

Securing Your Federal Interview: The Ins and Outs of Federal Resumes, KSAs, and ECQs

Whether you are seeking employment within the world of the Federal government or a long-standing employee entering the Senior Executive Service, the Federal resume is your key to securing the job you want. Each agency, regardless of nature, requires that every applicant complete an OF-612 or submit a Federal resume. Additionally, many positions require Knowledge, Skills and Abilities essays (KSAs). Higher-level positions for experienced Federal employees often request Executive Core Qualification essays (ECQs). Each of these requirements maintain a significant and distinct expression of capability, and as such, these three areas are addressed in turn.

I. The Federal Resume

Hiring in the Federal government is a lengthy and complex process. There are tens of thousands of applicants seeking positions within hundreds of Federal agencies across the globe. Thus, when reviewing applications, points are calculated based on your experience, knowledge and skill set. Further, there are a significant number of classifications and restrictions, often referred to as category ratings. Of the plethora of qualifications for employment, the most noted ones include: government direct hires, student employees and veterans. Because of these detail-oriented hiring specifications, hiring committees (yes, they are committees!) must first narrow down the applicants based on this eligibility.

As such, eligibility and hiring preference are considered two of the most important factors in your Federal resume. Your resume must highlight any special emphasis employment program for which you might be eligible. There are several programs which allocate additional points, including one for dependents and spouses of active duty personnel under the Military Spouse Preference program and the Family Member Preference Program. Further, Veterans Preference, as per the Veterans Readjustment Act allocates five or ten points depending on time served and war service.

Aside from this important distinction, the Federal resume is an exhaustive compilation of each position you have held, your educational background as well as any additional proficiencies, certifications, or training you maintain. The document can extend up to any page limit. The most noted exception to this limit is the Resumix System, which uploads resumes up to five pages in length.

The importance of your Federal resume can not be underscored enough, as it is the core description of what you can offer the agency as well as your expertise in the field area. It is essentially what demonstrates that you have the minimum qualifications for the position, thus allowing you to make the first cut. Because the Federal government now uses highly sophisticated, proprietary search engines, such as USAJobs or Resumix, your resume must hold the key words which delineate your knowledge and demonstrate your understanding of the field. Meanwhile, while meeting these needs, your resume must immediately highlight the relevant achievements and be a user-friendly document, allowing the reader to easily digest the information without becoming overwhelmed by the volume of information.

II. Knowledge, Skills & Abilities

KSAs are usually one-page narratives which answer direct questions posed by the job announcement. They can be quite vague, such as Describe your oral and written communication skills to a complex question requiring intricate knowledge of a federal program. As stated above, the answers to these questions carry point values, and as such, it is extremely important that you directly answer the question with as many examples as possible, always utilizing the specific words employed in the question. The answers to these questions should not exceed one page, but it is not uncommon for one question to occupy two pages when your experience is lengthy. KSAs are an essential part of your application and you should focus as much time as possible in ensuring that you have fully and completely answered each part of the question.

Remember, it is essential that you use as many specific examples as possible in your answer. The committee is looking for an understanding of the knowledge you maintain, your skill set in accomplishing the task questioned and your ability to complete the task properly. As such, each answer must demonstrate those three factors with examples to obtain maximum points.

According to the National Archives and Records Administration, KSAs can test either both or either of your technical skills or soft skills, technical skills being knowledge of "accounting principles or the ability to create and manage Microsoft Access databases." (See All About KSAOs, pg. 1) Soft skills include "the attitudes and approaches applicants take to their work, such as the ability to collaborate on team projects or the ability to communicate orally with a broad range of individuals." (See All About KSAOs, pg. 1) The committee then reviews your answers to the questions and assigns a rating between 5-20 points for each question. The point value is not publicized, and as such, you should weigh each question of equal importance.

Therefore, pay careful attention to your KSA answers in their specificity and their direct answer to the questions posed. Remember, your Federal resume expresses your minimum qualifications but your KSAs demonstrate your selective factors, qualifications "that are essential to successfully perform the duties of the job. A selective factor is one that usually cannot be learned during the normal period of orientation to the job and may take

extensive training or experience to develop.” (See All About KSAOs, pg. 4) Thus, it is essential that you demonstrate through your experience examples that you maintain the qualities called for and should receive further consideration by the committee in the form of an interview.

III. Executive Core Qualifications

ECQs are often utilized for the Senior Executive Service. These questions are rooted in finding people who can lead “the continuing transformation of government” based on the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. (See US Office of Personnel Management, www.opm.gov). ECQs are fundamentally different from KSAs as the totality of your answers are evaluated rather than each individual answer. As such, the rating is a score of your complete ECQ submission. The questions for ECQs are preset, and they include: Leading Change, Leading People, Results Driven, Business Acumen and Building Coalitions. In answering these questions you must describe a specific problem, discuss your immediate plan to resolve the problem, the action you took and the result of your action. In so doing, you must also address certain characteristics fundamental to senior-level Federal employees, such as leadership, communication skills, integrity and a passion for public service.

It is important to remember that ECQs are not evaluated for your specific expertise, as this is not what qualifies you for the position. In the Senior Executive Service, it is your “broad executive skills needed to succeed” which are examined. (See US Office of Personnel Management, www.opm.gov). More specifically, the committee needs to see that you are a person with the experience, credentials and character to lead people in areas of unprecedented change and growth. These people are out of the box thinkers and can develop strong teams to ensure that goals are met. The skill set required here is beyond that of lower Federal positions, as members of the SES often must be pioneers in the areas of the specialty. As such, your ECQs must be exceptional and demonstrate you as a person of integrity, skill and experience.

In conclusion, your application for any Federal position is a package of your Federal resume and either ECQs or KSAs. Each document weighs heavily in the interview selection process and it is essential that you devote the time necessary to ensure that your package not only answers the posed questions, but highlights your skills, accomplishments and knowledge in a manner that demonstrates that you are the most highly qualified applicant in their pool of prospective employees.

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