



THE BEST PLACES TO WORK IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT®



BEYOND THE BELTWAY HOW FEDERAL LEADERS CAN ENGAGE EMPLOYEES WORKING ACROSS THE NATION

INTRODUCTION

A common misperception of the federal government is that most civil servants work in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. In reality, 85 percent of federal employees live and work away from the capital in communities all across the country.

While policies and priorities may be set by agency leaders at headquarters, typically located in Washington, the day-to-day work of delivering on the missions of our government mostly falls on employees in the field. They care for our veterans, support our farmers, inspect our roads and bridges, protect our food supply and respond to disasters.

A critical part of managing such an important but dispersed workforce is finding ways to keep employees satisfied and committed to their work regardless of their distance from Washington. We know that higher employee engagement is associated with better agency performance.¹ If leaders want their agencies to successfully deliver services to the public, it is critical for the 1.7 million federal employees located away from their agency headquarters to be fully engaged in their work.

As in past years, federal employees working in field locations around the country in 2018 were less engaged than their counterparts assigned to headquarters.

¹ Partnership for Public Service and Boston Consulting Group, "A Prescription for Better Performance: Engaging Employees at VA Medical Centers," March 2019. Available at <https://bit.ly/2JB6aVF>

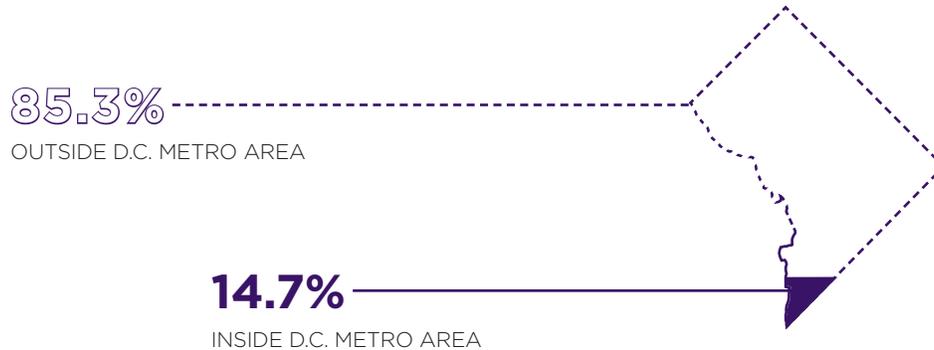
Government-wide, field employees reported a 2018 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® engagement score of 63.3 out of 100, 3.1 points behind their colleagues at headquarters. In fact, employees working away from their agency's headquarters reported lower satisfaction on every aspect of the workplace experience measured in the Best Places to Work rankings, from work-life balance and their views of leaders to training and development opportunities.

Through interviews with leaders at three federal agencies with high levels of field employee engagement, the Partnership for Public Service and Boston Consulting Group identified some key impediments to engaging field employees, and actions that these agencies have taken in service to narrowing the gap between the field and headquarters. For this analysis, we defined field employees as any staff not working at their agency's headquarters, including those working in regional or field offices, or remotely.

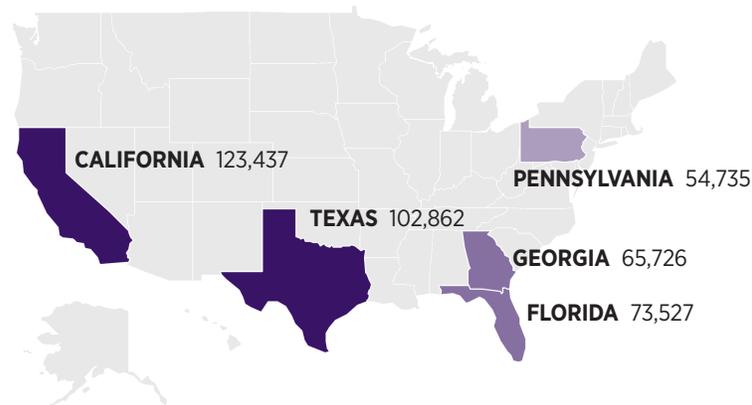
IMPEDIMENTS TO ENGAGING FIELD EMPLOYEES

Managing a workforce spread across the country can pose a unique set of challenges when it comes to employee engagement. In conversations with federal leaders and employees, we heard that those in the field often feel isolated from the rest of their agency and disconnected from senior leaders. We were told employees sometimes

MOST FEDERAL EMPLOYEES LIVE AND WORK OUTSIDE OF WASHINGTON



THE LARGEST FEDERAL EMPLOYEE POPULATIONS OUTSIDE OF THE D.C. AREA



Source: Office of Personnel Management, “FedScope, September 2018, full-time, nonseasonal, permanent employment data.” Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2shTfw7>

feel they are treated as “stepchildren” and do not think leaders at headquarters consult with regional offices on decisions that impact their work. In addition, we found that field employees can perceive a headquarters bias when it comes to recognition for good work and that field employees often feel that their work is not valued. In some instances, we were told field employees do not believe they have sufficient opportunities for career advancement.

2018 Government-Wide Scores	Employee Engagement Score (out of 100)
Headquarters	66.4
Field	63.3

These explanations mesh with the 2018 Best Places to Work data, which pinpoints workplace issues with the biggest divide between headquarters and field employees.

The largest workplace gap, for example, was on the perceptions of senior leaders. Field employees reported a 2018 senior leadership score of 47.7 out of 100, 6.9 points below headquarters employees. The senior leadership category measures the level of respect employees have for senior leaders, satisfaction with the amount of information provided by management and perceptions

about senior leaders’ honesty, integrity and ability to motivate employees.

The headquarters-field divide also was apparent when it came to recognition for doing good work and career advancement. In 2018, the field reported a performance-based rewards and advancement category score 5.5 points behind headquarters.

In addition, the 2018 data showed that field employees had an empowerment score that was 5.6 points behind the headquarters score of 54.3. The empowerment score measures the extent to which employees feel empowered with respect to work processes and how satisfied they are with their involvement in decisions that affect their work.

AGENCIES SUCCESSFULLY ENGAGING FIELD EMPLOYEES

While the gap in engagement between the field and headquarters is a problem that pervades government, some agencies reported success in engaging their field employees in 2018. Their approaches can serve as an inspiration and provide insights to federal leaders who are seeking to improve the management of their entire workforce.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, a subcomponent of the Department of Labor, is responsible for setting and enforcing health and safety standards for private sector workplaces and providing training, outreach, education and assistance to workers across the country.

OSHA's field workforce is divided into 10 regions, each of which is led by a regional administrator. According to Richard Mendelson, who currently serves as administrator for both the New York and Philadelphia regions, about 60 percent of OSHA's field office employees are safety and health officers who are responsible for ensuring compliance with OSHA's requirements aimed at preventing workplace injuries, illnesses and deaths. He said these individuals complete more than 32,000 inspections every year.

Mendelson said the direct link between the work in the field and the mission of the agency could explain why OSHA's employees outside of the nation's capital region report a higher level of engagement (71.8) than the headquarters staff (69.3). He said it is easy for compliance officers to see how their efforts help create safer workplaces. However, Mendelson added that the agency's leadership also takes affirmative steps to keep employees in the field and at headquarters engaged in their work.

For example, Mendelson said OSHA's leadership in Washington holds regional administrators accountable for the engagement of field employees. Every regional administrator is given access to their region's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey data and is expected to create plans to improve scores in areas where their employees report lower satisfaction.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration	
Headquarters Location	Washington, D.C.
Number of Headquarters Employees	298
Number of Field Employees	1,566
Headquarters Employee Engagement Score	69.3
Field Employee Engagement Score	71.8
Employee Engagement Gap	2.5

"We have come up with plans to address low scores within 30 days and that sends a message," Mendelson said. "It is not a check of the box."

By expecting leaders in the field to act on feedback from their employees, Mendelson said, OSHA's leadership signals to employees outside headquarters that their work and workplace experiences matter.

OSHA also has built a culture where leadership is expected to be engaged and committed, not just in leading, but in the day-to-day task of keeping workers

safe through compliance. For example, according to Mendelson, regional administrators are encouraged to go on compliance visits.

"It's important for leaders to get out with the hard hat and khakis and go out there with a compliance officer," he said. "It's important to message to people that leaders are going to be out with staff in tough conditions."

Another way OSHA tries to keep engagement at a high level is through frequent communication between headquarters and the regions, between the regions and within them. In addition to weekly nationwide calls, every regional administrator holds a weekly meeting with their managers spread across their region. Leaders at headquarters also hold discussions with staff using video conferencing and give time for questions from the field.

Mendelson said this direct and frequent communication helps the leadership convey important messages to staff about how they should be approaching their work.

For example, he said it is "important for leaders to acknowledge the balance between productivity and quality" when it comes to compliance inspections. By keeping lines of communication open, he added, OSHA's headquarters and regional leaders are better positioned to keep the workforce on the same page about expectations and ensure everyone has the information they need to do their jobs.

This approach is paying dividends. On the federal employee survey question on satisfaction with the information received from management about what is happening in the agency, the gap favoring employees at OSHA's headquarters was only 2.5 points in 2018 compared to the government-wide gap of 5.2 points.

Federal Trade Commission

The Federal Trade Commission is an agency of more than 1,000 public servants responsible for protecting consumers and competition in U.S. markets. The bulk of the commission's work is performed by three bureaus — Consumer Protection, Competition and Economics. Since the establishment of its first regional office in 1918, the FTC's footprint has grown to eight regional offices that support the bureaus of Consumer Protection and Competition by conducting investigations and litigation across the country.

The FTC, the top ranked Best Place to Work midsize agency in 2018, had a field office employee engagement score of 86.2 out of 100, slightly higher than the headquarters score of 85.1.

One way that the agency's leaders try to support and maintain high field employee engagement is by equipping every region with the staff and expertise that they need to succeed.

Chief Human Capital Officer Vicki Barber emphasized the importance for FTC leadership to leverage the skills of each attorney regardless of the individual's geographic location.

“We place an emphasis on hiring attorneys who can handle competitive practices and mergers so that any region can handle any case. That means that if you need an attorney who is purely antitrust and focuses on competition issues, you have that in the region,” Barber said. “If you need an attorney who focuses on consumer protection, you’ve got that in the region.”

Barber said this strategic staffing ultimately results in location becoming “irrelevant” and empowers the regional offices to lead on cases in collaboration with headquarters. While the FTC’s Best Places to Work empowerment score last year for its field offices (73.3) was very narrowly behind the employees at headquarters (74.4), the agency’s field office score was 19 points higher than the government-wide average and rose by 2.4 points from 2017 to 2018.

Federal Trade Commission	
Headquarters Location	Washington, D.C.
Number of Headquarters Employees	967
Number of Field Employees	148
Headquarters Employee Engagement Score	85.1
Field Employee Engagement Score	86.2
Employee Engagement Gap	1.1

The FTC’s leadership also makes a point of recognizing employees for their achievements regardless of where they are located. At their annual “Chairman’s Award” ceremony, HR Specialist Corey Pickeral said “there isn’t a disparity between headquarters and the regions. The regional offices and headquarters usually have a mix of people working on cases and everyone is recognized.”

This approach helps fight the perception that there is a headquarters bias when it comes to recognition and signals that the field’s work is valued. And it seems to be paying off. In 2018, FTC’s field employees registered a score 6.6 points higher than headquarters on the survey question of how satisfied they are with the recognition they receive for doing a good job.

U.S. Patent and Trademark Office

The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office is the federal agency responsible for granting U.S. patents and registering trademarks. To deliver on its mission, USPTO employs a field workforce that differs from most other federal agencies. In lieu of working out of traditional regional offices, the majority of USPTO’s field staff are patent examiners who work remotely. Having such a dispersed workforce, one that is not organized under a conventional regional structure, poses several unique challenges regarding employee engagement.

One USPTO official said their slightly higher 2018 employee engagement score of 77.9 for field employees compared to 76.8 for headquarters may be attributed in part to the autonomy they give to their patent examiners.

U.S. Patent and Trademark Office	
Headquarters Location	Alexandria, VA
Number of Headquarters Employees	9,285
Number of Field Employees	3,289
Headquarters Employee Engagement Score	76.8
Field Employee Engagement Score	77.9
Employee Engagement Gap	1.1

“The work is very autonomous. If I am an examiner, I just have to get the work done and I have discretion on when I do it and what hours of the day I do it,” said USPTO Division Chief John Tindal. Rather than resorting to micromanagement, USPTO’s leaders created a system based on trust where examiners are empowered to complete their work with appropriate oversight from their supervisors and where they “know what to do to be successful.”

Several years ago, a series of oversight reports found that some examiners were abusing the telework policy, including over reporting the number of hours worked. The agency subsequently instituted a series of review procedures designed to curtail potential abuses.

In a May 2019 testimony before a Senate Judiciary subcommittee, USPTO Director Andrei Iancu touted the benefits of the agency’s telework program. He said it saves the agency tens of millions of dollars in real estate costs and gives it the ability to hire and retain “the most skilled and successful workers from every corner of the United States.”²

To overcome the challenge of communicating in such a dispersed environment, Tindal said USPTO prioritized developing “robust tools for collaboration.” With teleconferencing, instant messaging and various workflow applications, examiners and their supervisors can collaborate and communicate effectively.

“We also make a point to live stream events and have remote participation to help employees feel a part of the community,” Tindal said.

USPTO’s leadership also makes a concerted effort to maintain that sense of community. A few times a year, for example, Tindal said examiners from across the country are brought to USPTO’s Alexandria, Va. campus to “collaborate, network, get training and do things together.” By bringing employees together who would not normally

² United States Patent and Trademark Office, “Statement of Director Iancu before the United States House Subcommittee on Courts, Intellectual Property, and the Internet Committee on the Judiciary,” May 9, 2019. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2WEa18c>

interact, he said, USPTO's leaders build a connection between headquarters and the field and create a culture where field employees feel connected to their colleagues and their agency.

CONCLUSION

Field employees are an integral part of our government and maintaining their engagement under a dispersed structure can be difficult.

Based on our discussions with leaders of agencies where field employees are just as, if not more, engaged as headquarters staff, there are several management practices that may help improve field employee engagement.

- **Own Engagement:** First and foremost, leaders in the field should have access to survey data for their employees and be held accountable for taking steps to respond to feedback and to improve the workplace experience.
- **Communicate:** Leaders in the field and at headquarters should prioritize communicating with field staff early and often, using technology to keep field employees connected. This will help them feel included, informed and committed to their agency.
- **Build Community:** Leaders should avoid creating silos where the field and headquarters are detached from each other. Create opportunities for the field and headquarters to work together, learn from each other and build a sense of shared community.
- **Empower:** Where possible and appropriate, leaders in the field and at headquarters should find ways to give field employees autonomy in their roles and create processes that empower them to independently deliver on the agency's mission in collaboration and coordination with headquarters.
- **Recognize:** Leaders at headquarters should never forget about the hard work being done by their employees in the field. They should take the time to recognize accomplishments of employees across the country and give the recognition the same importance and significance as recognition at headquarters.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand what can be done to improve engagement for field employees throughout the country, we interviewed leaders from across government who excel in this area. To select the agencies included in this analysis, we used Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey data to calculate Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® engagement scores for field and headquarters employees at the 488 agencies included in our 2018 rankings. We then calculated the gap in engagement between field and headquarters employees at each agency.

We then examined the Office of Personnel Management's FedScope database and identified three agencies each with a different share of employees located in and outside the nation's capital. All three agencies reported higher employee engagement scores in the field than at headquarters in 2018.

We then spoke with federal leaders to better understand the challenges of engaging field employees, and what can be done to keep them satisfied and committed to their work. We also spoke to field employees about their experiences.

To calculate the Best Places to Work engagement score, the Partnership uses the weighted percentage of positive responses to three items from the FEVS:

- I recommend my organization as a good place to work.
- Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization?
- Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?

Engagement scores range from 0-100, with higher scores indicating stronger employee engagement.

The Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings measure employee engagement government-wide and at individual agencies, providing leaders with insights into how public servants view their jobs and workplaces, alerting them to signs of trouble and laying out a roadmap to better manage the workforce. For more information, see bestplacestowork.org.

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Interviewees

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Occupational Safety and Health Administration

Vicki Barber
Chief Human Capital Officer
Federal Trade Commission

Corey Pickeral
Human Resources Specialist
Federal Trade Commission

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Director, Human Capital Management Operations
Federal Trade Commission

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