



# Book Managing Your Government Career

## Success Strategies That Work

Stewart Liff  
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## Recommendation

Are you thinking of a government career? If so, consider this parable: When sorority sisters Bailey and Brianna graduated, Bailey went to work for the ABCD Corporation at a nice salary. She picked up a promotion and raise after a year. Unfortunately, Bailey also picked up an exotic disease during a business trip and spent three weeks in the hospital. With no healthcare coverage from work, she went into debt paying her medical bills. Shortly afterward, ABCD announced layoffs. As a new hire, Bailey was one of the first to go. Brianna joined a U.S. federal government agency at a lesser salary than Bailey's, but her healthcare plan is golden, and she never frets about layoffs. Does that mean you should apply for a government job instead of one in the private sector? In today's environment, when all jobs are hard to get, business pays better, but government jobs are more secure and the benefits just don't quit. If you want to learn about U.S. government work, Stewart Liff's book – based on his 32-year ascent through federal agencies – will tell you everything you need to know, including how to avoid getting tangled in red tape. *BooksInShort* recommends this useful guide to people contemplating a career in the public sector and to civil service recruiters.

## Take-Aways

- Government jobs in the United States offer great security and benefits.
- However, they are also fraught with bureaucratic red tape.
- If pay is your most important consideration, a federal or state job may be best.
- If location is paramount, pursue a job in local government.
- Thanks to the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS), you can readily transfer back and forth from federal, state and local government jobs.
- Joining a government agency in a temporary capacity is not a smart career move.
- In government, frontline supervisors face constant scrutiny and pressure. They appreciate employees who work to make their jobs easier.
- Mentors can help you advance in a government career.
- A rewarding government career depends on having a clear goal and a pre-planned, but flexible career path.
- As in all fields, a satisfying career in government requires a healthy work-life balance.

## Summary

### Government Career Pros and Cons

Is a government job – federal, state or local – a good career opportunity for you? Before you apply for a government job of any type, consider these advantages:

- **Job satisfaction** – A government job enables you to contribute to the common good. Few other jobs offer this special opportunity.
- **Job security** – Businesses depend on profits to operate. If profits decrease, people get laid off. Mergers can also reduce jobs. Plus, many businesses now outsource jobs overseas where people will do them for less money. In general, government workers face none of these problems. If the federal government abolishes jobs, “reduction in force” protections shelter federal employees. Many state and local governments offer similar programs for their employees.
- **Perks** – The federal government provides outstanding benefits to its employees, including excellent health and life insurance packages, a liberal leave program, flexible work schedules, several retirement options and much more. Benefits at state and local governments often are also excellent.
- **Career opportunities** – The U.S. federal government employs nearly 2.7 million individuals (excluding the military). Approximately 19 million people have jobs in governmental work units, so clearly governmental staffers represent a huge portion of the workforce. Given the range of government employment available and the fact that senior employees are always retiring, job openings and promotions often abound.

“Before you decide to work for the government, it is important that you know what you are getting into, as the government is certainly not the right place for everyone.”

However, government jobs in the U.S. also have some distinct shortcomings:

- **Salary** – In most cases, you can earn more money in the private sector than you can as a government worker.
- **Red tape** – Government is the ultimate bureaucracy. If strict procedures and protocol frustrate and bother you, stay away from government work.
- **Politics** – The direction of the government often radically changes with the latest election results. This can be disconcerting for government employees who must adapt their processes every few years based on the most recent administration’s philosophy.

“Customize your résumé [or] application form to the job that you are applying for, since staffing specialists do not have the luxury of spending a lot of time reviewing each application.”

If the advantages of a government job outweigh the disadvantages for you, should you target a job in the federal, state or local government? In most cases, federal and state government jobs pay better than local government jobs. However, that depends on the specific job you want to pursue. Your planning must acknowledge the number of jobs available in your chosen field at different levels of government. For example, if you want to become a policeman or firefighter, you will find more of these jobs at the local level than at the federal level.

“Attend all of the office events that you can possibly get to, including lunches, dinners, picnics, after-work drinks and other such occasions.”

Location is another important factor when you plan a government career. If you like the area where you live, your best bet may be to seek a local government job. But if location is not an important issue, then a federal or state job may be a better option. The versatile Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS), which started in 1983, enables workers to transfer with relative ease among federal, state and local government agencies while securing their pensions.

## Getting a Job in Government

You can join the public sector in a temporary capacity. However, that route does not offer civil service eligibility or benefits, in most cases. Instead, try to get on one of these three paths to start working for the government:

1. Start out as a clerical worker, or in a blue-collar or technical capacity. This lets you take advantage of great government benefits as you get your foot in the door to move up to something better later.
2. Land a trainee role. Then, as you benefit from onsite training, systematically advance into a full-fledged professional position.
3. Join the government as an expert specialist, such as an accountant, scientist, nurse or engineer.

“Ultimately, the people who have the most knowledge, skills and abilities, and who have a strong track record of success, are the ones who make it to the top.”

Government agencies advertise open positions on their Web sites. To apply for a job, gather all the details of your previous employment history, education and, if applicable, any disability or veteran preference information. Carefully review all the application guidelines and procedures. Understand that you will need to include a “supplemental statement of your qualifications” for most government jobs. Hiring officials use this questionnaire to rate your experience. You also will need to write the answers to numerous multiple-choice questions covering your particular skills, capabilities and experience.

“Knowing what your supervisor’s goals are is extremely important because you do not want to be working at odds with these goals.”

If you have a good résumé, and you submit everything correctly, the next step may be an employment interview. Before your interview, learn everything you can about the agency where you have applied. Visit its Web site. You only get one chance to win over an interviewer, so prepare as thoroughly as possible. Anticipate the questions the interviewer will ask you, and practice answers that will reflect most favorably on your qualifications. Have your own questions ready. At the end of the interview, be prepared to state in a succinct, compelling fashion why the interviewer should hire you and not someone else. Send a thank-you note after your meeting. Then, keep your fingers crossed. If your experience or education are appropriate, and if your interview went well, you may have talked your way into your first government job.

## Your New Government Career

In government, as in business, you must be mindful of tradition and custom. As a new government employee, learn the accepted way to present yourself. How you look is important. Maintain a neat appearance and good personal hygiene. Men should wear suits and ties; women can wear suits, dresses or smart outfits. In all other things, do your best to fit in with your colleagues. Arrive on time. Never leave early. Maintain a friendly attitude. Don’t abuse your phone or computer privileges. Use your office time for work activities, not personal business.

“The best way to get into upper management is to do an excellent job as a first-line supervisor.”

Should you join a union? Active involvement will allow you to learn about your rights as an employee and to rub shoulders with upper management. Nationally, federal workers can refuse to join a union. However, many government workers at state and local levels must either join a union or pay the corresponding union fees. In so-called “right-to-work” states, government workers can choose to cancel their union memberships.

## **Your Work Supervisor**

No one in government has a tougher job than first-line supervisors. They receive criticism from every working group within their agencies, including upper management. Plus, they constantly come under fire from stakeholders and customers. Supervisors operate under close inspection from all layers of hierarchy. They must constantly supply all sorts of information to management regarding the work and accomplishments of the government employees they supervise. This can include audit and investigatory information for the Office of the Inspector General.

“The higher you go in management, the more you will be affected by the political process.”

In short, government supervisors constantly have their hands full. As a government employee, be mindful of the immense pressure that your supervisor is under at all times. Do your best to support him or her through your own good work and efforts. To help your supervisor out, always go the extra mile to do your job in an efficient manner, and to be as responsive to his or her needs and information requests as possible. This is not just the proper way for you to handle things, it also is the smart way. Your supervisor will remember your cooperation and assistance when it is time to evaluate your job performance.

## **Politics**

Government is all about politics; politics is all about government. As a government worker, you need to become knowledgeable about the political forces that shape your government agency. Otherwise, you will never truly understand what goes on there. Some government workers think it is enough to keep their heads down and simply put in their eight hours a day. This is a decidedly shortsighted point of view. The more reliable knowledge you have about the political forces at work within your agency, as well as the politics that affect it from the outside, the better able you will be not only to protect your career but also to advance it.

“An excellent way to grow is to study the lives of successful people.”

To develop a sophisticated understanding of the impact of politics at your agency, seek the guidance of knowledgeable mentors, seasoned and savvy individuals who can teach you the ins and outs of government work. You may meet potential mentors during seminars, at conferences or even as a result of formal mentor programs at your agency. During your career, you may have scores of such informal mentors or confidants. Treasure each relationship. At the same time, develop a strong network of trusted colleagues throughout government, so you can brainstorm your agency’s activities and operations, share new ideas and gain valuable perspectives. This is the best way to stay in the loop.

## **Your Career Path**

A career path without a map leads nowhere. Therefore, decide what direction you want your career to take. Maybe your goal is to be an executive vice president by age 50. This means you should be a “division manager” by age 40 and you should have a team working under you by age 30. To advance in government, you need a firm goal. Make sure you have one. But do not limit yourself to only one career path. Government presents numerous options for career-minded individuals. Therefore, it always pays to stay flexible and keep your options open.

“Many people become so wrapped up in their jobs that they define their own sense of self-worth almost exclusively by how they are doing at work.”

Do you aspire to management? The advantages of a management career in government are numerous, including power, prestige and better pay. Being a manager puts you in a more advantageous position to advance important agency goals, and to influence policy and direction. To become a manager, you must first work as a front-line supervisor, which, as noted, can be exceedingly tough. To get fully prepared for this challenge, develop a broad base of knowledge and expertise. Attend leadership courses. Establish your credentials as an expert, efficient front-line supervisor. Make sure your team scores for your agency. Get to know the agency’s current managers. Just as important, make sure that they know you and think well of you.

## **Work-Life Balance**

A satisfying career in government, or in any field, requires balancing your work life and your personal life. Too many people in government and elsewhere invest everything in their careers, while effectively leaving their personal lives “on the shelf.” This is a recipe for dissatisfaction, even disaster. A life that exists only in the office is no life at all. Make sure that your zeal to advance your career does not blind you to life’s necessities. You should eat well and find time for exercise. Get enough rest. What good is a career if you burn yourself out at it?

“Ultimately, managing your government career is all about managing your life.”

At the same time, work hard to get ahead. Read the professional journals that pertain to your field. Get additional education. Develop and enhance your skills. Strive to become the best government employee in your office. Government work is not easy. It can involve a great deal of pressure. It is bureaucratic. It is often stultifying. You may feel that you are constantly “swimming upstream.” But government work also offers special rewards. Through it, you can truly make a difference on behalf of your fellow citizens.

## **About the Author**

**Stewart Liff** began his federal government career in 1974. He is the winner of two prestigious governmental employee awards: the President’s Council on

