

# **Responding to the Challenges of Recruitment, Retention, and Succession at the Information Services Office of the National Institute of Standards and Technology**

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Summary: This paper is based on a presentation made at the American Library Association (ALA) Federal and Armed Forces Libraries Round Table in Las Vegas, June 29, 2014. The paper covers National Institute of Standards and Technology's (NIST) Alternative Personnel Management System (APMS), the Information Services Office's (ISO) recruitment and retention strategies, and succession planning approach.

## **Background**

The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) was founded in 1901; NIST is a non-regulatory federal agency within the U.S. Department of Commerce. NIST's mission is, "to promote U.S. innovation and industrial competitiveness by advancing measurement science, standards, and technology in ways that enhance economic security and improve our quality of life."

The current NIST goals are to:

- Strengthen NIST's Laboratories and facilities to ensure US leadership in measurement science
- Provide measurements, standards, and technology to address national priorities
- Maximize NIST's impact through effective collaboration and coordination
- Develop world class operations and support.

NIST's FY 2014 resources total \$850.0 million in direct appropriations, an estimated \$47.3 million in service fees, and \$107.0 million from other agencies. The agency operates in two locations: Gaithersburg, MD, (headquarters—234-hectare/578-acre campus) and Boulder, CO, (84-hectare/208-acre campus). NIST employs about 3,000 scientists, engineers, technicians, and support and administrative personnel. NIST also hosts about 2,700 associates from academia, industry, and other government agencies, who collaborate with NIST staff and access user facilities. In addition, NIST partners with more than 1,300 manufacturing specialists and staff at more than 400 Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) service locations around the country.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> National Institute of Standards and Technology website [http://nist.gov/public\\_affairs/general\\_information.cfm](http://nist.gov/public_affairs/general_information.cfm)

The mission of the Information Services Office (ISO), also referred to as the NIST Research Library, is to support and enhance the research activities of the NIST scientific and technological community through a comprehensive program of knowledge management. Indeed ISO supports the NIST mission in its role of providing leadership for the collection, dissemination, curation, and preservation of NIST scientific publication and data output. ISO has responsibility for the Research Library, Digital Services and Publishing, and the Museum and History Program. ISO has a staff of 29: 16 librarians, seven unique professional positions (administrative officer, business specialist, information specialist, museum curator, program analyst, technical information specialist, and writer/editor) and six support staff (four library technicians, secretary, and an editorial assistant). Additionally, ISO contracts for term librarians for specific projects.

### NIST Alternative Personnel Management System (APMS)

NIST operates on an Alternative Personnel Management System (APMS) instead of the General Schedule (GS) Grade Plan that is in place in the majority of agencies of the US Federal Government. The major differences between the APMS and the GS systems are shown below:

- Career Path – the APMS uses career paths (two for professionals and two for technicians/support personnel)
- Pay Bands – there are five pay bands versus 15 grades in the GS System
- Pay-for-Performance System – pay increase is awarded by merit as a percentage of salary
- Position Descriptions (PD) – PDs are shorter and use standard language within a career path and payband to describe knowledge, skills, and abilities
- Ratings – all employees are rated per benchmark standards which are preset and are part of the employee’s Performance Plan
- Flexible Salary Setting – hiring supervisor has flexibility to set the salary offer within the pay band
- Supervisory Differential – a salary differential of 6 % for supervisors within the Pay Band.

Career Paths and Pay Bands

CAREER PATHS	BANDS														
<b>Scientific and (ZP) Engineering</b>	I					II					III		IV		V
<b>S&amp;E Technician (ZT)</b>	I			II			III		IV		V				
<b>Administrative (ZA)</b> (Librarians 1410 Technical Information Specialists 1412)	I					II					III		IV		V
<b>Support (ZS)</b> (Technicians 1411)	I	II		III		IV		V							
Corresponding GS Grades	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15

The APMS Career Path structure provides for career growth for Librarians to move to the equivalent of GS 13. It permits broader flexibility in the use of the Technical Information Specialist (1412) as well as the Librarian (1410) and related series. The broader salary range within the Pay Bands permits more flexibility in exercising pay-for-performance. It also provides a career ladder for Library Technicians (1411) with education. (Note: Library Technicians are classified in the ZS Career Path.)

### **The Challenges of Recruitment, Retention, and Succession Planning**

The challenges of recruitment, retention, and succession are organizationally specific but certain factors are universal; organizational size, funding, and management support each impacts these areas. However, some factors are critical to meet these challenges. It is imperative that the organization have a strong infrastructure consisting of well thought-out hiring and workforce development processes; decision makers who are in tune with the shifting landscape of staff projects, capabilities, and interests and have a firm strategic grasp of the organization.

### **ISO Recruitment Process**

To meet recruitment challenges ISO has instituted a unique process designed to identify key organizational factors that will move the organization forward. Also unique is the emphasis ISO places on obtaining input from all levels of the organization.

Whenever a vacancy occurs, ISO focuses on its vision, mission, goals, and objectives as documented in its Strategic Plan to determine how best to fill the vacancy. Each vacancy is considered an opportunity to bring onboard staff to fill any skill gaps in the organization. A vacancy “belongs” to the organization and is not replaced one-for-one with an identical position description or in the same group.

ISO believes in building on the staff strengths, ISO’s successes, and designing for the future. The three members of the Management Team (MT) (ISO Director, Group Leader for the Research Library, and Group Leader for Digital Services and Publishing) examine the Office’s present and future needs and perform a gap analysis.

Periodically, ISO performs a Skills Assessment Survey. Staff are asked to self-assess their skills in key areas of leadership, emerging technology, information development, communication, and library, digital and publication trends. They assess their level of knowledge and skill, as well as their interests. Staff are also asked to identify workload, workflow, and technical issues and concerns.

The MT balances the gap analysis, the assessment survey, and the staff input to set priorities. All staff may not see their input in the resulting position description but staff have learned that their voice has been heard and their issue will be addressed in some way even if not in a new position.

The type of appointment depends on what the new position requires: grade level, contractor/civil servant, full/part time, and permanent/temporary/term. An agreement has to be achieved at the MT level before the new position is described and posted.

To fill a redefined position and before posting a position on usajobs.gov, ISO looks among its own staff to determine if someone would qualify as an advancement opportunity through reassignment or accretion of duties. If staff who express an interest in the position are not qualified through reassignment or accretion of duties, they are encouraged to apply in the usual method. In that way staff can be considered for promotion or a new path just as outside candidates for the position.

A new position requires a new PD that includes selecting appropriate functional parenthetical titles e.g. Librarian (Physical Sciences), and Specialty Descriptors, and creating Principal Objectives, and Position Specific Key Phrases. The Series Definition, General Duties, and Knowledge Skills and Abilities (KSAs) are predefined by the APMS. This makes job postings more standardized and KSAs are identical for all pay band positions within series and career paths. Position announcement and qualifications for the position follow standard government procedures. The hiring supervisor creates the Position Description, identifies the required KSAs, and writes the vacancy questions. The recruitment package is submitted to the Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM) for review, finalizing, and posting. Vacancies are posted on USAJobs.

OHRM refers qualified applicants to the hiring supervisor, and then ISO conducts multiple screening/vetting process. The hiring supervisor selects the candidates to interview, frequently after conducting an initial pre-screening interview over the phone. The hiring supervisor, the other Group Leader, a panel of selected staff, and the ISO Director conduct in-person interviews with each applicant the hiring supervisor has pre-screened. The ISO Director assesses the candidate for the following:

- Corporate cultural fit and shared values with current ISO staff and customers
- Candidate's vision, thinking, and agility
- Awareness of technology trends, new business models, and innovations.

A job offer requires the agreement of the MT and the staff panel. The staff panel plays an important role in the selection process since they need to be able to work well with the candidate. The MT and staff must come to a consensus on the candidate to hire. Experience has proven that this method works very well for ISO. We have brought in staff with excellent skills needed to fill the skill gap, the attitude and outlook to collaborate positively with their colleagues, and the ability to bring new ideas to the organization.

### **Retention Incentives**

Once we have hired talented and forward thinking individuals the challenge is to be able to fulfill their hiring expectations and keep them focused on new and emerging organizational directions. However, staff leave positions for a variety of other reasons but the underlying need to feel valued is usually the most important reason for continuing with an employer. Employees want to advance, experience new technology and projects, and benefit financially. Some want to move into management and leadership positions. Even the most loyal, long-term employees perform better when they are acknowledged for contributions.

It's a challenge to keep the exceptional individuals who have been hired. Retention incentives are an excellent way to infuse satisfaction and excitement into an organization.

- Tuition Assistance – NIST offers several financial programs for staff retention and ISO uses these incentives to retain staff depending on the situation.
  - o Support staff towards a BS and MS (Library/Info Science) degrees
  - o Support Certificate Programs in new technology or gap areas e.g. Digital Data Curation
  - o Support specialty training to fill or enhance a KSA gap
  - o Student Loan Reimbursement for graduate education (e.g. MLS)
  
- Leadership Opportunities – If an employee has a path to promotion without leaving the organization it's a win-win situation.
  - o NIST Leadership Programs – for next generation leaders and networking opportunity
  - o Federal Executive Institute – for Senior Executive Service tract
  - o Lead ISO Teams – tiger team for problem resolution or goal specific team e.g. Succession Planning Team or Discovery Services Team
  - o Participate in NIST-wide team (e.g. NIST Public Access Policy Team, NIST Scientific Data Committee)
  
- Professional Development
  - o Conference Attendance
  - o Professional networking opportunities
  - o Publishing and presentation support e.g. editorial, graphic arts
  
- Interesting/Engaging Projects – these may be staff or management initiated
  - o Participate in NIST-wide collaborations e.g. Space Planning, Innovation Center, Digital Preservation
  - o Participate in Lab Collaboration e.g. Special Lab Projects, Data Curation
  - o Create teams to examine new technology, workflows, and business models
  
- Conduct an Open and Creative Operating Philosophy
  - o Encourage and reward risk-taking
  - o Create “sandboxes” and opportunities for experimentation
  - o Encourage and reward initiative and innovation
  - o Support collaboration with colleagues within and outside ISO
  
- Rewards – this can be monetary or recognition
  - o Time Off and Cash-in-Your-Account
  - o Department of Commerce Medals
  - o NIST, Federal, or other awards
  - o Bonuses
  
- Promotion
  - o Accretion of duties – staff who over time have taken on additional duties that are not reflected in the initial PD and a Known Promotion Potential (KPP) exists, an

- accretion of duties request can be submitted to OHRM to justify promotion to the next pay band
- New Paths – a Technical Information Specialist (1412) series could apply for a Librarian Series (1410) vacancy after obtaining MLS Degree

Using a combination of retention incentives is an investment in our employees and the organization. The key to knowing the right incentive to offer is in having good communication with each employee so that we have an understanding of what motivates each person.

## **Succession Planning**

Succession Planning is often overlooked in staffing plans because one of the biggest challenges is handling the perception of fairness. Sometimes succession planning is not used to avoid perception of pre-selection or favoritism. But properly planned and implemented succession planning can be a powerful staffing and retention tool and is in the best interest of the organization.

A major aspect of the planning is preparing for retirements. Of the 29 ISO staff, 10 are retirement eligible. Many ISO employees stay beyond their retirement eligibility date that may be an indication of job satisfaction due to hiring and retention policies. While eligibility does not indicate a time of departure, the organization must prepare for the potential loss of institutional knowledge when an employee retires. This planning is part of ISO's approach to succession planning.

In addition, ISO must address normal attrition. ISO MT addresses succession with each new hiring. The MT considers what skills might be lost if there was a retirement or departure. The discussion centers on examination of potential skills and corporate knowledge loss. An attempt is made to cover critical competences by more than one employee but in small organizations with far reaching visions that is a challenge. However, it also adds to employee excitement of working in a best practices organization.

ISO Management is augmenting its current approach to include staff participation in succession planning to supplement Management's efforts. The MT has established an employee team to create a Leadership Succession Plan that aligns with ISO's management framework. This includes:

- NIST Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence Framework – ISO's organizational and operating framework (Fig. 1)
- The Knowledge Continuum – provides the overarching philosophy that drives ISO's products and services (Fig. 2)
- ISO Strategic Plan – long and short term goals, objectives, action plans, and measures.

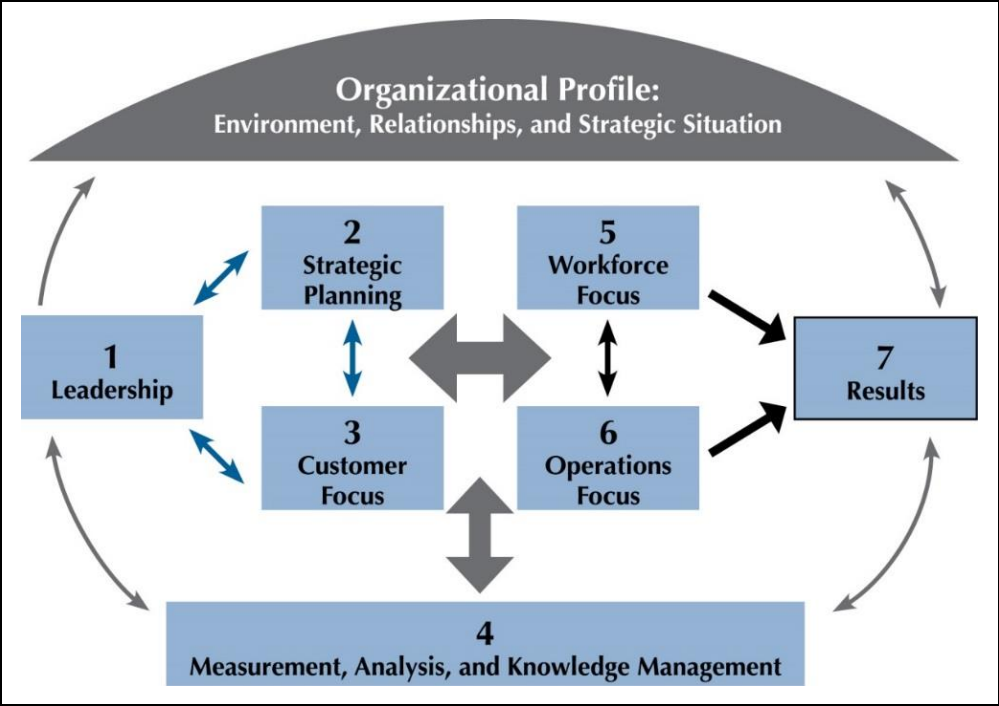


Fig. 1. The Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence Framework

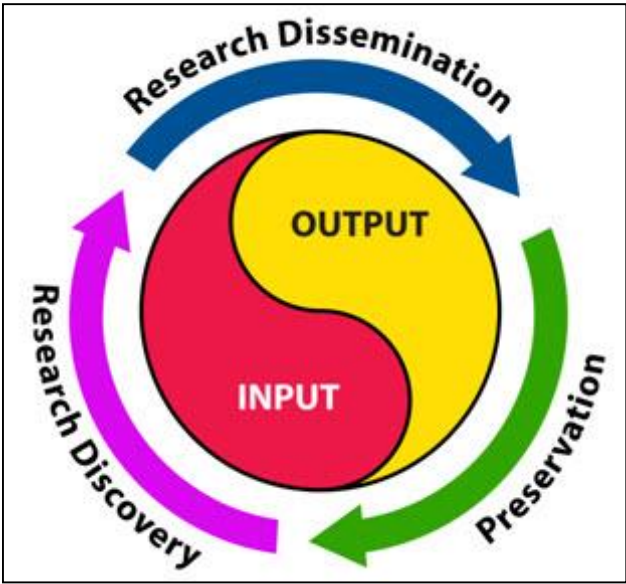


Fig. 2. ISO's Knowledge Continuum

The approach is to examine ISO's best practices and use the team findings to implement a succession plan for ISO staff, developed/created by ISO staff. The objectives of the plan are:

- Address the competencies of leadership: leading change, leading people, business acumen, building coalitions, and driving results
- Address technical competencies
- Determine how to fill key roles
- Determine how to develop a deeper bench of qualified staff in specific areas
- Address retention/commitment and departures
- Identify/develop untapped internal resources
- Identify potential internal candidates and process for self-identification.

The Succession Plan Documentation will include what new/future leaders should know about ISO such as:

- Preserving Institutional/Corporate Memory – useful in decision making
- Rationale for Process Documentation – imperative to understand decision rationale before changing process
- How ISO hiring process works within the federal hiring rules.

The plan must:

- Develop criteria and assessment process
- Determine measures of success
- Outline timeframes for introducing the plan to ISO, implementing the processes, and assessing effectiveness.

A recent conversation with the Succession Team indicated that they are using the action plans of the Strategic Plan as a guideline to identify future needs. They have also interviewed staff and held exit interviews with recent departures. Of particular note is the team's observations on the benefits of overlaps within ISO's critical functions; the benefits and curiosity that evolves from participating in a sharing organization; the need to address generational attitudes; the soft skills needed by leaders; and finding ways to map these concerns into a plan.

## **Conclusion**

Recruitment, retention, and succession are integral parts of ISO's workforce management cycle that is driven by the vision, mission, and strategic goals of the organization. To succeed all parts must work together and have the buy-in of all current and incoming staff. A natural assumption might be that the process begins with recruitment but the process is really a continuous loop. Where to concentrate depends on the maturity of the organization's management and workforce development approaches. Assuring the retention of promising and loyal employees might be strategically the first step. The most important thing is to view recruitment, retention, and succession planning as part of a workforce management system (WMS) as noted in the Baldrige framework.(Fig.1)

ISO's future depends in part on its ability to stay strategically focused and aligned with NIST goals and priorities; applying the Baldrige framework to improve and sustain organization performance; and using the Knowledge Continuum (Fig.2) to guide the development and



delivery of customer-focused products and services. Lastly, ISO will continue to respond to the challenges of recruitment, retention, and succession with innovation, creativity, and the sense of urgency they deserve.