

BEST PLACES TO WORK IN THE
FEDERAL GOVERNMENT® ANALYSISPERSPECTIVES FROM THE
SENIOR EXECUTIVE SERVICE

The *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*® rankings show consistently that while federal workers value leadership as the most important influence on employee job satisfaction and commitment, they also routinely give their top federal executives low marks for this skill.

But how do the high-level federal executives themselves view their own jobs and workplaces? Do their opinions differ greatly from those of other employees that challenge their leadership acumen? The Partnership for Public Service and Deloitte, set out to answer these questions through an analysis of the *Best Places to Work* data derived from the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) 2012 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey.

The focus of this snapshot is on government's Senior Executive Service (SES), the roughly 7,000-member leadership corps holding the highest managerial and policy positions in the federal government. Members of the SES typically have broad strategic oversight and high-level responsibilities, key factors for understanding the dynamic nature and unique pressures of federal leadership.

Senior Executives More Positive than Other Employees

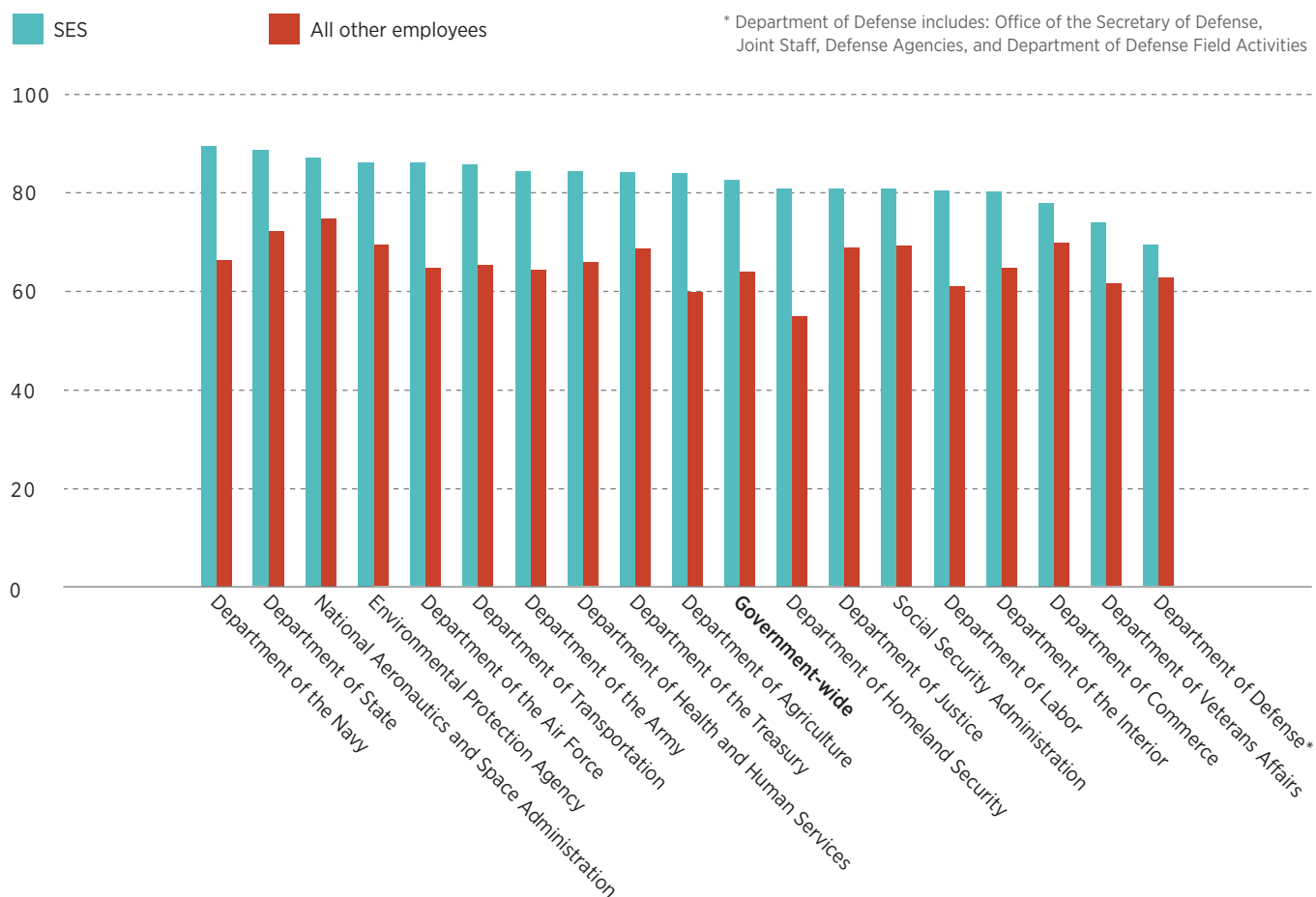
Our analysis found that members of the SES were more satisfied with their jobs than other federal employees overall and in all of the workplace categories examined in the *Best Places to Work* rankings, although there were some differences by agency and gender.

TABLE 1
**Government-wide index and workplace
category scores**

	MEMBERS OF THE SES	ALL OTHER EMPLOYEES	GAP
Best Places to Work index*	82.6	64.0	18.6
Effective Leadership	78.9	55.8	23.1
Empowerment	74.0	53.1	20.9
Fairness	81.5	53.8	27.7
Senior Leaders	77.7	49.3	28.4
Supervisors	81.4	64.8	16.6
Employee Skills/ Mission Match	89.8	77.5	12.3
Pay	63.7	58.6	5.1
Strategic Management	76.2	55.9	20.3
Teamwork	85.0	65.5	19.5
Training and Development	73.4	60.2	13.2
Work/Life Balance	62.6	61.1	1.5
Support for Diversity	83.1	57.8	25.3
Performance Based Rewards and Advancement	73.2	44.7	28.5

* The *Best Places to Work* index score is calculated based on three different survey questions: I recommend my organization as a good place to work; Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?; Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization? For more information about methodology, go to bestplacestowork.org

FIGURE 1
Large agency index scores



The 2012 *Best Places to Work* index score, which measures job satisfaction and commitment, was 82.6 on a scale of 100 for members of the SES, compared to a score of 64 for all other employees, an 18.6-point gap. While it may not be surprising that the senior leaders scored higher—because, generally speaking, an organization’s leaders enjoy more autonomy and have more control over issues that affect them—the difference is quite stark.

Four of the 10 workplace categories had gaps of 20 points or more between the general employee population and the senior leaders (Table 1). The largest disparity was on the issue of performance-based rewards and advancement, which showed a 28.5-point gap. On the question, “Promotions in my work unit are based on merit,” there was a gap of 46.5 points, with almost eight of 10 SES members agreeing with the statement in contrast to only three of 10 for all other employees.

There were large differences in the workplace category dealing with effective leadership, which includes questions regarding senior leaders, fairness and empower-

ment. With respect to the fairness question, “Arbitrary action, personal favoritism and coercion for partisan political purposes are not tolerated,” there was a 31.1-point gap between those employees who identified themselves as SES members and those who did not, with eight of 10 SES members in agreement compared with just about five out of 10 of all other employees. There was also a 25.3-point gap on support for diversity, with the executives having a much more favorable perspective on this issue than other employees.

Senior executives and all other employee views were most aligned on the issue of work/life balance. There was only a 1.5-point difference in scores between the two groups. On the work/life balance questions, “My workload is reasonable,” and “I have sufficient resources (for example, people, materials, budget) to get my job done,” employees had slightly more favorable scores than executives. These were the only questions in the federal survey where SES members had a lower score than all other employees. Likewise, there was a smaller gap on pay satisfaction (5.1 points), with SES members having a

higher satisfaction rating than other employees. Pay and work/life balance were also the lowest scoring categories for SES, although senior leaders were still more satisfied than all other employees on these two issues.

SES Agency Rankings

Which agencies had the most satisfied and committed SES members? According to our analysis, the top three large agencies were the Department of the Navy, Department of State and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Figure 1). Agencies with the lowest levels of SES satisfaction and commitment scores were the Department of Commerce, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, Defense Agencies and Department of Defense Field Activities.

Senior Executives and Employees Have Different Views of their Agencies

The job satisfaction ratings of SES members showed variations depending on the agency where they work. Did their employees share the same views of their agencies as their executives? The answer is no. The overall job satisfaction rating given by SES members to their agency (large departments and agencies) was universally higher than those given by employees (Figure 1). At the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), for example, senior executives had a score that was 26 points higher than that of all other employees. A similar large gap existed between senior leaders and all other employees at the Department of Agriculture (24.2 points) and the Department of the Navy (23.2 points).

The gap was the smallest (6.7 points) at the Office of the Secretary of Defense, but the score was low among both leaders and its employees. This organization had the least satisfied SES corps among large agencies.

A closer analysis of DHS workplace category scores revealed a similar pattern to government-wide results—larger gaps on performance-based rewards and advancement and on effective leadership, but smaller differences on work/life balance and pay. At DHS, however, the differences were quite pronounced. For example, there was a 37.7-point gap between senior leaders and employees on performance based rewards and advancement compared with 28.5 points government-wide. The largest gap at DHS was on the performance question, “Promotions in my work unit are based on merit.” On this question, almost 8 of 10 SES members at DHS agreed with the statement in contrast to only about one in five for all other employees.

TABLE 2
Workplace category scores by gender

	SES MEN	SES WOMEN	GAP
Best Places to Work index	82.8	82.7	0.1
Effective Leadership	79.4	78.4	1.0
Empowerment	74.5	73.3	1.2
Fairness	82.6	79.5	3.1
Senior Leaders	77.6	78.2	0.6
Supervisors	81.9	80.5	1.4
Employee Skills/ Mission Match	89.6	90.4	0.8
Pay	62.2	67.1	4.9
Strategic Management	76.2	76.3	0.1
Teamwork	85.4	84.3	1.1
Training and Development	73.2	74.2	1.0
Work/Life Balance	63.5	60.6	2.9
Support for Diversity	84.1	81.1	3.0
Performance Based Rewards and Advancement	73.0	74.0	1.0

Gender Comparison

Government-wide, there was virtually no difference between men and women members of the SES on overall job satisfaction (Table 2). The *Best Places to Work* score was 82.8 for men and 82.7 for women. However, there were some gender¹ differences on several workplace category scores. The largest difference was on satisfaction with pay. Women in the SES were more satisfied with their pay than men by 4.9 points. On fairness, male executives had a higher score than women by 3.1 points. Men also were slightly more positive than women on support for diversity and work/life balance. There was a gap of 5 points on the work/life question, “My workload is reasonable,” with about six in 10 male executives versus about five in 10 women executives in agreement.

Gender Gap by Agency

Although there was no real difference between men and women in the SES on overall satisfaction at the government-wide level, there were differences greater than 5 points at some large agencies (Table 3). At DHS and the State Department, women senior executives had higher overall satisfaction than men. In contrast, women executives had lower satisfaction scores than men at the En-

1 Other demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, tenure) for members of the SES were not included in this analysis.

vironmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Office of the Secretary of Defense and at the Department of Justice (DOJ).

At DOJ, men and women executives differed sharply on the issues of empowerment and fairness, as well as on the category of work/life balance. On empowerment, men were considerably more satisfied than women executives. In particular, there was a gap of 21.3 points on the empowerment survey question, “How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work?” Only six of 10 women executives at DOJ were satisfied, compared with eight of 10 men.

SES Opinions Vary on Whether Survey Results Will Be Used

As agency leaders, many members of the SES may be responsible for taking action on the survey results to improve employee satisfaction and commitment as well as the workplace environment. However, only slightly more than half of SES members government-wide responded favorably to the question, “I believe the results of this survey will be used to make my agency a better place to work.” What was more striking was the 42.3-point range of scores on this question among agencies (Figure 2).

At the Department of Health and Human Services, for example, seven of 10 senior executives believed the survey results would be used to improve the agency. Likewise, SES members at the Department of Transportation (DOT) also had a high percentage who believed the survey results will make a difference—perhaps, in part, due to the fact that senior executives are required to take action on survey results in their performance plans. With DOT’s overall improvement in the *Best Places to Work* rankings during the past few years, members of the SES have witnessed success on their actions first-hand by seeing the survey data turned into substantial improvements.

At the other end of the spectrum, fewer than three in 10 SES members at the Department of the Army and the Office of the Secretary of Defense believed the survey results will be used to improve their agencies. In fact, all other employees at those agencies were more positive about the impact of the survey than SES members

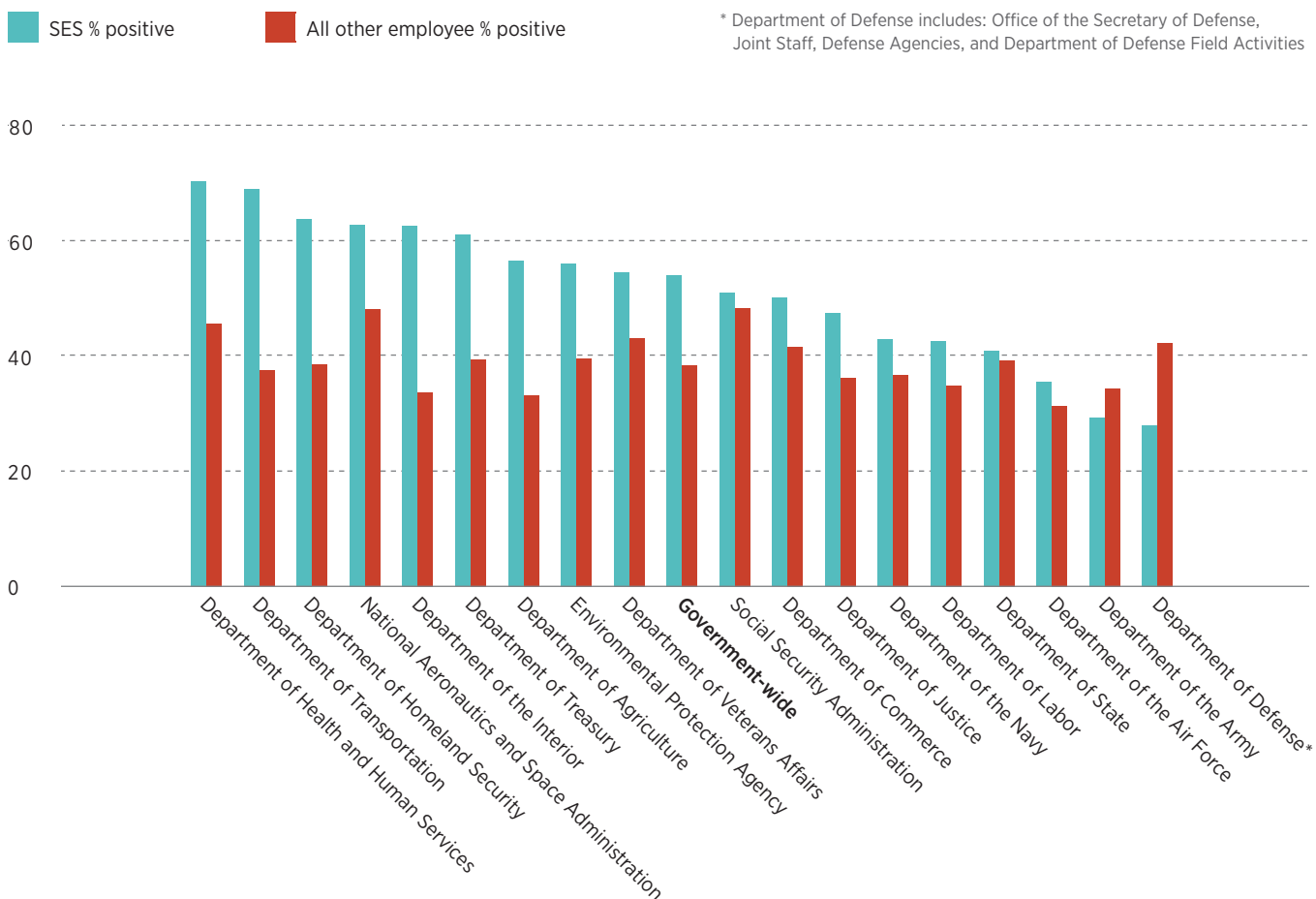
Several agencies with relatively high scores for senior executives on this question also had differences with all other employees that were greater than 20 points. While these agencies appeared to have members of the SES who are champions of the survey, they may have to work to convince their employees it will be used.

TABLE 3
Large agency index scores by gender

AGENCY	SES MEN	SES WOMEN	GAP
Department of Justice	85.3	73.6	11.7
Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, Defense Agencies, and Department of Defense Field Activities	72.0	61.7	10.3
Environmental Protection Agency	90.6	80.9	9.7
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	88.0	85.6	2.4
Department of the Interior	81.0	79.7	1.3
Department of Commerce	78.3	77.7	0.6
Department of Agriculture	83.7	83.9	0.2
Department of Health and Human Services	84.5	84.9	0.4
Government-wide	82.8	82.7	0.1
Department of Veterans Affairs	73.4	74.9	1.5
Social Security Administration	80.5	82.4	1.9
Department of Transportation	84.8	88.4	3.6
Department of the Treasury	82.5	86.7	4.2
Department of Homeland Security	79.4	84.5	5.1
Department of State	87.0	92.7	5.7
Department of the Air Force	86.4	-	-
Department of the Army	83.8	-	-
Department of Labor	85.6	-	-
Department of the Navy	89.1	-	-

FIGURE 2

Percentage of positive responses to survey question: “I believe the results of this survey will be used to make my agency a better place to work.”



Conclusion

Understanding the perspectives of the government’s senior executives is important because they are the leaders that set the tone for workplace culture and are responsible for executing the mission and improving employee performance.

It is understandable that senior executives may have more positive perceptions of the workplace than all other employees because they have advanced to the highest levels of the organization and are the ones making many of the day-to-day decisions, creating a vision and enjoying more autonomy. However, if the views of the leaders and their employees are at great variance, it also could mean that employees see real problems that the senior executives do not. If this is the case, senior executives may be missing opportunities to improve employee engagement and job performance, overlooking innovative ideas and hindered in efforts to increase employee productivity.

Some actions can be taken to avoid this major disconnect between agency executives and their employees, a prudent course during normal times let alone during periods like today with many budgetary of uncertainties, a salary freeze, hiring slowdowns and declining employee morale.

We recommend that agency leaders:

- Pay close attention to any differences in perceptions between employees and leaders and managers, and seek additional information and insights through active discussions with employees and by soliciting feedback.
- Hold executives accountable for taking steps to communicate and engage with their employees, and make this part of performance management plans for SES members. This should cascade down to middle managers and first-line supervisors.

- Help employees at all levels to feel empowered to recommend actions or initiatives that might improve employee satisfaction and commitment. It should be clear that improving the work environment is a shared responsibility and not something that is the sole job of agency leadership. Employees should be encouraged to raise concerns and offer constructive ideas to solve job related problems.
- Determine if there are any lessons to be learned from other organizations that have managed to close the satisfaction gaps between executives and employees, and apply those lessons if they fit the situation

The bottom line is that agency executives and their employees experience the workplace quite differently, with workers far less satisfied with their jobs than their bosses. Top agency executives must do a better job of understanding the issues that affect employees and take steps to engage the workers, to listen to what they have to say and to make changes that will have a positive impact on accomplishing the organization's mission as efficiently and effectively as possible.

TABLE 4
Large agency index scores

AGENCY	SES RANK	SES SCORE	NON-SES SCORE	GAP
Department of the Navy	1	89.5	66.3	23.2
Department of State	2	88.6	72.2	16.4
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	3	87.2	74.8	12.4
Environmental Protection Agency	4	86.2	69.4	16.8
Department of the Air Force	5	86.1	64.7	21.4
Department of Transportation	6	85.7	65.4	20.3
Department of the Army	7	84.4	64.3	20.1
Department of Health and Human Services	8	84.3	65.8	18.5
Department of the Treasury	9	84.2	68.7	15.5
Department of Agriculture	10	84.0	59.8	24.2
Department of Homeland Security	11	80.9	54.9	26.0
Department of Justice	12	80.8	68.9	11.9
Social Security Administration	12	80.8	69.3	11.5
Department of Labor	14	80.5	61.0	19.5
Department of the Interior	15	80.3	64.7	15.6
Department of Commerce	16	77.9	69.9	8.0
Department of Veterans Affairs	16	73.9	61.5	12.4
Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, Defense Agencies, and Department of Defense Field Activities	18	69.4	62.7	6.7