

Waste Watchers

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Last summer, I spent three weeks in Iraq as a temporary employee for the Defense Department, helping develop a compensation system for the Iraqi civil service. This was my first experience as a federal employee, and what I found was eye-opening. The federal employees I met were highly competent, articulate, dedicated and did great work under difficult conditions. But often, the processes within which they worked were inefficient, sometimes ridiculously so.

In preparation for my assignment, I attended orientation at Fort Belvoir, Va. Two hours of processing there were "crammed into a long, nine-hour day," as one of my colleagues put it. Getting an ID badge at the Coalition Provisional Authority headquarters in Baghdad, which should have taken minutes, took three hours over four days. Government employees and contractors expected to "hurry up and wait."

One small example of the pervasive inefficiency is coffee. At most agencies, the idea of free coffee is frowned upon as taxpayer waste. So employees go to coffee shops to buy a cup. How does this benefit taxpayers? Two or three times a day, people spend 10 minutes going out to get coffee or soda. The government saves what it would pay for coffee, but 20 to 30 minutes of each person's time is wasted. Add this up for 1.8 million employees, not to mention contractors, and it's major waste.

Well-managed private-sector companies are willing to spend reasonable amounts to provide in-office conveniences, recognizing the trade-off between cost and productivity, and the value of a worker-friendly environment. Federal agencies would do well to learn this lesson.

A more serious example is the inconsistent way that departments treat security clearances. A Top Secret clearance in one department is not necessarily recognized in another. The practical effect is to delay employee transfers, which slows the deployment of needed resources.

A 1995 executive order stipulated that background checks should be accepted at all agencies. But it had an out—this would not apply "when an agency has substantial information indicating that an employee may not satisfy the standards." The receiving agency could say the sending agency's check was insufficient.

Recognizing this loophole, the Clinton administration formed a Security Policy Board. It was making progress until President Bush abolished it. Responsibility for backgrounding now rests with the Justice Department, which is studying the inconsistencies. But there is no clear time line. The problem was addressed in 1995 and has certainly become more important since Sept. 11, but nearly nine years later, nothing has changed.

Time wasted getting coffee. Delayed appointments. Inconsistent implementation of security clearance standards. Who should you blame for these inefficiencies? Not rank-and-file

employees. Not department heads, who focus on policy, not procedures.

A solution might be to create chief operating officers for agencies, as the comptroller general has suggested, or to strengthen management authorities at the Office of Management and Budget or the Office of Personnel Management. In the meantime, here is an option:

- Ask federal employees, online, to identify obstacles to productivity and suggest how to remove them.
- Rank the problems by frequency and impact, and provide the results to the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, the House Government Reform Committee, the General Accounting Office, OMB and OPM.
- Ask the committees and agencies to draft legislation that requires agencies to resolve the top problems within a specified time (one or two years), and to report back with a list of the next round of changes.

This is not rocket science, nor should it be politically sensitive. It applies process reengineering concepts from the Clinton-Gore reinventing government initiative and President Bush's management agenda in ways that will benefit taxpayers and create better and more rewarding working conditions for federal employees.