GSA's Technology Transformation Services Violated Hiring Rules and Overpaid Incentives

Report Number A240037/Q/6/P25001
July 14, 2025

Executive Summary

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Why We Performed This Audit

We included this audit in our *Fiscal Year 2024 Audit Plan* as a result of risk areas identified during our audit planning. Our audit objective was to determine if the GSA Federal Acquisition Service's (FAS's) Technology Transformation Services (TTS) is complying with federal hiring authorities and appropriately classifying positions.

What We Found

Merit-based hiring is the cornerstone of a fair and effective federal workforce. It ensures that all candidates have an equal opportunity to compete and are selected based on their qualifications. TTS deviated from merit system principles in its hiring and workforce management practices, resulting in noncompliance with federal hiring requirements and raising serious concerns about fairness and accountability.

Specifically, TTS failed to comply with federal hiring authorities by improperly using Direct-Hire Authority (DHA), which eliminated veterans' preference and appeared to preselect future hires. TTS also failed to annually certify the U.S. Digital Corps (USDC) group recruitment incentive and misused recruitment strategies. Finally, the majority of TTS's employees receive the highest available pay grade, and the TTS Talent team performs some of the GSA Office of Human Resources Management's core functions.

What We Recommend

We recommend that the FAS Commissioner:

1. Evaluate TTS's use of DHA to ensure it complies with 5 C.F.R. 337.205, *Critical hiring needs*.

2. Ensure TTS's hiring procedures comply with GSA hiring requirements.

3. Strengthen controls to ensure that:
   a. TTS's hiring actions provide open and fair competition among qualified applicants and adhere to merit system principles;
   b. TTS's hiring actions are properly documented to allow for a complete and accurate third-party review, as required by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management;

c. Recruitment incentives are considered in lieu of Superior Qualifications Appointments and are documented to verify compliance with 5 C.F.R. 531.212(d), *Consideration of recruitment incentive*; and

d. The USDC group recruitment incentive is reviewed and approved annually, as required by GSA Order HRM 9575.1 CHGE 1, *Recruitment, Relocation and Retention Incentives;* and 5 C.F.R. 575.105(b)(3), *Applicability to employees*. Additionally, evaluate and document the need to award a group recruitment incentive that exceeds GSA's recommended amount.

4. Evaluate the Superior Qualifications Appointments awarded to TTS employees beginning April 1, 2021, to determine if the pay step granted is properly supported. If errors exist, refer to GSA's Office of General Counsel to determine the appropriate action.

5. Evaluate the TTS Talent team's job series classifications to ensure they align with the team's primary responsibilities and develop necessary controls to ensure future compliance.

6. Evaluate TTS's pay distribution and develop the controls necessary to ensure there is equal pay for work of equal value and consistency throughout TTS and GSA in accordance with 5 U.S.C. 2301(b)(3), *Merit system principles*.

The FAS Commissioner disagreed with the methodology underlying our findings and resulting recommendations. We stand by our methodology and reaffirm our findings and recommendations. Accordingly, we urge the FAS Commissioner to: (1) reconsider our findings and (2) develop corrective actions addressing our recommendations.

GSA's written comments are included in their entirety in ***Appendix B***.

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Introduction

We performed an audit of the hiring practices and classification procedures used by the GSA Federal Acquisition Service's (FAS's) Technology Transformation Services (TTS).

Purpose

We included this audit in our *Fiscal Year 2024 Audit Plan* as a result of risk areas identified during our audit planning. We focused on TTS hiring actions performed during the 3-year period ended March 31, 2024.

Objective

Our audit objective was to determine if FAS's TTS is complying with federal hiring authorities and appropriately classifying positions.

See *Appendix A* – Objective, Scope, and Methodology for additional details.

Background

TTS is a component of GSA's FAS. According to its website, TTS exists to design and deliver a digital government for the American people by applying modern methodologies and technologies to improve the lives of the public and public servants. During our audit fieldwork, TTS had various service groups, including the Centers of Excellence, Presidential Innovation Fellows, and the U.S. Digital Corps (USDC). As of February 12, 2025, TTS had a total of 688 employees. TTS's workforce is primarily composed of information technology (IT) professionals, with more than half of its employees at the highest available General Schedule (GS) grade level (GS-15). The TTS Talent team, which helps facilitate TTS's hiring actions, consisted of 15 employees as of November 2024.

Under 5 U.S.C. 2301, *Merit system principles*; and 5 U.S.C. 2302, *Prohibited personnel practices*, federal agencies must adhere to merit system principles in hiring actions. These principles require that all recruitment, hiring, and promotion decisions be based solely on an applicant's qualifications. Preferential treatment in any form is prohibited and a violation of federal law. Preselecting candidates, manipulating job descriptions to favor specific individuals, or improperly influencing hiring decisions undermine these government principles.

According to 5 U.S.C. 5106, *Basis for classifying positions*, each federal position must be classified according to the duties, responsibilities, and qualifications required. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) provides general classification standards that enable agencies to internally classify positions. Proper classification is crucial to ensuring job duties and pay are consistent among similar occupational series, regardless of division or agency. Additionally,

proper classification aligns the federal workforce with the required merit system principle of equal pay for work of equal value.[1]

Direct-Hire Authority

TTS's most-used hiring authority, Direct-Hire Authority (DHA), allows federal agencies to expedite hiring by eliminating competitive rating and ranking procedures, including veterans' preference. Before using DHA to hire permanent employees, agencies are required to: (1) request approval from OPM and (2) provide justification that they are hiring for positions with a critical hiring need or severe candidate shortage.[2]

Under 5 U.S.C. 3304, *Competitive service; examinations*, federal agencies are permitted to use DHA when there is a severe shortage of candidates or a critical hiring need.[3] Under 5 C.F.R. 337.205, *Critical hiring needs*, OPM can independently decide that a critical hiring need exists or make the decision in response to a written request from an agency. DHA is intended to fill positions with qualified candidates quickly and efficiently by eliminating competitive rating and ranking procedures. Accordingly, OPM requires agencies to review DHA applications in the order they are received, and make selections in that same order, to ensure objectivity in the hiring actions.

Public Notice Requirements

To comply with 5 U.S.C. 2301, agencies are generally required to provide adequate public notice for job postings to ensure fair and open competition. OPM recommends a job announcement be open for at least 5 calendar days.[4] However, OPM defers to agencies to set agency-specific requirements, so long as the announcement is open long enough to provide applicants with a reasonable opportunity to compete.

GSA requires public notices for hiring actions, including those under DHA, to be open for a minimum of 5 business days, unless a hiring official decides to use an application limit.[5] When an application limit is used, a job posting closes once a certain number of applicants has

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[1] 5 U.S.C. 2301(b)(3), *Merit system principles*.

[2] 5 C.F.R. 337.204, *Severe shortage of candidates*; and 5 C.F.R. 337.205, *Critical hiring needs*, assign OPM the responsibility of determining when there is a critical hiring need or severe shortage of candidates for particular occupations.

[3] Under 5 U.S.C. 3304, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is the only agency permitted to use DHA when there exists a severe shortage of "highly qualified" candidates.

[4] OPM, *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook: A Guide for Federal Agency Examining Offices* (June 2019).

[5] GSA Instructional Letter HRM IL-22-04, *Accepting and Processing Applications for Delegated Examining* (December 30, 2022); and GSA Order HRM 9501.1A, *Delegated Examining Policy* (November 3, 2023).

applied. Prior to 2023, GSA did not set a minimum application limit; GSA currently sets 150 applications as the lowest limit allowed.

Recruitment Incentives

Federal agencies may use recruitment incentives to attract candidates for hard-to-fill positions if there is a documented determination of difficulty.[6] Agencies must define the eligible group, establish the incentive terms, and develop a written justification plan outlining the incentive's purpose and impact.[7] Federal regulation also requires agencies to review each group recruitment incentive at least annually to determine if the positions within that group are still likely to be difficult to fill.[8] GSA policy goes further, requiring the organization requesting the incentive and GSA's Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM) to review and approve group recruitment incentive plans annually to ensure there is still a need.[9]

Superior Qualifications Appointments. The Superior Qualifications Appointment (SQA) is a recruitment tool that allows agencies to set higher pay rates for newly hired employees based on a candidate's superior qualifications or a special agency need.[10] An SQA is given in the form of a higher step within a candidate's pay grade level. Typically, without an SQA, an employee would have to serve 1 year or more of time-in-grade to achieve a higher step. Prior to awarding an SQA, OPM requires agencies to consider the possibility of authorizing other recruitment incentives in lieu of an SQA.

An SQA requires an agency to document a candidate's exceptional qualifications or the special agency need that justifies the higher pay rate. GSA policy required additional considerations, including a candidate's salary within the past year, any bona fide job offer(s) within the past 60 days, and the special qualifications the candidate demonstrated.[11] If an SQA is granted, the agency must document the justification and approval.[12]

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[6] 5 C.F.R. 575.101, *Purpose*.

[7] 5 C.F.R. 575.105, *Applicability to employees*; 5 C.F.R. 575.107, *Agency recruitment incentive plan and approval levels*; and 5 C.F.R. 575.108, *Approval criteria and written determination*.

[8] 5 C.F.R. 575.105(b)(3).

[9] GSA Order HRM 9575.1 CHGE 1, *Recruitment, Relocation and Retention Incentives* (February 5, 2021).

[10] 5 C.F.R. 531.212(b), *Superior qualifications or special needs determination*.

[11] GSA Order HRM 9531.1, *Superior Qualifications and Special Needs Pay Setting Authority* (April 8, 2016).

[12] 5 C.F.R. 531.212(e), *Approval and documentation requirements*.

Results

Merit-based hiring is the cornerstone of a fair and effective federal workforce. It ensures that all candidates have an equal opportunity to compete and are selected based on their qualifications. TTS deviated from merit system principles in its hiring and workforce management practices, resulting in noncompliance with federal hiring requirements and raising serious concerns about fairness and accountability.

Specifically, TTS failed to comply with federal hiring authorities by improperly using DHA, which eliminated veterans' preference and appeared to preselect future hires. TTS also failed to annually certify the USDC group recruitment incentive and misused recruitment strategies. Finally, the majority of TTS's employees receive the highest available pay grade, and the TTS Talent team performs some of OHRM's core functions.

Finding 1 – TTS failed to comply with federal hiring authorities.

TTS failed to comply with federal hiring authorities by improperly using DHA and appearing to preselect future hires.

Improper Use of DHA

DHA is a less-competitive process used for hiring in emergencies or extraordinary circumstances. It allows federal agencies to expedite hiring qualified candidates by eliminating competitive rating and ranking procedures, including veterans' preference. In an October 4, 2023, report, *Human Capital Management Evaluation of the U.S. General Services Administration*, OPM found that TTS improperly used DHA to recruit talent. In this report, OPM stated that TTS used DHA while also continuing to rate and rank candidates, stating that "it is evident that hiring managers are looking for highly qualified applicants." This essentially created a competitive hiring process, while ignoring veterans' preference requirements. In response to OPM's report, TTS created an internal task force to develop corrective actions for the employees affected by the improper DHA hires. However, despite OPM's report, TTS's internal task force, and TTS's efforts to correct improper DHA hires, we found that TTS continued to improperly use DHA by using competitive ranking processes to hire highly qualified candidates.

TTS incorrectly used DHA by routinely using competitive ranking processes to seek out highly qualified candidates. The OPM requirement for agencies to use this hiring authority is to hire any candidate who is qualified for the position.[13] The intention is to allow agencies to save time by hiring qualified candidates without assessing hiring preferences and qualification rankings. Since DHA is intended for hiring in emergencies or extraordinary circumstances, omitting these

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[13] Under 5 U.S.C. 3304, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is an exception to this requirement; it can use DHA to seek highly qualified candidates.

assessment procedures allows agencies to hire personnel quickly, so long as they are qualified for the position.

In interviews with TTS hiring managers and OHRM personnel, several of them highlighted the benefits of DHA, noting that DHA allows for a faster hiring process and emphasizing how long it takes to apply veterans' preference. In addition, the then-Acting Director of TTS emphasized the TTS-wide focus on hiring the best talent; however, TTS rarely used the formal competitive rating and ranking hiring authority that enables agencies to find best-qualified candidates. While using DHA allowed TTS to hire faster than other hiring authorities, TTS misused DHA by continuing to assess the applicants to find the highest-qualified candidates instead of quickly hiring any candidate who met the position qualifications. This raises concerns about whether: (1) TTS had a hiring emergency, and (2) TTS attempted to circumvent veterans' preference.

TTS also lacks proper justification for its use of DHA. Throughout our audit interviews and our review of TTS's past hiring documentation, TTS claimed a critical hiring need, citing: (1) federal mandates to increase IT hiring across the federal government and (2) a competitive job market. However, TTS failed to demonstrate why existing hiring authorities are impractical or ineffective, as required by 5 C.F.R. 337.205. TTS also claimed a shortage of candidates. However, TTS routinely receives hundreds of applicants for its job announcements, showing that no severe shortage of candidates exists—despite a severe shortage of candidates being a requirement under 5 C.F.R. 337.204.

TTS's improper use of DHA is further demonstrated by OPM's denial of GSA's 2021 request for DHA. OPM denied the request due to GSA's lack of support to address the criteria for critical need to address an urgency for hiring or shortage of applicants.[14] In GSA's 2023 request for DHA, the GSA Administrator acknowledged GSA's inability to provide historical data showing that other hiring authorities were insufficient—admitting that this was due to GSA's improper reliance on DHA in prior years.[15] In our audit interviews, multiple TTS hiring officials focused on the need for TTS to recruit top talent and a desire to mirror private industry. The lack of evidence showing alternative hiring authorities as ineffective, coupled with TTS's stated reason for using DHA, raises concerns that TTS is using DHA to make the hiring process easier, rather than to address a hiring emergency.

Furthermore, TTS's misuse of DHA reduced consideration of veterans' preference, resulting in TTS hiring fewer veterans in comparison to the rest of GSA. Nearly two-thirds (21 of 32) of TTS's hiring actions included in our sample used DHA, which bypasses the need to apply veterans' preference. In the few cases where TTS hired without using DHA, we found two separate instances where either the hiring case file lacked documentation regarding veterans' preference or veterans were not given consideration. In one case, two qualified veterans were improperly passed over, requiring OHRM to extend additional offers after selections were

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[14] OPM, *Human Capital Management Evaluation of the U.S. General Services Administration* (October 4, 2023).

[15] GSA letter to OPM, *Direct-Hire Authority Critical Hiring Need* (July 13, 2023).

finalized by TTS. As of 2024, veterans made up only 9 percent of TTS's workforce, compared to 26 percent across all of GSA as of 2023. When asked about the disparity, the then-Acting Director of TTS did not express concern about the low veteran representation in TTS and stated that "veterans may not have the experience needed to perform the job" at TTS. TTS's misapplication of hiring authorities related to veterans' preference, along with a senior TTS official's skepticism about veterans' abilities in IT roles, raises concerns about TTS's commitment to properly applying veterans' preference.

Preselecting Future Hires

In our review of documentation provided by TTS and OHRM officials, we identified concerns of preselection in TTS's hiring and promotions. We found that TTS hiring managers preselected and backfilled candidates for merit promotions, bypassing competitive assessment processes intended to ensure that employment decisions are based on qualifications and performance.

In TTS emails and hiring documentation, TTS hiring officials identified their preferences for certain candidates. For example, we reviewed correspondence from September 2024 that includes a TTS employee writing a detailed plan for the upcoming hiring actions of five TTS employees, including the plan for her own merit promotion announcement. By selecting candidates prior to public notice, TTS placed qualified candidates at a disadvantage and restricted candidates' opportunity to compete in a fair and open hiring process.

During our 3-year audit period, TTS designed application processes and restricted public notices in ways that may have limited the merit system principle of open and fair competition. While TTS is permitted to use application limits on its job postings, TTS limited the number of applications received to as few as 100 applicants, resulting in multiple job announcements that were only open for 1 day. In other instances, TTS posted a public job announcement, but ultimately selected applicants who applied through an alternative method. OPM's October 2023 report, *Human Capital Management Evaluation of the U.S. General Services Administration*, echoes these concerns by questioning TTS's ability to ensure equal opportunity for interview selection.

TTS's hiring practices of applicant pools restrictions raise concerns of an unfair advantage given to some applicants.[16] Taken together, these practices jeopardized federal requirements for broad and accessible public notices, which are essential for promoting open and fair competition.

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[16] 5 U.S.C. 2302, *Prohibited personnel practices*, requires federal hiring managers to refrain from granting preference or advantage to any employee or applicant for employment for the purpose of improving or injuring the prospects of any particular person for employment.

Finding 2 – TTS failed to annually certify the USDC group recruitment incentive and misused recruitment strategies.

TTS granted group recruitment incentives to all USDC fellows over their first 2 years of employment and awarded SQAs to applicants outside of the USDC to compete with private industry salaries. However, we found that TTS misused these recruitment strategies and failed to annually certify the USDC group recruitment incentive.

Despite Successful Recruiting, TTS Used Recruitment Incentives That Exceeded GSA-Recommended Amounts

Recruitment incentives are supposed to be used by federal agencies to attract candidates for hard-to-fill positions, provided there is a documented determination of difficulty. Despite receiving thousands of applications, TTS awarded a group recruitment incentive to all 82 USDC fellows hired in 2022 and 2023, which included a 25 percent incentive over each of their first 2 years of employment.[17] An example of how this recruitment incentive was paid over the USDC fellows' first 2 years is shown in *Figure 1* below. While OPM allows recruitment incentives up to 25 percent, GSA recommends a 10 percent maximum for entry-level IT positions, which includes the USDC fellows.

Despite consistently successful recruitment, TTS continued to award the maximum of a 25 percent incentive per year, or around $30,000 per USDC fellow, for their first 2 years of employment.

Figure 1. USDC Fellow Recruitment Incentive Example[18]

Year of Employment	Pay Grade Level	Annual Salary ($)	Recruitment Incentive ($)	Salary Plus Recruitment Incentive ($)
First Year	GS-9	61,947	20,650	82,597
Second Year	GS-11	75,248	10,323	85,571

Additionally, TTS awarded more than $1 million of recruitment incentives to the 2023 USDC fellows without annual review of the need for the recruitment incentive. OPM requires that agencies review the need for a group recruitment incentive at least annually to determine whether the positions are still likely to be difficult to fill, in accordance with 5 C.F.R.

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[17] GSA press release, *GSA announces new cohort of U.S. Digital Corps fellows* (August 13, 2024).

[18] The USDC group recruitment incentive is calculated by taking the GS-9 annual salary multiplied by 25 percent, multiplied by 2 (representing the 2-year term of employment), multiplied by two-thirds (for the first year) or one-third (for the second year).

575.105(b)(3). In addition, GSA policy requires that the recommending official (typically the hiring manager) certifies the group recruitment incentive annually.[19]

Despite the requirement by both OPM and GSA for an annual review, TTS awarded recruitment incentives in 2023 without reviewing and certifying the need for the incentives. When asked about its noncompliance with annual certification requirements, TTS officials stated that they *could* create a process to ensure their compliance with 5 C.F.R. 575.105(b)(3). (emphasis added)

TTS's use of group recruitment incentives without obtaining annual review violates OPM and GSA policy and highlights a pattern of wasteful recruitment strategies.

TTS's Use of SQAs Leads to Waste and Abuse Concerns

TTS frequently awarded SQAs in DHA hiring actions. As mentioned previously, SQAs are intended to attract top talent who possess superior qualifications by granting them starting pay increases. In contrast, DHA is supposed to be used to hire any candidate that meets the position qualifications without further assessments. However, our document review and interviews with OHRM personnel revealed that TTS consistently: (1) assessed candidates beyond the basic position qualifications and (2) failed to select alternative candidates instead of awarding the SQA pay increase. Awarding costly SQAs to candidates that TTS deemed highly qualified contradicts DHA's intended purpose of expediting hiring for any qualified candidates.

Further, 5 C.F.R. 531.212(d), *Consideration of recruitment incentive*, requires agencies to "consider the possibility of authorizing a recruitment incentive" in lieu of awarding an SQA. GSA includes this in its own SQA policy, stating that recruitment incentives are less costly than awarding SQAs. The language TTS used in nearly all SQA justification memos is quoted below.

> We considered the use of a recruitment bonus as an incentive in lieu of and in addition to a superior qualifications appointment. However, based on [candidate name]'s skills and ability to secure other employment at a rate of pay above [their] current rate, we do not see this as a feasible alternative.

We requested documentation to support the statement in the justification memos; however, TTS could not provide it to us. We also found no instances or evidence of TTS awarding recruitment incentives in lieu of SQAs. The lack of supporting documentation and no instances of recruitment incentives being awarded in lieu of SQAs raise concerns about whether recruitment incentives were actually considered in lieu of awarding SQAs.

In addition, our review of TTS's hiring documentation showed that the supporting documentation for the SQA awards did not detail the applicant's superior qualifications to justify the starting salary increase. While the documentation outlined the candidate's previous

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[19] GSA HRM 9575.1 CHGE 1.

job experience, it did not explain how the candidate's qualifications were superior to: (1) what the job required or (2) the qualifications of others who applied to the job announcement. See *Figure 2* below for six examples of SQAs granted during our 3-year audit period.

Figure 2. Examples of SQAs Granted During the Audit Period

Employee	Salary Prior to Joining TTS ($)	TTS Tentative Offer ($)	SQA Amount Offered ($)	TTS Final Offer ($)	Salary Increase Over Prior Employment ($)
Employee A	140,153	148,484	19,798	168,282	28,129
Employee B	135,000	143,314	32,986	176,300	41,300
Employee C	100,000	134,938	22,490	157,428	57,428
Employee D	122,316	158,520	24,980	183,500	61,184
Employee E	Unemployed	136,992	31,964	168,956	168,956
Employee F	Unemployed	161,139	10,743	171,882	171,882

Finally, TTS awarded more than $1.5 million in SQAs between 2021 and 2024, often using outdated and inaccurate income documentation. A 2024 OPM rule change eliminated the use of a candidate's private sector income to justify an increased federal salary. However, prior to this change, a candidate's previous salary was often used as the primary basis to justify an increase in pay. During this time, GSA required the verification of up-to-date income documentation; however, TTS awarded several SQAs with missing or outdated income documentation. In some instances, TTS used W-2s that were several years old. In other instances, TTS awarded SQAs to candidates who were unemployed at the time of the award.

In SQA justification memos, TTS continually justified SQAs by citing the difficulty of recruiting highly technical talent with government salaries at a General Schedule, Step 1 pay level. However, more than 70 percent of the 64 TTS-awarded SQAs we reviewed resulted in a net increase to the candidates' previous private sector income. As shown in *Figure 2* above, TTS's use of SQAs resulted in significant pay increases; this raises concerns about TTS's underlying recruitment strategies.

Finding 3 – The majority of TTS's employees receive the highest available pay grade, jeopardizing the merit system principle of equal pay for work of equal value.

TTS exhibits a significant imbalance in its pay distribution, with an unusually large concentration of GS-15 employees. We interviewed OHRM personnel to determine if this imbalance is common within GSA.

During an interview with an OHRM Director, she said FAS's Office of Information Technology Category (ITC) is similar to TTS in responsibilities and function; however, ITC may differ when comparing pay scales. After researching ITC's operations and workforce data, we arrived at the

same conclusion—both TTS and ITC exist within FAS and provide IT services to other government entities. ITC prioritizes connecting government entities with IT solutions and industry partners, while TTS focuses on providing services to government entities in an effort to modernize their IT systems. ITC also staffs a comparable number of employees and includes similar job classifications to TTS.[20] However, only 14 percent of ITC's workforce is paid at the highest GS pay grade (GS-15); whereas 52 percent of TTS employees are GS-15s (see *Figure 3* below).

Figure 3. Comparison of ITC and TTS Pay Grade Distributions
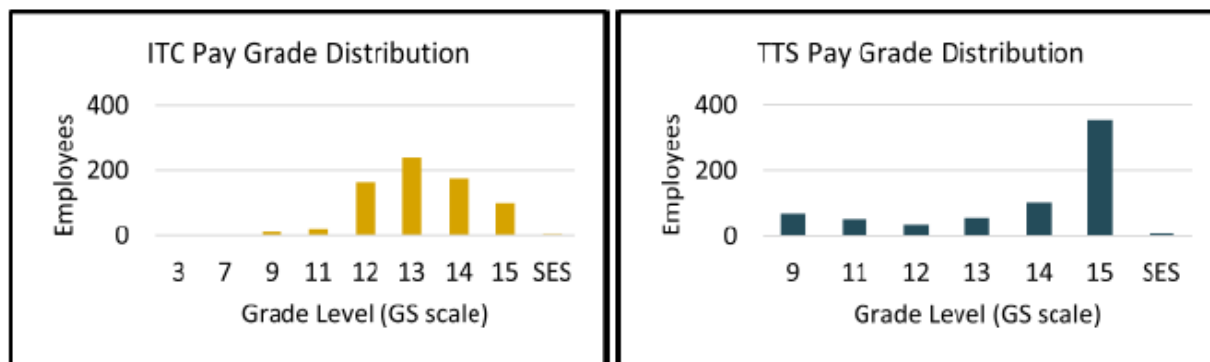
When we shared the information from *Figure 3* with the same OHRM Director, she said that she believes it is fair to compare TTS to ITC because both groups have similar properties and work externally to GSA. She also said that the number of GS-15 employees in TTS is concerning as it seemed the highest pay grade was TTS's go-to grade level for hiring.

The OHRM Director clarified that it is not OHRM's responsibility to say how many GS-15 employees TTS hires; she said that is a decision made by TTS management. When we asked the then-Acting Director of TTS about the information shown in *Figure 3*, he said there were a lot of GS-15 employees, but that he does "not know what that means." He went on to explain that TTS hires employees for highly technical IT work.

The large discrepancy between ITC and TTS pay grade distributions highlights that TTS is jeopardizing the merit system principles of equal pay for work of equal value and an efficient and effective federal workforce. The disproportionate number of GS-15 positions suggests inefficiencies in TTS's workforce management and compensation practices, which negatively affect fiscal accountability.

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[20] As of October 2024, TTS's workforce consisted of 686 employees, and ITC's workforce consisted of 713 employees.

Finding 4 – The TTS Talent team performs some of OHRM's core functions, resulting in duplication and waste of Agency resources.

The responsibilities of the TTS Talent team include resume reviews and recruitment, which overlap with some of OHRM's core functions, leading to inefficiencies and waste of Agency resources. According to OHRM's *Fiscal Year 2023 TTS Recruitment and Hiring Evaluation*, the TTS Talent team inappropriately directed applicants to contact TTS recruiters with pay-related questions instead of the appropriate OHRM officials. In interviews with OHRM officials, several of them stated that the TTS Talent team's actions made their work more difficult. Specifically, multiple OHRM officials raised concerns about the TTS Talent team improperly discussing job offers and pay with candidates, which should have been handled by OHRM personnel. During our audit, we found several human-resource-related tasks performed by the TTS Talent team, including accepting applications, creating plans to correct hiring errors, and drafting job descriptions. These overlapping functions and the blurred lines of responsibility between the TTS Talent team and OHRM indicate a waste of Agency resources.

In addition, the work performed by the TTS Talent team does not align with its employees' position descriptions. The position descriptions for TTS Talent team personnel that we reviewed are classified under the 300 series (general administrative, clerical and office services group) and state that the work completed by these positions consists of program analysis, providing technical advice, developing regulations, evaluating TTS program effectiveness, providing authoritative advice on interpretation of governing policy, and researching complex issues. After our exit conference, FAS provided additional position descriptions for supervisors and employees within the TTS Talent team that outlined some talent acquisition duties; however, they were also classified under the 300 series. The TTS Talent team may perform administrative and clerical functions; however, that greatly differs from what TTS Talent team employees outlined as their responsibilities during our audit interviews.

TTS Talent team employees stated that they engage in key hiring functions such as resume reviews, human resources correspondence, recruiting, candidate sourcing and communication, and the creation of essential hiring documentation. These job responsibilities are consistent with roles typically classified within the 200 series (human resources management group), which generally require specialized knowledge of human resources principles, laws, and practices. By classifying TTS Talent team personnel in the 300 series, TTS failed to reflect the nature and complexity of the work performed. This leads to discrepancies in job categorization and jeopardizes the merit system principle of equal pay for work of equal value.

Conclusion

Merit-based hiring is the cornerstone of a fair and effective federal workforce. It ensures that all candidates have an equal opportunity to compete and are selected based on their qualifications. TTS deviated from merit system principles in its hiring and workforce management practices, resulting in noncompliance with federal hiring requirements and raising serious concerns about fairness and accountability.

Specifically, TTS failed to comply with federal hiring authorities by improperly using DHA, which eliminated veterans' preference and appeared to preselect future hires. TTS also failed to annually certify the USDC group recruitment incentive and misused recruitment strategies. Finally, the majority of TTS's employees receive the highest available pay grade, and the TTS Talent team performs some of OHRM's core functions.

TTS should ensure that it complies with all federal hiring authorities and strengthens controls for future hiring. FAS should also evaluate: (1) SQAs awarded to TTS employees to ensure the pay step granted is properly supported, (2) the TTS Talent team's job series classification, and (3) TTS's pay distribution.

Recommendations

We recommend that the FAS Commissioner:

1. Evaluate TTS's use of DHA to ensure it complies with 5 C.F.R. 337.205.

2. Ensure TTS's hiring procedures comply with GSA hiring requirements.

3. Strengthen controls to ensure that:
    a. TTS's hiring actions provide open and fair competition among qualified applicants and adhere to merit system principles;
    b. TTS's hiring actions are properly documented to allow for a complete and accurate third-party review, as required by OPM;
    c. Recruitment incentives are considered in lieu of SQAs and are documented to verify compliance with 5 C.F.R. 531.212(d); and
    d. The USDC group recruitment incentive is reviewed and approved annually, as required by GSA Order HRM 9575.1 CHGE 1 and 5 C.F.R. 575.105(b)(3). Additionally, evaluate and document the need to award a group recruitment incentive that exceeds GSA's recommended amount.

4. Evaluate the SQAs awarded to TTS employees beginning April 1, 2021, to determine if the pay step granted is properly supported. If errors exist, refer to GSA's Office of General Counsel to determine the appropriate action.

5. Evaluate the TTS Talent team's job series classifications to ensure they align with the team's primary responsibilities and develop necessary controls to ensure future compliance.

6. Evaluate TTS's pay distribution and develop the controls necessary to ensure there is equal pay for work of equal value and consistency throughout TTS and GSA in accordance with 5 U.S.C. 2301(b)(3).

GSA Comments

The FAS Commissioner disagreed with the methodology underlying our findings and resulting recommendations. GSA's written comments are included in their entirety in *Appendix B*.

OIG Response

In the FAS Commissioner's response to our draft report, he presents arguments regarding our methodology that are unsupported and undermine the message of our report—for FAS to address the waste and abuse concerns identified during our audit. Our recommendations focus on FAS conducting its own evaluations of TTS and ensuring that TTS complies with applicable hiring criteria. The FAS Commissioner's response is clear about TTS's desire to "streamline" the hiring process for "highly qualified technologists." However, this hiring must be done in accordance with applicable laws and regulations. The FAS Commissioner's disagreement suggests that FAS is not planning to take any action to address these recommendations, leaving FAS at risk of violating hiring requirements in the future.

TTS's use of DHA. Throughout the FAS Commissioner's response, he states that FAS and OHRM are committed to hiring the best and most qualified technologists to serve the public. He also states that "GSA is committed to working with OPM and other agencies to develop ideas to streamline this process in order for GSA to continue hiring highly qualified technologists."

We did not report on or question FAS's need to hire the best and most qualified employees, but instead reported that TTS's use of DHA exceeded what was allowable under that hiring authority. As mentioned in our report, DHA is intended to hire *qualified candidates* quickly and expedite hiring by eliminating rating and ranking procedures, including veterans' preference. If TTS wants to hire the best and most qualified employees, and not just seek qualified candidates, other hiring authorities that allow for additional assessments and interviews are more suited to do so.

In his response, the FAS Commissioner states that GSA has already taken steps to improve hiring and recruitment processes, "rendering several of the report's recommendations moot." One of the steps he states GSA has taken was to create a standard operating procedure (SOP) for DHA hiring to be enforced agency-wide. This SOP was issued in May 2024, three months after this audit initiated, and does not address our recommendation to evaluate TTS's use of

DHA to ensure its compliance with 5 C.F.R. 337.205. Therefore, **we reaffirm Recommendation 1.**

Use of hiring authorities. In the FAS Commissioner's response, he states that limiting the number of applicants is a best practice used government-wide. We agree that application limits are allowed and state this in *Finding 1*; however, we also documented the risk of using overly strict application limits—it may impact the Agency's ability to abide by the merit system principle of open and fair competition. This argument is supported in GSA's SOP for DHA hiring, which prioritizes adequate notification to the general public when a vacancy exists and recommends posting vacancies for at least 5 workdays and allowing at least 150 applicants. In addition, the large number of applications TTS receives in relatively short periods of time, sometimes closing an announcement on the first day, weighs against the need for DHA.

In the FAS Commissioner's response, he states that the report lacks context and may provide the impression that GSA's request for DHA in 2023 lacked merit. However, we do not state this in our report and actually use similar language to what the FAS Commissioner included in his response to the draft report. GSA could not provide historical data to OPM showing other hiring authorities were impracticable when requesting DHA in 2023 because GSA had erroneously used DHA since 2021.

In the FAS Commissioner's response, he names OHRM as being responsible for hiring authorities. Specifically, his response alleges that "many of the issues raised [in the report] are targeting responsibilities, roles and authorities that [the] TTS Talent [team] did not have." We acknowledge several times in the report that OHRM and the TTS Talent team worked together to hire TTS employees. However, TTS did engage in key hiring functions OHRM is responsible for, such as resume reviews, human resources correspondence, recruiting, candidate sourcing and communication, and the creation of essential hiring documentation. Therefore, **we reaffirm Recommendations 2 and 3(a)**, which recommend that FAS ensures that TTS's hiring procedures comply with GSA hiring requirements, and that controls are strengthened to ensure that TTS's hiring actions provide open and fair competition among qualified applicants and adhere to merit system principles.

Adherence to applicable policy. In the FAS Commissioner's response, he alleges that TTS adhered to applicable GSA SQA policies. However, in *Finding 2*, we explain that TTS often used outdated and inaccurate income documentation to justify SQAs, which violated GSA's SQA policy in effect during the audit. Additionally, 5 C.F.R. 531.212(d) requires that recruitment incentives are considered in lieu of SQAs, which TTS could not provide documentation to support. We also found no instances or evidence of TTS awarding a recruitment incentive in lieu of an SQA. Therefore, **we reaffirm Recommendations 3(c) and 4**, which recommend that FAS strengthen controls to ensure that recruitment incentives are considered in lieu of SQAs and SQAs awarded to TTS employees are evaluated to determine if the pay step granted is properly supported.

In the FAS Commissioner's response, he alleges that our report overstates concerns and claims that "During the time audited and since, GSA OHRM and TTS have operated within the OPM policy and guidance in effect at the time." This is false. OPM's policy and guidance were often violated during our audit period, most notably shown in OPM's 14 required actions sent to the Agency as part of OPM's October 2023 report, *Human Capital Management Evaluation of the U.S. General Services Administration*. For example, one of these actions required the maintenance of examination records and documentation to allow for third-party review and reconstruction of hiring actions. During our audit, we found similar issues with missing hiring documentation, specifically regarding missing SQA income documentation. As a result, **we reaffirm Recommendation 3(b)**, which mirrors the previously mentioned OPM-required action.

USDC recruitment incentives. The FAS Commissioner states that GSA has also begun to review group recruitment incentives annually. However, in July 2024, when we notified TTS of its missing approval for the 2023 USDC fellows, we were told that TTS "can create a simplified and streamlined process … whereby each new annual cohort is cleared for the incentive program before the applicable vacancy announcement is issued …." This statement led us to our conclusion that TTS was not aware of the required annual review, or at the very least, was not doing it until we brought it to its attention. Furthermore, we were not provided with any documentation to support that controls were strengthened to ensure compliance with GSA Order HRM 9575.1 CHGE 1 and 5 C.F.R. 575.105(b)(3) when USDC fellows are hired.

Later in the FAS Commissioner's response, he argues that the 25 percent incentive granted to USDC fellows was awarded with the understanding that OHRM was working to change guidance to allow for entry-level hires to receive more than 10 percent. While this is certainly an avenue to work around a GSA-recommended limit on recruitment incentives, we ascertain that this limit was in place primarily to limit unnecessary spending and, furthermore, was not changed prior to granting the higher incentives. Based upon this and the facts presented in the prior paragraph, **we reaffirm Recommendation 3(d)**, which recommends the strengthening of controls to ensure that the policies governing the review of group recruitment incentives are met, and that FAS should evaluate and document whether the USDC recruitment incentive percentage should exceed GSA's recommended amount for entry-level IT hires.

Since it was not addressed in the FAS Commissioner's response, **we also reaffirm Recommendation 5**, which recommends that the TTS Talent team be evaluated to ensure their job series classifications align with the team's primary responsibilities, and that FAS develops the necessary controls to ensure future compliance.

TTS pay distribution. In the FAS Commissioner's response, he insists that "comparing ITC to TTS is an inappropriate equivalency as the two groups perform significantly different work" and that since "TTS and ITC do not have the same core functions … any comparison specific to responsibilities and associated pay required to recruit and retain them, is incorrect." In *Finding 3*, we show a comparison between ITC and TTS and explain that these two groups are similar in responsibilities and function because they both exist within FAS and provide IT services to other government entities. These two groups also had a comparable number of

employees and used the 2210 job series, which defines the grouping of similar occupations, job functions, and qualifications. We agree that these groups are not the same; however, we found them to be similar enough to use as a comparison to evaluate workforce data, which was supported by an OHRM Director during the audit.

The FAS Commissioner states that "TTS GS-15's consist of software developers, software engineers, and other IT specialists with highly technical experience." In response to this statement, we reviewed U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data.[21] We found that TTS salaries as a whole, and as a subset of IT positions, is higher, on average, than even the private sector. Therefore, **we reaffirm Recommendation 6**, which recommends that TTS's pay distribution be evaluated and that FAS develop the necessary controls to ensure there is equal pay for work of equal value in accordance with 5 U.S.C. 2301(b)(3).

We urge the FAS Commissioner to: (1) reconsider our findings and (2) develop corrective actions to address our recommendations.

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[21] We found 2024 median wages for computer and IT occupations at https://www.bls.gov/ooh/computer-and-information-technology/.

Appendix A – Objective, Scope, and Methodology

Objective

We included this audit in our *Fiscal Year 2024 Audit Plan* as a result of risk areas identified during our audit planning. Our audit objective was to determine if FAS's TTS is complying with federal hiring authorities and appropriately classifying positions.

Scope and Methodology

The scope of our audit focused on 32 hiring actions that resulted in 161 employees being hired during the 3-year period of April 1, 2021, through March 31, 2024.

To accomplish our objective, we:

- Reviewed laws, regulations, and guidance related to federal hiring to establish the audit criteria;
- Reviewed prior evaluation reports issued by OPM and OHRM related to the audit objective, along with documentation of corrective actions taken to determine past identified issues and actions performed;
- Evaluated OPM DHA approval documentation granted to GSA to determine limitations of this hiring authority;
- Reviewed GSA Office of Inspector General hotline complaints related to the audit objective to identify risk areas;
- Evaluated TTS's organizational structure and hiring practices to determine hiring roles and responsibilities;
- Interviewed TTS, OHRM, and OPM personnel to gain more information about hiring processes;
- Evaluated TTS hiring data provided by TTS and OHRM to develop summary statistics and select samples of hiring actions;
- Reviewed OHRM's hiring case file information, including correspondence, memorandums, job analysis documentation, position descriptions, public announcement information, recruitment documentation, and subject matter expert certification;
- Reviewed GSA-provided electronic Official Personnel Folder information on a case-by-case basis to verify hiring actions;
- Interviewed a sample of TTS employees and reviewed a sample of TTS job announcements to gain a better understanding of TTS's hiring practices;
- Evaluated TTS SQA documentation to determine compliance with federal and GSA guidance;
- Analyzed TTS and ITC workforce data to compare the two organizations; and

- Consulted with GSA Office of Inspector General human resources specialists to better understand TTS's hiring actions.

Data Reliability

We assessed the reliability of TTS hiring data provided by TTS and OHRM by cross-referencing the provided data with each hiring file found in GSA's hiring case files. We also reviewed information obtained from interviews and requested additional information and documentation from GSA when inconsistencies were observed. We determined that the data was sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this audit.

Sampling

We selected two samples of TTS job announcements provided by TTS and OHRM using a nonstatistical, judgmental methodology. This methodology was used to select the first sample of 18 TTS job announcements due to an initial lack of readily available information related to TTS job announcements. This restricted our selection to only include announcements that could be found in TTS-published information located on a TTS website. From a population of 121 TTS job announcements provided by OHRM, we selected a second sample of 14 TTS job announcements later in the audit. We selected the second sample using a judgmental selection methodology and prioritized the job announcements based on audit risk, including those with apparent anomalies.

We selected a sample of 16 TTS employees for interviews and further inquiries into hiring experiences from both samples of TTS job announcements. We judgmentally selected this sample of TTS employees by identifying hiring actions with apparent anomalies, such as low applicant counts, short public notice windows, and missing information in the hiring case files. We ensured that this sample included a representative variety of position series, grade levels, recruitment incentives, and hiring authorities used.

While our judgmental samples do not allow for projection of the results to the population, they did allow us to address our audit objective.

Internal Controls

We assessed internal controls significant within the context of our audit objective against GAO-14-704G, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*. The methodology above describes the scope of our assessment, and the report findings include any internal control deficiencies we identified. Our assessment is not intended to provide assurance on GSA's internal control structure as a whole. GSA management is responsible for establishing and maintaining internal controls.

Compliance Statement

We conducted the audit between January 2024 and February 2025 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective.

Appendix B – GSA Comments

GSA

Federal Acquisition Service

May 30, 2025

MEMORANDUM FOR   Michelle L. Westrup
Regional Inspector General For Auditing
Heartland Region Audit Office (JA-6)

FROM: Arron E. Helm
Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO)   *Jeremy Taylor*
Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM)

Josh Gruenbaum
Commissioner
Federal Acquisition Service

(Q)

SUBJECT: Response to Draft Report – *GSA's Technology Transformation Services Violated Hiring Rules and Overpaid Incentives* (A240037)

Thank you for the Office of Inspector General's (OIG) evaluation of Federal Acquisition Services' Technology Transformation Services (TTS) and its Talent team. GSA has reviewed the OIG's draft report on the matter; however, we respectfully disagree with OIG's methodology underlying its findings and resulting recommendations.

GSA is focused on driving an effective and efficient Government and enabling our sister agencies to provide better service to taxpayers at lower costs. GSA does this by adhering to a series of core principles, including embracing and building best in class technologies to accelerate digital transformation and modernize IT infrastructure. Hiring the best technologists is a key part of GSA leading technology transformation and innovation governmentwide.

Moving forward, GSA OHRM and TTS are committed to hiring the best people by leveraging the appropriate hiring authorities and compensation options that meet specific needs, while ensuring all flexibilities are used in compliance with hiring regulations and requirements. This includes working with the appropriate stakeholders to ensure TTS and other federal agencies are able to hire the most qualified technical talent as efficiently as possible.

As part of these efforts, GSA has already taken steps to improve hiring and recruitment processes, rendering several of the report's recommendations moot. For example:

U.S. General Services Administration
1800 F Street NW
Washington, DC 20270
www.gsa.gov

- In response to OPM's October 4, 2023 report, *Human Capital Management Evaluation of the General Services Administration*, GSA OHRM immediately took corrective action by creating a standard operating procedure for DHA hiring that was enforced across GSA, including by TTS. This included making necessary changes to ensure TTS and other offices comply with 5 C.F.R. 337.205 and GSA hiring requirements.
- When GSA OHRM informed TTS's USDC program that recruitment incentives needed to be reviewed annually, TTS immediately began reviewing the need for incentives in close collaboration with GSA OHRM. USDC conducted an annual review beginning in FY25.

GSA OHRM, under the Trump Administration, has continued to strengthen the way the agency conducts performance workforce management. The Administration's focus on cost management, including right-sizing staffing, consolidating functions, avoiding duplication, and ensuring clear roles and responsibilities will be reflected in future hiring efforts. Unfortunately, rather than acknowledging this progress, the draft report relies on a flawed methodology, contains a number of misleading statements and factual inaccuracies, and omits important information vital to drawing accurate conclusions.

- **Flawed Comparison of ITC and TTS Pay Grade Distributions.** The report states that the responsibilities and functions of the Information Technology Category (ITC) are similar to technologists in the Technology Transformation Services. According to the report, "[t]he large discrepancy between ITC and TTS pay grade distributions highlights that TTS is jeopardizing the merit system principles of equal pay for work of equal value and an efficient and effective federal workforce." However, comparing ITC to TTS is an inappropriate equivalency as the two groups perform significantly different work, with different technical expertise, and should not be compared. TTS and ITC do not have the same core functions; therefore, any comparison specific to responsibilities and the associated pay required to recruit and retain them, is incorrect. ITC primarily engages in procurement activities connecting federal agencies and military commands to vendors on GSA contract vehicles whereas the majority of TTS employees are software engineers or product managers who create software and build platforms. TTS GS-15's consist of software developers, software engineers, and other IT specialists with highly technical experience. ITC primarily hires IT project managers and IT acquisition professionals at the GS-15 level. This work is functionally different, despite the fact that both entities have the same 2210 job classification series.
- **Applicant Cut-off Number is a Best Practice.** The report states that "TTS designed application processes and restricted public notices in ways that may have limited the merit system principle of open and fair competition." However, the report fails to mention that limiting the number of applicants is a best practice used government wide. This best practice is explicitly mentioned on USAJOBS through the following statement: "Some job announcements close when the hiring agency receives a certain number of applications. If the 'cut-off' number is reached during the day, the job announcement will usually close that night at

midnight." GSA OHRM and TTS followed these best practices, setting application limits due to the level of effort needed to review and qualify the applicant pool. Furthermore, in questioning the use of DHA, the report itself asserts that "TTS routinely received hundreds of applicants for its job announcements." It is inconsistent to find that the agency did not consider enough candidates while also finding that there were too many candidates to justify DHA.

- **OPM Approved GSA's DHA.** The report states that OPM denied GSA DHA in 2021 and that GSA could not justify DHA in 2023. This finding lacks context and may provide the reader with the mistaken impression that GSA's request for DHA lacked merit. GSA's position is that it mistakenly believed that OPM had approved its use of DHA in 2021. When the mistake was realized, GSA provided a new justification to OPM in 2023. OPM approved GSA's request for DHA in 2023. In that justification, GSA also pointed out that it did not have historical data for other hiring authorities the past 2 years because it thought it had already received authorization to use DHA (so it was not tracking this data).
- **OHRM Manages GSA Hiring Authorities.** OIG focused on the actions of TTS when the hiring authorities within GSA sit with OHRM. TTS Talent was a function to support those authorities. Although there are many areas where GSA OHRM and TTS Talent work hand in hand, many of the issues raised are targeting responsibilities, roles and authorities that TTS Talent did not have.
- **GSA SQA policies.** TTS adhered to GSA SQA policies in effect from April 8, 2016 to July 16, 2024, during the audited period, and those that were recently revised and disseminated on February 16, 2025. When SQA policies were revised by OHRM, TTS adjusted its processes accordingly. TTS will continue to ensure that SQA's are judiciously pursued and recordkeeping is in accordance with the *Superior Qualifications and Special Needs Pay Setting Authority* going forward. In addition, as noted in this audit finding, the USDC recruitment incentive of 25% was allowable per OPM standards. When USDC issued 25% incentives, TTS understood GSA OHRM was actively working to change the internal guidance for entry level hires to allow for more than 10%; therefore, providing USDC the ability to go above the 10%.
- **OIG Report Overstates Concerns.** During the time audited and since, GSA OHRM and TTS have operated within the OPM policy and guidance in effect at the time. With any adjustments or awareness to mistaken approaches, GSA modifies procedures to comply. GSA proactively worked with OPM to maintain compliance with OPM policies and guidance issued by OPM as it relates to hiring technology talent.

Before the report was finalized, TTS provided information and other supporting evidence to the OIG demonstrating concerns with the methodology. Despite our efforts, the OIG maintained its original findings.

Since the time of the audit, it is important to note that GSA OHRM is under new leadership and GSA is under new Administration, both dedicated to ensuring that we hire the best, most talented technologists to serve the public. GSA is eager to reduce complexity and increase efficiencies with the current hiring processes and requirements.

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Creating a process that is more straightforward, applicant friendly, and recognizes value to ensure the Federal government is on equal footing when competing with the private sector for much-needed tech talent.

GSA is committed to working with OPM and other agencies to develop ideas to streamline this process in order for GSA to continue hiring highly qualified technologists. Not only does the report merit improvement as discussed previously, but the government could also improve the hiring of technologists by streamlining processes and regulations. GSA is committed to continuing to work to ensure the agency is able to hire the talent needed to execute its mission within the appropriate regulatory landscape. We hope this feedback provides a better understanding of the context in which the agency was operating during the review period.

Appendix C – Report Distribution

Acting GSA Administrator (A)

GSA Deputy Administrator (AD)

FAS Commissioner (Q)

FAS Deputy Commissioner (Q1)

FAS Deputy Commissioner (Q2)

FAS Chief of Staff (Q)

Chief Financial Officer (B)

Acting Deputy Chief Financial Officer (B)

Office of Audit Management and Accountability (BA)

Assistant Inspector General for Auditing (JA)

Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Acquisition Audits (JA)

Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Real Property Audits (JA)

Director (JAO)

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