

U.S. Office of Personnel Management
Division for Human Capital Leadership & Merit System Accountability
Classification Appeals Program

Chicago Field Services Group
230 South Dearborn Street, DPN-30
Chicago, IL 60604-1687

Classification Appeal Decision
Under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code

Appellant: [appellant]

Agency classification: Communications Clerk
GS-394-4

Organization: Communications Section
Business and Finance Office
[name] Veterans Affairs
Medical Center
Veterans Affairs [location]
Health Care System
Department of Veterans Affairs
[city and state]

OPM decision: Telephone Operator
GS-382-3

OPM decision number: C-0382-03-01

/s/ Manuela Martinez

Manuela Martinez
Classification Appeals Officer

April 16, 2003

Date

As provided in section 511.612 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, this decision constitutes a certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials and government. The agency is responsible for reviewing its classification decisions for identical, similar, or related positions to ensure consistency with this decision. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under conditions and time limits specified in the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards*, appendix 4, section G (address provided in appendix 4, section H)

Since this decision lowers the grade of the appealed position, it is to be effective no later than the beginning of the sixth pay period after the date of this decision, as permitted by 5 CFR 511.702. The servicing personnel office must submit a compliance report containing the corrected position description and a Standard Form 50 showing the personnel action taken. The report must be submitted within 30 days from the effective date of the personnel action.

The personnel office must also determine if the appellant is entitled to grade or pay retention, or both, under 5 U.S.C. 5362 and 5363 and 5CFR 536. If the appellant is entitled to grade retention, the two-year retention period begins on the date this decision is implemented.

Decision sent to:

[appellant]
VA Medical Center
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[city and state]

[union president]
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AFGE, Local [#]
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Introduction

On November 13, 2002, the Chicago Field Services Group, formerly the Chicago Oversight Division, of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a classification appeal from [appellant]. On December 30, 2002, we received the agency's administrative report concerning the appeal. The appellant's position is currently classified as Communications Clerk, GS-394-4. The appellant believes the classification of her position should be Mail Clerk, GS-305-5. The position is assigned to the Communications Section, Business and Finance Office, [location] Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC), Veterans Affairs [location] Health Care System, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), in [city and state]. We have accepted and decided the appeal under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.).

Background information

A representative of the Chicago Field Services Group conducted a telephone audit with the appellant and an interview with the immediate supervisor on January 13, 2003. On April 8, 2003, a representative of the Chicago Field Services Group also conducted an on-site audit with the appellant and an interview with the immediate supervisor. An on-site audit was conducted to clarify information in the record. In deciding this appeal, we fully considered the audit, the interview findings, and all the information of record provided by the appellant and her agency, including her current work assignments and position description (PD) of record.

The supervisor has certified to the accuracy of the appellant's official PD, number [number]. Although the appellant agrees with the duties and responsibilities described in her PD, she believes that the mail duties should be described in greater detail. The appellant and the supervisor agree that a minimal amount of the duty time is spent on performing mail activities. Our fact-finding disclosed that the appellant's mail duties as described in PD are an accurate depiction. The PD does meet the standard of adequacy as stated in the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards*.

Position information

The position is located in the VAMC which provides primary and secondary care to veterans throughout 29 counties of [city and state] [city and state]. The VAMC comprises of 16 general medicine beds and 40 extended care beds. Tertiary care support is provided by other VA medical centers. Our fact-finding shows that the VAMC is small. It has approximately 300 employees with a total of 22 special programs and clinics. There are a total of four employees in the Communications Section; Supervisory Health Systems Specialist, GS-671-11, Telecommunications Specialist, GS-391-9, and two Communications Clerks, GS-394-4 (one of whom is the appellant). The appealed position performs clerical work in support of the facility communications network which includes operation of the switchboard, overhead public address system, mail distribution, etc. Our fact-finding revealed that the mail activities are limited to sorting incoming and outgoing mail within the VAMC, which consists of five floors. The appellant's external mail duties are limited to placing the unstamped mail into a box which the mail carrier picks up in the afternoon. For incoming mail, the appellant's duties are limited to sorting mail to fewer than 40 destinations within the VAMC. Our findings show that the

predominant work of the position involves operating a switchboard to connect incoming calls to their proper destinations and providing telephone and organizational information to callers. A minimal amount of the appellant's duty time involves the performance of a variety of clerical functions including making overhead public announcements; keeping records concerning panic, fire, intrusion, and code blue alarms; recording police dispatcher log journals; reporting malfunction of equipment; providing information and direction to patients and visitors; reproducing communication leaflets for distribution; and sorting mail.

Series, title, and standard determination

The Mail and File Clerk Series, GS-305, is appropriate when the mail duties are a regular and recurring part of the work and performed for at least 25 percent of the duty time. According to the supervisor and the appellant, the mail duties occupy less than 25 percent of the appellant's time. The appellant's mail duties are not grade enhancing since they are limited to sorting mail to fewer than 40 destinations within the VAMC. Since the appellant spends less than 25 percent of the duty time on mail duties, the Mail and File Clerk Series, GS-305 is not appropriate.

Although the agency has classified the appellant's position to the Communications Clerical Series GS-394, we do not agree with the agency's assignment to that series. Although the appellant performs a variety of one-grade interval support work, it does not meet the intent of Situation A or Situation B as described in the GS-394 Position Classification Standard (PCS). In Situation A, the work essentially involves the performance of a specialized clerical function requiring knowledge of a restricted area of communications. Typically, functions require detailed knowledge of the processing steps for specific types of documents or materials such as call signs allocations, or a thorough knowledge of particular subject matter, such as prevailing communication rates and tariffs. Unlike the positions in Situation A, the appellant's position does not require knowledge of a specialized area of communications. In Situation B, the work essentially involves the performance of a variety of clerical functions requiring a general knowledge and understanding of communication operations. Functions are primarily concerned with recordkeeping and require knowledge of basic communications terminology and an understanding of the communication services involved. The work is often concerned with the compiling of data from various sources in order to develop summaries and reports on the communication operation and to maintain necessary communications records. Although the appellant writes entries into journals regarding activated alarms and keeps the Telecommunications Specialist informed of malfunctioning equipment throughout the VAMC, she does not use the information to develop summaries and reports as is typical in Situation B. The appellant's position does not meet the criteria of either Situation A or Situation B. Therefore, the use of the GS-394 series is not appropriate.

Since the paramount work of the appellant's position involves operating a switchboard to route incoming calls, the position is properly allocated to the Telephone Operating Series, GS-382, titled Telephone Operator, and properly evaluated by the criteria in the GS-382 PCS. As described in the GS-382 PCS, the appellant's work requires the use of telephone courtesy and tact in dealing with a diversity of callers, sometimes under very stressful circumstances. Typical of such work, the appellant performs related clerical duties including keeping records on alarms and dispatches as discussed previously. According to the PCS, the basic title appropriate for

positions within this series is Telephone Operator. Therefore, the appellant's position is properly allocated as Telephone Operator, GS-382.

Grade determination

The GS-382 PCS uses the Factor Evaluation System (FES) format. Under the FES, positions are evaluated on the basis of their duties, responsibilities, and the qualifications required in terms of nine factors common to nonsupervisory General Schedule positions. A point value is assigned to each factor based on a comparison of the position's duties with the factor-level descriptions in the standard. For a position to warrant a given point value, it must be fully equivalent to the overall intent of the selected factor-level description. If the position fails in any significant aspect to meet a particular factor level description in the standard, the point value for the next lower factor level must be assigned, unless the deficiency is balanced by an equally important aspect which meets a higher level.

Factor 1, Knowledge required by the position

This factor measures the nature and extent of information or facts that a worker must understand to do acceptable work, such as the steps, procedures, practices, rules, policies, theories, principles, and concepts; and the nature and extent of the skills needed to apply this knowledge.

Comparable to Level 1-2, the appellant's work requires knowledge of telephone procedures to operate a telephone switchboard in order to connect incoming calls to the appropriate destination. Within the VAMC, the appellant's position is the first point of contact for incoming calls. The work involves the operation of Siemens Model 9751 switchboard in order to connect incoming calls. The work requires knowledge of telephone courtesy techniques in order to deal with a variety of people who may be emotional. Consistent with positions at Level 1-2, the appellant is also responsible for monitoring a variety of alarms, operating the paging system, and contacting security personnel. The knowledge required for the appellant's position fully meets, but does not exceed, the intent of Level 1-2.

The appellant's position does not meet Level 1-3 where the work requires knowledge of a large, complex, and frequently changing organization. For example, employees at this level operate a telephone switchboard for a large hospital and assist others in placing conference and overseas calls. They also specialize in answering and placing the more complex calls. As previously discussed, the VAMC is a small facility. Although the appellant connects a variety of incoming calls, the work does not require knowledge of outgoing connections and skill in the procedures necessary to connect a number of parties as is characteristic of Level 1-3.

Level 1-2 is credited for 200 points.

Factor 2, Supervisory controls

This factor covers the nature and extent of direct and indirect controls exercised by the supervisor, the employee's responsibility, and the review of completed work.

The appellant's position fully meets and does not exceed Level 2-2, the highest level described in the PCS. Consistent with positions at Level 2-2, the appellant operates relatively free from supervision when directing calls to their appropriate destination. The appellant is expected to follow established telephone procedures. Typical of Level 2-2, when unusual issues or problems arise, the appellant is expected to notify her supervisor. The supervisor reviews the work by occasional monitoring for quality and by spot-checking logs for adherence to established procedures. The controls for the appellant's work are characteristic of Level 2-2.

Level 2-2 is credited for 125 points.

Factor 3, Guidelines

This factor covers the nature of guidelines and the judgment needed to apply them.

Comparable to Level 3-1, the appellant has technical manuals that show how to operate the switchboard, standard operating procedures, and directories. The appellant uses directories that contain detailed information regarding employee listings which change infrequently. For example, the appellant may also enter the last name of a staff member and the computer provides the latest telephone number. The on-site audit revealed that the work does not require deviation or adaptation of standard operating procedures. For situations that do not readily fit instructions or other applicable guidelines, the appellant refers to the supervisor.

In contrast to Level 3-2, the appellant is not required to make minor adaptations in established procedures. Our fact-finding disclosed that the appellant does not routinely deal with unusual calls that would require her to deviate from established procedures. Since her work does not involve making minor adaptations in established procedures, it precludes crediting Level 3-2.

Level 3-1 is credited for 25 points.

Factor 4, Complexity

This factor covers the nature, number, variety, and intricacy of tasks, steps, processes, or methods in the work performed; the difficulty in identifying what needs to be done; and the difficulty and originality involved in performing the work.

Similar to Level 4-2, the highest level described in the PCS, the appellant operates a telephone switchboard to connect a variety of local and long distance incoming calls throughout the VAMC. Frequently, the appellant must ask questions of the caller in order to determine where to route the calls. The appellant's decisions regarding what needs to be done are based on the destination and priority level of the call. Consistent with that level, the appellant also monitors a variety of alarm systems which include panic, fire, intrusion, and code blue throughout VAMC. When an alarm is activated, the action to be taken by the appellant depends on the type of alarm. For example, if a panic alarm is activated, the appellant is responsible for using the radio to transmit the information to security personnel. Therefore, the appellant's position meets, but does not exceed Level 4-2.

Level 4-2 is credited for 75 points.

Factor 5, Scope and effect

This factor covers the relationship between the nature of the work (i.e., the purpose, breadth, and depth of the assignment) and the effect of work products or services both within and outside the organization. Only the effect of properly performed work is considered.

Like Level 5-1, the appellant's duties involve connecting telephone calls to their correct destination. The work of the appellant helps to ensure efficient telephone communication throughout the VAMC. Unlike Level 5-2, the work does not affect the accurate and reliable transmission of national defense, medical, or other important messages.

Level 5-1 is credited for 25 points.

Factor 6, Personal contacts, and Factor 7, Purpose of contacts

The GS-382 PCS treats Factors 6 and 7 together. The contacts credited under Factor 6 must be the same contacts considered under Factor 7. Factor 6 includes face-to face and telephone contacts with persons not in the supervisory chain. Factor 7 addresses the purpose of personal contacts, which may range from factual exchange of information to situations involving significant or controversial issues and differing viewpoints or objectives.

The appellant's contacts are characteristic of Level 1 where contacts are with employees in the unit and with callers. Comparable to this level, the appellant's typical contacts are limited to the employees within the VAMC, where the calls are being connected, and with the callers. Unlike Level 2, the appellant does not have contacts with commercial operators in other locations or with contractors for repairs.

The purpose of the appellant's contacts meets Level a where the employee exchanges information necessary to connect callers with the appropriate individuals. Level b is not met since the appellant's purposes of contacts are not for solving problems. The Telecommunications Specialist is responsible for resolving and communicating with repair technicians to locate telephone equipment and line problems.

Using the point assignment chart in the standard, the combination of Level 1 for personal contacts and Level a for purpose of contacts results in crediting 30 points.

Factor 8, Physical demands

As at Level 8-1, the appellant's work is usually sedentary, but may involve some standing and walking to consult directories and manuals.

Level 8-1 is credited for 5 points.

Factor 9, Work environment

As at Level 9-1, the appellant's work is normally performed in a well-lighted, temperature controlled room.

Level 9-1 is credited for 5 points.

Summary

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Points</i>
1. Knowledge required by the position	1-2	200
2. Supervisory controls	2-2	125
3. Guidelines	3-1	25
4. Complexity	4-2	75
5. Scope and effect	5-1	25
6. Personal contacts and 7. Purpose of contacts	1a	30
8. Physical demands	8-1	5
9. Work environment	9-1	5
<i>Total</i>		490

A total of 490 points falls within the GS-3 grade level point range of 455-650 points in the PCS's Grade Conversion Table.

Decision

The appellant's position is properly classified as Telephone Operator, GS-382-3.