

# From Political Appointee to Career Employee

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The approach of summer brings with it warmer temperatures, the scent of flowers in the air, and road trips to the beach. During an election year, it's also peak "burrowing in" season - the mad scramble among some political appointees looking for career positions before the administration change.

So what's wrong with this? Don't we want people with the institutional knowledge and expertise to stay around for the next administration? Yes, of course. These individuals could be the loudest proponents for the technology programs that are the bread and butter of the IT contracting community. However, transition year burrowing season brings to mind a 2006 GAO report that found that 18 out of 130 conversions from non-career to career positions at GS-12 level or higher were not done using the appropriate procedures. In those instances, the merit-based hiring process either failed to catch individuals who didn't have enough of or the right type of experience, or overlooked those who did. That may not be *statistically* relevant, but it can affect the morale of career employees who followed the rules. With focus on bringing in its own people, will the new President have the bandwidth to make sure that conversions are being done correctly this time around?

According to the 2006 GAO [report](#) "Personnel Practices: Conversions of Employees from Noncareer to Career Positions, May 2001 – April 2005:"

*"Some of the apparent improper procedures included: selecting former noncareer appointees who appeared to have limited qualifications and experience for career positions, creating career positions specifically for particular individuals, and failing to apply veteran's preference in the selection process."*

One of the 18 cases involved the 2003 hiring of a Program Specialist to conceive and implement new initiatives and projects to strengthen emergency management programs. In one corner was a former Schedule C FEMA Staff Assistant with 14 months of government experience following 4 years working for the former FEMA Director. Her opponent - a career employee with over 10 years experience at FEMA as an Emergency Management Specialist. Both received Best Qualified status, but somehow the 10-year veteran was passed over. We are all aware of another infamous case of a hiring "misstep" at FEMA.

So what can OPM do in the future to minimize this problem? One approach would be to convert many of the politically appointed positions to career positions. I was recently included in an email distribution from an SESer at OMB whose position was recently reclassified from political appointee to career competitive. Although he is leaving government, he is helping identify potential replacements. While this approach won't fix the merit hiring system, it will hopefully serve two purposes: recruitment participation by someone who knows what the job takes, and reducing the number of political appointees in the next administration.