

Navigating USAJobs.gov: Land a federal job

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For those seeking federal employment, there's only one way in: USAJobs.gov, a sprawling portal listing all federal jobs. It's the first stop for anyone wanting to work for Uncle Sam.

Some say it's helpful to have all those federal opportunities neatly consolidated. Others call it a nightmare of Byzantine complexity.

We took USAJobs.gov for a test drive. Armed with a dummy military résumé **supplied by Pete Charest, director of CivilianJobs.com (a service of search firm Bradley-Morris)**, we went looking for a job.

So many choices

Our Sgt. 1st Class Jim Smith joined up in 1996 and has been serving as an automated logistics senior supervisor at Fort Campbell, Ky., since November 2004. We sent him out to seek civilian employment as a logistics management specialist.

From the portal's home page, we followed the link to create an account, a simple matter of entering an email address and creating a password. Then we entered our ideal job title, with no limits on city or state.

Problem No. 1, and it's a biggie: We got almost 200 results. Every federal job with the words logistics, or management, or specialist showed up in the results. This included maintenance jobs, specialists in fire management, and a \$14-an-hour laborer job with the Defense Department.

It takes considerable finesse to conduct an effective search here. We tried different approaches using the Advanced Search option, limiting our query according to criteria such as geography, federal agency, and occupational series. This last option included "logistics management" as a choice, and eventually we narrowed the list down to 19 possible jobs.

This task was by no means trivial, and it's easy to get bogged down. Too broad a search and you'll get literally hundreds of hits. You can sort them by factors such as title or salary, but it's still a lot of wading. Yet too narrow a search may yield just three or four job possibilities.

We came away feeling this was a major flaw in the system.

But we did hone the search eventually, and Mr. Smith decided to apply for a job with the Air Force. The title was right — logistics management specialist — but the listing had some curious features. For instance: Salary ranged from about \$41,000 to more than \$129,000 a year.

Obviously the span related to experience, but still, could those figures be describing a single job? Even with considerably more experience, could we seriously out-earn another applicant by 300 percent? We began the application process feeling a little unsure of what we were even applying for.

That said, the job description sounded right: "Directing, developing, or performing logistics management operations that involve planning, coordinating, or evaluating the logistical actions required to support a specified mission, weapons system, or other designated program."

The description also asked for specialized experience, described as "particular knowledge, skills, and abilities" that would make us good at this job. Pretty vague, but lacking further specifics we decided we were indeed qualified, and soldiered on.

Apply ... now?

Once we'd opted to apply for the position, we again were asked to create an account. This appeared to be a slight elaboration on our earlier efforts, filling out our profile with a name, phone number and password.

Our next step was to put a résumé into the mix. Two choices: Upload a résumé, or build one using the site's own résumé-builder tool. One can make a good case for using the online tool, since it gives résumés a uniform look and feel that should simplify things for hiring managers.

Also, we caught this line at the bottom of the page: "Uploaded résumés may not be accepted by some agencies' online application processes." That pretty much decided it for us, and we went ahead and built a résumé. The template has all the standard blanks, and if you already have a résumé, it may seem like a hassle to cut-and-paste it all, but it's still preferable to the vagaries of uploading.

With the résumé in place we hit the magic button: "Apply for this position now!"

Gosh, that was easy.

Wrong. The system now bumped us out of USAJobs.gov and into an "Application Manager." A lot of people quit here — since it looks like you're done — but in fact there's still a lot to do.

The application manager wanted more profile information: citizenship, Selective Service history, armed forces information including data on our claim to veteran preference in the hiring process. Here we uploaded the DD214, then went on to name some preferences: Did we want full time or part time? Were we tied to a particular city? We could also fill in the blanks on race, religion, etc., if we chose.

It went on like this for a while longer: educational history, language skills, space for references. We also met a dozen or so "assessment" questions, meant to weed out the unqualified at various pay grades. Did we have the right number of years' specialized experience? Appropriate academic achievement?

Then very suddenly, it was over. Nothing to do but hit "Submit."

Faceless names

We had spent a couple of hours hacking away at all this, and it seemed that we hadn't really said anything about Jim Smith. There wasn't any place to flesh out the dry bones of his résumé. True, we could have attached a cover letter along with our résumé and military papers, but as Charest of CivilianJobs.com pointed out: No one would have cared.

With hundreds of résumés flooding in for every position, hiring managers are skipping past cover letters and making fast cuts. Do you have the skills? Have you got the experience? It had better be at the top of the résumé — otherwise you're out.

Which brings us to the hard truth of USAJobs.gov: You probably aren't going to get a job this way. There are just too many people squeezing through this tiny bureaucratic aperture. Even if you can slog through the tedious online application, you're a mere dot.

On the other hand, you can get a job at USAJobs.gov.

You do it by making a personal connection, Charest said. Talk to the hiring manager. Call the contact person whose name appears in the job listing. Connect with someone in the department where the job exists.

In short, make yourself a person, a memorable individual standing out amidst a sea of bland résumés. Do this, and USAJobs.gov becomes a mere matter of paperwork. If the hiring manager knows you, and quite possibly wants you, filling in the blanks online is nothing more than a formality.

In the meantime, don't abandon the private sector. "Military people don't realize the value they bring," Charest said. "A lot of them think they have to work in government, so they only apply in that one place."

Give it a shot at USAJobs.gov, for sure, "but keep your other options open."