

**U.S. Office of Personnel Management
Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness
Classification Appeals and FLSA Programs**

**Chicago Oversight Division
230 South Dearborn Street, DPN 30-6
Chicago, Illinois 60604**

**Classification Appeal Decision
Under Section 5112 of Title 5, United States Code**

Appellant: **Appellant**

Representative: [representative]

Agency Classification: Computer Specialist, GS-334-9

Organization: Department of Veterans Affairs
 VA [agency] Health Care System
 Information Resource Management Service
 [office] Division
 [city, state]

OPM decision: **GS-334-9**
 Computer Specialist

OPM decision number: C-0334-09-03

 Kathryn A. Rabelhofer for
Frederick J. Boland
Classification Appeals Officer

 November 12, 1998
Date

As provided in section 511.612 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, this decision constitutes a certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials of the government. The agency is responsible for reviewing its classification decisions for identical, similar, or related positions to ensure consistency with this decision. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under conditions and time limits specified in the Introduction to the Position Classification Standards, appendix 4, section G (address provided in appendix 4, section H).

Decision sent to:

Ms. [representative]
President
AFGE Local [xxxx]
[address]
[city, state, zip code]

appellant

[city, state]

[personnel person]
Chief, Human Resources Service
[agency] Health Care System
[office] Division
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[city, state]

Mr. Ronald E. Cowles
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Personnel
and Labor Relations
Department of Veterans Affairs
Washington, DC 20420

Introduction

The appellant contests the classification of his position, number [###], as Computer Specialist, GS-334-9. This position is located in the [office location], Information Resource Management Service, VA [office] Health Care System (GNHCS), Department of Veterans Affairs, [city, state]. He agrees that his official position description accurately reflects his major duties, but believes his work warrants higher credit than his agency allowed under Factors 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7 of the classification standard.

In his appeal, the appellant assigns factor levels for the disputed factors and claims:

Factors 1, 2, 4, 6 & 7 are rated higher than the audit because I have clearly demonstrated that these factors meet the requirement of the Qualification Standards Operating Manual for a GS-334-12.

OPM is required by law to classify positions on the basis of the duties, responsibilities, and qualification requirements of the position, rather than the incumbent's qualifications. Other methods of evaluation, such as comparisons to other positions, are not permitted. Similarly, factors such as volume of work, quality of work, level of performance, length of service, or difficulty in recruiting for the position, are not considered in determining grade level.

Position Information

The appellant is assigned to the Information Resource Management (IRM) Service of the VA [city state] Health Care System (GNHCS). The IRM Service has about 12 positions which include: one GS-334-13 Chief, Information Resource; four GS-334-11 Computer Specialists; three GS-334-9 Computer Specialists; two GS-391-11 Telecommunications Specialists; one GS-856-9 Electronics Technician; and one GS-335-7 Computer Assistant. The staff is geographically divided between [city] and [city, state]. The appellant reports to the Chief, Information Resource, who is located in [city, state].

The GNHCS maintains a cluster of three Alpha 1000 servers in Lincoln (with a duplicate backup system in Grand Island) supporting about 400 users. Although the GNHCS operates various other servers in addition to the Alpha 1000, the appellant deals solely with the Alpha servers. As the Software Applications Coordinator, he is responsible for the overall implementation of clinical and administrative software packages as part of the Veterans Information Systems Technical Administration (VISTA), formerly called the Decentralized Hospital Computer Program (DHCP); locally developed enhancements; and off-the-shelf software obtained for use at the Medical Center. He supports Automated Data Packages Application Coordinators (ADPACs, who are users, not Computer Specialists) located at the Medical Center in Grand Island, Nebraska, as well as, ADPACs located in the Lincoln Medical Center and at the North Platte Clinic. Each ADPAC is responsible for managing a specific VISTA software package and the appellant coordinates the installation of newly released packages and patches with the appropriate ADPAC. The appellant also provides training to ADPACs on the various software packages used in their section. He answers their questions and provides updated information on anticipated changes/upgrades to software programs.

The appellant estimates his time is approximately evenly divided across four areas:

- installing applications and associated patches; testing new applications and patches; and providing training on the new applications to the Automated Data Packages Application Coordinators (ADPACs);
- developing VA FileMan templates, routines, and ad hoc reports; and implementing locally developed enhancements;
- troubleshooting, debugging software and hardware issues; and
- miscellaneous work including assessing and analyzing software and hardware needs; monitoring database integrity, application processing, telecommunications and network connectivity; hardware installation, PC support and associated software; and developing and conducting training programs, serving as a liaison between services and users, assessing and analyzing IRMs Cost Distribution Report (CDR).

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Series and Title Determination

The Computer Specialist, GS-334, series covers positions, like the appellant's, whose primary requirement is knowledge of information processing methodology and technology, computer capabilities, and processing techniques. The prescribed title for non-supervisory positions in this series is *Computer Specialist*.

Grade Determination

The OPM *Computer Specialist, GS-334, Series* standard, dated July 1991, is in Factor Evaluation System (FES) format. This system requires that credit levels assigned under each factor relate to only one set of duties and responsibilities. Under FES, work must be fully equivalent to the factor-level described in the standard to warrant credit at that level's point value. If work is not fully equivalent to the overall intent of a particular level described in the standard, a lower level and point value must be assigned, unless the deficiency is balanced by an equally important aspect of the work that meets a higher level.

Work demanding less than a substantial (at least 25 percent) amount of time is not considered in classifying a position. Similarly, acting, backup, and other temporary responsibilities that are not regular and continuing are not considered.

The appellant raises specific issues regarding five of the nine factors discussed in the standard. Accordingly, this decision details our analysis of these five factors alone. However, we independently reviewed his duties and responsibilities against the other factors and concur with the agency's credit level assignments for the four undisputed factors.

Factor 1: Knowledge Required by the Position

This factor assesses the nature and extent of information or facts that employees must understand to do acceptable work (e.g., steps, procedures, practices, rules, policies, theories, principles, and concepts) and the nature and extent of the skills needed to apply those knowledges.

The appellant believes that the knowledge required to perform the duties of his position meets the requirements for higher credit. He states:

My responsibility clearly state that I am to assess and analyze unique hardware needs for specific software application and prepare reports on alternative methods, cost effectiveness and make recommendations. As an example I offer the MUMPS System. I conducted an analysis of the system and advised management on its feasibility, maintenance cost, and cost effectiveness compared to the current manual system of notifying patients of their future appointments and pharmacy refills. A long with assessing and analyzing hardware needs I also assess and analyze unique software needs for existing hardware and prepare reports on alternative methods, cost effectiveness and make recommendations. As an example I offer the On Line Access to Greatful MED on the Internet. Although this project did not require as an intensive analysis as the MUMPS system none the less I had to research past performances to arrive at a cost effective solution.

The analytical work done by the appellant to determine the cost effectiveness and feasibility of applications at Grand Island is that which is envisioned at Level 1-6, namely, recommending software selection and compatibility with existing systems. As at Level 1-6, the appellant uses his knowledge to carry out assignments where the objectives to be reached are clearly identified and are realizable by straightforward adaptation of precedents and established practices. The information provided typically specifies basic requirements and the work requires knowledge of how to execute assignments such as evaluating vendor developed software available over the counter for well defined subject-matter applications. At this level, Computer Specialists develop individual programs, test plans, or reports within an approved framework; or facilitate user interface and access to computer systems by giving training on using generalized software such as operating system interface commands, communications software, and application systems.

Typical assignments at Level 1-6, like the appellant's, have objectives clearly identified and realizable by straightforward adaption of precedents and established practices. In the appellant's case the adaptations are to individual, rather than unique, needs. For example, in response to the appellant's claim that the MUMPS related work he did was difficult, his supervisor stated that the MUMPS system has been in operation throughout the VA for years, and therefore ample precedence exists. The MUMPS application language is the standard programming language used in the VA and its implementation was a VA wide decision made in 1984.

The Greatful MED system to which the appellant refers provides on-line access to current information on medical practices and procedures via the Internet. The appellant claims work researching past practices used to obtain this medical information in order to arrive at a new more cost effective proposal for this continued service.

The audio fax system, another example the appellant cited during our interview, was implemented at the Grand Island facility after their integration with the Lincoln facility. The audio fax system is

an automated phone system, which allows veterans to call the Medical Center for such things as inquiring about appointments, information on prescriptions and refills, and pharmacy medication consultation. The automated system also places calls to veterans to remind them of scheduled appointments.

In regard to the audio fax system, the appellant's supervisor stated that this work did not require any design, development, or extensive analysis and that generally, the appellant's assignments do not consist of projects or studies that require substantial problem analysis or the development of methods to evaluate alternatives. The projects with which the appellant is involved have already been established in the VA.

In both cases, i.e., Audio fax and Greatful MED, the appellant's studies and proposals comport with Level 1-6 work. Typical assignments at this level include ensuring compatibility with existing networked hardware systems, languages used, and established network operating protocols accommodated; recommending software selection from among several options, considering operating characteristics, human-machine interface, and compatibility and interoperability with existing systems.

In contrast, Level 1-7 of the standard calls for knowledge of a wide range of computer techniques, requirements, methods, sources, and procedures. Included at this level is knowledge of system software and systems development life cycles (including systems documentation, design development, configuration management, cost analysis, data administration, systems integrations, and testing). Unlike the appellant's assignments, work at this level requires tracking the use and status of resources for system design projects through development, modification, maintenance, and evaluation of a standard program management system. It also entails modifying standard practices and adapting computer systems to solve a variety of problems, making significant departures from previous approaches in order to meet specialized requirements, and applying standard practices of related scientific disciplines.

We evaluate this factor at Level 1-6 and credit 950 points.

Factor 2: Supervisory Controls

This factor covers the nature and extent of direct and indirect controls exercised by the supervisor, the employee's responsibility, and the review of completed work. Controls are exercised by the supervisor in the way assignments are made, instructions are given to the employee, priorities and deadlines are set, and objectives and boundaries are defined. Responsibility of the employee depends upon the extent to which the employee is expected to develop the sequence and timing of various aspects of the work, to modify or recommend modification of instructions, and to participate in establishing priorities and defining objectives. The degree of review of completed work depends upon the nature and extent of the review, e.g., close and detailed review of each phase of the assignment; detailed review of the finished assignment; spot-check of finished work for accuracy; or review only for adherence to policy.

The appellant states:

I report directly to the Chief, Information Resource Management Service. My assignments are initiated through directives that outline broad objectives. The Office of Personnel Management manual for series GS-334 rates it at a level 2-5 (650 points) "The supervisor provides administrative direction with assignments in terms of broadly defined missions or functions."

Additionally, Level 2-5 of the standard requires that the Specialist have responsibility for planning, designing, and carrying out studies or projects as well as responsibility for coordinating, as a peer, with experts both within and outside the organization. Unlike the appellant, the Specialist at this level makes extensive unreviewed technical judgments concerning the interpretation and implementation of existing data processing policy for the assigned speciality area. The Specialist is regarded as the leading technical authority for the employing organization in a data processing specialization or over a wide range of interrelated computer systems. Level 2-5 is the highest level of independence and responsibility awarded under the standard and requires authority and independence significantly exceeding the appellant's.

The supervision received by the appellant is similar to that described at Level 2-3. He reports directly to the Chief, IRM who sets overall objectives and priorities. The appellant operates independently within the scope set by the supervisor. He receives his work assignments through e-mail or weekly site visits made by the supervisor. Special assignments are made by the supervisor during site visits or through telephone discussions. Work is reviewed on the basis of its effectiveness upon completion and based on the feedback given to the supervisor by system users.

Unlike Level 2-4, the work completed by the appellant has ample precedent and does not require extensive analysis of the organization's requirements. The projects with which he deals have generally already been established within the VA. He is not responsible for interpreting policy or regulation for conformance with mission objectives or for integrating the work of others. Rather, the appellant independently carries out work assignments within the scope set by the supervisor. As is typical at Level 2-3, the techniques used by the appellant to accomplish his work are not reviewed in detail.

We evaluate this factor at level 2-3 and credit 275 points.

Factor 4: Complexity

This factor covers the nature, number, variety, and intricacy of tasks, steps, processes, or methods in the work performed; the difficulty in identifying what needs to be done; and the difficulty and originality involved in performing the work.

The appellant believes that the complexity of his work should be credited at Level 4-4 of the standard. He states:

The automation field is in a constant change. What is new technology today is out dated technology tomorrow. This constant change demands new concepts and approaches where useful precedents do not exist for substantial problem analysis. Deciding what has to be done typically involves assessing situations complicated by conflicting or insufficient data requiring extensive probing and analysis to determine the nature and scope of

the problem. As an example, the MUMPS system was a complete new system lacking insufficient data as to its compatibility with existing systems. Tests had to be performed to resolve the compatibility problem.

The system to which the appellant refers is the MUMPS audio fax system, which is an interactive telephone system. As explained under Factor 1, this system had been in place at other VA facilities prior to its implementation at Grand Island. As with other Level 4-3 work, the appellant's study of Grand Island's implementation of MUMPS required that he analyze local operations to discern deviations or other situations that would bear on the choice of other established techniques for accomplishing the same end. As such, he was expected to ascertain and analyze system and user interrelationships in developing his proposal. Unlike Level 4-4 work, his study and proposal involved little in the way of unusual circumstances and considerable data.

In a telephone interview, the appellant cited, as an example of his most difficult diagnostics work on equipment hardware, determining why a user's CRT would not come on even though the power button was on. He diagnosed the problem by moving the cable around to see if any power connection could be made. He determined the cable was split or broken internally, and therefore, not visible from the outside. As an example of difficult or complex troubleshooting work, he explained a situation where a user had not followed through on an entry made on his computer and did not hit the "enter key" after keying in the data. The computer timed out (a screen saver came on) and at that point accepted the incomplete entry data. The internal entry number generated by the computer for this data entry could not find a match because there is no code for incomplete entries. The appellant explained he had to look at the globals to see at what point in the routine the error occurred. In addition to these examples, the appellant is also assigned other work similar to that described in Level 4-3. For example, software developers continually modify their software products and the high number of changes and patches that are received from the software developers can cause other files to become corrupted. The appellant must review the globals to determine if and where there are corrupted files. This patching work is similar to that described at Level 4-3, i.e., determining and analyzing interrelationships between program changes on related programs in the system.

At Level 4-3 of the standard, assignments consist of various tasks or duties involving different methods or procedures. Typically, concern is with one or two of the stages in an automation project (e.g., program design and module development) or a portion of a specialty area (e.g., equipment utilization). Decisions regarding methods to be used depend on the nature of the data involved. Normally the Specialist must analyze plans to discern deviation or other situations that have a bearing on the choice among established techniques for carrying out the assignment. Accomplishing the assignment involves ascertaining and analyzing interrelationships, e.g., the potential effect of program changes on related programs in the system.

In contrast, Level 4-4 assignments consist of projects, studies, or evaluations characterized by the need for substantial problem analysis. Typically, this includes working with several of the stages in an automation project, or project assignments in a specialty area that require a variety of techniques and methods to evaluate alternatives. Situations are typically complicated by conflicting or insufficient data which must be analyzed to determine the applicability of established methods. Different technical approaches often must be tested and projections made.

Development of project controls normally is required to integrate various phases of the project. Consideration must be given to probable areas of future change in systems design, equipment layout, or comparable aspects that will facilitate subsequent modifications. At this level, work requires consideration of considerable data. The level of difficulty is typified by developing programming specifications for major modifications to existing systems, or new systems where precedents exist at the same general scale of operation as the new systems. Such work is largely absent from the appellant's own assignments..

We evaluate this factor at Level 4-3 and credit 150 points.

Factor 6: Personal Contacts and Factor 7: Purpose of Contacts

The Computer Specialist standard covers Factors 6 and 7 together. Factor 6 (Levels 1 to 4) includes face-to-face contacts and telephone and radio dialogue with persons not in the supervisory chain. Levels of this factor are based on what is required to make the initial contact, the difficulty of communicating with those contacted, and the setting in which the contact takes place (e.g., the degree to which the employee and those contacted recognize their relative roles and authorities). Factor 7 (Levels A to D) addresses the purpose of personal contacts, which may range from factual exchange of information to situations involving significant or controversial issues and differing viewpoints or objectives. Contacts credited under Factor 6 must be the same contacts considered under Factor 7.

Personal Contacts

The appellant believes that his contacts should be credited at Level 3. He states:

My personal contacts extend beyond the boundaries of the medical center's staff. Because of special projects I am assigned contact with heads of employing agency and program developers, which are several managerial levels above, is essential. In preparing my analysis and recommendation on the MUMPS system I had to contact the Manager of Marketing and the head of the development department. And a long with these contacts comes the responsibility of coordinating the implementation of the system/programs, keep management abreast with problems or concerns. And as with any new system user problems arise that require resolutions.”

The appellant correctly cites that Level 3 contacts include high level managerial staff at the employing agency but this level also notes that these contacts occur on an ad hoc or non-routine basis. Personal contacts at this level, unlike the appellant's, are varied and the role and authority of each participant is developed during the course of the contact. This unstructured setting adds to the difficulty since no routine course of action has been previously decided upon.

In contrast, the appellant's contacts, like those at Level 2, are structured and are for the purpose of exchanging factual information. The purpose and roles of the participants are fixed and readily clarified. The appellant's contacts with vendor representatives are for the purpose of obtaining factual information about their products. He also occasionally talks with software developers who staff “help desks” to get answers to technical questions which may arise. The appellant additionally claimed in a telephone interview that his most recurring personal contacts are with Medical Center users of the computer systems and that the majority of these contacts occur at the user's work station. These personal contacts are similar to that envisioned at Level 2.

We evaluate Personal Contacts at Level 2.

Purpose of Contacts

At Level B, contacts are for the purpose of coordinating work efforts, solving problems, or providing advice to managers on noncontroversial organization or program related issues and concerns.

At Level C, the purpose of contacts is to influence others to utilize particular technical methods and procedures, or to persuade others to cooperate in meeting objectives when, in either case, there are problems in securing cooperation.

The appellant stated that the primary reason for his personal contacts is to discover what problem the user is having with a personal computer and/or application program. Unlike Level C, these contacts do not require that the appellant persuade skeptical users to adopt technical methods they oppose. Rather, as at Level B, the purpose of the appellant's personal contacts is to solve computer related problems for system users. Accordingly, we evaluate Purpose of Contacts at Level B.

We evaluate these combined factor at Level 2-B and credit 75 points.

FACTOR LEVEL POINT SUMMARY

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Points</i>
<i>1</i>	<i>1-6</i>	<i>950</i>
<i>2</i>	<i>2-3</i>	<i>275</i>
<i>3</i>	<i>3-3</i>	<i>275</i>
<i>4</i>	<i>4-3</i>	<i>150</i>
<i>5</i>	<i>5-3</i>	<i>150</i>
<i>6 & 7</i>	<i>2-B</i>	<i>75</i>
<i>8</i>	<i>8-1</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>9</i>	<i>9-1</i>	<i>5</i>
	<i>Total:</i>	<i>1885</i>

The table above summarizes our evaluation of the appellant's work. As shown on page 11 of the standard, a total of 1885 points falls within the GS-9 grade range (1855-2100).

DECISION

The proper classification of the appellant's position is Computer Specialist, GS-334-9 .