
Defense Report

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Hiring Good Scientists and Engineers— The Government is a Non-competitive Employer

Almost every branch of the federal government needs highly competent scientists and engineers to develop and oversee programs involving the expenditure of billions of tax dollars each year. Programs in the health sciences, in agriculture, in energy source development and in the design of military hardware all need top-notch people to oversee them.

The source the government would most like to tap is the yearly flow of young graduates of the nation's top colleges and universities. They enter the job market in possession of the latest technical knowledge and are eager to embark on a career that will offer professional challenge as well as personal satisfaction—including the satisfaction of a proper salary.

But some federal agencies find themselves unable to compete with private industry in recruiting the best graduates. The reason is simple. Despite the fact that the government can offer broad professional challenges in vital areas of science and engineering it cannot offer uniformly competitive salaries. Exceptions are sometimes made, as they are for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, but the Department of Defense keeps a rigid grade ceiling on the civilians working for the military services. This puts military research and development at an obvious disadvantage.

The absolute top salary most government agencies can offer a newly-graduated scientist or engineer is \$13,980 per year (GS-7, step 5) and to qualify for that highest starting salary the graduate must have been in the top 25 percent of his or her class or have a grade average of at least 3.0 on a 4 point scale. Lacking those striking credentials the most a new graduate can usually expect from federal employment is a rating of GS-5, step 5 with a salary of \$11,287 per year. In contrast the median salary—that which occurs most frequently—for beginning engineers and scientists in private industry is \$16,700, almost \$3000 more than the highest possible federal salary.

It would be unfair, of course, to say that because of the salary gap the government does not get any of the top science and engineering graduates each year. There will always be some prospective employees willing to sacrifice top pay for the professional satisfaction of working on a vital government project with far-reaching impact. The fact remains, nevertheless, that salary is a primary determining factor for the job choice.

This arbitrary grade and salary ceiling ties the hands of government personnel managers who seek the best people to become involved in projects supported by public funds. It is a false economy that, over the long run, can result in project mismanagement. It is more likely to waste tax dollars than to save them.