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## **The Federal Position Classification System: A Case Study for Updating an Archaic Personnel Management System**

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**The Federal Position Classification System:  
A Case Study for Updating an Archaic Personnel Management System**

Submitted by

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for

Executive Master of Public Administration 396

Graduate Research Project in Public Management

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## Abstract

The ability of the federal position classification system to keep pace with the evolving complexity and type of federal work has been in doubt for many years. Nearly 30 percent of federal occupations have not been updated since 1990, and many more have not been updated since the 1970s. This study will explore the federal position classification system and evaluate how it attracts quality candidates, compete with the private sector and accurately classify positions. Relevant literature, surveys completed by stakeholders and subject matter experts, and key informant interviews will be used to capture the state and characteristics of the federal position classification system. The research method approach will be adapted to obtain the perspective and experience for the validity of the outcome. The study is intended to demonstrate to stakeholders whether the federal position classification system needs to be revised and updated and whether to recommend the necessity to hire dedicated classification specialists to review, update, and maintain the position classification standards.

*Keywords:* position classification, Classification Act

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has failed to comply with Title 5, United States Code. Under the law, OPM is responsible for developing and providing classification standards used by federal agencies. This law requires OPM to continually review, update, and maintain position classification standards that include conducting occupational studies and writing new standards. There are about 120 federal agencies that rely on the United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM) for human resources leadership and support to achieve their mission. The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), reported in 2014 that OPM has not reviewed the classification program of any federal agencies since the 1980s. This research will examine the current status of the federal position classification system and provide recommendations on how it can be improved.

### **Background of the Problem**

When it comes to the federal classification system, OPM has oversight and final authority of classification standards. In contrast, all the federal agencies only have general authority and responsibility for the classification of General Schedule (GS) positions. There are 1.5 million federal white-collar employees under the GS classification. The federal work has been organized into 23 occupational groups, 420 occupational series, and 15 grades (GS-1 to GS-15). The federal position classification system is based on a 70-year-old law, the Classification Act, which was established in 1949. Two of the primary purposes of the Classification Act of 1949 was to establish a standard plan for the allocation of positions and provide a schedule of compensation rate. A problem with the position classification system is that there are not enough classification specialists to review, update, and maintain the position classification standards. In addition, there is not enough management oversight to ensure that occupational standards are updated, and there continues to be no plan to commit resources to maintain classification standards. About

124 of the 420 occupation series have not been updated since 1990. Furthermore, there are occupation standards that have not been updated since the 1970s.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The federal position classification system is outdated and difficult to change. The federal position classification system was based on standards established by the Office of Personnel Management created in 1949. Many of the position classifications have not been updated due to the downsizing of federal classification specialists. The classification system relies on generalized standards, generalized job descriptions, and does not account for actual hours needed to document specific duties and knowledge of the job. Additionally, this makes it rather challenging to capture specialized skills and hold those in positions accountable for the actual assigned tasks.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of the study is to validate or invalidate the main assumption that IF the federal position classification system is revised and updated, THEN it will be able to attract quality candidates, THEN it will be able to compete with the private sector, THEN it will be able to accurately classify positions. Another purpose of the study is to gain insight into the challenges the federal position classification system is facing. Lastly, the purpose of this study is to gain knowledge of the current state of the federal position classification system from primary data. The study could provide findings that would show that the federal position classification system would need to be improved by establishing a uniform and consistent classification for all federal agencies to keep pace with the complexity and type of federal work.

### **Significance of the Study**

A practical and more modern position classification would benefit all federal agencies, current employees, and prospective employees. The purpose of the study would benefit the



current federal position classification system as the study could provide insight into improving a position classification that is 70 years old. The study could provide federal position classifiers and hiring managers ideas on how to perform their job more effectively and efficiently. The study could produce insight into the significance of modernizing the federal position classification system to compete with the private sector and reward.

### **Research Format**

The research for this study is based on the assumption format. The theory of change or main assumption of this study is that IF the federal position classification system is revised and updated, THEN it will be able to attract quality candidates, THEN it will be able to compete with the private sector, THEN it will be able to accurately classify positions. This study will also examine three research sub-assumptions that correlate with the main assumption. These three sub-assumptions are: 1) IF the federal position classification system is revised and updated, THEN it will be able to attract quality candidates, 2) IF the federal position classification system is revised and updated, THEN it will be able to compete with the private sector, 3) IF the federal position classification system is revised and updated, THEN it will be able to accurately classify positions. The significance of the findings from these sub-assumptions will significantly aid to either validate or invalidate the main assumption.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

The survey will be given to current and prior federal employees, federal hiring managers, and federal human resources professionals with the assumption that 100 percent participation will not be acquired. The level of confidence with the findings from the survey is directly dependent on the number of participants. The survey responses are assumed to be accurate and correct from the perspective and experience of the respondents. All the literature and data reviewed to support the research are assumed to be relevant, current, and accurate. The

interviewees are assumed to provide unbiased and factual information; however, they are expected to withhold certain information that might be invaluable to the research. Research limitations are foreseen with those participating in the survey and key informant interviews. These participants might be reluctant to provide full disclosure to safeguard themselves from repercussions or create unwanted attention to their agency due to any violation of the Merit Systems Principles and the Prohibited Personnel Practices.

### **Definition of Terms**

The three definitions of terms that are highlighted are position classification, position classification standard, and position description. For the purpose of this study, the definitions have been defined as listed below.

#### ***Position Classification***

The process used to assign Federal jobs to a pay system, series, title, and grade/pay band as it corresponds to the position classification standards.

#### ***Position Classification Standard***

A standard that provides a common reference in the classification of positions across all federal agencies, which may cover one or numerous occupations, and supports position classification uniformity and equity; includes a description of the work that is performed, official titles, and standards to determine grades.

#### ***Position Description***

Also known as a “PD,” which indicates the primary duties, responsibilities, and supervisory relationships of a position. PD does not spell out the details of all possible workday activities.

**Expected Impact of the Research**

The expected impact of the research is to provide data to show that a modern federal position classification system is needed. The current classification needs to be improved to keep pace with the evolving complexity and nature of federal work to compete with the private sector, attract quality candidates, accurately classify positions, and reward top employees. Another impact of the research is to show that dedicated classification specialists are needed for reviewing, updating, and maintaining the position classification standards. Furthermore, classification specialists are needed to develop accurate position descriptions (PD).

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

### **Introduction**

A review of the literature for this research was arranged into four themes. These four themes consist of the background of the federal position classification system, attracting quality candidates, comparing public versus private sector hiring and retention, and position classification reform. The background theme's focus is to gain insight into the purpose of the federal position classification system, the law that governs it, historical information, and reform initiatives to improve it. The theme of attracting quality candidates provides insight into the effect of the classification system in the organization, improvements to the classification system, and the effective way of recruiting the right person. The third theme compared the hiring and retention between the public and private sectors. The fourth theme discussed the changes and opportunities to improve the federal position classification system.

Literature sources, specifically in the federal position classification subject area, were limited. Sources were mainly found in government websites such as OPM.gov, GAO.gov, and U.S. Merit System Protection Board Newsletter on MSPB.gov. A couple of literature sources were related to the subject available through the Government Executive and Federal News Network articles. Reviews of literature that solely focus on the General Schedule (GS) were intentionally excluded as this research is focused on the federal position classification system.

### **Background of the Federal Position Classification System**

The first focus of the literature review is the background of the federal position classification system. The literature review of the federal position classification will provide the backdrop for this research and highlight any changes to the federal position classification system. *The Classification Act of 1949* (1949) explained that the federal position classification system was established in 1949. The Senate and House of Representatives enacted the Classification

Act of 1949 on October 28, 1949. The Classification Act of 1949 was enacted to “establish a standard schedule of rates of basic compensation for certain employees of the Federal Government; to provide an equitable system for fixing and adjusting the rates of basic compensation of individual employees” (The Classification Act of 1949, 1949, p. 954). The Classification Act of 1949 was used to repeal the Classification Act of 1923. The *Classification Act of 1923* (1923) discussed that the Classification Act of 1923 was enacted by the Senate and House Representatives on March 4, 1923, to classify civilian positions in the District of Columbia and the field services.

*The Classifier’s Handbook* (1991) explained that Chapter 51 of Title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.), is what governs the Federal service position classification and “states that positions shall be classified based on the duties and responsibilities assigned and the qualifications required to do the work” (p. 4). In the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards* (2009), Title 5, U.S.C. “directs OPM to prepare and publish position classification standards as a means of implementing the classification system” (p. 6). Title 5 U.S.C defines the classification system oversight role of OPM and that the final authority over standards lies with OPM (Introduction to the Position Classification Standards, 2009). The general authority and responsibility for adequately classifying all of its positions covered by the GS lie with all federal agencies. *The Classifier’s Handbook* (1991) and *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards* (2009), provide the classification guidance and standards of OPM as well as the type of authority and responsibility of the classification system.

The *OPM Needs to Improve the Design, Management, and Oversight of the Federal Classification* by GAO (2014) mentioned, “from 2003 to 2014, OPM established 14 new occupational standards and revised almost 20 percent of the occupational standards” (p. 26). OPM has organized the government's work into 23 occupational groups or families, 420

occupational series or occupation, and 15 grades (GS-1 to GS-15). This literature outlines the occupational areas OPM is responsible for, and the work OPM has accomplished.

### **Attracting Quality Candidates**

In the literature *How Job-Based Classification Systems Promote Organizational Ineffectiveness* by Penner (1983), the different attributes between the hybrid federal classification system, and the Baruch classification factors were compared. The federal classification showed that job families were ranked based on job ranking, point rating, and factor comparison. In contrast, the Baruch classification factor used difficulty and complexity of duties, non-supervisory responsibilities, supervisory and administrative responsibilities, and qualification standards (Penner, 1983). Penner's article compared the difference between the two types of classification systems and showed problems with the job-based classification and recommended that alternatives be considered to preserve merit system type classification.

The *Civil Service Recruitment: Recruiting the Right Persons the Right Way* by Van Acker (2019) compared the recruitment practices of nine different countries to include Australia, Iceland, Netherlands, France, China, Brazil, Republic of Korea, and Ireland. The comparison highlighted that the organization of the recruitment for each country was directly connected to the bases of the civil service system; careers or positions. Furthermore, Van Acker's (2019) literature pointed out that merit-based recruitment focuses on the quality of the candidate, which "correlates with economic growth and lower levels of corruption" (p. 1). This literature gives ideas on how the civil service system of other countries is recruiting.

The GAO report titled *OPM Needs to Improve the Design, Management, and Oversight of the Federal Classification System (2014)*, discussed how GAO consolidated into eight essential attributes that make up a modern, effective classification system. These attributes include internal equity, external equity, transparency, flexibility, adaptability, simplicity, rank-in-

position, and rank-in person. According to GAO, all eight key attributes should be present for a classification system to be effective.

The GAO report titled *Opportunities to Improve Executive Agencies' Hiring Processes* by Mihm (2003), disclosed findings that the "federal hiring process all too often does not meet the needs of agencies in achieving their missions, managers in filling positions with the right talent, and applicants for a timely, efficient, transparent, and merit-based process" (p. 3). The GAO report demonstrated that the classification needs to be reformed by OPM to eliminate factors that hamper or delay the hiring process.

The article *Where have all the classifiers gone?* by Neal (2019), discussed the impact of automation on classification. The automated classification tools were intended to assist HR Specialists, but instead, they were misused and took the place of the judgment of HR Specialists. According to Neal (2019), with the automated tools managers and HR Specialists did not write "description of the work that needed to be done, they could say what grade level they wanted and the system would tell them the words they needed to put on paper to get there" (p. 1). Automated tools opened the gate to deliberate over grading. This literature described the extent agencies would go to compete for talent by relying on mis-classification of jobs.

Risher (2015) described the challenges of position classification in *What's in a Name? Everything That's Wrong With Job Classification*. Risher (2015) stated that the purpose of position classification is to guarantee internal equity; however, position classification merely maintains the status quo and acts as a "barrier to change and to competing for people with high-demand job skills" (p. 1). This article provided the understanding that the position classification is an old process in which the government no longer wants to invest time and resources.

Furthermore, this article pointed out that federal agencies are more reliant on generalized job descriptions and commonly applied the practice of grade inflation to attract talent.

### **Comparing Public vs Private Sector Hiring and Retention**

The *Acquisition Workforce Challenge-motivation For Government vs. Industry Employment* by Dobriansky (2009) pointed out that “the federal government does not have the manpower or resources to staff and execute major multi-million dollar, multi-year, complex systems and services programs” (p. 69). This situation forces the federal government to contract with prime and subcontractors to obtain the workforce of engineers to execute the work needed to successfully develop and build high tech systems to support the military. This literature challenges the capabilities and effectiveness of the federal classification system relating to talent acquisition and retention.

In the literature *Comparing Private and Public Sector Employees’ Psychological Contracts*, Willem, De Vos, and Buelens (2010) compared the motivations between private and public sector employees that attract them to private or public sector jobs. This article stated that public sector employees are less interested in career development and financial rewards than with private sector employees. Additionally, this article found that “there is no there is no difference in the importance attached to job content, social atmosphere and work-life balance” (Willem, De Vos, & Buelens, 2010, p. 276). This literature conveyed to the study the importance of psychological contracts provided by the private and public sectors as employee motivation.

*The Future of Position Classification: Not Only “What?” But “Who?”* by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MPSB), Office of Policy and Evaluation (2015), identified that the foundation of hiring and pay for Federal civil service is the position classification. MSPB (2015), highlighted the significant decrease of staff performing position classification for federal



agencies and staff maintaining and overseeing position classification for OPM. This article provided the study with information that OPM has not reviewed the position classification for federal agencies since the 1980s. Additionally, this provided the study information that “OPM has not reviewed agency position classification programs since the 1980’s” (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, Office of Policy and Evaluation, 2015, p. 7) and that the accuracy of position classification is not guaranteed.

In the article *Are Federal Employee Position Descriptions Accurate?* by The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, Office of Policy and Evaluation (2019), the MPSB discussed that standardized PDs should be used for populous, stable, and homogeneous jobs. Since there is a risk that agencies may miss an essential aspect of a position, it is not recommended that standardized PDs be used for diverse or dynamic jobs. The overuse of standard job descriptions significantly contributes to the inaccuracy of job descriptions. This article provided the study with information that federal agencies were not getting adequate assistance from assistant managers, a direct result from the impact of the downsizing of position classification specialists.

The authors of the article, *OPM Needs to Improve the Design, Management, and Oversight of the Federal Classification* (2014), highlighted that OPM only had six full-time classification specialists in 2014, while OPM had 16 in 2001. In 2017, Jeff Neal wrote *Rethinking Position Classification*, which discussed the shrinking federal HR classification positions and how classification has changed from performing detailed, accurate classification analysis to more straightforward and quicker job classification. The limited classification specialist staff restricts OPM from providing oversight of positions classified by federal agencies, which has resulted in about 124 occupations not being reviewed or updated since 1990.

According to *OPM Needs to Improve the Design, Management, and Oversight of the Federal Classification* by GAO (2014), several occupations have not been reviewed or updated since 1970. Risher (2019) wrote the article *GAO is Wrong: Job Classification Cannot be Fixed*

in which he indicated that the federal position classification system is antiquated and bureaucratic. Risher (2019) called attention to the problem with position descriptions being outdated and lengthy while providing some classification examples that have not been revised since 1963, 1971, and 1980. In support of this study, the articles and literature emphasized that a position classification is an essential tool for hiring federal civil service and that position classification specialists play an essential role in maintaining and overseeing accurate and current position classification.

### **Position Classification Reform**

In the literature, *Can We Fix the GS Position Classification System?* by Winchell (2015), discussed the numerous initiatives to reform the federal GS classification pay since the beginning of the 90s to resolve the issues with the classification system. The reforms included “the total quality movement, the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPRG), the President’s Management Agenda, and President Obama’s call for federal restructuring” (Winchell, 2015, p. 51). This literature also noted that the federal position classification system has issues, which is broken, which supports this study's sub-assumption. The issues discussed included the complexity of the classification system, the friction between managers and position classifiers about the classification system, and the reality of the classification system. The reform initiatives

*The Classifier’s Handbook* (1991) described that in 1977, the Factor Evaluation System (FES) was developed. The FES was established as a tool to assure occupation alignment, for the classification of GS work, and to assign grades to nonsupervisory positions under the federal position classification system. Factors with established point values were the basis for the FES. “The Primary Standard serves as the framework for FES and for classification standards and guides written in FES format” (The Classifier’s Handbook, 1991, p. 8). The basic levels of the

nine factors are described by the Primary Standard, which also established the point values of the factor level descriptions for position classification standards. This literature showed that reform for the federal classification system could be established and implemented.

Federal Pay (2020) provided the information that in 2006, a Pay Band system was created called the National Security Personnel System (NSPS) to replace the federal classification and pay system. The Pay Band system was created to provide greater flexibility on how much employees would be paid based on education, experience, and position classification. Congress repealed the NSPS Pay Band System in 2009 before it was fully implemented. The repeal of the NSPS Pay Band revealed that ideas and efforts had been made to improve the federal position classification system; however, the change effort requires the approval of Congress as the law governs the federal position classification system.

*The Next Wave of Civil Service Reform* by Beecher (2003) discussed the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, which included the authority for civil service demonstration projects. According to Beecher (2003), Congress was aware that the civil service needed change; however, each idea brought forward was constantly challenged by other groups preventing the solution from being passed. The demonstration projects were vital in building strong cases for reform solutions showed this study that successful demonstration projects have resulted in legislative reform.

A study was performed to determine if the federal government links rewards to performance and if the federal government should link rewards to performance in the literature *Performance Ratings and Career Advancement in the Us Federal Civil Service* by Oh and Lewis (2013). Oh and Lewis (2013) had raised the question if the “performance-rewards link strong enough to retain the federal government’s best employees, to advance them to the top levels of

the bureaucracy, and to motivate workers to improve or maintain their performance?” (p. 757). This literature analyzed a possible solution to change the process for awarding pay increases, which disclosed to this study idea of reform that could be used to attract candidates for employment and be used as a tool for retention.

### **Conclusion**

The review of the literature afforded several critical findings for this study. One of the literature review's findings was that the federal position classification is based on the Classification Act of 1949 and is governed by Chapter 51 of Title 5, United States Code. The overall authority for establishing the necessary policies and guidelines governing the classification system lies with OPM, while the general authority and responsibility for adequately classifying all of its positions covered by the GS lie with all federal agencies. There are various alternatives used by various countries; however, merit-based classification is the popular alternative. The literature revealed that OPM and the federal agencies lack the staff to review, maintain, and update to ensure accurate position classification for talent acquisition and retention. Different psychological contracts are used to motivate candidates for private or public sectors. According to the literature, although reforms have been made to the federal position classification, the system still needs reforming. Reforming the classification takes an act of congress.

## Chapter 3: Research Methods

### Introduction

This study was a mixed-method research based on qualitative and quantitative data through the collection of topic-related literature data, completed surveys by stakeholders and subject matter experts, and responses from key informant interviews. This approach was used so that the research main assumption and sub-assumptions could be completely addressed through the collection, analyzation, and interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative data. Another reason this approach was used was to complement the small population that provided qualitative data, complementing the larger population that provided quantitative data. Furthermore, this study used the explanatory sequential design as this study used a phased approach of quantitative followed by qualitative data collection and analysis sequence.

### Research Assumption

The focus of this study was on the theory of change or main assumption that IF the federal position classification system is revised and updated, THEN it will be able to attract quality candidates, THEN it will be able to compete with the private sector, THEN it will be able to accurately classify positions. This study attempted to validate or invalidate the main assumption. This study also looked into the three sub-assumptions that correlated with the primary assumption. The three sub-assumptions were: 1) IF the federal position classification system is revised and updated, THEN it will be able to attract quality candidates, 2) IF the federal position classification system is revised and updated, THEN it will be able to compete with the private sector, 3) IF the federal position classification system is revised and updated, THEN it will be able to accurately classify positions. The significance of the findings from these subsection assumptions aided to either validate or invalidate the main assumption.

### **Data Collection Plan Overview**

The data collection plan was to collect primary data through a two-minute rapid survey and key informant interview while the secondary data was to be collected from various literature. The plan was to review the primary data as quantitative and qualitative data. Additionally, the plan was to review the secondary data as qualitative data.

### **Population Sampling Strategy**

The survey participants targeted for this research were 50 to 100 stakeholders and subject matter experts. Stakeholders were federal agency hiring managers and federal employees, while the subject matter experts were the HR Specialists (Classifiers, Recruiters, and Staffers) from various federal agencies. Hiring managers were selected to participate with the survey because they are directly involved with preparing and evaluating new job descriptions as well as getting grade change approved. The reason HR Specialists (Classifiers) were selected to participate in the survey is that they are responsible for preparing and evaluating job descriptions. HR Specialists (Recruiters and Staffers) were selected to participate in the survey because they are directly responsible for the screening of candidates' resumes to ensure they meet qualifications per the job description. Both hiring managers and HR Specialists (Classifiers) use the position classification standards issued by OPM. Federal employees were selected to participate in the survey to expand the population sampling to those with interest and awareness of the federal position classification.

During this study, the target was to interview with 5 to 10 key informants who are with the OPM HR professionals, GAO personnel involved with reviewing the OPM Human Capital, and professionals from Graduate School USA. OPM HR professionals were considered for this study because they have the oversight and final authority when establishing new occupational

standards and reviewing existing ones. GAO personnel involved with reviewing OPM Human Capital were considered because they were the office assigned to conduct the OPM study and generated the report in 2014. Additionally, interviewing key informants with extensive federal position classification system experience such as Graduate School USA HR instructors or professors and HR professionals from other institutions with federal HR background provided invaluable knowledge and experience of the reality of the federal position classification system.

The number of participants selected for this study was thought to be an adequate amount in consideration of the time constraint of the schedule to complete the research. The approach with the sampling strategy was adapted to obtain the perspective and experience as a method to achieve the right sample size in assessing the federal position classification system.

### **Procedure**

The survey and key informant interview questions addressed the reality of the federal position classification system and sought insights into its current status. The rapid two-minute survey forms were provided to stakeholders and subject matter experts via email, Survey Monkey, and LinkedIn. The rapid two-minute survey included four Likert scale opinion statements with additional comment blocks and one open-ended question. See Appendix A for a rapid two-minute survey sample. The survey took less than 2 minutes to complete.

The key informant interviews were conducted over the phone, and participants were provided with the questions ahead of the interview. The interview questions included four closed-ended questions with a follow on to elaborate, the option to add more information, and a snowball question. See Appendix B for key informant interview guide sample. The key informant interviews took less than 20 minutes to complete.

Data were collected from various literature to include literature from the OPM, the GAO OPM Human Capital report 2014. Additionally, data were reviewed from various reliable

literature addressing the federal position classification system. These data were collected to gain insight into the current status of the federal position classification system.

### **Data Processing and Analysis**

Performance measurement was based on qualitative and quantitative data through a collection of topic-related literature, surveys, and key informant interviews. The close-ended questions on the rapid survey were analyzed as quantitative data. The quantification of qualitative entities from the close-ended questions was based on the Likert scale. From a scale of 1 - 5 where 5 is “Strongly Agree” and 1 is “Strongly Disagree.”

The additional comments on the surveys and the open-ended questions on the key informant interviews were analyzed as qualitative data. The qualitative data collected from the surveys and key informant interviews were dependent on how the responses were understood and interpreted. The qualitative data from the surveys and key informant interviews were compared with the data collected from the various literature of OPM and the OPM Human Capital report by GAO to draw conclusions and explain the findings.

### **Internal and External Validity**

The internal validity of this study would apply to all federal agencies under the GS classification and pay, which is made up of about 1.5 million civilian white-collar federal employees. This study would not apply to federal agencies that are under the classification of Law Enforcement Officers (LEO) and Federal Wage System (FWS) pay schedules. The classification for LEO is specific to those employees who are defined as law enforcement officers. The classification for FWS applies to blue-collar federal employees who are covered by appropriated and non-appropriated funds. FWS has a uniform pay-setting system that pays employees on an hourly basis.



External validity does not apply to this study as this study does not apply to organizations outside of the federal agencies. This study is specific to GS classification standards, which the private sector does not use.

### **Dependent and Independent Variables**

The independent variable of this study is the revising and updating of the federal position classification system. Three dependent variables depend on the revising and updating of the federal classification system. The first dependent variable is the ability to attract quality candidates. The second dependent variable is the ability to compete with the private sector. Lastly, the third dependent variable is the ability to accurately classify positions.

### **Limitations**

The outcome of this research is dependent on the right sample size. The availability of participants to complete the survey for this research is not guaranteed, which is a limitation that would affect the validity of the outcome. Restraints to provide complete responses by key informants during the interview may affect the study. The timeline of the research might not be enough to complete a comprehensive study.

### **Conclusion**

The research method for this study was a mixed-method, which consisted of a rapid two-minute survey, key informant interview, and a collection of literature data. The performance measurement was based on qualitative and quantitative data through the collection of data from topic related literature, survey responses, and key informant interview responses. The qualitative data from the surveys and key informant interviews were compared with the data collected from the literature review to draw conclusions and explain the findings. During the study, the approach was adapted to obtain the perspective and experience as a method of assessing the federal position classification system. The findings from the data analysis of survey responses,

key informant interview responses, and review of literature data shed light on the current status of the federal position classification. The results of these findings are discussed in detail in the next chapters.

## **Chapter 4: Results and Findings Expectations**

### **Introduction**

This chapter provides an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected from a two-minute rapid survey and key informant interviews. The purpose of the collection and analyses of this primary data was to examine the federal position classification system to validate or invalidate the assumption and sub-assumptions of this study. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from current and former federal employees and included subject matter experts, supervisors, hiring managers, and Human Resources specialists. The SurveyMonkey.com application was used to collect quantitative data using a two-minute rapid survey. A Likert scale was used to capture the perspectives and opinions of the selected population sample. The qualitative data were also gathered from the two-minute rapid survey. One (1) key informant interview was conducted to complement the qualitative data.

The objective for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting both quantitative and qualitative data for this study was to examine if the federal position classification system needs to be revised and updated. Additionally, this study was intended to examine and then determine from the perspective and opinion of the population sample whether or not revising and updating the federal position classification system would attract quality candidates, compete with the private sector, and accurately classify positions.

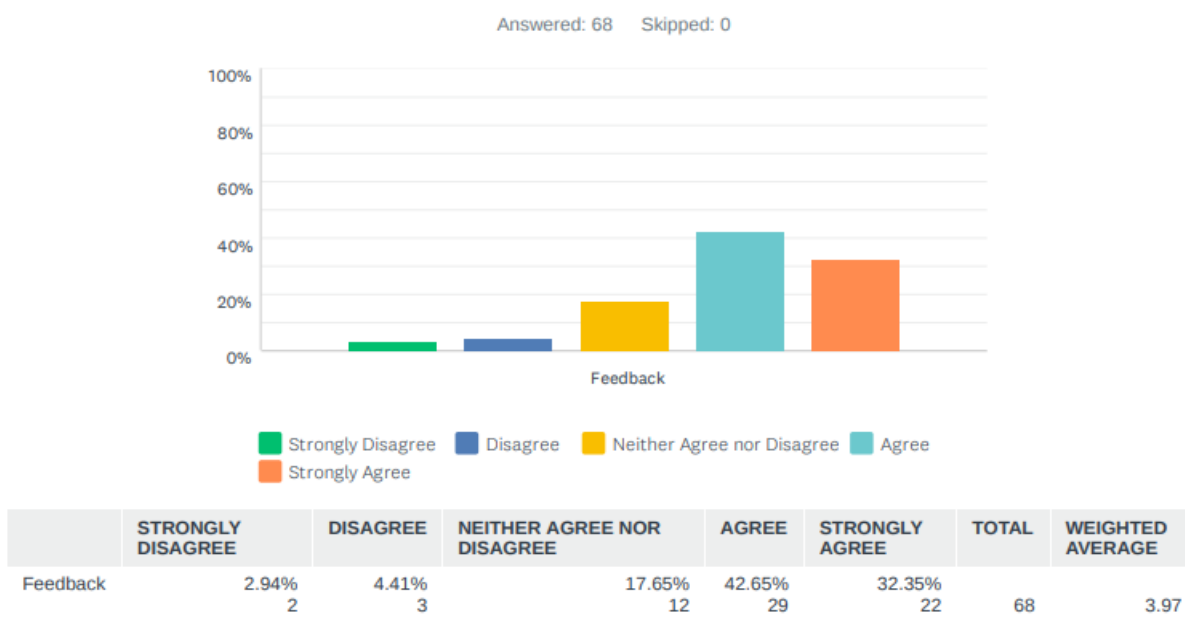
### **Quantitative Results**

A total of 68 population participants completed the two-minute rapid survey through Survey Monkey. The two-minute rapid survey inquired on the population participants' opinion of the theory of change/main assumption and research sub-assumptions with the following:

1. The federal position classification system needs revising and updating.

2. If the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to attract quality candidates.
3. If the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to compete with the private sector.
4. If the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to accurately classify positions.

### Q1 The federal position classification system needs revision and updating.

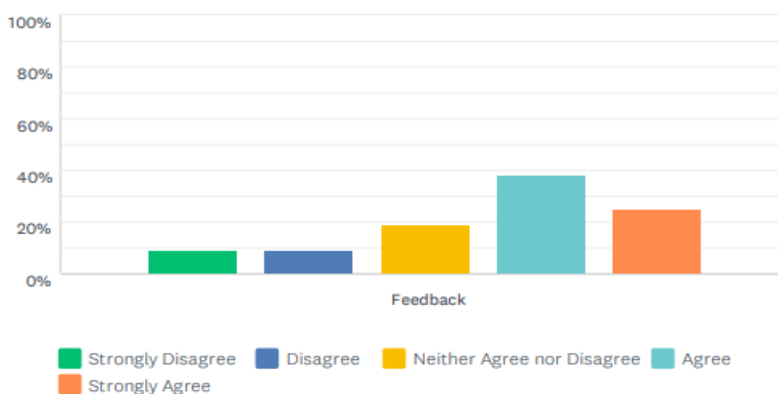


The survey started with inquiring about the population participants' opinion of the theory of change/main assumption with Q1 that the federal position classification system needs revision and updating. About 75 percent of the 68 respondents concurred (Agree/Strongly Agree) that the federal position classification system needs revision and updating compared with the seven (7) percent (Strongly Disagree/Disagree) who challenged the theory of change/main assumption. The results of Q1 also showed that almost 18 percent of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the theory of change/main assumption, which is more than double of those responses that

challenged the theory of change/main assumption. Overall, the majority of respondents for Q1 confirmed the theory of change/main assumption.

**Q2 If the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to attract quality candidates.**

Answered: 68 Skipped: 0

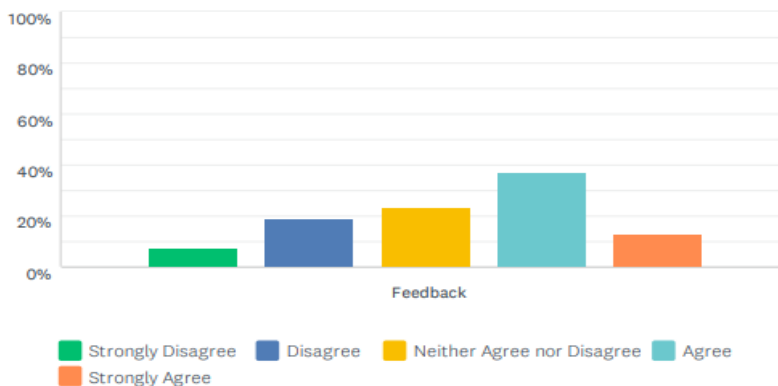


	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
Feedback	8.82% 6	8.82% 6	19.12% 13	38.24% 26	25.00% 17	68	3.62

Q2 inquired about the population participants' opinion of assumption 1 (A1) that if the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to attract quality candidates. Sixty-three percent of the 68 respondents concurred (Agree/Strongly Agree) with A1 compared with about 18 percent (Strongly Disagree/Disagree) who challenged this assumption. The results of Q2 showed a difference of less than two (2) percent between those who responded with "Neither Agree/Nor Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree/Disagree." Overall, the majority of Q2 respondents confirmed A1.

**Q3 If the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to compete with the private sector.**

Answered: 68 Skipped: 0

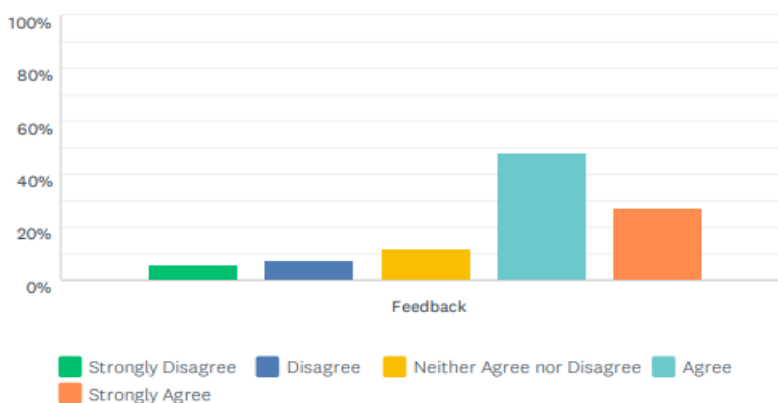


	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
Feedback	7.35%	19.12%	23.53%	36.76%	13.24%	68	3.29
	5	13	16	25	9		

Q3 inquired about the population participants' opinion of assumption 2 (A2) that if the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to compete with the private sector. Fifty percent of the 68 respondents concurred (Agree/Strongly Agree) with A2 compared with the 26 percent (Strongly Disagree/Disagree) who challenged this assumption. The results of Q3 also showed that there were close to three (3) percent more respondents selected "Strongly Disagree/Disagree" compared with those who selected "Neither Agree/Nor Disagree." Overall, the majority of Q3 respondents confirmed A2.

#### Q4 If the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to accurately classify positions.

Answered: 67 Skipped: 1



	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
Feedback	5.97% 4	7.46% 5	11.94% 8	47.76% 32	26.87% 18	67	3.82

Q4 inquired about the population participants' opinion of assumption 3 (A3) that if the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to accurately classify positions. Seventy-five percent of the 67 respondents concurred (Agree/Strongly Agree) with A3. There were close to 13 percent (Strongly Disagree/Disagree) who challenged A3. The results of Q4 also showed that there were slightly over one (1) percent more respondents who selected "Strongly Disagree/Disagree" in contrast with those who selected "Neither Agree/Nor Disagree." Overall, the majority of Q4 respondents confirmed A3.

#### Qualitative Results

Qualitative data consisted of the additional comments provided by population participants from Q1 through Q4 and the additional thoughts on how to improve the federal position classification from Q5 of the two-minute rapid survey conducted on Survey Monkey. Additionally, qualitative data consisted of information analyzed from the literature review and response from the key informant interview.

**Theory of change/main assumption.** Q1 solicited additional comments about the population participants opinion of the theory of change/main assumption that the federal position classification system needs revision and updating. Q1 had 14 out of the 68 respondents who provided additional comments. Twelve (12) of the 14 qualitative data responses concurred with revising and updating the federal position classification system. The responses indicated recommendations to streamline the federal positions classification system and develop the classification system to focus more on responsibility, job knowledge, scope and complexity of the role, and performance instead of focusing on GS salary level and overall time in federal service. One of the responses stated: “The current classification system relies on an agency (OPM) not properly staffed. There needs to be personnel assigned to each standard where periodic updates or clarifications are published. Certain standards have needed updating as they are quite dated.”

Q5 solicited additional thoughts on how to improve the federal position classification system to gather further qualitative data. Forty-one out of the 68 respondents responded while 27 skipped Q5 altogether. Thirty-one (31) of the 41 qualitative concurred with the theory of change/main assumption that the federal position classification system needs to be revised and updated. At the same time, six (6) remained neutral, and four (4) challenged the theory of change/main assumption. Recommendations for improvement varied; however, the common themes are that the federal position classification system has to correspond with pay, that classification is affected by human factors, and that it varies with each agency position.

Analysis of the literature review identified that Winchell (2015) concurred with the theory of change/main assumption. Winchell (2015) recognized that the federal general position classification is broken and states that “perhaps it’s time for practitioners at the operating level to



recommend strategies to repair the GS system's inherent dysfunction" (p. 53). Risher (2019) also concurred with the theory of change/main assumption. Risher (2019) communicated that the federal position classification system "stands out as the most antiquated and bureaucratic of all federal HR practices" (p. 1). Risher (2019) suggested "that it is time to rethink" the federal position classification system by first revising the job description format.

Analysis of key informant interview Q1 found that Interviewee A concurred with the theory of change/main assumption. Interviewee A stated that the federal position classification needs to be revised and updated. Interviewee A suggested that the federal position classification system should be changed "to an alternative classification system" and "instead of going by grade level, go by pay bands that are based upon GS structure that is going to have two parts." Interviewee A indicated that revising and updating the federal position classification would attract quality candidates, agencies would be able to compete with the private sector, and that positions would be accurately classified.

Analysis of key informant interview Q5 found that Interviewee A concurred with the theory of change/main assumption. Q5 asked, is there anything you would like to add? Interviewee A added that the "classification system should be up to the agency, unique to the agency, and work category refined to work agency mission and work occupation." Interviewee A also mentioned that "classification systems need to be more efficient and streamlined, delegated to federal agencies, reported to OPM, and federal agencies should be primary quality control."

Overall, the majority of the primary qualitative data from Q1 of the Survey Monkey, the primary qualitative data from Q1 and Q5 of the key informant interview, and secondary

qualitative data of the literature review mentioned confirmed the theory of change/main assumption.

**Assumption 1.** Q2 solicited additional comments about the population participants' opinion of A1 that if the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to attract quality candidates. There were 15 out of the 68 respondents who provided additional comments (qualitative data). Four (4) of the 15 qualitative data concurred with A1. Some of the qualitative data examples included: "cleaning up the classification AND application process will allow for them (quality candidates) to consider applying without feeling like it is a lost cause and waste of time," "you should have an accurate position description when recruiting talent," and "definitely think if it updated it would attract quality candidates on par with the private sector." Eleven (11) of the 15 qualitative data appeared to challenge the assumption which indicated that the current federal position classification system already attracts quality candidates and that other factors prevent attracting quality candidates like the "assessment tool utilized to evaluate applicants" and "ineffective recruiting process."

Analysis of the literature review found Mihm (2003) concurred with A1. According to Mihm (2003), the current federal hiring process has often been recognized as insufficient when it comes to hiring the right talent. Mihm (2003) acknowledged that the classification process needs to be reformed and more effective hiring assessment tools developed. Neal (2019) concurred with A1. Neal (2019) discussed the problem of deliberate over grading to compete for talent which stems from the failure to accurately classify positions to determine comparable level of pay.

Analysis of key informant interview Q2 found that Interviewee A concurred with A1. Q2 asked if the federal position classification system is revised and updated, do you think it will be

able to attract quality candidates? Interviewee A suggested that updating the federal position classification system to an alternative system would attract quality candidates. Interviewee A explained how the pay band would allow staffers “to recruit with a salary range between category 1 - 4.”

Overall, the majority of the primary qualitative data from Q2 of the Survey Monkey challenged A1; however, the primary qualitative data from Q2 of the key informant interview and the secondary qualitative data of the literature review mentioned confirmed A1.

**Assumption 2.** Q3 solicited additional comments about the population participants’ opinion of A2 that if the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to compete with the private sector. Sixteen (16) out of the 68 respondents provide additional comments (qualitative data). Nine (9) of the 16 qualitative data challenged the assumption, while five (5) concurred with the assumption, and two (2) were neutral. One of the responses that challenged A2 stated that “the federal already competes with the private sector, in both salary and job satisfaction.”

Analysis of the literature review found Risher (2019) concurred with A2. Risher (2019) noted that a reform of the federal position classification system was implemented in the 1970s called the FES. The FES was consistent with private sector practice; however, the FES became outdated and no longer relevant, while the private sector relied on a more straightforward approach. Risher (2019) stated that the federal position classification is a lost cause and should be revised with a process that provides added value to compete with the private sector. Neal (2019) concurred with A2. Neal (2019) suggested to have “accurate job descriptions and pay that conforms to the law, and we want some basis for comparing federal pay with the private sector” (p. 2). Additionally, Neal (2019) communicated that all federal agencies require a

functioning classification process based not on a process from 1949 but from what applies to the reality of today.

Analysis of key informant interview Q3 found that Interviewee A concurred with A2. Q3 asked if the federal position classification system is revised and updated, do you think it will make federal hiring and retention competitive with the private sector? Interviewee A responded that changing the federal position classification system to an alternative classification system will allow agencies "to compete with private industry." Interviewee A conveyed that the alternative classification system would be "peculiarly unique to each agency, based on mission, major work category defined (like engineering position), all professions in one category, and defined level for each category (1 - 4)." Additionally, Interviewee A mentioned that "each level would have a classification and would equate to a pay band consistent with the GS salary schedule" and that all federal agencies would have the "ability to advertise at different levels."

Overall, the majority of the primary qualitative data from Q3 of the Survey Monkey challenged A2; however, the primary qualitative data from Q3 of the key informant interview and the secondary qualitative data of the literature review mentioned confirmed A2.

**Assumption 3.** Q4 solicited additional comments about the population participants' opinion of A3 that if the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to accurately classify positions. Thirteen (13) out of the 67 respondents provide additional comments (qualitative data). Nine (9) of the 13 qualitative data concurred with the assumption, while three (3) remained neutral, and one (1) challenged the assumption. Some examples of the responses that concurred with A3 expressed that "the OPM needs to make the classifier's handbook more user friendly", "the more ambiguity you take out of the system the more consistent and fair it will be for all employees", and "it's so outdated.

Analysis of the literature review found Winchell (2015) concurred with A3. According to Winchell (2015), “the last nationwide study of classification accuracy was conducted in 1983” (p. 50). Winchell (2015) stated that there’s a common practice of gaming the federal position classification system which is the practice of over-grading positions. A suggestion from Winchell (2015) was to develop and implement a federal position classification system that consisted of attributes of a modern, effective classification system. The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (2019) concurred with A3. The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (2019) discussed the inaccuracy of PDs, “that work has become too unpredictable and dynamic to be formally documented” (p. 7), and that there is room for improvement.

Analysis of key informant interview Q4 found that Interviewee A concurred with A3. Q4 asked if the federal position classification system is revised and updated, do you think it will be able to accurately classify positions? According to Interviewee A, revising and updating the federal classification system to an alternative classification system would accurately classify positions. Interviewee A indicated that the "classification would be unique to each agency, the pay band system would be unique to each agency with overlap, and the classification would be geared toward the mission of each agency." Furthermore, Interviewee A stated that all federal agencies' classification units would oversee classification systems.

Overall, the majority of the primary qualitative data from Q4 of the Survey Monkey, the primary qualitative data from Q4 of the key informant interview, and the secondary qualitative data of the literature review mentioned confirmed A3.

### **Summary of Key Findings of Survey Data**

For this study, 68 respondents participated in the two-minute rapid survey, and one (1) key informant interview participant. Overall, this study's findings from the primary data

concluded with the theory of change/main assumption and A1, A2, and A3. An overall average of about 66 percent of the quantitative data concurred (Agreed/Strongly Agreed) that if the federal position classification system were revised and updated, it would attract quality candidates, compete with the private sector, and accurately classify positions while 16 percent challenged these assumptions.

A total of 99 qualitative data were gathered between Q1 - Q5 from the two-minute rapid survey. Sixty-two percent (total of 61 responses) out of the 99 qualitative data collected concurred with all the assumptions of this study compared with the total of 27 percent that challenged these assumptions. Several secondary data were confirmed to align with the assumptions of this study, while there was no secondary data found to challenge the assumptions. Furthermore, the qualitative data collected from the key informant interview concurred with all the assumptions.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

### Conclusions

The federal position classification system was based on the Classification Act of 1949. Under Title 5, United States Code, OPM has the oversight and final authority of the federal position classification system standards. OPM is directly responsible for developing and providing classification standards and about 120 federal agencies that rely on OPM for human resources leadership and support to achieve their mission.

This study was conducted on the federal position classification system to validate or invalidate the theory of change/main assumption that IF the federal position classification system is revised and updated, THEN it will be able to attract quality candidates, THEN it will be able to compete with the private sector, THEN it will be able to accurately classify positions. This study examined three sub-assumptions: 1) IF the federal position classification system is revised and updated, THEN it will be able to attract quality candidates, 2) IF the federal position classification system is revised and updated, THEN it will be able to compete with the private sector, 3) IF the federal position classification system is revised and updated, THEN it will be able to accurately classify positions.

This study concludes that the federal position classification system needs to be revised and updated. This conclusion is affirmed repeatedly by the quantitative and qualitative analysis from the Survey Monkey application, the literature, and the qualitative analysis based on an interview with a Graduate School USA instructor. Findings revealed that revising and updating the federal position classification system would have a positive impact on attracting quality candidates, create a competitive workplace with the private sector, and provide more accuracy in classifying positions. The theory of change/main assumption, A1, A2, and A3 is confirmed.

**Recommendation 1**

Recommend the OPM generate a letter of instruction (LOI) or policy, by September 2020, which communicates that the OPM would concede oversight of the federal position classification to each federal agency for their own agency's position classification. Additionally, the LOI or policy would mandate federal agencies review, update, and maintain the position classification specific to each agencies' position. The OPM would need to champion the LOI or policy through the House of Congress as the OPM is governed to have oversight and final authority of the federal position classification system standards by Title 5 of the United States Code. The goal of this instruction should go in effect on October 1, 2020, at the beginning of the fiscal year (FY) 2021. This instruction aims to streamline the position classification process and change OPM's role as strictly support.

**Recommendation 2**

Recommend, within the first two months of FY 2021, federal agencies assign Human Resources (HR) Specialists (Classification) and determine the amount of classification work and hours needed to complete the classification review and update. This recommendation will help identify if more HR Specialists are needed and if an additional budget is required to meet the mission requirements.

**Recommendation 3**

Recommend each federal agency's HR Specialists review, update, and develop the classification of positions specific to that agency during the remainder of FY 2021. The HR Specialists will build a position classification library and maintain the position classification moving forward.



### **Areas for Further Research**

The General Schedule (GS) salary was not the focus of this study. Additionally, reviews of literature that focused on the GS salary were intentionally excluded as this study was mainly focused on the federal position classification system. A review of the primary data showed responses about the GS salary as it pertains to position classification. The GS salary and position classification directly correlate with each other. Further research on the correlation between position classification and GS salary would provide a better understanding of how the position classification affects the GS salary placement.

Another area of further research is the performance and job scope of federal employees versus federal service time. The performance and job scope, as well as federal service time, were not considered in this study; however, responses showed that not enough focus is placed on the performance and job scope of federal employees and federal service time. The study's data showed a disparity in position and salary grade placement due to priority placed on federal service time instead of actual performance and job scope.

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## Appendix A

### Rapid Survey

**Informed consent:** Hello, my name is Eduardo Pareño. I am an Executive Master of Public Administration candidate at Golden Gate University and currently employed with the federal government. The subject of my final thesis is an examination of the federal position classification system and how it could be improved. This survey will take less than two minutes. Your responses will be kept completely confidential, anonymous, and secure. If you feel uncomfortable answering any question, please skip it or withdraw from the study altogether. I can be reached at: [epareno@my.ggu.edu](mailto:epareno@my.ggu.edu) if you have any further questions. Thank you!

From a scale of 1 - 5 where 5 is “Strongly Agree” and 1 is “Strongly Disagree,” please share your opinion on the following statements.

**1. The federal position classification system needs revision and updating.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5
Additional Comments:				

**2. If the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to attract quality candidates.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5
Additional Comments:				

**3. If the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to compete with the private sector.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5
Additional Comments:				

**4. If the federal position classification system is revised and updated, then it will be able to accurately classify positions.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5
Additional Comments:				

**5. Additional thoughts on how to improve?**

## Appendix B

### Key Informant Interview Guide

**Informed consent:** Hello, my name is Eduardo Pareño. I am an Executive Master of Public Administration candidate at Golden Gate University and currently employed with the federal government. The subject of my final thesis is an examination of the federal position classification system and how it could be improved. This interview will take less than 20 minutes and can be conducted in person, on the phone, or by Zoom. I can be reached via: [epareno@my.ggu.edu](mailto:epareno@my.ggu.edu) if you have any further questions. Thank you!

### Interview Questions:

1. In what ways, if any, does the federal position classification system need to be revised and/or updated? Please elaborate.
2. If the federal position classification system is revised and updated, do you think it will be able to attract quality candidates? Please elaborate.
3. If the federal position classification system is revised and updated, do you think it will make federal hiring and retention competitive with the private sector? Please elaborate.
4. If the federal position classification system is revised and updated, do you think it will be able to accurately classify positions? Please elaborate.
5. Is there anything you would like to add?
6. Anyone else in the organization you would suggest I interview on this topic?