

# The Federal Manager



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The Federal Manager (ISBN 0893-8415) is published by the Federal Managers Association, 1641 Prince Street, Alexandria, VA 22314-2818, to inform federal managers of management-related topics, professional development, and legislation affecting them. Statements of fact and opinion are made on the responsibility of the author alone and do not imply an endorsement by the editor, the officers or members of the Federal Managers Association® 2012. All rights reserved. Redistribution or reproduction of any part of this publication is prohibited without written permission. Printed in the U.S.A.

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## PRESIDENT'S PAGE



*FMA National President  
Patricia Niehaus*

### One Hundred and One and Going Strong!

FMA has now provided *OVER* a Century of Dedicated Service to America! As I write this article, I am looking forward to the National Convention in a little over a week. Our National Staff has been working hard to ensure we have a great Convention. We have a lot planned and we are very fortunate to have the outstanding caliber of training lined up for our attendees by our partners at the USDA Virtual University.

Although Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow last month, we're hoping our *Day on the Hill* won't be weathered out as it was last year. This is one of the most important parts of our Convention – when we walk the halls of Congress and talk about our issues. As I said about last year's Convention, I wish you could ALL be here to participate in this important effort. Since that's not possible, please reach out to your Members of Congress in their local offices. Both the Senate and the House have scheduled time in their local offices April 14-28 and May 12-16. Please contact your local offices now to schedule appointments – and don't forget to let the NOS know who you met with and what was discussed. Your Members of Congress need to hear that you are their constituents and how their actions, or lack of action, impact you, your family, your employees, and your community. Also, please forward copies of any pictures you take with your Members of Congress. If you're planning a vacation in the D.C. area, please don't hesitate to ask the NOS to help you make appointments on the Hill.

One of the reasons FMA has had so many doors remain open to us for over a century is our *conversational not confrontational* approach. Please keep in mind when meeting with your Senators and Representatives. We can be emphatic and direct without being unprofessional.

Are you interested in attending a local fundraising event for your Member of Congress? Ask their staff to let you know when your elected official is having a fundraising event. Then, contact Katie Maddocks in the National Office to discuss the use of PAC funds to send you to local events. We get more bang for our bucks at a local event than one in D.C. and, most importantly, your elected officials get to see that the faces behind FMA are their constituents.

One of the challenges facing many organizations is declining membership. FMA is no different. I urge you to share the value of FMA with your fellow managers and invite them to join this prestigious organization. At the Region 1 Meeting last fall, Lori Bledsoe from the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation chapter shared an Elevator Speech (ES) that they use to attract new members. I'd like to encourage you to develop your own ES. The ES is intended to give a fellow manager reasons why joining us is the right thing to do. And it should be very short (less than a minute) and personal. I'd suggest, starting with why you want them to join your chapter. Talk about how they can benefit from local and national efforts. And praise them – tell them the chapter can benefit from their participation, talents and support. Once you've developed one, please share your ES with the NOS so other chapters can piggy-back off your efforts.

Thank you for everything you do every day to serve this great country. Please don't let the actions, or inaction, of our elected officials discourage you. We've accomplished truly great things in our century of dedicated service to America and I know we'll continue to do so for the next 100 years. ■

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Pat".

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**Annual Subscription Rate: \$30**

**Single Issue Rate: \$8.50**

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All materials submitted to *The Federal Manager* should pertain to public service managers. Copy should be double-spaced, no longer than 10 pages. High resolution color images, charts, or illustrations should be included if possible. Text should be submitted by email or on compact disc. Include a biography of the author.

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# Best Places to Work in the Federal Government

Agencies that engaged the workforce, improved communication and responded to employee feedback countered the downward slide in job satisfaction

## By The Partnership for Public Service

The most recent *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government* rankings present a troubling picture of declining employee satisfaction and commitment across the government, with workers buffeted in 2013 by unpaid furloughs, increased pension contributions, hiring slowdowns and budget cuts.

Yet even under these difficult circumstances, about a quarter of the federal agencies managed to defy the downward trend and boost workforce morale, including the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, the Defense Contract Audit Agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Federal Communications Commission and the U.S. International Trade Commission.

These federal organizations improved employee satisfaction and commitment by placing an emphasis on engaging the workforce, improving communication, soliciting and acting on worker feedback and changing the day-to-day work environment.

Produced by the Partnership for Public Service and Deloitte, the *Best Places to Work* rankings measure overall federal employee job satisfaction and commitment, critical elements in developing high-performing workplaces needed to meet the nation's challenges.

In 2013, the *Best Places to Work*



*Top-ranked NASA leadership accepting their Best Places to Work in the Federal Government award. (l-r): Richard J. Gilbrech, Director, John C. Stennis, Space Center; Jeri L. Buchholz, Assistant Administrator for Human Capital Management; and Robert M. Lightfoot, Jr., Associate Administrator.*

government-wide job and workplace satisfaction and commitment score was 57.8 on a scale of 100, the lowest total since the rankings were first published in 2003. This was the third straight year the score has decreased, dropping 7.2 points from a high of 65.0 in 2010.

The *Best Places to Work* data also shed light on a range of employee attitudes on topics such as satisfaction with pay, leadership, teamwork, work-life balance, strategic management and the connection between agency missions and worker

skills. For the eighth time in a row, the primary driver of employee satisfaction and commitment was effective leadership, and in particular, senior leadership.

Max Stier, the president and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service, said he hopes the *Best Places to Work* data will serve as a wakeup call for policymakers to stop making cuts to the federal workforce and concentrate on pursuing better government by investing in employees.

*continued on next page*

# Best Places to Work

*Best Places to Work continued from page 3*

The status quo, he said, is unacceptable.

"What it really means is that agencies aren't positioned to successfully meet the needs of the American people," said Stier.

Dan Helfrich, principal, Deloitte Consulting LLP, said that as the most recent data show, the cumulative effect of budget issues and pay freezes within the federal government are clearly taking a toll on the workforce.

"But there are also some positive developments. Some agencies are improving their scores even in this challenging climate," said Helfrich. "We need to learn what those agencies are doing. Clearly right now the departments and federal leaders who are investing in workforce and leadership development are still making moves up the rankings."

Here are five case studies of agencies that beat the odds by boosting the job and workplace satisfaction and commitment of their employees during 2013.

## U.S. Patent and Trademark Office

The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) was the number one ranked agency out of 300 government subcomponents surveyed in 2013, registering a job and workplace satisfaction and commitment score of 84.4 out of 100.

This represents a 4.1-point increase from 2012, a jump of 20.1 points since 2009 and a rise in the rankings from 172 out of 222 agency subcomponents in 2007 to first place today. The 2013 improvement occurred at a time when three-quarters of all federal agencies showed a decline in employee satisfaction and commitment, and as patent applications were on the rise.

The USPTO, a Department of Commerce agency with more than 11,000 employees, showed gains in the 10 workplace categories that were measured, including increased employee satisfaction regarding training and development (+4.6 points), teamwork (+4.0 points), effective

leadership (+3.8 points), support for diversity (+3.5 points) and rewards and advancement (+3.4 points).

Frederick Steckler, the USPTO's chief administrative officer, said the agency continued to make progress in key areas, including building productive relationships with employee unions that once were quite hostile, improving the patent examination process to speed the workflow, and reducing the large backlog of patent applications.

"Our labor-management relations are huge because it sets the backdrop for a cooperative, engaged environment," said Steckler. He said many issues have been resolved short of collective bargaining, and noted that having employees and managers working on ways to improve agency performance and then seeing positive results "makes everyone feel connected to the progress."

Steckler said the agency continues to promote a robust telework program, as well as training and development programs for employees and managers. He said there is an emphasis on management communication with employees and avenues for feedback. In 2013, he said, the agency launched a new web-based crowdsourcing pilot project for employees to contribute suggestions and have a dialogue about innovations at the agency.

Additionally, Steckler said each work unit analyzes its employee survey data and develops action plans, and every senior executive must include employee satisfaction goals in their performance plans.

"There is accountability and talk year-round about being a best place to work," said Steckler.

"We have a general atmosphere of self-examination and concern about what we can do to improve our work and the culture."

## Defense Contract Audit Agency

The Defense Contract Audit Agency (DCAA) managed to rise in the *Best Places*

*to Work in the Federal Government* rankings from 202 of 231 subcomponents in 2009 to 88 out of 300 in 2013.

Underlying the effort by the Department of Defense agency was a decision to use the *Best Places to Work* rankings and the federal employee survey data on which the rankings are based to pinpoint and address problem areas.

In 2011, each of DCAA's five regional directors analyzed their regional data and personally visited each field audit office to discuss the survey results with employees in general and those that were specific to their offices. The visits emphasized DCAA senior leadership commitment to using survey results to bring about positive change.

The agency leadership created 16 committees with employee volunteers, each championed by a designated top executive, to address a range of topics that were of concern.

The result has been a revision of the agency telework policy; creation of a career paths webpage depicting career tracks for auditors; a revamped onboarding process; a recruiting Facebook page; the launch of a developmental assignment program; the improvement of mentoring and coaching programs; renewed emphasis on non-monetary awards; and revised leadership training processes.

Agency leaders feel that employees have responded positively because they not only listened to them, but took affirmative steps to address their concerns. The effort clearly has paid off.

## The National Aeronautics and Space Administration

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) maintained its position as the top large agency in the 2013 *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government* rankings, building on its already strong record by raising its worker satisfaction and commitment score from 72.8 points out of 100 in 2012 to 74 in 2013.

NASA, which has the mission of pioneering the future in space exploration, scientific discovery and aeronautics research, also was the highest ranked large agency in all 10 workplace categories measured in the rankings except for work-life balance and satisfaction with pay. The agency continued a steady upward trend in the category of effective leadership, a key driver of overall employee satisfaction.

NASA's score has risen every year since 2007. According to NASA administrator Charles Bolden, "The combination of employee engagement and intentional management of workforce culture is so compelling it overcomes even the most difficult management challenges."

Chief Human Capital Officer Jeri Buchholz attributed NASA's success to the agency's extensive focus on three key priority areas: connecting people to each other and the mission; building model supervisors; and recognizing and rewarding innovative performance.

"Where we really focus our attention, we see measurable improvement," she said.

NASA recently implemented a "reverse mentoring" program where junior employees mentor more senior staff on a particular topic. For example, one employee mentored a deputy center director on how to effectively use social media.

This program carries with it a variety of benefits, such as improved networking and personal connections among staff, and increased exposure to new fields and topics. Buchholz described the program as a "universally rewarding experience that costs nothing and demonstrates that senior leadership is committed to understanding what people do every day."

According to Bolden, NASA's efforts to build model supervisors include shifting the weighting on all Senior Executive Service

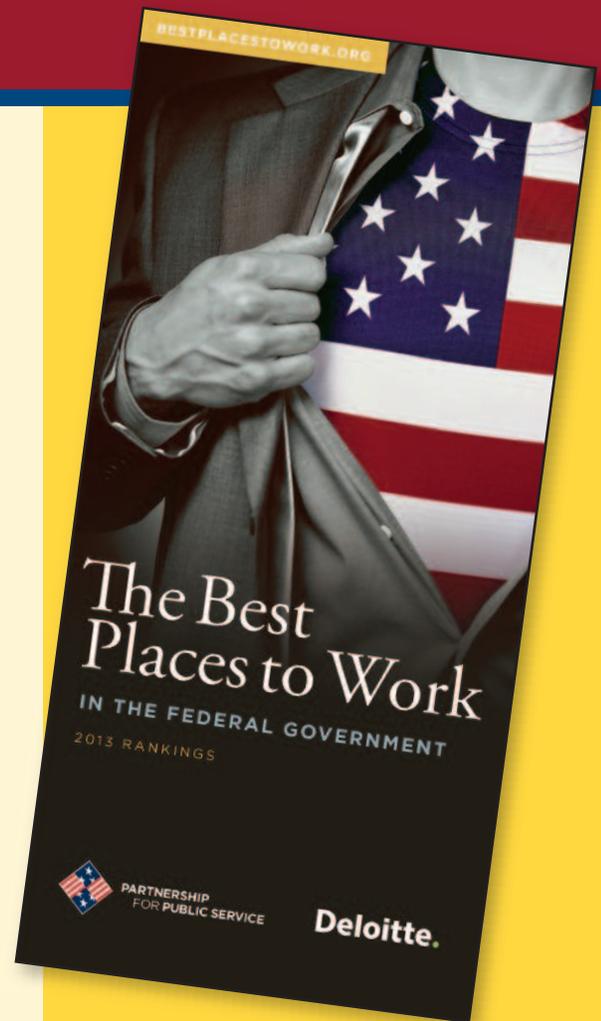
performance plans to emphasize management accomplishments such as "leading people, building coalitions, and diversity and inclusion," as opposed to emphasizing more technical or scientific accomplishments. He said this emphasis communicates the importance NASA places on developing strong management and supervisory skills in its senior leaders.

Buchholz said a major goal at NASA is to "infuse a spirit of innovation in everything we do." NASA developed an internal culture strategy based on the idea that "if people believe they are working in an innovative environment, they will be innovative," said Buchholz. NASA leaders carefully monitor their scores on the Partnership for Public Service's innovation index to track and strengthen their employees' perceptions on innovation in the workplace.

Accurate and timely workforce communication also has been critical to strengthening employee satisfaction at NASA, according to Buchholz.

The agency uses a communications tool called the Human Resources Messaging System to provide staff with tailored and specific communications. The system targets messages to specific employee subsets, such as all supervisors or all staff based in California, so employees know the messages they receive are carefully directed and relevant. Messages also avoid government jargon and are written in an easy-to-read style. The system allows employees to provide feedback for each message, helping to ensure the communication is useful and relevant. Buchholz said timely and accurate communication was especially important during the stress and uncertainty of the government shutdown in October.

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“ [If] people believe they are working in an innovative environment, they will be innovative. ”

# Best Places to Work

*Best Places to Work continued from page 5*

When communication with employees about applying for unemployment insurance was designated an “excepted activity” during the shutdown, NASA sent text messages via an emergency notification system alerting staff that they were allowed to check their work emails for important information about unemployment insurance. After the shutdown ended, Buchholz reported receiving many thank-you notes from employees grateful to have received accurate and timely updates.

## The Federal Communications Commission

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was the most improved mid-size agency in the 2013 *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*

rankings, moving from 10th of 22 agencies to 7th place out of 23.

The FCC, which regulates interstate and international communications by radio, television, wire, satellite and cable, had a *Best Places to Work* job and workplace satisfaction and commitment score of 71.3 out of 100, an increase of 4.6 points since 2012.

In addition to increasing its overall score, the FCC improved employee satisfaction in seven of the 10 separate workplace categories that were measured. The biggest gain was a 4.7-point increase in strategic management, which measures the extent to which employees believe management ensures they have the necessary skills and abilities to do their jobs. The FCC also jumped 3.8 points in its effective leadership score, which measures the extent to which employees believe leadership generates motivation and commitment, encourages integrity and manages people fairly.

Tom Green, the Acting Chief Human

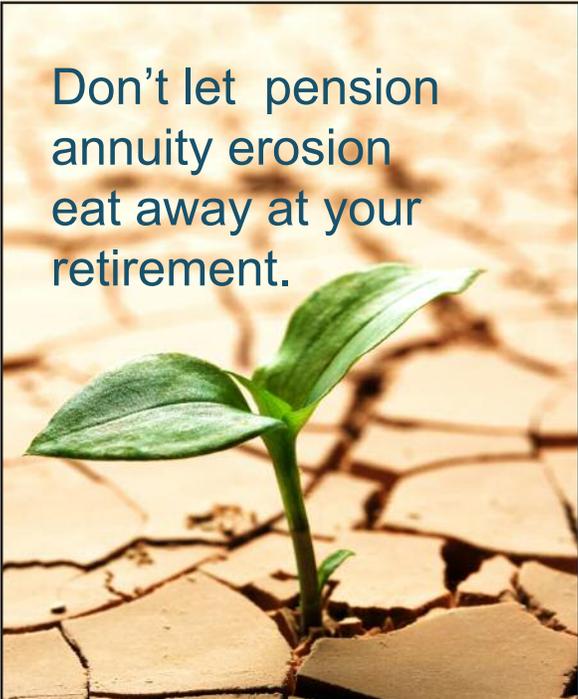
Capital Officer, said the agency carefully studied the federal survey used to compile the *Best Places to Work* rankings, and decided to place an emphasis on finding ways for management to better communicate with its more than 1,700 employees.

Green said the emphasis on communications included emails from the chairman and town hall meetings in various bureaus to highlight what the commission is doing, the importance of the mission and the valuable role played by employees.

During performance reviews, Green said, managers also have talked about the importance of the work and the employee’s contribution.

“We have been trying to emphasize to employees how their work relates to mission and goals and priorities of commission,” said Green. “We want to connect management to the workforce and let them know their work is valued.”

Green said town hall meetings were



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held to discuss the possibility of unpaid furloughs due to the across-the-board budget cuts imposed by Congress during 2013, and to assure everyone that management was doing everything possible to prevent them. In the end, the FCC did not have to furlough employees, Green said.

In addition, Green said the FCC used a web-based comment site to enhance workplace engagement—a forum where employees can post and discuss ideas, raise issues and get a response from management.

“Our goal has been to increase management outreach to the employees, to talk about what we are doing as an agency and how we have been successful,” said Green.

## The U.S. International Trade Commission

The U.S. International Trade Commission (USITC) was the most improved small agency in the 2013 *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government* rankings, making critical gains in employee job satisfaction despite the challenging environment facing federal agencies.

USITC increased its *Best Places to Work* score by 9.3 points to 69.3 out of 100, and improved its ranking from 22nd to 9th out of 29 small agencies.

The trade agency registered an 11.5-point gain, the largest among small agencies, in the area of strategic management, which measures employees’ perceptions of whether staff have the knowledge and skills they need to accomplish the agency’s goals. The USITC also increased its score on effective leadership, a primary driver of employee job satisfaction and commitment, with the score for senior leaders rising 9.6 points, the largest increase among small agencies on this issue.

Director of the Office of Human Resources Patricia Connelly believes that

these strong gains were the result of a concerted effort and focus, especially among top agency leaders, to improve employee job satisfaction and commitment. Director of Operations Bob Koopman agreed, noting, “It is increasingly important in times of tight resources that our most valuable resource, our employees, be satisfied and engaged.”

For the first time in 2013, USITC developed an agency-wide action plan focused on improving employee satisfaction and raising its scores in the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, which is used to calculate the *Best Places to Work* rankings. USITC staff analyzed previous employee survey data to identify key areas where scores were low and ripe for improvement. According to Connelly, they identified specific questions in the survey on which they wanted to improve.

The action plan that followed identified communication between management and staff, as well as employee empowerment and innovation as the areas where efforts could drive improvements. Agency leaders held a focus group with management and staff to generate ideas around these ideas. Stakeholders from several offices provided input, as did members of USITC’s Labor-Management Partnership Council. The final action plan was posted on the agency’s intranet site, and employees were notified of its availability.

According to Connelly and Olympia Hand, a senior program analyst in the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, the action planning process itself helped boost employee morale and engagement by demonstrating that management was listening to staff feedback and actively addressing their concerns.

In response to the feedback, the agency has been working with managers to facilitate inter-office work, reduce bottlenecks, encourage staff innovation and help managers improve performance management and more effectively establish work priorities.

As part of the plan to improve

communication between managers and employees, USITC has provided new training for managers on topics such as conducting performance reviews and managing difficult conversations with employees

Strong support from senior agency leadership was critical to this work, according to Connelly. Also important was having a dedicated staff person responsible for leading and coordinating the action planning efforts. “If you don’t have someone dedicated to it, coordinating with the rest of the agency, you don’t see movement on the scores,” noted Connelly.

The USITC is an independent, quasi-judicial federal agency that serves the public by implementing U.S. trade law and contributing to the development of sound and informed U.S. trade policy. ■

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The 2013 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings include 371 federal agencies and subcomponents, which represent 97 percent of the 2.1 million person federal workforce. Agencies are ranked within one of four categories: large agency, mid-size agency, small agency and federal subcomponent. Scores and rankings are revealed for all agencies and subcomponents, from first to worst. The rankings are based on data from the Office of Personnel Management’s annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, which was conducted from April through June of 2013. Additional survey data from eight agencies plus the Intelligence Community are included in the Best Places to Work results. This is the eighth edition of the Best Places to Work rankings; the first was produced in 2003.