCALJ, HOD, GS)	158	85	79

How would you rate the overall *efficiency of processing* under HPI compared to pre-HPI? (Percentages)
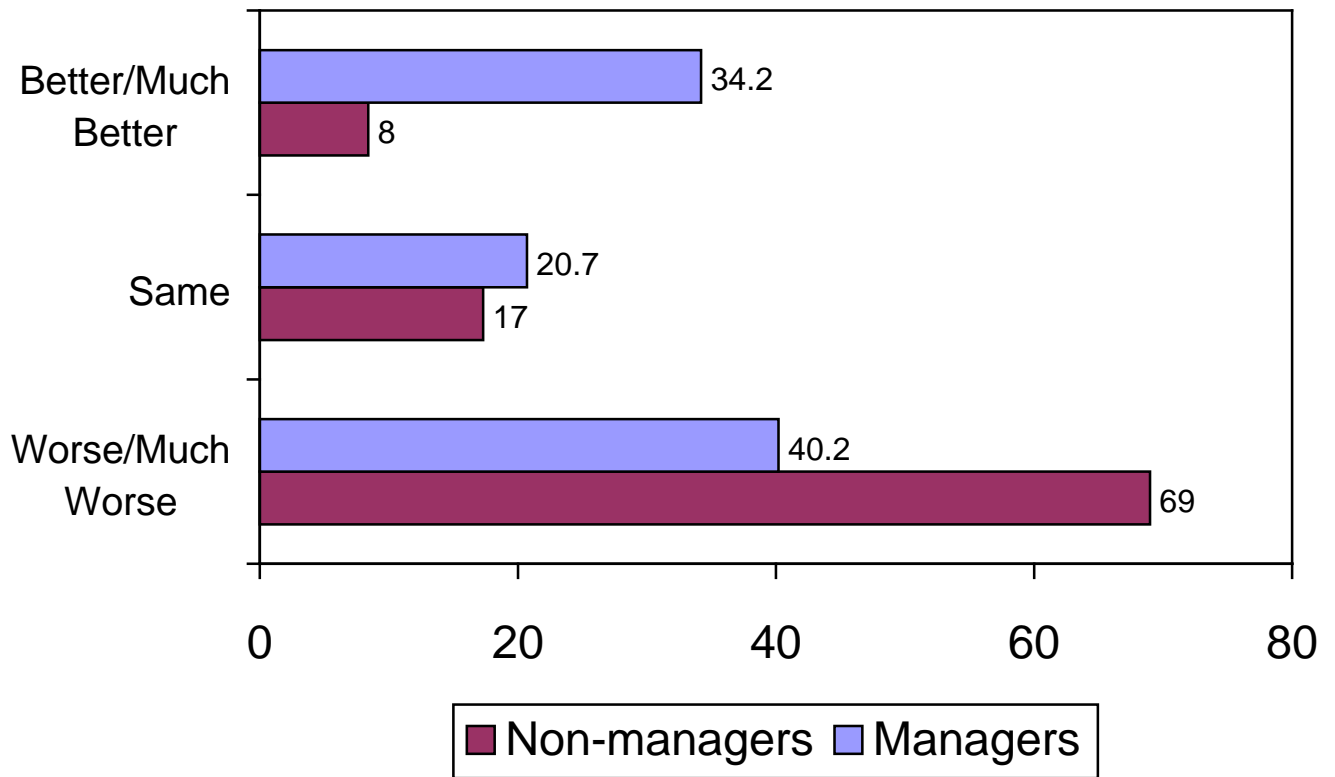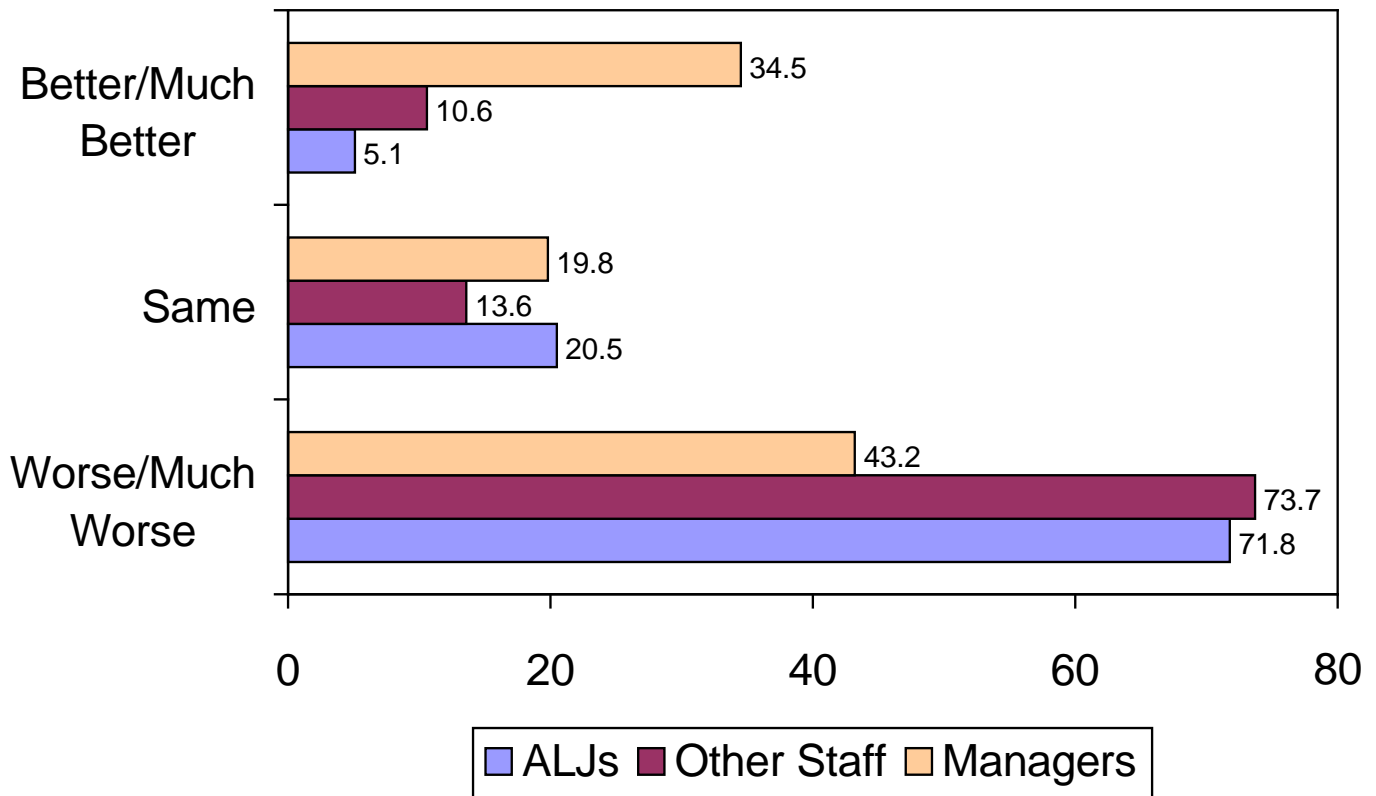

Note: Percentages will not add to 100 percent because those answering "don't know" were not included in the chart.

	Universe Total (Phase 1 Offices)	Number Who Returned the Survey	Number Who Rated the Efficiency of Processing
Non-managers (ALJ, AA, LCT, SCT, CT)	1,168	524	483
Managers (HOCALJ, HOD, GS)	158	85	78

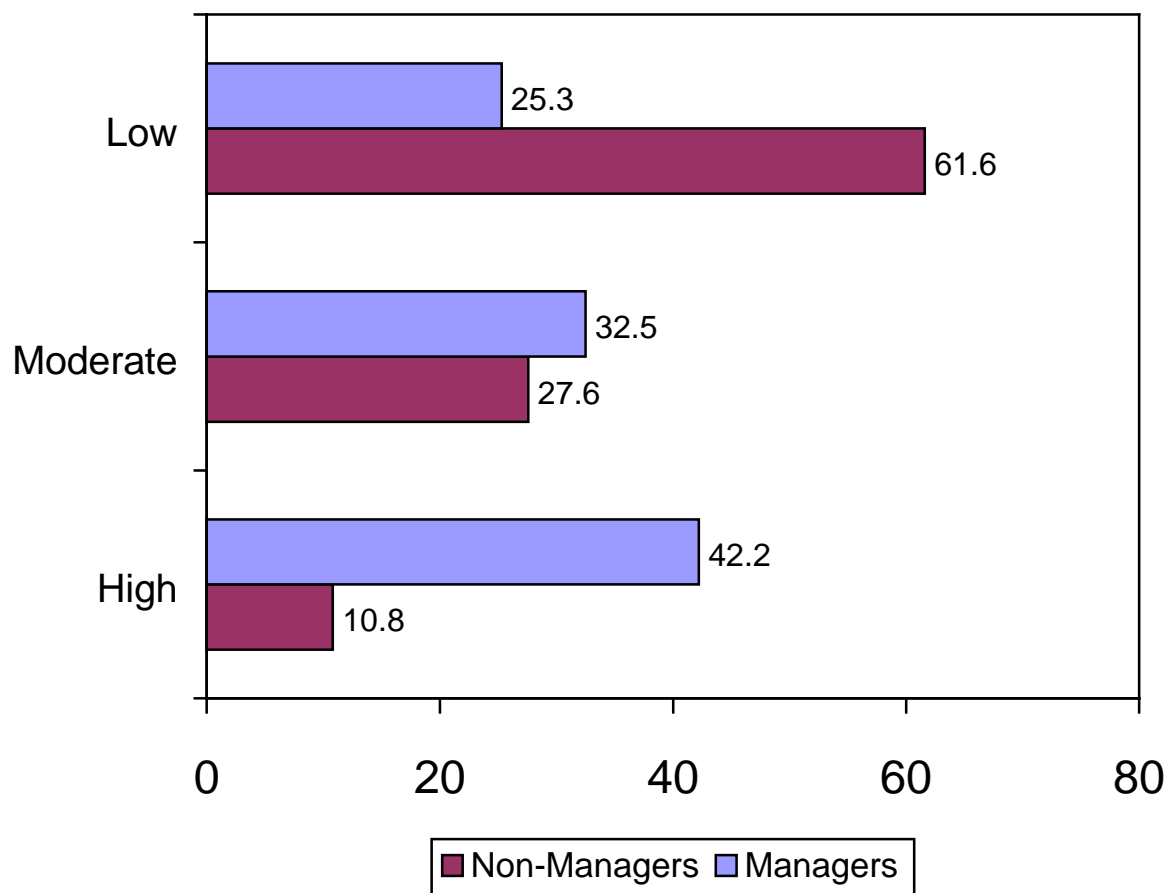# Overall, How Satisfied Are You With the HPI Plan? (Percentages)

Not Satisfied — Managers: 33.3, Non-Managers: 67.7
Neutral — Managers: 16.7, Non-Managers: 21
Satisfied — Managers: 50, Non-Managers: 11.3

Legend: Non-Managers, Managers

Compared to pre-HPI, how would you rate the overall *job satisfaction* in this hearing office?
(Percentages)

Better/Much Better
- Managers: 34.5
- Other Staff: 10.6
- ALJs: 5.1

Same
- Managers: 19.8
- Other Staff: 13.6
- ALJs: 20.5

Worse/Much Worse
- Managers: 43.2
- Other Staff: 73.7
- ALJs: 71.8

Legend: ☐ ALJs ☐ Other Staff ☐ Managers

Note: Percentages will not add to 100 percent because those answering "don't know" were not included in the chart.

	Universe Total (Phase 1 Offices)	Number Who Returned the Survey	Number Who Rated Job Satisfaction
ALJs	248	121	114
Other Staff (AA, LCT, SCT, CT)	920	403	388
Managers (HOCALJ, HOD, GS)	158	85	79

Overall, how would you rate *your morale* as a result of the HPI Plan? (Percentages)

Horizontal bar chart comparing Non-Managers and Managers across three morale ratings:

Rating	Non-Managers	Managers
Low	61.6	25.3
Moderate	27.6	32.5
High	10.8	42.2

Legend: Non-Managers, Managers

Selected Employee Comments

1. Need for Additional Staff

Managerial Comments

We have three Senior Case Technicians (SCT) in an office with six Administrative Law Judges (ALJ). In essence, we have one Case Technician (CT) to type cases for six ALJs and she is required to rotate into other duties, including phone and reception.

Staffing of lower level positions (i.e., receptionist & mail clerks) would allow the SCTs and CTs to process HPI cases quicker. Don't waste their talent.

We also need more CTs, SCTs, and Attorney/Paralegals in order for HPI to work (and we cannot hire employees because we do not have space in our office).

To have been effective HPI should have been implemented with full staffing in each office, rather than trying to make do with existing staff.

Non-managerial Comments

HPI would work for us if we can hire additional staff at the case-technician and senior-case-technician levels. Prior to HPI, people left and have not been replaced. With HPI, we need many, many more employees.

The process cannot function efficiently with a ratio of less than one CT per ALJ. Promotions are great, but clerical positions have not been filled. Cases are not distributed evenly in each group. Group "C" has three clerks/technicians and get as many cases or more than group "B" and group "A". Group "A" has six technicians and so does group "B".

2. Use of Standing Orders

Managerial Comments

The ALJs have had difficulties adapting to HPI as well. They continue to issue specific standing orders for the group, rather than general standing orders.

Standing instructions by the ALJs in addition to specific instructions are too detailed and confusing; ALJs require the sky under HPI.

No standing orders have been issued by the ALJs in my group.

I work in a group for three judges and none of them does things the same way. Each one still feels like he has a unit and does things his own way. This really makes it hard on staff doing things in HPI.

Not all ALJs do general standing orders; they are not consistent. They do their own thing. I do not feel this office (as a whole) complies with the HPI plan.

3. Handoffs are on the Increase

Managerial Comments

Establishing case ownership can sometimes lead to many handoffs (e.g., to analysts, back to owner of case for development, back to the analyst when development comes in).

This process has significantly increased "handoffs" rather than decreased them.

Non-managerial Comments

Appears HPI created more hand-offs rather than less due to always using a middleman (LCT or GS) for handling cases.

HPI has increased the number of hand-offs. Too many people handle the files, too many mistakes and too many errors.

Agency Comments

SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

May 29, 2001   Refer To: S1J-3

To: James G. Huse, Jr.
        Inspector General

        Larry G. Massanari
        Acting Commissioner of Social Security

Subject: Office of the Inspector General (OIG) Draft Report, "Assessment of the Hearings Process
           Improvement Plan Phase I" (A-06-00-20051)—INFORMATION

We appreciate OIG's efforts in evaluating the results of the Office of Hearings and Appeals'
implementation of Phase I of the Hearings Process Improvement (HPI) plan. Our comments on
the draft report and the specific recommendations are attached.

Please let us know if we may be of further assistance. Staff questions may be referred to
Robert Berzanski on extension 52675.

Attachment:
SSA Comments

COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL'S (OIG) DRAFT REPORT, "ASSESSMENT OF THE HEARINGS PROCESS IMPROVEMENT PLAN: PHASE I" (A-06-00-20051)

During the time period in which OIG was preparing the subject report, SSA proceeded with the implementation of Phases 2 and 3 of the Hearings Process Improvement (HPI) plan. We note that information in the OIG report is consistent with areas of concern that we identified during our early monitoring and internal reviews of Phase 1. We incorporated "lessons learned" in Phase 1 to provide a smoother transition as we implemented Phases 2 and 3, and we are confident that many of the hearing office (HO) employees' concerns expressed in the OIG survey have been addressed. We appreciate your feedback and will rely on OIG for continued assistance in our evaluation of the HPI initiative. Our specific comments for each recommendation follow:

Recommendation 1

Establish a timeframe by which HOs should implement all parts of the HPI Plan.

Comment

We agree. A specific schedule was established to implement HPI in HOs. For Phases II and III, the responsible management officials were required to certify, within 2 weeks of rollout of each HO, that key elements of the plan were in place.

Recommendation 2

Reassess training needs for non-managers and ensure they have an adequate understanding of OHA's expectations under HPI.

Comment

We agree. As part of our planning efforts for Phases II and III, we held weekly teleconference meetings with local and regional management involved in the Phase I implementation. We were able to identify implementation issues and some additional training needs from those meetings and from other assessment tools. We changed the timing of new process orientation for Phases II and III to deliver it "just in time." We provided skills training for non-managers as soon as practicable after selection, and that effort continues for those employees promoted more recently. Additionally, we plan to conduct a training needs assessment within the next 4 months to identify supplemental and outgoing training needs.

A video presentation, hosted by the Associate Commissioner for Hearings and Appeals and the Chief Administrative Law Judge, was delivered to all HO employees in March 2001. Its purpose was to address employees' concerns, focus on the intent of HPI and emphasize that the plan is flexible enough to respond to workload changes and enable us to meet our goals. Our communication with employees about the new business process continues in written form and via executive management presentations and discussions in HOs around the country.

Recommendation 3

Re-evaluate the staffing needs for technicians and clerical staff within each HO to maximize productivity.

Comment

We agree. Staffing needs are reviewed on an ongoing basis. The needs of individual offices depend on factors that are unique to each office, such as the number of retiring employees and the number of employees promoted to new positions under HPI. Those specific needs are evaluated on the local and regional levels, where SSA management have authority to make certain personnel decisions as necessary.

Recommendation 4

Perform an evaluation of standing orders, or the lack of standing orders, in each office to ensure employees have clear and uniform instructions from ALJs within each processing group.

Comment

Management in the OHA regional offices and HOs review the use of standing orders on an ongoing basis as part of our continuous improvement activity. However, while standing orders can be very helpful and they are encouraged, their development is voluntary. We will continue to encourage their development and use as we look to maximize the potential of our new business process.

OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

OIG Contacts

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