

**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, Room 3060
Chicago, Illinois 60604-1687**

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

Appellant: [Appellant's name]

Agency Classification: Computer Specialist, GS-334-11

Organization: U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
[Name] Technical Office
[City, State]

OPM decision: **GS-334-11**
Computer Specialist

OPM decision number: C-0334-11-05

/s/

Frederick J. Boland
Classification Appeals Officer

January 29, 1999

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:

[appellant's name and address]

[name and address of appellant's servicing
personnel office]

Mr. Larry Wachs
Acting Director, Office of Human Resources
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INTRODUCTION

The appellant contests his agency's decision classifying his position as Computer Specialist, GS-334-11. The position (00MC4128) is located in the [City State] Technical Office, Information Technology Staff, [Name of] State Conservationist's Office, Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, [City, State]. The appellant believes his position description accurately lists his major duties, but feels his work warrants more credit under Factor 3 (Guidelines), Factor 6 (Personal Contacts), and Factor 7 (Purpose of Contacts) of the classification standard.

POSITION INFORMATION

The appellant one of about seven employees assigned to the Technical Office which includes a GS-12 Computer Systems Analyst, four GS-11 Computer Support Specialists, a GS-11 Resource Soil Scientist, and a GS-11 Conservation Agronomist. The four Computer Support Specialists are geographically dispersed in [State] among four locations: the appellant in the [City] Technical Office; and one in each of the [City], [City], and [City] Service Centers. The appellant reports to the Computer Systems Analyst, who is located at the State Office in [City, State].

The appellants's major duties include providing training and technical assistance on computer systems in all National Resources Conversation Service (NRCS) and Soil Conservation District (SCD) offices within the [Name] Watershed Team and within parts of the [Name] and [Name] Watershed Teams. He supports users on operating systems such as UNIX, DOS, Windows NT, Windows 3.1, Windows '95, and Windows '98. His area of responsibility includes 17 NRCS and 3 SCD offices. He estimates that there are about 88 users total for which he provides support.

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, temporary, and other responsibilities that are not regular and

continuing are not considered in classifying positions. (Temporary assignments of sufficient duration, though, are sometimes recognized in accordance with agency discretion by temporary promotion if higher graded duties are involved, by formal detail, or by performance recognition.)

The appellant raises specific issues regarding three of the nine factors discussed in the standard. Accordingly, this decision details our analysis of those disputed factors. However, we independently reviewed his duties and responsibilities against the other factors and concur with the agency's credit level assignments on all but Factor 5, which we also address in our analysis.

Factor 3: Guidelines

This factor covers the nature of guidelines and the judgment needed to apply them.

The appellant states:

On the Position Classification Worksheet, I mentioned that technical reference materials are not always available, In fact, guidelines of any kind are rare. Manuals for Windows 3.1 or Windows 95 are not available, yet we are expected to support those products, There is no "good" reference for DB-ACCESS (database) or Intelligent Queries (IQ) (data query) software. Instructions for Field Office Computing System (FOCS) software installation and support are often inadequate or outdated. I develop my own procedural guidelines, checklists and instruction sheets when others are inadequate. Guidelines are rare and, when available, they do not always fit every scenario in the Field Offices. When guidelines do not fit a situation, I can not always wait for help from the state Office or the Helpdesk and must use my own judgement in completing a project. We often need to replace hard drives, motherboards and other computer components, but have little or no reference material and have not had training in order to complete those tasks. Yet the work gets done.

In addressing occupational guidelines under the classification standard, the proper reference frame is the availability of guidelines within an industry or field, rather than, as the appellant suggests, within an organization. His organization's lack of suitable reference manuals or formal training opportunities undeniably presents performance problems, but it does not change the nature of the appellant's work, which concerns supporting computer systems having ample guidance and precedents for their use and operation. For example, both Windows 3.1 and Windows 95 are in widespread use and have an abundance of documentation available from both the manufacturer and third parties. Operating manuals, resource kits, and technical bulletins are readily available for purchase or retrieval from web sites.

The appellant is already credited at Level 3-3 with adapting industry guides and precedents, by gathering considerable information to supplement informational gaps or lack of specificity, to resolve computer problems his users and organizations encounter. Like other Level 3-3 specialists, he must use his judgment in providing advice when system documentation is not completely applicable or has significant gaps. At this level, this typically requires considerable research to resolve problems or to determine the kind and amount of data needed for testing system modifications.

Level 3-4 work, unlike the appellant's, usually requires deviating from standard methods or researching trends and patterns to develop improved methods or formulate criteria. His assignments involve standard applications rather than the more difficult assignments found at Level 3-4, such as:

- novel design efforts;
- integrating the work of others as a team or project leader; or
- predicting future environments or the impact on future processing.

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

Factor 5: Scope and Effect

This factor covers the relationship between the nature of the work (i.e., the purpose, breadth, and depth of the assignment) and the effect of work products or services both within and outside the organization. Only the effect of properly performed work is considered.

Scope

The purpose of the appellant's work is, like Level 5-3, to resolve a variety of conventional computer support problems, questions, or situations. The appellant uses established industry practices and techniques to maintain and modify the systems he supports and to resolve hardware and software problems.

Unlike Level 5-4, his work's purpose is not typically to investigate and analyze a variety of *unusual* computer problems, questions, or conditions; to formulate projects or studies such as those substantially altering major systems; to establish criteria for developing programming or procurement specifications; or work of equivalent difficulty, i.e., presenting broad, difficult, and complex problems that require systematic fact-finding and analysis.

We evaluate Scope at Level 5-3.

Effect

To receive credit for a level under this factor, the work must meet the criteria under both Scope and Effect. Regardless of whether the work meets the Level 5-4 Effect criteria (e.g., having significant affect on the other agencies' functions), the position's credit under this factor remains limited by its scope.

We evaluate this factor at Level 5-3 and credit 150 points.

Factors 6 and 7: Personal Contacts and 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.

The appellant states:

I still deal with users who are somewhat skeptical and I often need to try and motivate and try to be a positive influence on those individuals, in order to get the desired results from the users and their equipment. I provide support, not only to the users in my designated area, but the rest of the state when the other Specialists are unavailable, Statewide responsibilities have been written into our AD-435B (Performance Plan, Progress Review, and Appraisal Worksheet) "to install and maintain hardware throughout the state". I exchange and share information with Computer Specialists in other agencies and in other states as well as those in [State].

Personal Contacts

At Level 3, the appellant is already credited with contacting persons within and outside of his own agency in moderately unstructured settings for the purpose of coordinating work efforts, solving problems, or providing advice and training. His contacts include other Computer Specialists (both within his own agency and other Federal agencies), staff at the Help Desk located in [City], NRCS management (Leadership Team), and vendors.

Unlike Level 4, the appellant does not have contacts with high-ranking officials from outside the employing agency at national or international levels in highly unstructured settings.

We evaluate this factor at Level 3.

Purpose of Contacts

The appellant is already credited at Level b with coordinating work efforts, solving problems, and providing advice to users, supervisors, and managers on noncontroversial matters. Unlike Level c, he does not face significant problems securing cooperation that would demand special persuasive skills.

Although the appellant must encourage staff to use new equipment or applications they are unfamiliar with, this is not equivalent in difficulty to frequently persuading supervisors or managers to adopt new systems or software that they oppose or otherwise believe will not meet their needs. Level c credits the more demanding tasks of overcoming significant objections other Computer Specialists present to technological proposals, placating organizations or individuals who have conflicting interests and viewpoints on the use of various resources so as to reach agreements that achieve the technical as well as practical goals and objectives of a program, and justifying the feasibility and desirability of computer resource plans and proposals that face significant opposition. Because the appellant's assignments do not frequently involve such matters, Level c credit is inappropriate.

We evaluate this factor at Level b. A combination of Personal Contacts Level 3 and Purpose of Contacts Level b results in Level 3-b, according to the table on page 31 of the standard.

We evaluate this factor at Level 3-b and credit 110 points.

FACTOR LEVEL POINT SUMMARY

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Points</i>
<i>1</i>	<i>1-7</i>	<i>1250</i>
<i>2</i>	<i>2-4</i>	<i>450</i>
<i>3</i>	<i>3-3</i>	<i>275</i>
<i>4</i>	<i>4-4</i>	<i>225</i>
<i>5</i>	<i>5-3</i>	<i>150</i>
<i>6 & 7</i>	<i>3-b</i>	<i>110</i>
<i>8</i>	<i>8-2</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>9</i>	<i>9-1</i>	<i>5</i>
	<i>Total:</i>	<i>2485</i>

The table above summarizes our evaluation of the appellant's work. As shown on page 11 of the standard, a total of 2485 points falls within the GS-11 grade range (2355-2750).

Decision

The proper classification of the appellant's position is Computer Specialist, GS-334-11.