

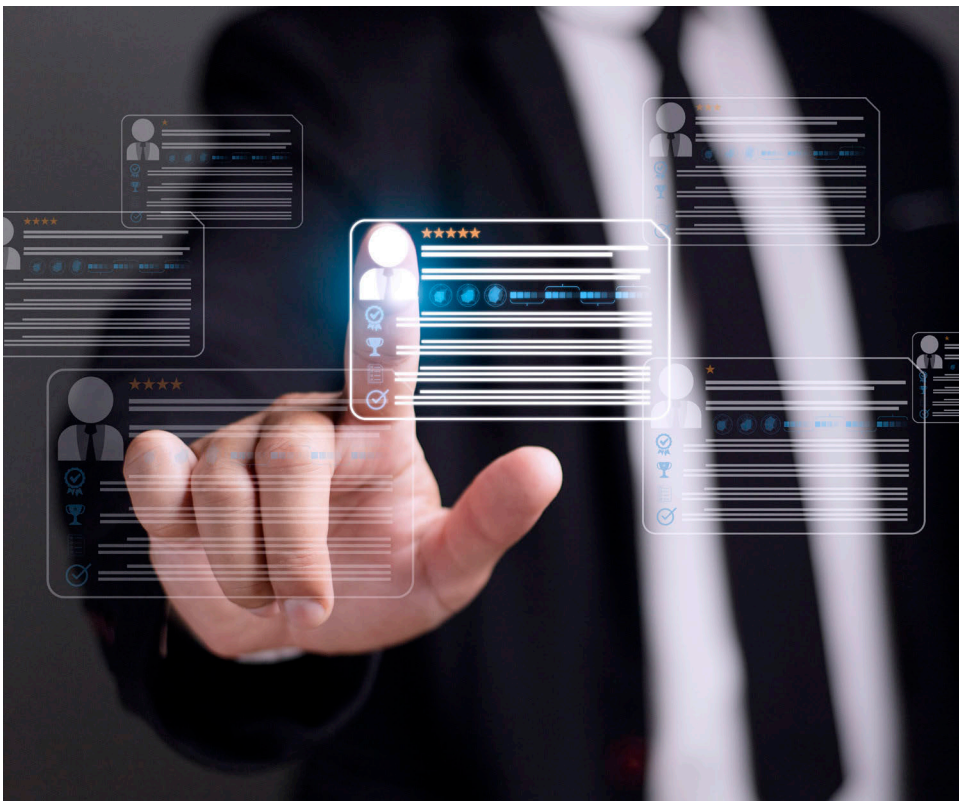


Research Report

DAVID STEBBINS, RICHARD S. GIRVEN, SAMANTHA RYAN

National Security Employment

Improving the Candidate Experience Journey
Through the Personnel Vetting Process



For more information on this publication, visit www.rand.org/t/RRA1990-1.

About RAND

The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. To learn more about RAND, visit www.rand.org.

Research Integrity

Our mission to help improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis is enabled through our core values of quality and objectivity and our unwavering commitment to the highest level of integrity and ethical behavior. To help ensure our research and analysis are rigorous, objective, and nonpartisan, we subject our research publications to a robust and exacting quality-assurance process; avoid both the appearance and reality of financial and other conflicts of interest through staff training, project screening, and a policy of mandatory disclosure; and pursue transparency in our research engagements through our commitment to the open publication of our research findings and recommendations, disclosure of the source of funding of published research, and policies to ensure intellectual independence. For more information, visit www.rand.org/about/research-integrity.

RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

© 2023 RAND Corporation

RAND® is a registered trademark.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this publication.

ISBN: 978-1-9774-1095-5

Cover: Userba011d64_201/Getty Images

Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights

This publication and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law. This representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for noncommercial use only. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited; linking directly to its webpage on rand.org is encouraged. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of its research products for commercial purposes. For information on reprint and reuse permissions, please visit www.rand.org/pubs/permissions.

About This Report

Numerous societal and generational changes will affect the way the U.S. government attracts, hires, and retains candidates as they undergo hiring and screening for federal employment. This report explores how existing security, suitability, and credentialing (SSC) mechanisms might benefit from a formalized candidate experience strategy and framework to create a more positive vetting experience. Organizations that provide investigative and adjudicative services (e.g., investigative service providers, authorized adjudicative agencies) and other SSC stakeholders will need to increase engagement to promote, gauge, and maintain candidate commitment throughout initial personnel vetting. SSC processes may benefit from consideration of the adoption or adaptation of some of the hiring, onboarding, and retention practices from across the private sector that are focused on creating a more engaging candidate experience.

This initial examination provides a new way of thinking about the vetting process from the candidate point of view. The observations and suggestions provided in this report provide a framework to present the factors that may contribute to a positive candidate experience across the pre-initial vetting phase (factors that influence candidate awareness, organizational attraction, and job consideration), the initial vetting phase (candidate “conversion” to apply to a position and ongoing relationship management), and the post-initial vetting phase (including entry on duty [EOD], onboarding, retention, and future job mobility).

The research reported here was completed in February 2023 and underwent security review with the sponsor and the Defense Office of Prepublication and Security Review before public release.

RAND National Security Research Division

This research was sponsored by the Security, Suitability, and Credentialing Performance Accountability Council Program Management Office and conducted within the Personnel, Readiness, and Health Program of the RAND National Security Research Division (NSRD), which operates the National Defense Research Institute (NDRI), a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense intelligence enterprise.

For more information on the RAND Personnel, Readiness, and Health Program, see www.rand.org/nsrd/prh or contact the director (contact information is provided on the webpage).

Acknowledgments

The research contained within this report would not be possible without the input, assistance, and continued support from several individuals. We would like to thank David Colangelo and Renee Oberlin at the Security, Suitability, and Credentialing Performance Accountability Council (our sponsoring office) for their continuous guidance, feedback, and connections for our interviews with U.S. government (USG) vetting representatives. We would like to express our gratitude to the many USG and private-sector subject-matter experts we spoke with over the course of this project, who greatly informed the development of our proposed framework. We would also like to thank our reviewers, Sina Beaghley, Stephanie Platz-Vieno, and Daniel Ginsberg, for their thoughtful review of this report. Finally, we owe our gratitude to Kate Giglio, whose graphics continuously helped to depict the candidate's journey throughout the federal hiring and vetting process.

Summary

This report provides the Security, Suitability, and Credentialing Performance Accountability Council Program Management Office with an initial examination of organizational characteristics and processes that may attract new generations to the national security workforce and promote a positive candidate experience throughout the personnel vetting and screening process. Rapidly evolving social and cultural norms will require government organizations to consider characteristics not typically accounted for across the hiring and screening process. The key objectives of this research project were to (1) identify prominent (and emerging) factors for consideration when attracting, hiring, and engaging new generations of the national security workforce, (2) highlight relevant private-sector engagement practices that help to maintain candidate interest during recruitment and hiring processes, and (3) develop a tailorable candidate experience framework that can help departments and agencies think about how to approach cross-cutting vetting and screening challenges and inform future candidate experience initiatives.¹

Observations and Suggestions

A summary of our observations and suggestions from this research is presented in abbreviated form in Table S.1. A more detailed explanation of our observations and suggestions is presented in Chapter 5.

Our observations and suggestions for the U.S. government (USG) security, suitability, and credentialing (SSC) stakeholder community result from the information gleaned through our review of USG and private-sector literature, our interviews with USG vetting stakeholders, and our discussions with private-sector subject-matter experts familiar with developing candidate experiences for private-sector organizations. We use the term *suggestions* to signify options and/or actions that our initial examination identified as potentially beneficial for USG SSC stakeholders as they explore ways to offer a formalized positive candidate experience within personnel vetting processes. The observations and suggestions provided in Table S.1 (and in Chapter 5) are not prioritized, because many of the associated actions and activities would likely occur simultaneously across SSC stakeholders. However, we suggest

¹ Developing a formal candidate experience framework may also assist with other U.S. government (USG) efforts to acquire the diverse talent needed for the federal government's important, unique, and varied missions. Departments and agencies might not be able to maintain pace with private-sector practices highlighted in this report, as USG departments and agencies might not possess the human resources information technology capabilities, resources, technical expertise, or senior leadership backing and collaborative partnerships to tackle this issue. Building an integrated, robust talent acquisition program that focuses on the candidate experience may help to reengineer efforts toward prioritizing candidate needs.

TABLE S.1

Candidate Vetting Experience: Observations and Suggestions

Observations	Suggestions
<p>Observation 1: The USG has not institutionalized an approach across the federal hiring and screening processes for creating a positive candidate experience.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the proposed tailorable SSC candidate experience framework to further operationalize Federal Personnel Vetting Engagement Guideline end-state objectives.
<p>Observation 2: Connections between candidate experience and its importance to ensuring U.S. national security workforce continuity are critical in fostering SSC stakeholder buy-in.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deploy foundational change-management techniques to emulate desired process changes. • Develop relevant candidate experience metrics across all vetting phases. • Institute data-collection platforms and standardize data collection to inform candidate experience metrics. • Incorporate best practices in talent acquisition as part of an overall candidate experience strategy.
<p>Observation 3: There is no consistent or formalized training across the USG on how to ensure a positive candidate experience.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a candidate experience training curriculum based on stated candidate experience outcomes within the developed candidate experience strategy.
<p>Observation 4: The private sector’s hiring and screening processes will likely retain several advantages (e.g., timeliness, location flexibility) over the USG’s for the foreseeable future.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SSC stakeholders should consider engaging with pre- and post-initial vetting personnel to develop more-effective engagements across the awareness, attraction, consideration, relationship management, and retention stages.

alignment of our proposed recommendations with the Federal Personnel Vetting Engagement Guidelines,² which would reinforce (and validate) USG screening priorities.

Connections between creating a positive candidate experience and its importance to ensuring U.S. national security workforce continuity are critical for attracting, hiring, screening, and retaining prospective applications. The USG would likely benefit from a formalized candidate experience strategy and framework that could help organizations prioritize candidates within existing hiring and screening processes. However, absent a stronger demand signal from senior leadership, progress on providing a more comprehensive candidate experience across organizations may languish in lieu of other vetting modernization priorities. Although the USG has been striving to improve interaction and engagement with the public for several decades (via a series of executive orders across several administrations), an institutionalized candidate experience process has yet to emerge across organizations responsible for hiring and screening prospective government employees. Wide-scale incorporation of candidate experience practices will also likely require a change in overall vetting culture to conform with relevant private-sector practices.

² Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the Office of Personnel Management, “Federal Vetting Engagement Guidelines,” February 10, 2022b.

The private sector's hiring and screening process will likely retain several advantages (e.g., timeliness, hybrid working environment) over the USG's for the foreseeable future. This creates an imperative of increasing candidate engagement and process transparency throughout the vetting phases we have identified to ensure as seamless of a candidate experience as possible. SSC stakeholders will likely need to increase engagement with pre- and post-initial vetting personnel (e.g., recruiters or web-designers for front end processes) to develop more effective candidate engagement methods to develop unity of effort. Including SSC stakeholders earlier in a candidate's federal hiring journey could also highlight additional process efficiencies (e.g., prescreening assessments) to reduce overall burden for both parties.

Contents

About This Report iii

Summary v

Figures and Tables xi

CHAPTER 1

Introduction 1

 Objectives and Approach 1

 Organization of This Report 2

 Scope..... 2

 Research Method and Approach..... 3

 Brief Background on USG Efforts to Create a Positive Customer Experience..... 5

CHAPTER 2

The State of the USG Candidate Hiring Experience 7

 Overview 7

 Why Do USG Positions Require a Background Investigation? 7

 How Does Personnel Vetting Fit in with the Overall Federal Hiring Process?..... 10

 The Demand Signal for Providing a Better SSC Candidate Experience..... 13

 Existing USG Policy and Guidance on Candidate Experience 16

 Summary of Existing USG Guidance and Policy in the SSC Context 27

 Ongoing Efforts to Incorporate Candidate Experience into USG Hiring Practices
 (USG Interviews)..... 28

 Summary 32

CHAPTER 3

Candidate Experience in the Private Sector 33

 Candidate Experience Factors to Consider in the Pre-Initial Vetting Phase 33

 Prehire Factors for Framework Consideration..... 39

 Candidate Experience Factors to Consider in the Initial Vetting Phase 40

 Hiring and Screening Factors for Framework Consideration..... 43

 Candidate Experience Factors to Consider in the Post-Initial Vetting Phase 45

 Retention Factors for Framework Consideration..... 48

 Private-Sector Organization Interviews 48

 Summary 52

CHAPTER 4

A Tailorable Framework: Improving the Candidate Journey Through the SSC Process ... 53

 Overview 53

 Framework Development Methodology 53

Step 1: Develop Relevant Candidate Experience Framework Categories	54
Step 2: Map the Candidate’s Journey	57
Step 3: Assemble Populated Framework Categories with Journey Mapping to Create Holistic Candidate Experience Framework	65
Summary	65
 CHAPTER 5	
Observations, Suggestions, and Conclusions	69
 APPENDIXES	
A. Potential Strategic Questions, by Vetting Phase and Step	73
B. List of Interviewee Affiliations and Interview Protocol	77
C. Annotated Bibliography for Chapter 3	81
 Abbreviations	 99
References	101

Figures and Tables

Figures

2.1.	Forrester Customer Experience Index, 2021	14
2.2.	USG High-Impact Service Provider Designations	19
2.3.	OMB Customer Experience Drivers and Categories for Metric Development	21
2.4.	U.S. Department of Education Integrated Student Experience (as of 2015)	23
2.5.	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Customer Experience Cookbook	24
3.1.	Candidate Journey Phases	35
4.1.	A Candidate’s Journey Through the Federal Hiring Process	57
4.2.	Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 1	58
4.3.	Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 2	59
4.4.	Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 3	60
4.5.	Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 4	60
4.6.	Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 5	61
4.7.	Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 6	62
4.8.	Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 7	63
4.9.	Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 8	64
4.10.	Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 9	64

Tables

S.1.	Candidate Vetting Experience: Observations and Suggestions	vi
1.1.	History/Evolution of USG Customer Experience	6
2.1.	Federal Investigation Forms and Purpose	10
2.2.	Generalized Background Investigation Process	11
2.3.	Three Vetting Phases Identified	12
2.4.	Federal Personnel Vetting Engagement Guideline Components and Outcomes	17
2.5.	Veterans Affairs Customer Experience Cookbook Phases and Categories	25
4.1.	SSC Framework Categories	55
4.2.	Pre-Initial Vetting Phase, Worked Example (Look for Job/Apply to Job)	66
4.3.	SSC Phases, Worked Example (Background Investigation/Adjudication)	67
A.1.	Potential Strategic Questions, by Vetting Phase, Candidate Stage, and Step	73
B.1.	List of Interviewee Affiliations	77

Introduction

Objectives and Approach

The Security, Suitability, and Credentialing Performance Accountability Council (PAC) Program Management Office (PMO) asked the RAND Corporation to conduct a study that considered the types of organizational characteristics and processes that can help to create a positive candidate experience throughout the personnel vetting and screening process. Because of rapidly evolving social and cultural norms, government organizations will likely need to consider characteristics and factors not typically accounted for across the hiring process. The key objectives of this research project were as follows:

- Identify prominent (and emerging) factors for consideration when attracting, hiring, and engaging new generations of the national security workforce.
- Highlight relevant private-sector engagement practices that help to maintain candidate interest during recruitment and hiring processes.
- Develop a tailorable candidate experience framework that can help departments and agencies think about how to approach cross-cutting vetting and screening challenges and inform future candidate experience initiatives.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) recently defined *customer experience* as “a combination of factors that result from touchpoints between an individual, business, or organization and the Federal Government over the duration of an interaction and relationship.”¹ However, this definition captures only U.S. government (USG) service delivery provisions for external customers (e.g., tax assistance).² We build on this definition and define *candidate experience* as follows:

The USG’s ability to proactively manage and retain positive relationships with prospective federal employees, active job applicants, and the existing workforce throughout the

¹ Office of Management and Budget, Circular No. A-11, “Preparation, Submission, and Execution of the Budget,” August 2022, Section 280—Managing Customer Experience and Improving Service Delivery.

² We discuss the USG’s distinction between *candidate* and *customer* more in Chapter 2.

federal hiring, screening, and onboarding process, informed through a formalized collection of federal hiring process inputs, outputs, and outcomes.

The initial examination presented in this report is intended to establish a research baseline to create a positive candidate experience (within the definition we have provided) and a framework (i.e., a tool for assessment and improvement) that can assist the USG with improving candidate experience throughout the candidate's hiring and personnel vetting journey.

Organization of This Report

This report presents our observations and suggestions, culminating in the presentation of a novel candidate framework for consideration that is intended to enable stakeholders in the federal personnel vetting enterprise to assist in improving candidate experiences. This chapter provides a brief introduction to our research, describes the project scope, and explains our research objectives and approach. In Chapter 2, we provide an overview and analysis of the current state of the USG candidate hiring experience, based on our literature review and interviews with USG hiring managers. We review existing USG policy and guidance documents, consider customer and candidate experiences, and discuss High-Impact Service Providers (HISPs).³ We then provide an overview of the USG's security, suitability, and credentialing (SSC) process within the context of the overall federal hiring process, and we discuss ongoing efforts to incorporate candidate experience into existing hiring practices. In Chapter 3, we examine relevant candidate experience practices in the private sector, drawing on our literature review and interviews. We summarize factors that are in use in various sectors and organizations and seek to align them, where possible, with the SSC phases of government hiring. In Chapter 4, we examine a candidate's journey through the SSC process, offer some considerations for each hiring and screening stage, and provide a candidate journey map through the SSC vetting process that could be used to create and assess overall candidate experience. Finally, we offer some examples of how the framework could be adapted. In Chapter 5, we conclude with final observations and suggestions.

Scope

Our research primarily sought to understand factors associated with creating a positive candidate experience during the USG's SSC processes; however, our literature review and interviews with subject-matter experts (SMEs) highlighted the importance of examining pre-initial vetting processes (recruiting and hiring) and post-initial vetting processes (entry on duty [EOD], onboarding, retention, job mobility) to ensure a comprehensive capture of all

³ As we explain in Chapter 2, an HISP is a U.S. organization that provides the public with various forms of service delivery.

factors that may affect a candidate's journey through the hiring processes. We describe our methods and approach below.

Research Method and Approach

Literature Review

Our initial research task focused on gathering USG policy and guidance relevant to the personnel vetting process.⁴ We developed four overarching research questions to drive our literature collection:⁵

- What is the existing state of the USG's candidate experience efforts?
- Has the USG issued targeted candidate experience policy or guidance to assist the SSC stakeholder community?
- Are there federal departments or agencies outside the traditional vetting space that might offer use cases (i.e., relevant practices) that could assist in creating a positive candidate vetting experience?
- Are there any existing frameworks or "journey maps" that could inform the development of a novel candidate vetting experience framework?

We then developed several keyword search terms to assist literature review efforts. Example search terms and Boolean search strings for this task include the following:

- search terms:
 - candidate experience
 - customer experience (CX)
 - customer/candidate toolkit
 - high-impact service provider (HISP)
 - service quality
 - vetting process
 - security vetting
 - background checks or background investigations
 - personnel selection
 - employee life cycle
 - talent management and recruitment
 - customer/candidate framework

⁴ The personnel vetting process includes background investigation and adjudication activities that are required for positions requiring a security clearance or a suitability determination, or for other federal employment credentialing (collectively known as the "SSC" process).

⁵ These research questions were developed in close collaboration with our sponsor.

- Boolean search strings:
 - “candidate experience” OR “candidate recruitment” OR “candidate onboarding” OR “candidate interest” OR “candidate reflections” OR “hiring practices” OR “framework” OR “applicant experience”
 - “government” OR “federal” OR “national security” OR “federal organizations” OR “vetting” OR “security vetting” OR “clearance process” AND “candidate experience” OR “applicant experience”
 - “candidate experience” AND “improve*” OR “reform” OR “update” OR “transform” OR “upgrade.”

We considered the literature review to be a “living” research task; that is, if we uncovered new terms or acronyms related to USG vetting or candidate experience, these terms were then used to conduct new searches to ensure comprehensive data collection.⁶ We used the initial observations and findings from the literature review to develop USG-specific interview protocols for subsequent engagement with SSC SMEs.⁷

Interviews

We then developed a semistructured interview instrument for use with USG and private-sector organization SMEs. The semistructured nature of our interviews with personnel allowed us to analyze findings across each of the organizations with which we spoke, while also providing the flexibility to explore unique vetting and hiring practices during our conversations. Interviews were designed to further evaluate information gleaned from our literature review and help us understand (1) generational factors and relevant hiring practices to consider when engaging with new federal workforce populations, (2) relevant challenges and lessons learned for engaging with prospective candidates, (3) characteristics of hiring technology platforms that might promote or maintain candidate interest throughout the hiring process, and (4) recommendations on how the USG might best incorporate candidate experience factors in future SSC processes.⁸ We interviewed a total of ten individuals between August 2022 and November 2022. Five individuals provided subject-matter expertise on

⁶ This approach is reflected in our list of example search terms and Boolean search strings. For example, the USG began substituting the abbreviation CX for customer experience in 2021–2022. Performance.gov now uses the CX abbreviation when discussing department and agency progress toward meeting the Presidential Management Directives outlined in Performance.gov, “President’s Management Agenda: Customer Experience Priority: Delivering Excellent, Equitable, and Secure Federal Services and Customer Experience,” webpage, undated, and the related “CX Blog” (Performance.gov, “Federal Customer Experience Blog,” undated).

⁷ USG and private-sector interview protocols and questions may be viewed in Appendix B.

⁸ Our interviews with public- and private-sector stakeholders are governed by our Human Subjects Protection Committee (HSPC), which serves as RAND’s Institutional Review Board to review and ensure ethical treatment of individuals who are participants in RAND projects through observation, intervention, interaction or use of data about them. RAND’s HSPC determined that this research did not constitute human subjects research per the Common Rule (Code of Regulations, Title 45, Public Welfare; Subtitle A,

existing candidate experience integration within the USG SSC enterprise. We also held three discussions with candidate experience experts in the private sector to better understand the state of hiring practices external to the USG. Finally, we identified and interviewed two individuals who recently required security vetting as part of their federal hiring process.

Brief Background on USG Efforts to Create a Positive Customer Experience

The federal government has been working to improve interaction and engagement with the public for several decades. The series of presidential executive orders (E.O.'s) presented in Table 1.1 highlight the evolution of USG efforts intended to bolster service delivery (e.g., student loan assistance, veterans' benefits) for the U.S. public. However, we were not able to identify any E.O.'s that focus specifically on candidate experience during federal hiring.⁹

Several U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports have examined SSC hiring process timelines, though they do not investigate factors required to improve the candidate experience within the vetting process.¹⁰ One GAO report published in 2019 notes the importance of creating clear job announcements and advancing greater transparency within the federal hiring process to attract human capital, though the report does not mention candidate experience process improvements within the personnel vetting context.¹¹

SSC stakeholders are working toward enhancing individual engagement during the vetting process through the USG's Trusted Workforce Initiative, promoting two-way communication between SSC personnel and in-process candidates, providing engagement training for SSC stakeholders who interact with candidates, and creating methods for candidates to maintain situational awareness on status of their application and clearance (e.g., dashboards) under the Trusted Workforce Initiative.¹² The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) and U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) in 2022 also issued the Federal

Department of Health and Human Services; Subchapter A, General Administration; Part 46, Protection of Human Subjects).

⁹ E.O. 13932, "Modernizing and Reforming the Assessment and Hiring of Federal Job Candidates," is the first E.O. that begins to address candidate experience issues—though it is more focused on reforming job postings and assessment methods rather than instituting continuous engagement with candidates in-process.

¹⁰ See GAO, *Personnel Vetting: Actions Needed to Implement Reforms, Address Challenges, and Improve Planning*, GAO-22-104093, December 9, 2021. Also see Brenda S. Farrell, "Personnel Security Clearances: Additional Actions Needed to Implement Key Reforms and Improve Timely Processing of Investigations," testimony before the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-18-431T, March 7, 2018.

¹¹ Yvonne D. Jones, "Human Capital: Improving Federal Recruiting and Hiring Efforts," testimony before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs and Federal Management, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-19-696T, July 30, 2019..

¹² We discuss the Trusted Workforce Initiative more in Chapter 2.

TABLE 1.1

History/Evolution of USG Customer Experience

USG Document	Description
E.O. 12862, Setting Customer Service Standards (1993)	<i>Required agencies that provide significant services directly to the public to identify and gather feedback from customers; establish service standards and measure performance against those standards; and benchmark customer service performance against the best customer experience provided in the private sector.</i>
E.O. 13571, Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service (2011)	<i>Further required agencies to develop a “Customer Service Plan . . . to address how the agency will provide services in a manner that seeks to streamline service delivery and improve the experience of its customers.”</i>
E.O. 13707, Using Behavioral Science Insights to Better Serve the American People (2015)	<i>Called for the use of empirical findings in behavioral science fields to deliver better results for the American people, including by identifying “opportunities to help qualifying individuals, families, communities, and businesses access public programs and benefits.”</i>
OMB Circular No. A-11 (2020)	Government-wide document establishing standards for customer experience and requiring HISPs to assess their customer experience performance.
E.O. 13932, Modernizing and Reforming the Assessment and Hiring of Federal Job Candidates (2021)	Requires OPM to review and revise job classifications and qualification standards for positions within competitive service
E.O. 13985, Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (2021)	<i>Established the policy of the Federal Government to “pursue a comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality.”</i>
E.O. 14058, Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government (2021)	Directs HISPs and other departments and agencies to collect, measure, and analyze customer experience to improve USG-provided services.

SOURCE: Presents information from E.O. 14058, “Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government,” Executive Office of the President, December 13, 2021. Italics indicate that the cell is directly quoting E.O. 14058 and that quotations within the cell are quoting the E.O. that is being described.

Personnel Vetting Engagement Guidelines to outline expected candidate-oriented process changes in fiscal years 2023 and 2024.¹³

¹³ ODNI and OPM, “Federal Personnel Vetting Engagement Guidelines,” February 10, 2022b.

The State of the USG Candidate Hiring Experience

Overview

This chapter highlights existing federal government efforts to improve the hiring and vetting experience across departments and agencies. We discuss why some federal positions require background investigation and adjudication before job placement, how the personnel vetting process fits within the overall USG hiring process, and some of the expected process changes under the USG's Trusted Workforce Initiative.

We distinguish between two related but distinct terms used throughout the USG policy and guidance we reviewed. While our research indicated that the USG has not developed formal (codified) *candidate* experience policy or guidance related to the vetting process, the USG has instituted several reforms intended to improve the *customer* experience by designating select departments and agencies as High-Impact Service Providers (HISPs). The HISP designation affords select U.S. organizations with an external (public-facing) mission with some additional resources to accomplish missions that include various types of service delivery to the U.S. public.¹

This chapter concludes with observations and suggestions provided through our interviews with USG SMEs to improve the candidate vetting experience.

Why Do USG Positions Require a Background Investigation?

Background investigations for federal government positions are designated based on two primary factors: risk level and sensitivity level.² The type of background investigation will differ depending on the sensitivity and risk level of the job position. Following the investigation, the federal government will make a trustworthiness determination. Positions with the potential to “damage the public’s trust in the Federal Government” may either be designated as *low-*

¹ More on HISPs later in this chapter.

² Such positions may also be simultaneously designated as non-sensitive, non-critical sensitive, critical sensitive, or special sensitive.

*risk, moderate-risk, or high-risk.*³ Positions that may affect U.S. national security may be designated as *non-critical sensitive, critical sensitive, or special sensitive*. Categorizations (“tiers”) of position-based risk and sensitivity are undergoing modernization through vetting process reform efforts.⁴

Sensitivity and Risk

USAJobs explains that “sensitivity has to do with the position’s potential impact on the national security of the United States.”⁵ For example, a non-sensitive position may have “no impact” on national security. Federal regulations require that a background investigation be conducted on each federal employee, contractor, and military member before they begin work. Specifically, “In the interest of safeguarding the welfare of the American people, it is required that all persons privileged to be employed in the departments and agencies of the United States Government shall be reliable, trustworthy, of good conduct and character, and of complete and unswerving loyalty to the United States.”⁶ In other words, can the USG trust the person applying for work?

Risk categorizations focus on a position’s potential to damage the public’s trust in the federal government. The scope and depth of the background investigation varies, depending on the nature of the position and degree of harm that could be caused by an individual if they are hired into the organization and position. The government assigns risk to a specific position or group of positions in order to determine suitability and security clearance requirements.⁷ Determining the risk level allows the government to assign whether the posi-

³ USAJobs, “What Are Background Checks and Security Clearances?” webpage, undated.

⁴ For example, some positions are designated low risk, non-sensitive (“Tier 1”) under the 2012 investigative standards but will be designated as “low tier” under the Trusted Workforce 2.0 standards. Some positions are also designated as *public trust* positions. Public trust positions are non-sensitive positions that can pose moderate risk (Tier 2 under 2012 standards, moderate tier under Trusted Workforce 2.0) or high risk (Tier 4 under 2012 standards, high tier under Trusted Workforce 2.0). Some positions are categorized as *national security* positions. National security positions are either non-critical sensitive (Tier 3 under 2012 standards, moderate tier under Trusted Workforce 2.0) or critical sensitive or special sensitive (Tier 5 under 2012, high tier under Trusted Workforce 2.0). Positions designated as non-critical sensitive are automatically designated as moderate risk, and positions designated as critical sensitive or special sensitive are automatically designated as high risk. (This information is based on a January 31, 2023, email exchange with PAC PMO).

⁵ USAJobs, undated.

⁶ Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, “Investigations, Adjudications and Clearance Processes at a Glance,” webpage, undated.

⁷ *Suitability* refers to a person’s identifiable character traits and conduct that are sufficient to decide whether employment would protect the integrity or promote the efficiency of the hiring organization. See Code of Federal Regulations, Title 5, Administrative Personnel; Chapter I, Office of Personnel Management, Subchapter B, Civil Service Regulations; Part 731, Suitability; and Code of Federal Regulations, Title 5, Administrative Personnel; Chapter IV, Office of Personnel Management and Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Part 1400, Designation of National Security Positions.

tion should be categorized as *non-sensitive* (a position that involves little national security risk), *public trust* (a position that does not require a security clearance but involves sensitive duties, such as overseeing finances or conducting investigations) or *national security* (a position that requires a security clearance). Requirements to be investigated for the purposes of a suitability determination apply whether or not the position requires a security clearance.

Clearance Levels

As of January 2023, there are three levels of security clearance, listed below, and each requires a more in-depth investigation than the one above it. The clearance level is directly associated with the risk level—the damage that could potentially be done with access to that type of material:⁸

- **Confidential.** This refers to material that, if improperly disclosed, could reasonably be expected to cause measurable damage to national security. Most military personnel are given this very basic level of clearance.
- **Secret.** This refers to material that, if improperly disclosed, could reasonably be expected to cause serious damage to national security.
- **Top Secret.** This refers to material that, if improperly disclosed, could reasonably be expected to cause exceptionally grave damage to national security.

Applicants to a federal position fill out a background investigation form relevant to the type of position they are applying for and the type of access they require for routine job duties. Security Executive Agent Directive (SEAD) 4 defines *classified national security information* as “information that has been determined pursuant to EO 13526 or any predecessor or successor order, or the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, as amended, to require protection against unauthorized disclosure.”⁹ SEAD 4 further defines a *sensitive position* as “any position within or in support of an agency in which the occupant could bring about, by virtue of the nature of the position, a material adverse effect on the national security regardless of whether the occupant has access to classified information, and regardless of whether the occupant is an employee, military service member, or contractor.”¹⁰ The Standard Form (SF)-86 national security questionnaire is required to process security clearance investigations, which are “an inquiry into an individual’s loyalty, character, trustworthiness and reliability to ensure that

⁸ For more, see Code of Federal Regulations, Title 18, Conservation of Power and Water Resources; Chapter I, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Department of Energy; Subchapter A, General Rules; Part 3a, National Security Information, Section 3a.11, Classification of official information.

⁹ SEAD 4, *National Security Adjudicative Guidelines*, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, June 8, 2017, p. 2. Also see Executive Order 13526, “Classified National Security Information,” Executive Office of the President, December 29, 2009.

¹⁰ SEAD 4, 2017, p. 2.

he or she is eligible for access to national security information.”¹¹ Completion of the SF-85 (for low-risk, non-sensitive positions) or SF85-P (for public trust positions) questionnaire is required to process suitability investigations, which are “an inquiry into a person’s identifiable character traits and conduct sufficient to decide whether an individual’s employment or continued employment would or would not protect the integrity or promote the efficiency of the service.”¹² Table 2.1 provides additional relevant information and exemplars.

How Does Personnel Vetting Fit in with the Overall Federal Hiring Process?

Personnel vetting is the process by which individuals undergo investigation, evaluation, and adjudication under the SSC process—the key components of which are security clearance, suitability/fitness, and credentialing.¹³ Vetting includes all the policies, processes, and tools used to determine whether personnel should be trusted with to access to government infor-

TABLE 2.1
Federal Investigation Forms and Purpose

SF-85	SF85-P	SF-86
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaire for non-sensitive positions • No work duties requiring access to sensitive or classified national security information • Example population: janitorial/housekeeping staff, administrative staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaire for public trust positions • Work duties may require access to sensitive USG information or IT systems • Example population: federal law enforcement entities (e.g., Customs and Border Patrol), federal contract managers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaire for national security positions • Work duties require access to classified or IT systems • Example population: intelligence analysts, intelligence collectors, program/portfolio managers

SOURCES: Information from OPM, “Federal Investigation Forms,” webpage, undated; Marko Hakamaa, “Understanding Your Position Designation Determination,” ClearanceJobs, November 23, 3013.

NOTE: The distinguishing factor between *public trust* and *non-sensitive* positions is the risk level of the position and not the sensitivity. Public trust positions may also be considered non-sensitive. We also note that, in November 2022, OPM submitted a 60-day notice (an Information Collection Request, or ICR) in the *Federal Register* to gather comments on proposed changes to background investigation forms. OPM’s proposed Personnel Vetting Questionnaire (PVQ) would consolidate questions across background investigation forms into a single questionnaire to streamline information capture.

¹¹ ODNI, “Security vs. Suitability,” webpage, undated.

¹² The SF85 P-S supplements the SF85-P, which is used only after an organization has extended an offer of employment: “This form is supplemental to SF85-P, Questionnaire for Public Trust Positions, but is used only after an offer of employment has been made and when the information it requests is job-related and justified by business necessity. Other than this restriction to its use, this form has the same purposes and authorities described on SF 85P” (OPM, “Standard Form 85P-S: Supplemental Questionnaire for Selected Positions,” December 2017; also see ODNI, undated).

¹³ Joseph Maguire, Joseph Kernan, Dale Cabaniss, and Margaret Weichert, “Security Clearance, Suitability/Fitness, and Credentialing Reform: CAP Goal Action Plan,” President’s Management Agenda, December 2019.

mation technology (IT) systems or facilities (credentialing); to work for—or on behalf of—the government (suitability/fitness); and to occupy a sensitive position, which may include having access to classified information (security clearance).

While the exact process and order of events is different from agency to agency, in general, candidates will be asked to apply for a security clearance at the level appropriate for the job and organization once a conditional offer of employment is given. This means the candidate has already applied for the job, and the agency or organization has determined that they are an appropriate fit in terms of background, skills, experience, and education but cannot fully commit to hiring them until they make it through the clearance process. The government agency to which the candidate applies initiates the clearance process, and the candidate is asked to fill out the appropriate level of documentation (see Table 2.1) to request the relevant background check. The clearance process can take anywhere from three months to one year or more depending on the agency granting the clearance and the background details of the candidate applying. Table 2.2 depicts a generalized view of the background investigation process once the hiring organization has formally sponsored a candidate for vetting.

We suggest that the background investigation process is one element required in creating a candidate experience framework but does not capture the federal hiring process at a holistic level.¹⁴ We use the following key terms to signify specific vetting phases and processes associated within the context of creating a candidate experience framework: (1) pre-initial vetting, (2) initial vetting, and (3) post-initial vetting. The pre-initial vetting phase generally refers to hiring processes that occur prior to a candidate's formal interaction with vetting

TABLE 2.2
Generalized Background Investigation Process

Vetting Steps	Description
Step 1: Questionnaire	Notification from the candidate's sponsoring/hiring agency to fill out an investigative questionnaire on the Electronic Questionnaires for Investigations Processing (e-QIP) website. The candidate may be required to provide fingerprints.
Step 2: Submission	Complete and release questionnaire to sponsoring (hiring) agency.
Step 3: Investigation	Investigation service provider begins background investigation.
Step 4: Completion and Adjudication	Completed background investigation is sent to sponsoring/hiring agency for a decision; candidate is notified of decision.
Step 5: Clearance Decision	Sponsoring/hiring agency makes clearance decision.
Step 6: Continuous Vetting	Candidate is enrolled in the continuous vetting program.

SOURCE: Information from Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, undated.

¹⁴ That is, the vetting process could be viewed within a "system of systems" approach. For example, see Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, "General Theory of Systems: Application to Psychology," *Social Science Information*, Vol. 6, No. 6, 1967.

processes. Recruiting, hiring organization interviews, job assessments, and other front-end hiring processes that happen before a candidate submits required vetting forms represent the pre-initial vetting stage.¹⁵ The initial vetting process includes a candidate engagement or interaction with security questionnaires, investigators (and background investigations), and adjudicators while applicants are assessed based on specific determinations of position-based trust or risk. The post-initial vetting phase includes not only hiring organization onboarding and retention practices but also captures SSC stakeholder activities that occur within a continuous vetting context.¹⁶ These phases are summarized in Table 2.3.

Expected Process Changes Under the Trusted Workforce Initiative

In early 2018, the USG announced the Trusted Workforce 2.0 initiative, a whole-of-government approach to overhaul and improve personnel vetting policies and processes that have been in place since the end of World War II.¹⁷ Trusted Workforce’s objective is to establish one personnel vetting model across the government, aligning guidelines and standards and providing stated characteristics of a trusted person. The underpinning of the personnel vetting model includes multiple changes to the federal investigative standards and (possibly) adjudicative criteria. It also reduces the number of investigative tiers from five to three and eliminates the requirement for periodic (every 5–10 years) reinvestigations in favor of continuous vetting. With the elimination of periodic reinvestigations, previously used categories/tiers and temporal requirements triggering reinvestigation are eliminated. Trusted Workforce 2.0 seeks to implement five specific vetting scenarios:

- **Initial Vetting:** New investigative standards for initial vetting streamline the investigative requirements overall and include sending “high-yield” automated record checks to agencies quickly, the results of which may lead agencies to determine they can

TABLE 2.3
Three Vetting Phases Identified

Pre-Initial Vetting	Initial Vetting	Post-Initial Vetting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for a job • Apply to position • Job interview/testing • Conditional offer/probationary period 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submission of vetting questionnaires • Background investigation/other security requirements • Adjudication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EOD/onboarding • Job mobility (and reciprocity) • Continuous vetting

¹⁵ We discuss this further in Chapter 3.

¹⁶ These SSC stakeholder activities include USG department and agency reciprocity determinations, which are further described later in this chapter.

¹⁷ Security, Suitability, and Credentialing Performance Accountability Council, “Trusted Workforce 2.0 Implementation Strategy Endorsement,” April 2022.

accept the risk of allowing an individual to enter on duty before the full investigation is complete.

- **Continuous Vetting:** Continuous vetting involves continuous review of elements of an individual's background to ensure that they continue to meet an appropriate level of vetting requirements for their position risk level and should continue to hold positions of trust. Automated record checks pull data from criminal, terrorism, financial, and other databases and public records throughout an individual's period of eligibility. If these checks show that an individual meets certain thresholds, an alert is triggered, and the issue is investigated and adjudicated to determine whether clearance and access should continue.
- **Upgrade in Trust:** New policies that outline investigative requirements and decision paths to assist agencies in upgrading trust (e.g., upgrading a Secret clearance to Top Secret or granting special access to certain programs) are being developed by the Executive Agents. Once in place, agencies will follow the new policies and have access to automated records checks to speed up vetting for the higher risk levels.
- **Transfer of Trust:** Previously often referred to as *reciprocity*, which must consider other criteria related to employment suitability, *transfer of trust* refers to the ability of a cleared individual to move quickly and efficiently from one agency or component to another.
- **Reestablishing Trust:** Under the legacy periodic reinvestigation model, an investigation would be considered "current" if it was conducted within the past 5–10 years. With the elimination of periodic reinvestigations, the amount of vetting activity to reestablish trust will depend on the status of an individual's vetting history and not the completion date of the last investigation.¹⁸

The Demand Signal for Providing a Better SSC Candidate Experience

The impetus for ensuring a positive candidate hiring experience is evident through recently issued E.O.'s (see Chapter 1) and through President's Management Agenda (PMA) priorities released in November 2022.¹⁹ The PMA priorities (in order) are (1) "strengthening and empowering the Federal workforce," (2) "delivering excellent, equitable, and secure Federal services and customer experience," and (3) "managing the business of Government to build back better."²⁰ The PMA uses data obtained from Forrester's *2021 US Customer Experience*

¹⁸ For example, depending on whether the individual's investigation was considered "in-scope."

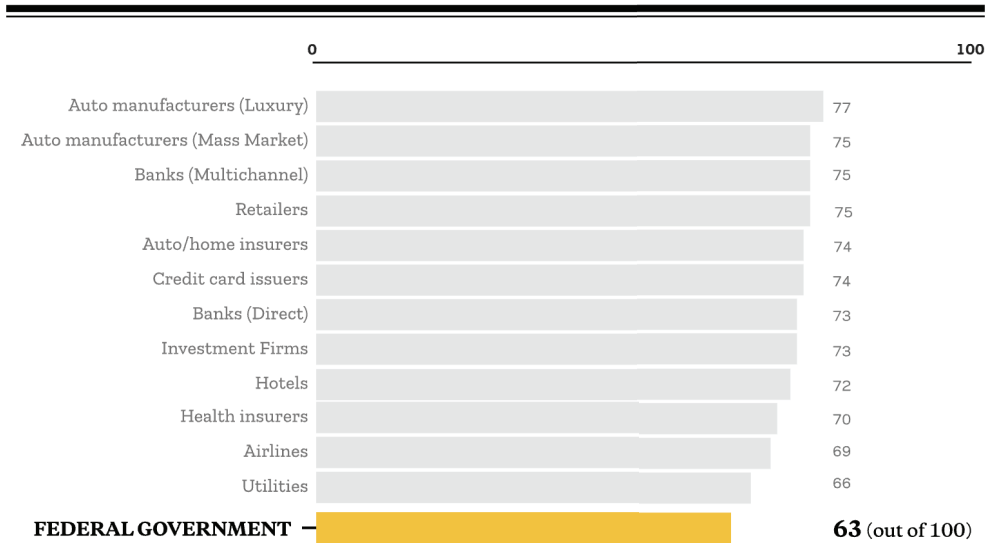
¹⁹ The PMA "defines Government-wide management priorities for all Federal agencies to improve how Government operates and performs" (President's Management Council, *The President's Management Agenda: The Biden-Harris Management Agenda Vision—A Roadmap for Our Government to Deliver Results for All Americans*, 2021).

²⁰ President's Management Council, 2021, p. 3.

FIGURE 2.1
Forrester Customer Experience Index, 2021

Among 13 industries studied, the Federal Government ranks last in customer experience

The Forrester Customer Experience Index (2021) rates industries' customer experiences on a scale of 1 to 100, using results from a nationally representative survey.



SOURCE: Reproduces a graphic from Performance.gov, "President's Management Agenda: Priority 2—Delivering Excellent, Equitable, and Secure Federal Services and Customer Experience," webpage, accessed September 27, 2022.

NOTE: One PMA "target" includes moving "from last into top 10 on Forrester industry ranking" (Performance.gov, "President's Management Agenda: Priority 2—Customer Experience: Data," webpage, undated.)

Index to compare and contrast USG customer experiences with those of prominent private-sector industries (see Figure 2.1). Key USG objectives under PMA Priority 1 include attracting and hiring "the most qualified employees, who reflect the diversity of our country," making "every Federal job a good job, where all employees are engaged, supported, heard, and empowered, with opportunities to learn, grow, join a union and have an effective voice in their workplaces through their union, and thrive throughout their careers," reimagining and building "a roadmap to the future of Federal work informed by lessons from the pandemic and nationwide workforce and workplace trends," and building the "personnel system and support required to sustain the Federal Government as a model employer able to effectively deliver on a broad range of agency missions."²¹

²¹ President's Management Council, 2021. These objectives are also described in Performance.gov, "President's Management Agenda: Workforce Priority: Strengthening and Empowering the Federal Workforce,"

Key USG objectives under PMA Priority 2 include improving the “service design, digital products, and customer-experience management of Federal High Impact Service Providers by reducing customer burden, addressing inequities, and streamlining processes”; designing, building, and managing USG “service delivery for key life experiences that cut across Federal agencies”; and identifying and prioritizing the “development of Federal shared products, services, and standards that enable simple, seamless, and secure customer experiences across High Impact Service Providers.”²²

A Tale of Two Candidate Experiences

We spoke with two individuals who had recent experience with the USG vetting process from two different perspectives: one who transitioned from the USG to the private sector and one who transitioned from a federal contractor position to the USG. Both of these individuals had traversed the pre-initial vetting phase and the initial vetting phase and were in the third phase of post-initial vetting (which includes job mobility and reciprocity). Both interviewees reported that a lack of timely security clearance reciprocity and process transparency affected their overall candidate experience. One interviewee stated that, despite already having access to a variety of unique U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and Intelligence Community (IC) networks and reporting systems throughout 15 years of USG service, they were repeatedly required to fill out security questionnaires and complete medical screenings and polygraphs when seeking new USG positions.²³ During one job application to a DoD organization, this individual interviewed, received a job offer in the mail, but then did not hear anything else for 18 months. While the individual received a recruiter point of contact (POC) to assist with the application, the POC never received return calls.²⁴ This individual reported that in the last USG position to which they applied, the hiring and screening process lasted for two years—despite this individual already having active accounts within the hiring organization’s IT system. This individual also reported that it took one year from the date of application to schedule a screening interview.²⁵

webpage, undated, which states the overall goal of Priority 1 as “Federal agencies must attract, hire, develop, and empower talented individuals who are well suited and well prepared to face the challenges the Government faces.”

²² Performance.gov, “President’s Management Agenda: Customer Experience Priority: Delivering Excellent, Equitable, and Secure Federal Services and Customer Experience,” webpage, undated.

²³ Interview H.

²⁴ The interviewee noted that “I had gotten to the point that I was doubting there was still a position for me because of negligence.” Interview H.

²⁵ Our interviewee also noted that referring individuals with existing clearances to hiring organizations also proved to be a frustrating process; our discussant noted that despite referring several individuals to organizations needing to fill unique IC positions, the referees never received an invitation to apply or an interview. Interview H.

The other interviewee, who recently transitioned from a federal contracting position to the IC, reported similar issues in transparency and clearance reciprocity. This individual was required to manually fill out an SF-86 form in 2021, despite having a successfully adjudicated Top Secret/Secure Compartmentalized Information clearance from 2018.²⁶ This interviewee reported that, although there was some flexibility in scheduling the background investigation interview for the IC job they were applying for, the medical screening and polygraph requirements were more stringent: The hiring organization provided only a two-day notice for the individual to report for an out-of-state medical and polygraph screening.²⁷ After completing the screening, the USG candidate reported an inability to understand status (e.g., no dashboard) until they received a call for the next screening phase one month later.

Existing USG Policy and Guidance on Candidate Experience

Our searches yielded several documents and other government repositories related to improving the USG’s “customer experience” for providing services to the U.S. public (e.g., Internal Revenue Service assistance, Federal Student Loan communications), but very few focused on internal candidate experiences during the hiring and vetting process. The following subsections highlight relevant findings from government literature and information gleaned from our government interviews.

Candidate Experience vs. Customer Experience

The USG has not defined candidate experience within the context of federal hiring—nor within the personnel vetting context. ODNI, in tandem with OPM, developed the Federal Personnel Vetting Engagement Guidelines in February 2022 to help drive modernization of the personnel vetting process under the government’s collective Trusted Workforce Initiative.²⁸ The engagement guidelines direct investigative service providers, authorized adjudicative agencies, Trusted Information Providers, and personnel vetting management to include a series of components to achieve specific outcomes (see Table 2.4). Three key themes across the engagement guidance are (1) increasing the applicant’s active participation in the vetting process, (2) finding methods to foster increased collaboration between applicants and

²⁶ Interview J.

²⁷ The interviewee also reported several diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) issues within medical screening forms that made filling out required forms “extremely uncomfortable.” Interview J.

²⁸ The Federal Personnel Vetting Engagement Guidelines (ODNI and OPM, 2022b) are also aligned with objectives and outcomes listed within the Federal Personnel Vetting Core Doctrine (ODNI and OPM, “Federal Personnel Vetting Core Doctrine,” January 13, 2021) and the Federal Personnel Vetting Guidelines (ODNI and OPM, “Federal Personnel Vetting Guidelines,” February 10, 2022a).

vetting personnel, and (3) increasing transparency to promote applicant “confidence” in the process.²⁹

However, the engagement guidelines do not offer further information on how federal departments and agencies might operationalize suggested components to achieve desired engagement outcomes—nor do the guidelines offer a clear definition for *candidate experience* within the SSC context. Factors listed within the guidelines also appear to consider the SSC as an isolated process, rather than as part of a system within systems, which may inhibit overall achievement of the listed outcomes if not connected to pre-initial vetting processes (e.g., position information, job recruitment) and post-initial vetting processes (e.g., onboarding, retention, job mobility).

A more comprehensive logic of effort (or logic model) would seek to bolster transparency in the vetting process even before a candidate enters the background investigation stage. Similarly, communicating with candidates about why certain types of data are needed for investigations (e.g., position-based risk) could relay increased confidence in the personnel vetting process while a potential candidate is actively seeking federal employment. Although the guidelines outline several engagement outcomes from an SSC stakeholder (USG) perspective, the guidance does not provide a process view from the candidate’s perspective, which could inhibit meaningful process changes over time.³⁰ Finally, the engagement guidelines

²⁹ ODNI and OPM, 2022b, p. 2.

³⁰ The SSC community has developed a series of vetting scenarios that have not been publicly released that

TABLE 2.4
Federal Personnel Vetting Engagement Guideline Components and Outcomes

Engagement Components	Engagement Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enlisting individuals as active participants in the personnel vetting program • Keeping the individual apprised of their progress during the vetting process, as appropriate • Informing the individual when results are unresolved from any investigative scenario, as appropriate • Ensuring individuals understand what situations they must self-report and encouraging self-reporting in a timely manner • Identifying individuals who may require additional support or assistance offered under existing programs • Taking steps to prevent potentially harmful behavior from presenting a serious security concern 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear expectations that provide transparency and consistency of interaction between the individual and the federal government • Two-way communication between the individual and the federal government throughout the personnel vetting process • Improved and timely collaboration between individuals and the federal government throughout the personnel vetting process • Information captured promptly and directly via IT • Confidence in the personnel vetting process

SOURCE: Information from ODNI and OPM, 2022b.

begin to illustrate what form this perspective-taking might look like; that is, an attempt to understand the

do not provide additional types of inputs and outputs required to measure progress toward outcome fulfillment.

Given the lack of a formalized policy for candidate experience within official vetting doctrine, we expanded our search to outside the SSC community to see whether there might be additional policy or guidance that we could draw from to inform the development of our framework. OMB defines *customers* as “individuals, businesses, and organizations (such as grantees, state and municipal agencies) that interact with a Federal Government agency or program, either directly or via a Federal contractor or even a Federally-funded program.”³¹ OMB Circular A-11 defines *USG customer experience (CX)* as “a combination of factors that result from touchpoints between an individual, business, or organization and the Federal Government over the duration of an interaction and relationship.”³² Further, “these factors can include ease/simplicity, efficiency/speed, and equity/transparency of the process, effectiveness/perceived value of the service itself, and the interaction with any employees.”³³ OMB’s CX guidance is intended to provide direction for executive branch agencies that have been designated as an HISP.

High-Impact Service Providers

While our research indicated that the USG has not developed formal (codified) *candidate* experience policy related to the vetting process, the USG has instituted several reforms intended to improve the *customer* experience by designating select departments and agencies as HISPs. The HISP designation affords select U.S. organizations with an outward (public-facing) mission with some additional resources to accomplish missions that include various types of service delivery to the U.S. public. Organizations that have received HISP designations are also required to implement a variety of planning and assessment activities designed to track and demonstrate progress toward fulfilling customer experience goals.³⁴ The full listing of 17 executive branch and independent HISP-designated agencies is shown in Figure 2.2.

HISP-designated agencies represent organizations that are primarily focused on interfacing with—or providing services to—the U.S. general public. OMB Circular A-11 categorizes HISP services into the following categories: *administrative* (customers requesting or renewing

candidate’s perspective in line with “enlisting individuals as active participants in the personnel vetting program” (ODNI and OPM, 2022b, p. 2).

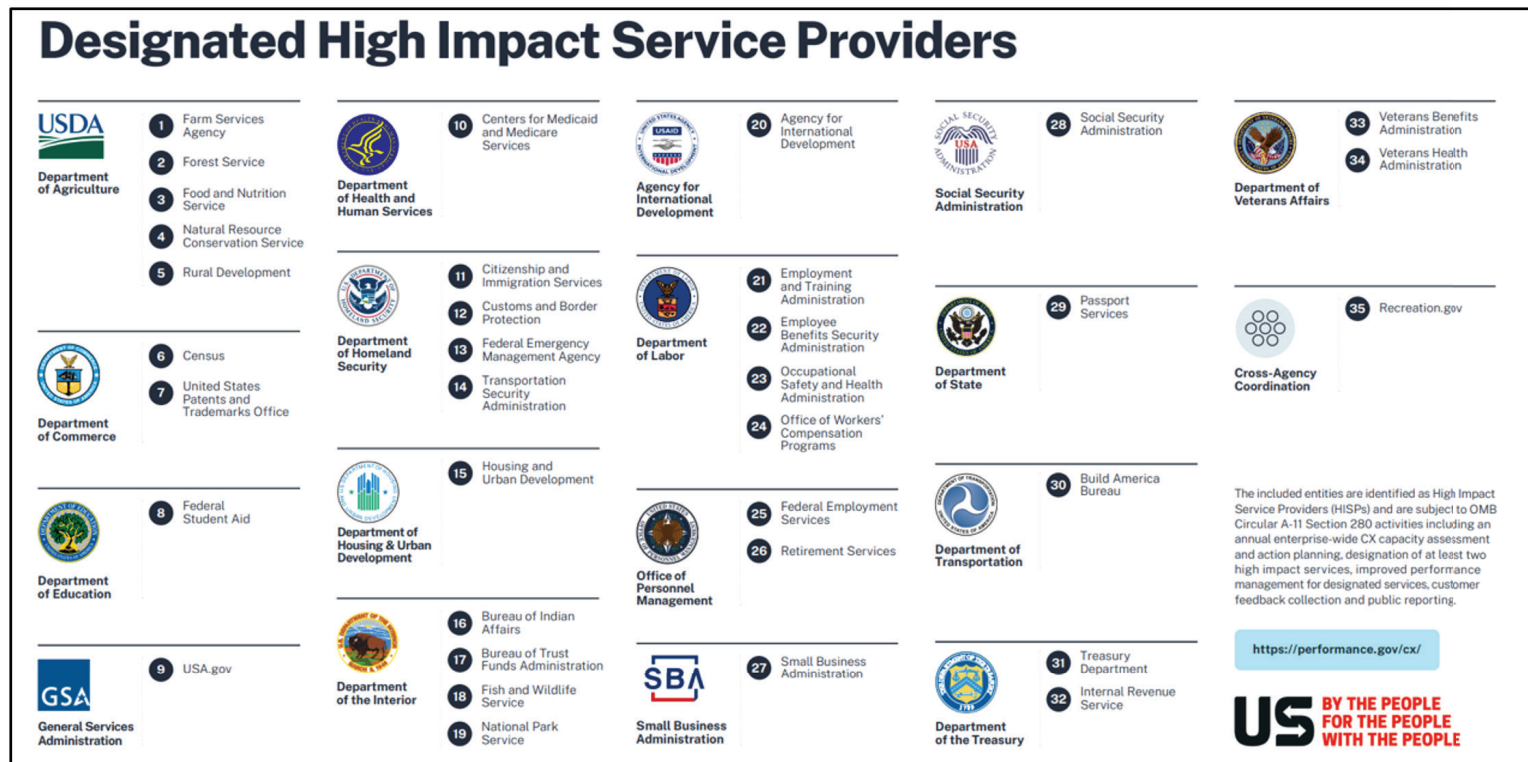
³¹ OMB Circular A-11 also lists “public servants and employees” who have “interactions with Federal processes” as customers, though does further define such processes (OMB, 2022, Section 280—Managing Customer Experience and Improving Service Delivery).

³² OMB, 2022, Section 280, p. 16.

³³ OMB, 2022, Section 280, p. 16.

³⁴ OMB notes that HISPs are “subject to OMB Circular A-11 Section 280 activities including an annual enterprise-wide CX capacity assessment and action planning, designation of at least two high impact services, improved performance management for designated services, customer feedback collection and public reporting” (OMB, “Designated High Impact Service Providers,” graphic, 2021).

FIGURE 2.2
USG High-Impact Service Provider Designations



SOURCE: Reproduces OMB, 2021.

driver licenses, passports, or social security cards), *benefits* (more complex eligibility-based applications, such as immigration or Medicare forms), *compliance* (required public actions, such as filing taxes), *recreation* (USG public information for national parks or museums), *informational* (provisions of “knowledge-based resources” that might include warning labels or providing health recommendations), *data and research* (ongoing U.S. research efforts, information sharing with public), and *regulatory* (guidance to support commerce, transportation, employment rules, or workplace safety).³⁵ While OPM (a designated HISP) retains responsibilities for improving some elements of the federal hiring process (e.g., USAJobs, USA Staffing, and USA Hire), the USG has not designated any organizations with responsibilities to improve screening services provided to candidates who have applied to USG job positions requiring a background investigation.³⁶

OMB Customer Experience Metrics and Assessment Guidance

Section 280 of OMB Circular A-11 serves as the primary reference document for HISPs when developing CX metrics and related assessments.³⁷ Practitioners developing metrics are instructed to collect service feedback on “the services of highest-impact using customer volume, annual program cost, and/or knowledge of customer priority as weighting factors” in “as a real-time manner as possible: immediately following or within 48 hours of completion or exiting the service interaction” and “in as few questions as possible leveraging what we know drives experience . . . in the design of the survey.”³⁸

HISP CX-required feedback mechanisms (e.g., surveys) include (1) an overall “trust score” based on a Likert scale, (2) an overall Likert scale score based on customer transaction/satisfaction level, (3) a “series of questions or choices to assess relationships between the overall score and experience drivers relevant to the service,” (4) one free-form question “allowing but not requiring” a response, and (5) as “few questions as possible that enable the agency to make use of the data, such as a question regarding the purpose of a visit or call, for a total survey length of no more than 15 questions.”³⁹ Each of these five requirements must use the statements that appear in Figure 2.3 as the baseline for survey design.

³⁵ OMB, 2022, Section 280, p. 3.

³⁶ For example, in response to OMB Circular A-11, OPM set a goal to “Create a personalized USAJOBS experience to help applicants find relevant opportunities. By fiscal year 2026, improve applicant satisfaction to 4.1 out of 5 for the desktop platform and to 4.5 out of 5 for the mobile platform” (OPM, “Goal 3: Create a Human-Centered Customer Experience,” webpage, undated, Objective 3.2). Recent customer experience usage metrics are available at Performance.gov, “Office of Personnel Management: Federal Employment Services,” webpage, undated.

³⁷ OMB, 2022, Section 280, pp. 7–9. OMB, 2022, Section 280, p. 7, notes that, “To assist in developing comparable, government-wide scores that enable cross-agency benchmarking (when relevant) . . . and reduce burden on the public, programs providing services to the public should measure their touchpoint/transactional performance.”

³⁸ OMB, 2022, Section 280, p. 7.

³⁹ OMB, 2022, Section 280, p. 8.

OMB Circular A-11 further requires HISPs to use the following five “core CX functions” when developing CX capacity assessments (annually due to OMB by January 31) and action plans (annually due to OMB by April 30): measurement; governance and strategy; culture and organization; customer understanding and service design and improvement.⁴⁰ HISP capacity assessments and action plans must (1) describe the organizational alignment of CX resources and personnel, (2) provide information on CX program maturity (e.g., CX initiative achievement), (3) identify data sources to inform subsequent assessments, and (4) provide an explanation of how the organization is aligning CX activities with the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (IDEA).⁴¹

FIGURE 2.3

OMB Customer Experience Drivers and Categories for Metric Development

Customer Experience Drivers	Driver Sub-Categories
Service Quality	Service Effectiveness / Perception of Value
	My need was addressed / My issue was resolved. / I found what I needed. / My question was answered.
Process	Ease / Simplicity
	It was easy to complete what I needed to do. / It was easy to find what I needed.
	Efficiency / Speed
	It took a reasonable amount of time to do what I needed to do. / I found what I needed on the site quickly.
	Equity / Transparency
	I was treated fairly / I understand what was being asked of me throughout the process.
People <i>(If applicable for a transaction)</i>	Employee Interaction / Warmth / Helpfulness / Competence
	Employees I interacted with were helpful. / The Call Center Representative was committed to solving my problem.

SOURCE: Reproduces graphic from OMB, 2022, Section 280, pp. 8–9.

NOTE: Any requested modification to the wording of these statements must first be discussed with OMB prior to implementation in order to maintain reporting comparability government-wide. OMB also notes that “these domains are in alignment with leading practices from both the private and public sectors, including Fortune 500 companies, market research institutions, and international organizations” (OMB, 2022, Section 280, p. 9).

⁴⁰ For more, see OMB, 2022, pp. 6–7.

⁴¹ OMB, 2022, p. 12. IDEA (Pub. L. 115-336) was passed in December 2018 and “aims to improve the digital experience for government customers and reinforces existing requirements for federal public websites.” The USG reports that in “2019, there were over 14 billion sessions and 38 billion page views on federal websites” and that “customer expectations are being ratcheted up by the private sector” (Digital.gov, “21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act,” webpage, undated). The IDEA requires all executive branch agencies to modernize websites, digitize services and forms, accelerate use of e-signatures, improve customer experience, and standardize and transition to centralized shared services.

Two Existing HISP CX Frameworks

The U.S. Department of Education is tasked with providing a variety of loan counseling services, providing direction for students who are required to fill out Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) forms, and maintaining community engagement with underserved educational communities.⁴² As a designated HISP, the Department of Education has instituted several CX initiatives to meet OMB requirements.⁴³ One initiative included the development of a phased mapping to help align departmental tools, platforms, touchpoints, and student perspectives (see Figure 2.4). The Education Department's Integrated Student Experience framework not only captures the "experience" for students while attending academic institutions, but also accounts for tasks and actions before students enroll—and post-learning, when students may enter a loan repayment period.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has developed a similar set of tools to assist its staff in providing health care and benefits services for the U.S. military population, and to serve also as a blueprint for other organizations seeking to implement their own CX processes: VA's Veterans Experience Office has developed a CX "cookbook" that outlines key mechanisms for successful customer experiences that integrates OMB Circular A-11 requirements.⁴⁴

The VA cookbook describes three overarching phases to achieving an ideal customer experience organized by "prepping" (understanding the agency ecosystem and building a CX coalition), "mixing" (incorporating and adopting best practices from the private sector), and "baking" (ensuring that tools and supporting personnel are optimally aligned to achieve CX initiatives; these categories are depicted in Figure 2.5).⁴⁵

Each of the cookbook phases includes CX categories that organizations may use to help create a positive customer experience, depending on departmental missions or objectives. Within the prepping phase, a governmental organization may choose to focus on developing CX strategy through an examination of the PMA, create CX performance measures to help refine future processes, and understand CX funding sources through specific budget or reimbursement authorities (see Table 2.5 for the VA's alignment of CX phases to CX categories).

For the mixing phase, the cookbook recommends that USG departments and agencies create CX structures (e.g., creating CX-based positions and sub-elements) to organize around a CX mission, begin to lay the groundwork for a CX-focused culture shift, or develop internal

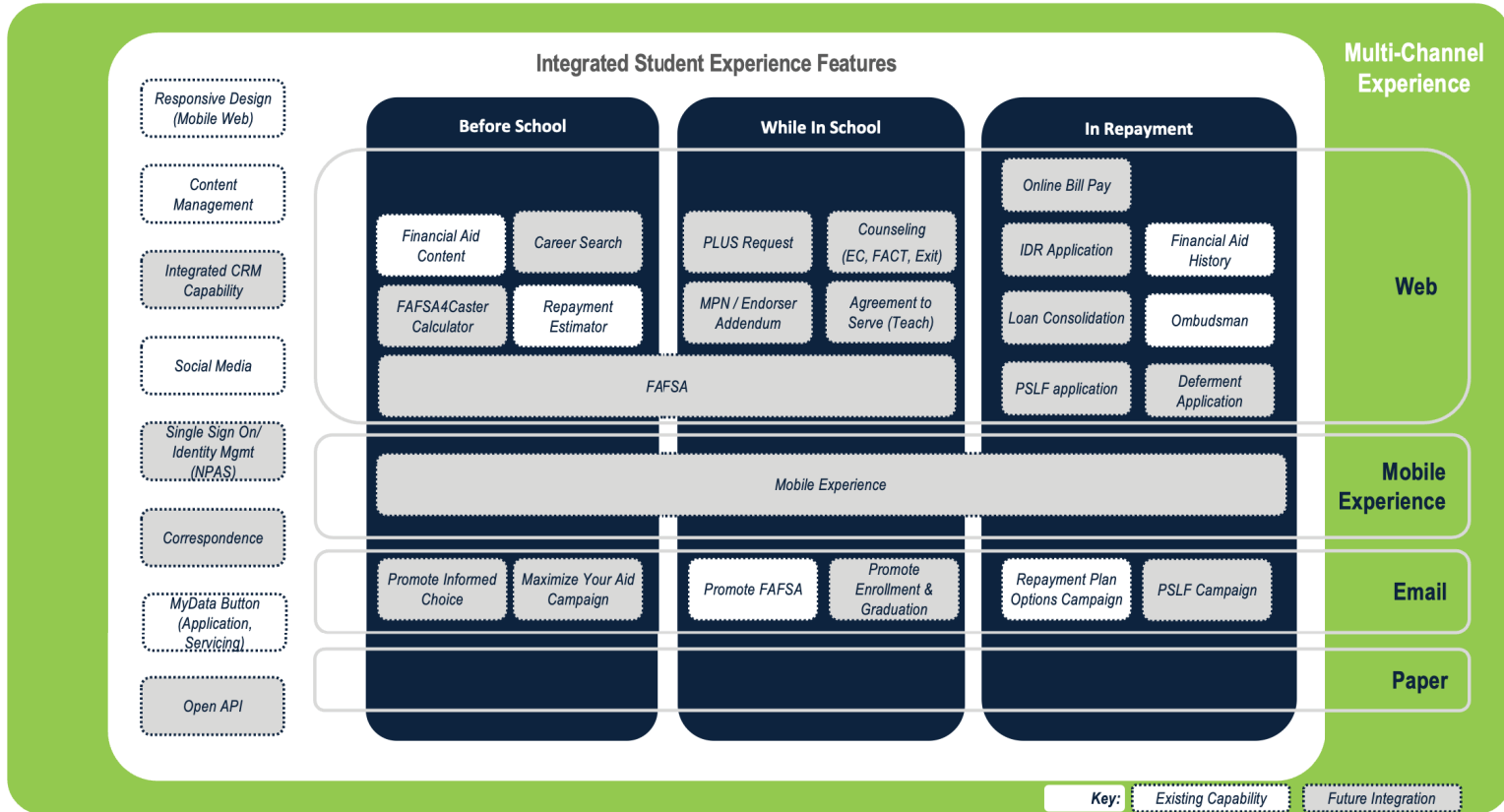
⁴² For more, see U.S. Department of Education, homepage, undated.

⁴³ The Department of Education created the Federal Student Aid Customer Experience Office in 2010, which has since grown to include an Office of the Chief Customer Experience Officer, an Awareness and Outreach Group, an Ombuds Group, a Student Experience Group, a School Experience Group, and a Customer Analytics Group (Brenda Wensil, "Federal Student Aid Customer Experience Journey," U.S. Department of Education Customer Experience Office, July 2015).

⁴⁴ VA, Veterans Experience Office, *The CX (Customer Experience) Cookbook: A Collection of Key Ingredients and Recipes for Embedding Customer Experience in Federal Services*, November 11, 2020.

⁴⁵ VA, Veterans Experience Office, 2020, p. 6.

FIGURE 2.4
U.S. Department of Education Integrated Student Experience (as of 2015)




SOURCE: Reproduced from Wensil, 2015.

FIGURE 2.5
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Customer Experience Cookbook

The **CX** CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE Cookbook

VA



VETERANS
EXPERIENCE
OFFICE




Prepping

Know Agency Ecosystem

Understand the levers of government operations and current agency culture, and how to actualize opportunities and minimize risks.

Build the Coalition



Identify like-minded CX thinkers and influencers.



Mixing

Identify Key Ingredients

Select any combination of ingredients from the **8 CX Cooking Categories** that will maximize positive impact within your organization.






Baking

Adapt & Adopt

Incorporate and adapt best CX practices from private sector, across government, and within the agency.

Sequence & Execute

Align key ingredients in an order that matches cultural readiness to support the needed bake times and engagement within appropriate organizational levels.



<div><input type="checkbox"/> Agency Leadership<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Top Down & Bottom Up<input type="checkbox"/> Leveraging Catalysts<input type="checkbox"/> President's Management Agenda<input type="checkbox"/> Existing Legislation<input type="checkbox"/> Agency Strategic Plan<input type="checkbox"/> Agency Regulations<input type="checkbox"/> Agency Policies / Directives<input type="checkbox"/> Agency Priority Goal (APG) & Annual Performance Plan (APP)<input type="checkbox"/> Programming, Planning, Budget, Execution (PPBE)<input type="checkbox"/> Agency Risk Registry<input type="checkbox"/> Data Strategy<input type="checkbox"/> Communications</div>	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Governance<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Agency Performance Measures<input type="checkbox"/> SES & GS Performance Measures<input type="checkbox"/> CX Positions & Capacity<input type="checkbox"/> Acquisitions</div>	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Budget Authority (BA)<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Reimbursement Authority (RA)<input type="checkbox"/> Hybrid BA/RA<input type="checkbox"/> Tie Funding Request to IDEA Act, Evidence Based Budget, PMA, APG, OMB Circular<input type="checkbox"/> Leverage Detailees & Other Term Partnerships</div>	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Agency Chief Experience Officer<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Direct Report to Agency Secretary<input type="checkbox"/> CX FTE<input type="checkbox"/> Existing CX Practitioners</div>	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Employee Alignment with CX Practice In Mission: Empathy-Driven vs. Security Driven vs. Transaction-Driven<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> CX Included as Agency Core Value<input type="checkbox"/> Servant Leadership<input type="checkbox"/> Employee Experience (EX)<input type="checkbox"/> Employee Innovation<input type="checkbox"/> Co-Designed CX Solutions (Employees & Customers)<input type="checkbox"/> CX Hubs / CX Communities of Practice<input type="checkbox"/> CX Integration in Agency Leadership<input type="checkbox"/> CX Training / Certifications<input type="checkbox"/> CX Recognition</div>	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Federal Employee Recognition (i.e. Gears of Government Award)<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Agency Employee Recognition<input type="checkbox"/> Favorable Budget Determinations<input type="checkbox"/> CX Bonuses<input type="checkbox"/> CX Details / Rotations<input type="checkbox"/> Publish CX Feedback</div>	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Federal Customer Experience Initiative (FCXI)<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Lab @ OPM<input type="checkbox"/> Presidential Innovation Fellows (PIF)<input type="checkbox"/> United States Digital Service (USDS)<input type="checkbox"/> GSA Digital Services (18F)<input type="checkbox"/> White House Leadership Development Program (WHLDP)<input type="checkbox"/> GSA Centers of Excellence (CoE)<input type="checkbox"/> Agency Innovation Groups<input type="checkbox"/> Academia<input type="checkbox"/> Non-Profits<input type="checkbox"/> Federal Advisory Committee (FAC)<input type="checkbox"/> Private Sector Partners</div>	<div><input type="checkbox"/> CX Framework<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Human-Centered Design (HCD) Practice<input type="checkbox"/> Real-Time CX Surveys<input type="checkbox"/> CX Data Analytics & Artificial Intelligence (AI)<input type="checkbox"/> Back End Business Processes<input type="checkbox"/> Tangible CX Tools<input type="checkbox"/> Omni-Channel Technology Initiatives<input type="checkbox"/> Communications & Engagement</div>
--	--	--	--	--	---	---	---

SOURCE: Reproduced from VA, Veterans Experience Office, 2020, p. 6.

National Security Employment: Improving the Candidate Experience

TABLE 2.5**Veterans Affairs Customer Experience Cookbook Phases and Categories**

VA Cookbook CX Phase	CX Categories
Prepping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy: Utilizing Internal & External Levers in Government to Fold CX into the Organization • Operations: Folding CX into Governance, Performance Metrics, Human Resources and Acquisitions • Funding: Secure Funding to Execute, Scale, Sustain & Mature Agency's CX Program
Mixing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization: Positioning CX Program in the Agency for Maximum Impact • Culture: Utilizing Agency Mission, Training & Leadership Development Programs to Drive CX Now and in the Future • Incentives: Reinforcing CX as a Core Business Discipline by Incentivizing CX Performance & Behaviors
Baking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships: Leveraging Partnerships Inside & Outside of Government to Meet Mission, Build Capacity and Bring in Cutting-Edge CX Practices • Capabilities: Implementing CX through Customer Understanding/Human-Centered Design (HCD), Measurement, Service Design & Delivery of Tangible CX Tools to Employees

SOURCE: Adapts information from VA, 2020.

incentives to drive CX business practices. Finally, USG entities could seek to bolster CX partnerships (both USG and private-sector) to incorporate leading CX practices within the baking phase that are intended to solidify service delivery based on “human-centered design.”⁴⁶

The examples included in this section (the Department of Education and VA) provide two illustrative frameworks for consideration within the SSC context.⁴⁷ The Education Department's Integrated Student Experience, although dated, highlights the customer's (i.e., the student's) point of view across three distinct phases (pre-, during, and post-academic career) to capture holistic processes and functions during the entire student life cycle. The VA's cookbook also provided a phased approach to understanding CX, offering several planning and implementation factors for USG organizations seeking to bolster customer engagement, partnerships with external entities, and methods of collecting and implementing customer feedback for process improvement.

Other USG Efforts to Map the Customer Journey

There are several other ongoing efforts across the USG that seek to better understand engagement with USG entities from a customer perspective.⁴⁸ OMB's Federal Customer Experience

⁴⁶ VA, Veterans Experience Office, 2020, p. 5.

⁴⁷ The U.S. Department of Education and the VA represent two of the 17 OMB-designated HISPs. While the other 15 HISPs may have developed internal CX guidance or frameworks in response to OMB Circular A-11, our research found that only these two organizations provided public-facing frameworks for consideration.

⁴⁸ Something the USG has termed *human-centered design*, or HCD. For more, see Performance.gov, “A Human-Centered Approach to Government,” webpage, January 7, 2021b.

Initiative (FCXI) team is actively collaborating with the U.S. General Services Administration and DoD to develop customer journey maps. This collaborative effort is conducting research by interviewing and surveying active duty and retired military service members and their families; government workers across federal, state, and local organizations; and others who interact with USG service providers.⁴⁹ This effort has resulted in the creation of three customer journey maps, each with a distinct personas (1) a framework that depicts how federal, state, and local service providers can provide aid to individuals with an intellectual disability as they transition into adulthood;⁵⁰ (2) a framework for individuals requiring government aid in the aftermath of a natural disaster;⁵¹ and (3) a framework to assist military members transition into civilian jobs post-service.⁵² Much like the frameworks developed by the Education Department and VA, which seek to capture customer experience both before and after the interaction, the FCXI webpage notes that “It is important to capture both the front stage experience (what customers see) and the backstage operations (what makes this experience possible).”⁵³ Further, the FCXI webpage states that future customer journey mapping should increase focus on collecting qualitative customer data, mapping process flows at a more granular level, incorporating “rigorous research and behavioral data,” and deriving operational performance data to understand whether existing USG tools or platforms are adequate to address customer choke points.⁵⁴ OMB’s FCXI team plans to foster increased agency collaboration and data-collection efforts in line with the PMA and Cross-Agency Priority (CAP) goals.

Ongoing USG Efforts to Measure Federal Employee Satisfaction

There are some efforts underway across the USG to collect and analyze federal workforce satisfaction that offer some insight into a variety of factors, including job satisfaction, pay satisfaction, and even whether the employee would recommend working at their organization to prospective government workers.⁵⁵ OPM’s Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), required through 5 CFR Part 250, Subpart C, is intended to assess “how employ-

⁴⁹ OMB reports that

We conducted more than 150 interviews of service members and veterans, persons with a disability, their family members, disaster survivors, advocacy and non-profit organizations’ representatives, case managers, service providers, and government employees at Federal, State and local levels. We also designed and deployed surveys of the disaster and disability customer communities, and collected over 350 survey responses. (Performance.gov, “Mapping the Cross-Agency Customer Experience,” webpage, January 1, 2021a)

⁵⁰ Performance.gov, “Transitioning to Adulthood,” webpage, undated.

⁵¹ Performance.gov, “Surviving a Natural Disaster,” webpage, undated.

⁵² Performance.gov, “Seeking Employment After Service,” webpage, undated.

⁵³ Performance.gov, 2021a.

⁵⁴ Performance.gov, 2021a.

⁵⁵ OPM, *Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Results: Governmentwide Management Report*, 2022a.

ees jointly experience the policies, practices, and procedures characteristic of their agency and its leadership.”⁵⁶ However, the FEVS is administered only to current federal employees, which may help inform retention practices but may not provide the types of granular-level information required to improve SSC hiring and vetting processes, since that is not its focus.⁵⁷ However, the FEVS does include two (of 57) questions that might help generate initial data for SSC process refinement, including Q14, “Employees in my work unit meet the needs of our customers,” and Q23, “I recommend my organization as a good place to work,” which could be used to view responses if the FEVS was administered to investigative service providers and authorized adjudicative agencies.⁵⁸

Summary of Existing USG Guidance and Policy in the SSC Context

This section provides our findings on the existing state of candidate experience within the SSC context. We first provide distinction between the *candidate* and *customer* experience, a brief examination of USG policies and guidance that include direction and requirements for HISP-designated organizations, and a survey of existing framework and journey maps relevant to the development of a novel SSC candidate experience framework.

⁵⁶ The FEVS “was first administered in 2002 as the Federal Human Capital Survey, and then again in 2004, 2006, and 2008.” The Federal Human Capital Survey was “renamed the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) in 2010 and revised to focus more on actionable items. Beginning in 2010, the OPM FEVS has been administered annually.” For more, see OPM, “Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey,” webpage, undated.

⁵⁷ The full list of FEVS member organizations is as follows: Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Communications Commission, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Federal Trade Commission, General Services Administration, National Archives and Records Administration, National Credit Union Administration, National Labor Relations Board, National Science Foundation, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, OMB, OPM, Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, Railroad Retirement Board, Small Business Administration, Social Security Administration, U.S. Agency for Global Media, U.S. Agency for International Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Commerce, DoD, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Energy, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Department of Transportation, U.S. Department of State, and “small/independent agencies.” DoD includes DoD’s service components, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the DoD “4th estate,” which includes “19 defense agencies and 8 DOD field activities that are defense organizations separate from the military departments. They are intended to provide a common supply or service across more than one DOD organization” (GAO, *Defense Management: DOD Needs to Address Inefficiencies and Implement Reform Across Its Defense Agencies and DOD Field Activities*, GAO-18-592, September 2018).

⁵⁸ FEVS employee responses are based on the following categories: Always, Most of the time, Sometimes, Rarely, and Never. Original FEVS datasets may be viewed at OPM, “Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Data Reports,” webpage, undated.

In our literature review of USG publications, we found that there are no formal policies governing candidate experience within the SSC context. While the joint ODNI-OPM Federal Personnel Vetting Engagement Guidelines provide a much-needed baseline for the types of components and outcomes that would enable the creation of a positive candidate experience (e.g., making individuals active participants in the process, increasing transparency, fostering greater two-way communication), the guidelines are not directive (i.e., they are not stipulated through a requirement).⁵⁹

Second, we found that external SSC guidance primarily focuses on customer experience within a USG service delivery context. OMB has designated select federal organizations with “high-impact customer-facing services” as HISPs, which require a series of performance and effectiveness metrics, associated assessments, and annual public CX reporting that tracks progress against customer experience goals and objectives. While OMB Circular A-11 offers several additional factors for consideration into a candidate experience framework, such factors are reserved only for public service delivery (e.g., tax assistance) and not within a USG hiring or vetting context. Further, the USG has developed several customer-oriented journey maps to help HISP practitioners understand human-centered approaches in response to the PMA vision and in accordance with E.O. 14058 principles, though it does not perform a journey mapping of the USG’s federal hiring and vetting process.

The next section relays observations from our discussions with USG personnel vetting experts, CX strategists, and other representatives that served as additional considerations in the development of our candidate experience framework.

Ongoing Efforts to Incorporate Candidate Experience into USG Hiring Practices (USG Interviews)

This section includes some observations and suggestions provided through our interviews with USG SMEs that may be useful in improving the candidate vetting and hiring experience.

Enablers

Several interviewees suggested that the hardest part of the vetting process was the lack of transparency during the long wait for approval or denial. Not knowing for weeks or months or longer whether you will be cleared to take the job that has been offered to you can be very stressful, and in many cases may lead a candidate to eventually accept a position elsewhere, because the stress of not knowing is too great. One interviewee described a former hiring manager who was an enabler in the sense that while they could not provide transparency

⁵⁹ ODNI and OPM, 2022b. The guidelines are intended to “serve as a high-level, outcome-based strategy” that will “shape a culture of personal accountability and shared responsibility” between executive branch SSC stakeholders (p. 1).

in the substance of the ongoing investigation and adjudication, they did provide awareness of the important mission they would join, and the stability and focus that would come with getting past the clearance threshold. Also, an honest assessment of the timing and duration of the process and continuous communication made the interviewee feel like the end result would be worth the wait.

The interviewee recalled that they were able to endure the long wait only because of their hiring manager's efforts to keep them interested and informed along the way:

And the ability to have stability is really compelling. That's what made it worth it to me. And I only knew that because my hiring manager was excellent and she told me. She told me it would be okay and she called me, her deputy called me . . . to let me know it was on pause. And he said I'll call you again in two weeks or you can follow up with me. . . . And those calls happened. And that made me realize it was going to be ok . . . it wasn't that I had transparency, it was I was notified what was happening on the way and had an understanding that at the end, this world would be opened up to me with a mission.⁶⁰

One government official with whom we spoke described their organization's methods for checking in with candidates who had problems along the way: "Sometimes it's good to pick up the phone, ask questions, and address everything."⁶¹ Checking in with people was a good way to keep the information flowing in both directions. The organization stopped short of providing the candidate a number to call if they had any questions or were getting nervous about the long wait: "If we do that, subjects will keep calling us and bothering us. We let them know we'll reach out if we need more information."⁶²

Difficulty with security clearance forms was mentioned repeatedly during our interviews with government hiring managers and security officials, but only a few suggested willingness to attack the problem. One federal hiring manager goes so far as to help candidates when they have issues with their security clearance forms, recognizing that they are being hired for a specific expertise that may not be filling out forms:

That's how I was trained, that if a subject has an issue in filling out the e-QIP, you should help them through it. I carried that through when I became a supervisor and that's how I train my staff at the [federal organization]. Not all agencies do that but I think they should. Because we need the applicant's expertise and it's very competitive and that's not supposed to be an obstacle from someone pursuing a job with the federal government.⁶³

Another federal hiring manager is from an agency with an assistance guide and suggested willingness to answer questions as necessary:

⁶⁰ Interview D.

⁶¹ Interview B.

⁶² Interview C.

⁶³ Interview A.

If there is a chokepoint, whether it was COVID or not, one thing I felt was the Electronic Questionnaire. For some it's really easy, for others, even folks with Ph.D.'s, it's a challenge. And that's where practitioners need patience. We need to provide the tools. We have a nice guide for first-time users. If we need to get on the phone and answer questions and walk them through, we should do that.⁶⁴

Challenges

As mentioned previously, one of the biggest challenges in the candidate experience for government vetting is the lack of transparency to the candidate. Sometimes this is because the organization makes an informed decision not to keep the candidate apprised of where they are in the process. Sometimes it is because the vagaries of internal communications between security managers and hiring managers creates an actual lack of awareness on the part of hiring managers. Managers looking to fill billets are often as frustrated as the candidates themselves, both with the long security clearance lead times and the lack of transparency in the overall process itself. One manager we spoke with said,

There's very little transparency around hiring and onboarding so even if you know someone you think would be great, it's not clear if you can give them any leg up. The whole thing is such a marathon. It's difficult. I referred people who were internal to the intelligence community and had clearance and they never got called up for their interview.⁶⁵

In some cases, the lack of transparency is accompanied by bureaucracy that seems to enable sluggish hiring. In one federal organization where Human Resources (HR) contact information *is* provided to candidates, one interviewee suggested that bureaucratic inertia and the lack of any incentive or requirement to be responsive to candidates often prevents a quick resolution to hiring:

I hear it from my team members all the time. If it's taking longer than normal for a job to be filled, they are hearing constantly from applicants. To the extent that some people are in [my organization] who don't answer those calls, on the government side they're not responsive to people, that's what people have told my folks. As contractors providing the service, we are responsive because we have to be, but the federal employees don't have that need to be responsive and therefore they aren't.⁶⁶

This appears to be in stark contrast to the hiring processes of many private-sector organizations. Recognizing that they are in competition with other businesses for the best talent, private-sector hiring managers often seem to move with great speed and alacrity compared

⁶⁴ Interview A.

⁶⁵ Interview H.

⁶⁶ Interview I.

with their government counterparts. One government manager discussed a cleared candidate who was trying to move from one federal organization to another with little success:

To give you context, I referred someone who I thought was totally exceptional, had won multiple awards and top awards in intelligence. I referred them for an intelligence job at a different agency. I moved to the tech sector, referred this person, they were contacted within a week, interviewed within a few weeks, onboarded within a few weeks. The whole cycle was about a couple of months.⁶⁷

Reciprocity

The issue of reciprocity—the willingness of one organization to accept the clearance granted by another organization—continued to come up organically in our discussions. Cleared candidates from one federal organization applying to another often find themselves in the same frustrating and sluggish pipeline as candidates who have never been cleared. One interviewee said,

I ended up transitioning . . . to an agency who did not take my previous clearance. That was huge. You would think as someone who'd already worked in their building . . . , written cables inside their system and been in their network, but there was no reciprocity there. So I had to go through the full clearance process again. . . . That was a two year process, as someone who'd been in government for 14 years and had already worked on the system of the agency I was joining.⁶⁸

Relevant Practices

Some organizations have existing practices for improving their relationships with customers or partners, but no similar practices for improving relationships with their candidate pools. For example, one interviewee with whom we spoke works for an agency that actively seeks out customer feedback through a “customer feedback” link at the bottom of every email. “Yesterday at our staff meeting we went over feedback. Perfect is a 5 rating and we’re right at a 4.7 average. So I guess it’s good we get that feedback.”⁶⁹ Unfortunately, feedback is not solicited for candidates in the hiring process. Other organizations solicit feedback from candidates as a matter of course and use the information to improve processes and to motivate hiring staff:

We normally have signature blocks with a survey people can take if service was up to standard or if there’s something we can improve on. We always encourage people to fill it out

⁶⁷ Interview H.

⁶⁸ Interview H.

⁶⁹ Interview B.

and develop as much as we can. We also get kudos. . . . You get kudos (from) your Branch Chief, Division Chief, and they let you know you did a good job.⁷⁰

Others suggested that while they did a good job of working with candidates during their initial hiring, they perform less well on retention because they do not continue the communication and feedback that started during the initial hire:

At least with underserved populations . . . we recruit, we re-hire, and then we drop the ball. Meaning we don't have a good mentorship program and we don't have the tools to check-in, see how they're doing. . . . But we need to look at how we can improve not only retaining good employees but where are we dropping the ball? Do they feel they're not getting support from supervisors? Do they feel a disconnect in communication, which I've heard from five or six colleagues of color that left within the year and a half I've been here? We're working long and hard to recruit but we gotta retain our colleagues.⁷¹

Summary

This section first explored the demand signal for greater candidate engagement within the existing SSC process. We then provided brief context on why some federal positions require personnel vetting, proposed vetting process changes under the USG's Trusted Workforce 2.0 Initiative, and the distinction between *candidates* and *customers* as outlined through OMB HISP designations. We then discussed relevant guidance from government literature and relevant observations from our interviews across the areas of enablers, challenges, the issue of reciprocity, and other relevant practices.⁷² The next chapter focuses on our private-sector literature review and our discussions with private-sector organizations that help to inform the development of our candidate experience framework in Chapter 4.

⁷⁰ Interview C.

⁷¹ Interview A.

⁷² Although our USG interviewee population does not represent generalizable research, we highlighted the most salient observations on existing candidate experience efforts relevant to the creation of our candidate experience framework.

Candidate Experience in the Private Sector

This chapter highlights our observations from the literature on candidate experience within private-sector organizations and provides an overview of our discussions with private-sector representatives. A more in-depth annotated bibliography that supports the observations in this chapter appears in Appendix C.¹ The observations and findings from Chapter 2 and in this chapter serve as the basis for our framework in Chapter 4.

Candidate Experience Factors to Consider in the Pre-Initial Vetting Phase

This section briefly summarizes our findings from our literature review that focus on candidate experience during initial stages of hiring. While improving candidate experience in the initial vetting phase serves as the primary focus of our research, understanding and implementing mechanisms that can serve in the creation of a positive candidate experience in hiring phases preceding the candidate vetting is imperative to creating a more streamlined process. For example:

- How do prospective employees know about national security job vacancies?
- How are departments and agencies attracting the right types of diverse talent needed to backfill an aging federal employee demographic?
- How are candidates weighing USG opportunities that require a security clearance (or suitability determination) against other hiring processes external to the USG?

These factors traditionally fall outside the purview of SSC stakeholders, but they are an important step to ensuring a seamless transition between hiring phases—and may even offer additional screening mechanisms at the front end of the hiring process that would allow the creation of a positive candidate experience later on in the hiring process.

¹ The annotated bibliography that appears in Appendix C is not intended to be an exhaustive list of every source that might pertain to the candidate experience, though it is intended to provide a selection of literature that we identified as the most relevant publicly available and unclassified sources.

Awareness, Attraction, and Consideration

Some organizations across the private sector have developed additional categories to help promote candidate experience—even before the candidate has applied to an open position. This framing assumes various forms throughout the literature, though it generally falls into two prehiring categories: (1) candidate awareness and attraction and (2) candidate consideration. Although customer awareness, attraction, and consideration feature prominently within the business literature, we define *candidate awareness and attraction* as the point at which an individual learns of the existence of an organization and decides whether there is sufficient available information to further invest time and resources in pursuing a career. We define *candidate consideration* as the point at which an individual further assesses the hiring process and requirements necessary to compete with other candidates in process. We also adopt two business terms to help SSC stakeholders understand potential applicant pools: *Passive candidates* represent individuals who may be actively seeking employment—or weighing the benefits of working at one organization over another—whereas *active candidates* represent individuals who have engaged with any part of the hiring process (e.g., application, interviews). The following sections use the awareness, attraction, and consideration framing (shown in Figure 3.1), which shares many characteristics with the USG federal hiring process.

Candidate Awareness and Attraction Challenges

The literature notes that many companies seeking to enable a more positive candidate experience lack an appropriate organizational structure to support candidate experience initiatives. Further, the literature notes that organizations should begin thinking about the candidate experience even before a candidate has applied to the organization.² Companies that do not include the “awareness” stage in their candidate frameworks may struggle to garner sustained interest from passive applicants if candidate needs and points of view are not accounted for.³

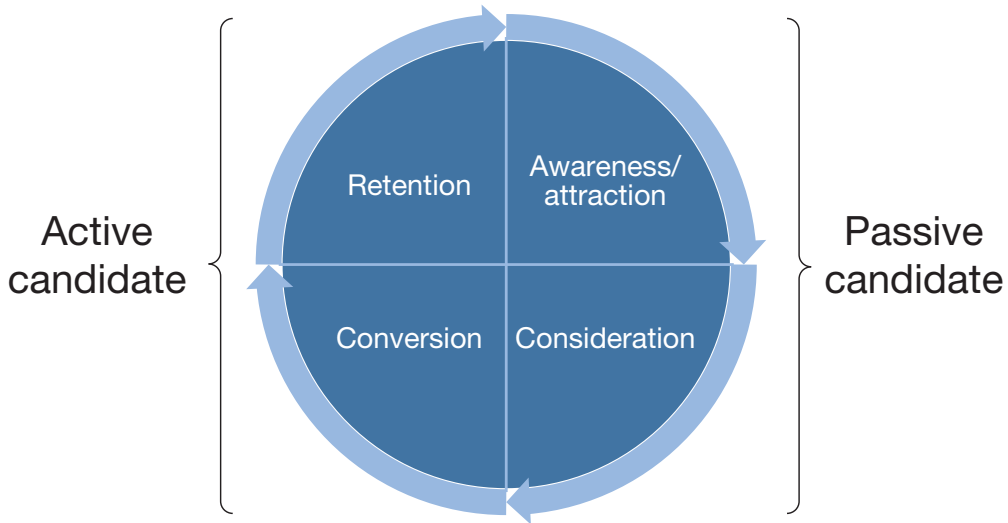
Organizations may also assume that candidates have the requisite information required to make informed decisions about their future career. However, the literature suggests that candidates likely have imperfect knowledge about the hiring organization and job opportunities.⁴ Managing employer brand awareness has become a crucial component of the candi-

² Harver notes that “Expecting candidates to evaluate job-opportunities through their own research, testimonials from recruiters or hiring managers, and by asking questions when given the opportunity,” may set organizations up for failure (Harver, “Introducing the Two-Way Matching Framework: Candidate Selection at Scale,” May 19, 2021).

³ Partnership for Public Service, “Government for the People, Designing for Equitable and Trusted Customer Experiences,” November 16, 2021; Perengo, “Job Seeker Journey: A Framework to Truly Understand the Job Seeker Experience,” Medium, May 31, 2018.

⁴ Sharlyn Lauby, “Four Ways to Improve the Candidate Experience,” Society for Human Resource Management, April 11, 2018.

FIGURE 3.1
Candidate Journey Phases



date experience with the proliferation of social media.⁵ A poorly designed experience could have repercussions across social media platforms, requiring increased organizational efforts to mitigate negative word-of-mouth reporting, which may influence a candidate's decision to apply for a job.⁶ Emerging research also suggests that emerging generations may already have “low trust in government” and may be more “pragmatic and analytical about their decisions than members of previous generations were.”⁷ The literature also notes that Facebook and Twitter may no longer be the primary platforms for potential candidate engagement.⁸

Even if an organization has invested time and resources into ensuring that potential employees are aware of potential job opportunities, motivating candidates to continue with the application process can prove challenging if certain factors are not incorporated into

⁵ Ted Diaz, “The 7-Stage Framework for Developing an Award-Winning Candidate Experience,” ERE Recruiting Intelligence, February 13, 2018

⁶ Also known as maintaining a positive “online image.” See Mara Calvella, “How to Provide a Winning Candidate Experience Every Time,” G2, February 8, 2021. Also see Monster.com, “Recruiting Strategies and Talent Acquisition,” undated.

⁷ See Courtney Weinbaum, Richard Girven, and Jenny Oberholtzer, *The Millennial Generation: Implications for the Intelligence and Policy Communities*, RAND Corporation, RR-1306-OSD, 2016; and Tracy Francis and Fernanda Hoefel, “‘True Gen’: Generation Z and Its Implications for Companies,” McKinsey Company, July 7, 2020.

⁸ A 2018 HireVue report noted that “81% of companies use Facebook and 78% use Twitter to cater to candidates [while] only 17% of candidates use Facebook and 4% use Twitter to search for jobs” (Jon-Mark Sabel, “9 Key Takeaways from the Just-Released 2018 Candidate Experience Research Report,” HireVue, February 20, 2019).

an end-to-end candidate experience framework. Understanding specific candidate wants, needs, and motivations; setting clear timeline expectations; and creating an immersive user interface (hiring websites) to attract passive candidates are frequently underprioritized.⁹ Companies that struggle to address and clearly define process expectations in the prehire phase may create negative experiences in subsequent phases.¹⁰ Both the length and the clarity of applications also contribute toward a candidate's decision to continue with the hiring process.¹¹ Several articles suggest that applying for a position at an organization should take no longer than 5–15 minutes.¹² Debate on the use of “chatbots” to help guide candidates through initial application processes or to help answer frequently asked questions served as another prominent theme in our review. Finding the right balance between automation and human touchpoints can present candidate experience obstacles in the prehire phase.¹³ Much like in the awareness stage, not having a dedicated team focused on attracting candidates could mean that applicants begin losing interest even before applying for a position.¹⁴

Candidate Awareness and Attraction Enablers

Organizations seeking to enable a more positive candidate experience will first need to proactively understand a prospective employee's ability to discover available job opportunities; identify hiring process obstacles (based on previous experiences); and uncover false or misleading online information (i.e., perceptions of process), “negative reviews,” and other issues that may prohibit accurate representations of the hiring process.¹⁵ Ensuring that hiring websites or application portals are search-engine-optimized and mobile-ready can also help alert candidates to available positions.¹⁶ The literature also suggests that organizations should begin collecting experience-related data (even in the early stages of candidate website engagement) that can help to redesign or streamline future hiring website development.

⁹ See iCIMS, *The Candidate Experience Playbook*, 2017; Deloitte, “Your Candidate Experience: Creating an Impact or Burning Cash?” webpage, undated; and John Sumser, “Candidate Experience,” HRExaminer, undated.

¹⁰ Otherwise known as candidate “dissonance”—or the difference between hiring expectations and the reality of the actual process (Johnny Campbell, “7 Insights for Creating Great Candidate Experiences,” SocialTalent, 2020).

¹¹ Paul, Slezak, “Why a Poor Candidate Experience Can Destroy Your Business,” RecruitLoop, September 12, 2016; Calvello, 2021.

¹² With the majority advocating for five minutes or less. See Appendix C.

¹³ HireVue, “The 2021 Candidate Experience Whitepaper,” January 2021.

¹⁴ Paul Petrone, “9 Stats Key to Providing a Great Candidate Experience,” LinkedIn Business, December 28, 2015.

¹⁵ Andrew Greenberg, “What Is a Candidate Journey Map? (And Why You Need One),” Rally Recruitment Marketing, May 5, 2022.

¹⁶ One source suggests that hiring websites should aim to be 100 percent mobile: Jordan Fuller, “How to Improve the Digital Candidate Experience,” Recruiteeblog, March 2, 2021. Also see Calvello, 2021.

As a prospective employee compares one company against others during the job search, organizations will need to consider how best to relay their mission, culture, and possible career trajectories to attract and maintain candidate interest. Emerging generations are also actively seeking organizations with strong corporate social responsibility (CSR) statements and employee value propositions (EVPs) when weighing future job options.¹⁷ Successful organizations also actively work to “entertain and engage” passive candidates.¹⁸ Providing video-based job testimonials, virtual tours (that incorporate virtual reality software), and website accessibility for multiple demographics, and having a well-defined customer journey map that includes a visual representation of the recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and career trajectory, can be deciding factors in a candidate’s choice to continue to the next step.¹⁹

Candidate Consideration Challenges

Once a candidate has an adequate understanding of an organization (e.g., culture) and the types of positions available, and has assessed the complexity of the hiring process that lay ahead, organizations must still have mechanisms in place to help “tip” a passive employee to an active job candidate.²⁰ Job description clarity, process transparency, communication, and information exchange present prominent obstacles to the overall candidate experience.²¹ One source notes that the traditional hiring and recruiting process tends to institute a “one-way matching process” whereby candidate information (e.g., résumé, references) is required to proceed in the hiring process.²² However, “two-way matching,” whereby the organization increases information “push” before requesting an information “pull,” can help improve candidate willingness to proceed with the application process.²³ A 2021 Gartner report examining equity in candidate experience also notes that “Racially diverse candidates in the United States are more likely than white candidates to discontinue an application process due to two

¹⁷ CSR statements showcase philanthropic contributions or alignment with larger social movements. EVP may be defined as the “part of an employer’s branding strategy that represents everything of value that the employer has to offer its employees. Items such as pay, benefits and career development are common, but employers also highlight offerings that are currently in demand—like technology, remote work and flexible scheduling.” See Society for Human Resource Management, “Employee Value Proposition (EVP),” webpage, undated. Also see Diaz, 2018; and Campbell, 2020.

¹⁸ iCIMS, 2017.

¹⁹ Website accessibility means having mobile compatibility and accessibility within the DEIA sense of the term (e.g., multiple languages). See Medium, 2018; Deloitte, undated; and VantageCircle, “Is Candidate Experience Different from Candidate Engagement?” April 7, 2022.

²⁰ Dave Zielinski, “Study: Most Job Seekers Abandon Online Job Applications,” Society for Human Resource Management, March 8, 2016.

²¹ See Gartner, “Measuring Equity in Candidate Experience,” 2021; Harver, 2021; and Partnership for Public Service, 2021.

²² Harver, 2021.

²³ Harver, 2021.

critical factors: diversity of the team and management style of potential manager.”²⁴ Further, “LGBTQ+ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other identities] candidates are more likely than heterosexual candidates not to apply for a job because they perceive they lack the education and years of work experience required for the role.”²⁵

Candidate Consideration Enablers

The literature offers several suggestions that could help encourage candidates to remain within the hiring and screening process. Many of the sources we reviewed note that application complexity, length, and types of information available may be the deciding factors for process retention when weighing future employment options. The literature suggests that organizations should create application forms that require between 5 and 15 minutes to complete, offer public-facing preparatory materials that preview the structure of the interviews and any job-specific testing or assessment,²⁶ and ensure that job descriptions and associated requirements are clear (free of jargon) and accurate (continuously reevaluated for needed skills).²⁷

Candidate interaction with a company’s job description could be the first touchpoint for organizations to consider when designing a comprehensive candidate experience.²⁸ Some organizations are also creating video-based job descriptions to create a more immersive application experience that integrates organizational culture and EVP to streamline candidate engagement before the application process has started.²⁹ Surveying passive candidates in the consideration stage (e.g., “Is there anything that our website did not provide that would be more helpful?”) can help to refine application portal “welcome mats” and provide additional information that can be used to address future job-seeker “motivations and needs.”³⁰ Finally, organizations are advised not to “dance around the truth” regarding hiring timelines; ensuring that the candidate is presented with an accurate depiction of each stage of the hiring and onboarding process helps to build trust with passive candidates and helps to mitigate candidate expectations.³¹

²⁴ Gartner, 2021.

²⁵ Gartner, 2021.

²⁶ Providing read-ahead materials about interviews and assessments may help to reduce candidate anxiety through increased process transparency.

²⁷ iCIMS, 2017; Diaz, 2018; HireVue, “What Is Candidate Experience?” December 13, 2020.

²⁸ VantageCircle (2022) notes that “72% of hiring managers say that they provide clear job descriptions; however, only 36% of the candidates agree with this.” Also see Calvello, 2021.

²⁹ Sabel, 2019.

³⁰ Recruiting.com, “The Case for Providing a Positive Candidate Experience,” blog post, undated.

³¹ Monster.com, undated.

Prehire Factors for Framework Consideration

The literature examined in this section highlighted factors that may present challenges to achieving an ideal candidate experience and mitigating factors that could help create a positive candidate vetting experience. Although the literature parsed primarily focuses on the prehire phase within the private sector, there are several areas of overlap with the USG federal hiring process. USG candidates may spend time searching for organizations that may fit their skill sets or experience (awareness), navigating hiring websites (e.g., USAJobs) to compare and contrast department and agency requirements (attraction), and gauging process requirements and timelines when actively pursuing federal employment (consideration).³² Applying the relevant practices identified in this section would likely enable a positive candidate experience during candidate interaction throughout the initial vetting phase.³³

There are several factors to consider in the pre-initial vetting phase that would assist in the creation of a positive candidate experience. Initial framework development should focus on identifying candidate needs, mapping specific organization-candidate touchpoints (i.e., human and machine), understanding online presence (e.g., negative reviews) and available information, creating a series of candidate personas based on a variety of possible applicants, and instituting platforms that can help track and promote communication between organizations (e.g., recruiters) and candidates in subsequent phases.³⁴ Providing visual timelines, promoting two-way information exchange, and previewing in-office culture to the greatest extent possible (especially within the remote-hiring context) with passive candidates in the pre-initial vetting stage would help “demystify” subsequent hiring processes.³⁵ Populating a framework with these factors would help practitioners build connections between vetting phases to help build out an end-to-end candidate journey mapping.³⁶ The next section highlights literature applicable to the hiring and screening phase, which we categorize as candidate *conversion*.

³² The prehire phase may be outside the purview of existing SSC stakeholder responsibilities. However, increased engagement between USG personnel across phases would likely create candidate experience synergies.

³³ Deloitte (undated) suggests that organizations should not “treat branding, sourcing, interviewing, hiring, and onboarding as separate processes.”

³⁴ Organizations might consider customer relationship management (CRM) software to help collect passive candidate feedback during website or application-portal interaction to refine prehire processes and platforms. See Qualtrics, “How to Design a Great Candidate Experience,” webpage, undated. Also see Greenberg, 2022; Medium, 2018; and Deloitte, undated.

³⁵ Lauby, 2018.

³⁶ We use these factors to develop our proposed framework in Chapter 4.

Candidate Experience Factors to Consider in the Initial Vetting Phase

This section briefly summarizes our findings from our literature review that focused on candidate experience during the hiring and screening processes. We used the following questions to guide our review of factors relevant to this stage:

- How can organizations increase candidate engagement through lengthy screening processes?
- How could organizations better empower candidates during the hiring process?

Whereas a candidate in the previous phase likely remained “passive” during job-search activities, we suggest that candidates have now transitioned to an “active” status moving into the hiring and screening stage. Having an active candidate means that organizations and hiring representatives are now fully engaged in a transactional relationship; the candidate wants a job (among other factors), and the organization needs to focus on how best it can help the candidate in achieving that objective.

Candidate Conversion

To aid the discussion in this section, we define *candidate conversion* as the point at which the candidate begins interacting with the hiring organization (e.g., application portal) or organizational representatives (e.g., recruiters) to obtain employment. Relationship management is a crucial element of “converting” passive job-seekers to active candidates. Organizations have the responsibility for fostering and maintaining positive relationships with the candidate throughout the hiring process—even if the candidate is not selected for employment.³⁷

Candidate Conversion Challenges

Many of the same challenges found in the prehiring stages (awareness, attraction, and consideration) may surface again in the candidate conversion stage if not planned for and addressed within a comprehensive framework. Complex job descriptions, unclear hiring processes, and infrequent communication with candidates can undermine overall hiring experiences and can undermine the candidate’s experience.

Application length, accessibility challenges, and lack of expectation-setting can lead to candidates self-selecting out of the hiring process.³⁸ Requiring manual data entry after applicants have uploaded required forms may further frustrate candidates, who may already be stressed by a variety of other factors, including applying for a new job while already employed (stress related to not informing current employer during active job-seeking) or being in the

³⁷ More on ensuring a positive experience even in the case of rejections below.

³⁸ Calvello, 2021.

final stages of an academic program.³⁹ The hybrid/virtual environment has added application (and interview) obstacles that organizations and candidates must work together to overcome.⁴⁰

Organizations that have adopted a “one-size-fits-all” approach to hiring and screening tend to have a higher attrition rate than companies that tailor processes to individuals.⁴¹ While phone screening may help narrow down potential candidate pools, traditional phone screening may make “candidates start to look the same, and they often get taken off script in a way that gives some candidates an advantage over others.”⁴²

Asking traditional (or expected) questions during interviews, screening, or other organizational assessments may also detract from the overall candidate experience.⁴³ For many candidates, the interview process may be the first human interaction with a company, especially for applicants who do not first interface with recruiters. One-way information exchange (information pull) during hiring interviews may also make some candidates feel uncomfortable and uninformed, leading to decreased position interest.

Stagnant or infrequent communication between application submission, interviews, job offers, or job rejections prohibit a positive experience.⁴⁴ One source reports that “40 percent of candidates reject offers because another employer gave them an offer faster,” which highlights the need for efficient and effective communication methods to maintain candidate interest.⁴⁵ Emerging generations do not adhere to “no news equals good news” and instead view the lack of communication as “ghosting” during the hiring process—especially during more lengthy hiring and screening processes.⁴⁶ Ignoring or discounting candidate wants and needs during the conversion stage can greatly diminish candidate enthusiasm about advertised positions and lead to negative word-of-mouth reporting.⁴⁷

Candidate Conversion Enablers

Given the scale of challenges noted in the conversion stage, organizations will need to focus on managing relationships through increased engagement and information exchange. Under-

³⁹ The Pipeline, “9 Proven Ways to Improve Candidate Experience,” webpage, May 3, 2019.

⁴⁰ HireVue, 2021; Fuller, 2021; Calvello, 2021.

⁴¹ HireVue, 2021.

⁴² HireVue, 2021.

⁴³ For example, “What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?” and “Tell me about a time you overcame a challenge at work,” which have been found to be “unreliable” as predictors of job success (Alex Haimann, “How to Design a Better Hiring Process,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 26, 2020).

⁴⁴ Sabel, 2019; Miles, 2018.

⁴⁵ Recruiting.com, 2022.

⁴⁶ See HireVue, 2020; and Slezak, 2016.

⁴⁷ Bryan Adams, “6 Simple Steps to Revitalizing Your Candidate Experience,” ERE Recruiting Intelligence, September 9, 2016.

standing personal motivations for employment in previous stages (through data capture) and satisfying underlying objectives can help personalize hiring processes to the individual. Setting process benchmarks (e.g., expected wait times) in previous stages can help manage candidate expectations, though it may not be enough to retain applicants in-process. Providing candidate experience training to all staff (i.e., not just to recruiters) may help to generate the buy-in necessary to improve the overall experience.⁴⁸

Using customer relationship management (CRM) tools and candidate-facing dashboards could bolster organizational efforts in this stage. Some companies have integrated applicant tracking software with CRM platforms allowing feedback capture (metrics) that are then used to refine hiring and screening processes. Such platforms can also increase communication with candidates by generating automated (yet personal) correspondence to keep applicants informed during the process and allow a sense of control to candidates by offering interview, screening, and assessment scheduling capabilities.⁴⁹ Others within the private sector are also experimenting with artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to process applications and assist in matching candidates with current or future job openings.⁵⁰ Implementing situational judgement tests (SJTs), developing engaging game-based assessments (with potential future teammates/current employees), or using “storytelling-based” screening create a more immersive experience for the candidate and may create experiential learning opportunities for both the candidate and the organization.⁵¹ The literature also suggests that the more a company is able to “flatter” a candidate on the day of the interview (e.g., sending a surprise driver, having a candidate concierge to get water and food, inviting senior personnel to the interview) may create “moments to remember” and have a lasting positive impact.⁵² Including a desk receptionist or administrative coordinators as part of the interview team provides additional insight that can be used for candidate assessment.⁵³

⁴⁸ Incentivizing high performers (i.e., candidate experience teams) may also foster a better candidate experience in the long term. See Keenan Steiner, “Bad Candidate Experience Cost Virgin Media \$5M Annually—Here Is How They Turned That Around,” LinkedIn Business, March 15, 2017; and Career Plug, *2021 Candidate Experience Report*, September 2021.

⁴⁹ Thereby reducing staff needed for administrivia, who can focus on other experience priorities (JOB-VITE, “Candidate Experience,” webpage, undated).

⁵⁰ Jay Miller, “Five Ways To Improve The Candidate Experience,” *Forbes*, May 11, 2021; Fuller, 2021.

⁵¹ An article appearing in the *Harvard Business Review* reports that interviewing should move away from formulaic prompts to testing candidates for preparations skills, “critical thinking and tech savviness,” and “listening and communication skills”—for example, “teach us something as if we know nothing about it” (Haimann, 2020). Also see Harver, 2021; and HireVue, 2021.

⁵² Greenhouse, “8 Ingredients for a Great Candidate Experience,” blog post, May 21, 2013; Petrone, 2015.

⁵³ For example, incorporating a “receptionist or interview coordinator” as part of the interview team can relay informal information to the interview team (e.g., “how they behave when they think no one is watching” or “was the candidate polite or condescending when interacting with the coordinator”) (Greenhouse, 2013).

Providing frequent feedback during hiring can also promote a positive experience. Providing interview or other assessment results to candidates as soon as possible after the event may help to foster a more trusting relationship with the candidate.⁵⁴ Feedback also extends to applicants who are rejected; several sources note that organizations can counter negative reporting about the hiring process by (1) alerting rejected candidates as quickly as possible, (2) providing “constructive” feedback to help with a future application or interview, and (3) providing personalized correspondence that may highlight alternative career paths in the organization.⁵⁵

Hiring and Screening Factors for Framework Consideration

This section summarizes our observations from the literature on hiring and screening practices within the private-sector literature. We now briefly discuss the relevance of these observations to the vetting process before moving to the final *retention* stage of the candidate experience, which includes EOD, onboarding, and future job mobility (e.g., reciprocity).

Background Investigation Forms

Initial stages of the SSC process require filling out a series of forms and authorizations needed to begin the background investigation process. Such forms (e.g., the traditional SF-86 National Security Questionnaire) via e-QIP or eAPP require the candidate to list information related to work history, criminal history, mental health history, potential areas for foreign influence, and other personally identifiable information needed to conduct the background check.⁵⁶ Candidates might now be considered moving from an active to a passive status while awaiting next steps and may not know the status of their questionnaire submission until they receive a call from the background investigator or receive a rejection letter that their application will not receive a positive adjudicative determination.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Diaz, 2018.

⁵⁵ Many times, unsuccessful candidates are quickly dismissed and could sacrifice a potential future relationship. See Qualtrics, 2022; Diaz, 2018; Calvello, 2018; Harver, 2021; and Sandra Jeanquart Miles and Randy McCamey, “The Candidate Experience: Is It Damaging Your Employer Brand?” *Business Horizons*, Vol. 61, No. 5, 2018.

⁵⁶ Distinctions between the SF-86, 85, and 85P may soon be obsolete with OPM’s 2022 issuance in the *Federal Register* calling for congressional and public comment on a new “Personnel Vetting Questionnaire” that would consolidate questions and categories into one form for background investigations (OPM, “Notice of Submission for a New Information Collection Common Form: Personnel Vetting Questionnaire,” *Federal Register*, Vol. 87, No. 225, November 23, 2022b). Therefore, we are not differentiating between security, suitability, or public trust forms for the purposes of this report.

⁵⁷ Informally, candidates may be able to gauge how quickly their application is moving by speaking/checking in with references listed on the forms.

Prominent factors for framework inclusion will need to focus on increased SSC stakeholder communication; progress- or questionnaire-tracking capabilities that allow the candidate to view their status; information “push,” which might provide the passive candidate with news updates about the department or agency they have applied to (to maintain continued interest); or a listing of POCs who are able to answer ongoing questions a candidate may have about the process. Expectation-setting (or “sign-posting”) in previous phases will help manage candidate expectations in the background investigation phase and should be reiterated during every interaction with the candidate. If investigative service provider staff find issues in the course of vetting the candidate that require clarification, investigators might seek to communicate with applicants via the candidate’s preferred method of communication.⁵⁸

Background Investigation Interviews

Background interviews for national security positions can make some candidates feel anxious or uncomfortable—especially given the nature or sensitivity of questions being asked. Investigators in this phase tend to ask standardized sets of questions to assess an individual’s character or trustworthiness in relation to the type of organizational position sought and are not intended to gauge candidate skills or whether the candidate is the right “fit” for the position.

However, many of the same factors that enable a positive interview experience in the private-sector screening stage could be applied to the background investigation interview. Ensuring that candidates have flexibility in scheduling the interview, providing accommodation for those who require additional accessibility considerations (e.g., virtual/video interviews), and catering to candidate needs (e.g., water, snacks) before and during the interview can have a lasting impact. As with the private sector, the investigator (and interview) may be the candidate’s first interaction with a government agency, creating greater urgency to ensure that investigators have received adequate candidate experience training. Effective communication (even informal) with a candidate in the post-interview stage becomes even more important as candidates transition back into a passive stage while awaiting adjudication results.

Adjudication

Candidates proceeding through SSC stages generally have limited to no interaction with the adjudicators who are ultimately deciding the fate of their future employment.⁵⁹ While it may be difficult to create a communication mechanism between candidates and adjudicators, SSC

⁵⁸ We understand the limitations imposed by USG-approved devices for the handling of identifiable information; we are suggesting that a candidate may simply prefer a video-chat or texting capability, per emerging generation technology expectations.

⁵⁹ Limited, for example, because exceptions may occur if the candidate has entered into an appeals process to contest the adjudication decision.

stakeholders might consider how best to keep candidates informed during this phase. For example, turning Federal Investigative Standards and Adjudicative Guidelines into easy-to-understand materials (e.g., graphics, personas) that provide further information on adjudication and why it is needed for their position could foster greater process transparency.

Adjudication staff might also seek to provide candidates with information beyond formulaic adverse adjudication decisions, such as specific timelines the candidate may need to wait to apply again in the future or a listing of other USG positions that might not require stringent application of the adjudicative guidelines.⁶⁰ Timeliness is also key in this stage; a candidate may already have spent a substantial amount of time (e.g., having a “passive” candidate for 12 to 18 months depending on the type of investigation required) waiting for this pivotal moment in their journey. Making candidates wait even longer just to receive bad news may result in negative word-of-mouth reporting and dissuade other candidates from applying.

Candidate Experience Factors to Consider in the Post-Initial Vetting Phase

This section briefly summarizes our findings from our literature review that focus on candidate experience during the onboarding and retention process. Although existing SSC stakeholder responsibilities do not extend to the onboarding phase, we suggest that relaying relevant private-sector practices in this phase would help to create a more comprehensive candidate experience framework, since the initial vetting process does not exist in isolation.⁶¹ We used the following questions to guide our review of factors relevant to this stage:

- How can organizations help ease a candidate’s transition into the workplace?
- What are some of the key retention practices used within the private sector to reduce workforce turnover?

While no longer a “candidate” in this phase, a federal USG employee may routinely seek employment at other federal departments or agencies during their career progression. Therefore, having a reasonably smooth transfer of a security clearance or suitability determination (i.e., reciprocity) may play a key role in whether an employee remains within the USG—or exits to private-sector employment. Therefore, we include *job mobility* as a key component for

⁶⁰ For example, many SF-86 questions begin with the caveat, “In the last 7 years have you XX.” Therefore, if the candidate was instructed to reapply in n = number of years, they might receive a successful adjudication.

⁶¹ But rather within a system of systems. For more on systems theory, see Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, “An Outline of General System Theory,” *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, Vol 1, No. 2, August 1950; and Dean Karnopp, review of George J. Klir, ed., *Trends in General System Theory*, Wiley-Interscience, 1972, in *Transactions of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers*, December 1972.

consideration in the post–initial vetting phase, even though an employee may face reciprocity issues at any stage of their career.⁶²

Retention

To facilitate the discussion in this section, we define *retention* as the point at which the candidate has received a job offer and extending through the onboarding and training period. We consider retention to be a continuous process without a defined end point, given the cyclical nature of federal employment (e.g., General Schedule [GS]-scale progression) and the need to provide an excellent “candidate” experience as existing employees continue to interact with the SSC process through external organization reciprocity and expected changes from periodic reinvestigations to continuous vetting under Trusted Workforce 2.0.

One of the key challenges noted within the literature is that not all organizations recognize that onboarding is still part of the candidate experience.⁶³ Once the candidate has signed the offer letter and received EOD instructions (e.g., reporting date, office location), they may then transition to a separate HR or administrative team tasked with ensuring that the new employee fulfills organizational requirements, such as completion of mandatory paperwork, tax forms, and other benefits information. The lack of integration between recruiters, hiring managers, interview teams, and HR can create disconnects in the overall candidate experience and could detract from an employee’s willingness to remain at the hiring organization. The hybrid work environment poses additional challenges to the onboarding process; wait times between job offers and EOD can make new employees feel unwelcome.⁶⁴ Disconnects between the hiring and onboarding process may also inhibit the collection of feedback that would otherwise serve as a cumulative measure of the candidate’s overall experience.

The literature also suggests that the onboarding experience differs among white male workers, nonwhite workers, women, and LGBTQ+ communities. One survey found that the “percentage of women who are satisfied with their onboarding program (58%) is lower than the percentage of men (65%).”⁶⁵ Further, “LGBTQ+ candidates (7%) are more likely than heterosexual candidates (2%) to not have learned how their jobs relate to their organization’s goals and outcomes.”⁶⁶ While surveys focusing on equity within the hiring and onboarding

⁶² Meaning that a current federal employee could be considered a “candidate” at any stage of their career—and could interact with the SSC process without proceeding through the prehire phase.

⁶³ Mason Mitchel and Noah Schreiber, “Everything You Need to Know About Onboarding in 2022,” *SmartRecruiters Blog*, March 22, 2020; Debbie Lamb, “Onboarding is the Key to a Terrific Candidate Experience—Sterling,” *Sterling Talent Solutions*, September 11, 2017; Morgan McKinley, “How to Create an Effective Candidate Experience and Why It Matters to Your Hiring,” January 3, 2022.

⁶⁴ Ramesh Krishnam, “The 5-Star Candidate Experience,” LinkedIn post, February 19, 2022.

⁶⁵ Gartner, 2021. Further, “Fewer than half of women gain access to the equipment they need to do their job during onboarding, compared with more than 60% of men.”

⁶⁶ Gartner (2021) also notes that “Fifteen percent of LGBTQ+ candidates did not learn what it takes to get promoted in their role compared with 7% of heterosexual candidates. LGBTQ+ candidates are also three

process are nascent, these findings suggest that organizations will need to actively work to ensure that future onboarding processes do not exclude or marginalize diverse populations.

Retention Enablers

Organizations that treat “every day as day one” in the posthiring phase may be more likely to retain workers in the long term. Continuous monitoring of needs once the employee has arrived in their new position helps to communicate that the company values the employee’s commitment to the organization.⁶⁷ Ensuring that the new employee is partnered with an “onboarding buddy,” creating personalized welcome videos from senior leadership, and communicating unique benefits, compensation, and organizational career paths helps to promote a more holistic candidate experience.⁶⁸ Some organizations that have moved to a hybrid working environment are also actively working to create virtual orientation and training videos to help acclimate new hires, given in-person constraints.⁶⁹ In-person constraints have also necessitated the need for IT departments to ensure that new employees receive the equipment and software required for the new position.⁷⁰ Surveying newly hired employees can also help organizations redesign their job portal user experience (UX) interface, refine hiring process, and determine the types of benefits, trainings, or other perks most likely to attract emerging talent pools. Finally, providing new hires with access to internal referral databases can generate new leads for proactive recruitment; if a recently hired employee reported a positive candidate experience, that individual may now be in a position to mitigate negative word-of-mouth reporting as an external organizational representative and recruiter.

Retention Factors for Framework Consideration

The literature surveyed in this section presents several factors for inclusion in our candidate experience framework. First, data collection via surveys or other informal capture in the post-initial vetting phase can help identify problematic hiring processes and procedures throughout the candidate journey. Providing virtual onboarding and training materials prior to “in-office” reporting dates and ensuring that new employees are partnered with individuals or teams can help to quickly acclimatize to the organization’s culture and environment.

times more likely than heterosexual candidates not to have learned about the culture of their team during their onboarding process (10% vs. 3%, respectively).

⁶⁷ Greenberg, 2022.

⁶⁸ Miller, 2021; Diaz, 2018; Fuller, 2021.

⁶⁹ See Anna Baluch and Kelly Main, “14 Onboarding Best Practices (2022 Guide),” *Forbes.com*, October 12, 2022; Indeed, “Onboarding Best Practices,” webpage, undated; and Fuller, 2021.

⁷⁰ Dennis O’Keefe, “11 Ways to Successfully Onboard Your New Hires,” *Business.com*, updated March 22, 2023.

Routine monitoring of employee needs once hired may also contribute toward retention long-term. Proactively identifying professional development and career trajectories for new employees can help foster a positive end-to-end candidate experience. Working with other (external) USG departments and agencies to increase reciprocity between job categories and positions may contribute to candidate retention over time. Finally, including onboarding within the framework helps those who had a positive candidate experience act as organizational representatives for future hires. The next section highlights our observations and findings from our discussion with private-sector organization SMEs.

Private-Sector Organization Interviews

We conducted five interviews with private-sector organizations between August and November 2022. Three of the interviews were conducted with senior-level executives across HR consultancy firms and employee advocacy groups. We conducted one interview with an individual who recently transitioned from the USG to the private sector, and one interview with an individual who recently transitioned from a federal (civilian) contracting position to a USG agency to triangulate the current state of SSC candidate experience. Though such a small sample size cannot represent generalizable research, the following subsections highlight the prominent observations on ways to improve candidate experiences that emerged from the handful of discussions we had related to the creation of our candidate experience framework.

Private-Sector Subject-Matter Expert Observations

Gain Senior Leader Buy-In, Create Supporting Structures

Interviews with private-sector organization SMEs highlighted that creating an ideal candidate experience should begin with generating senior-leader buy-in. Relaying the importance of ensuring a positive hiring and onboarding candidate journey (e.g., positive online process “reviews,” long-term retention) can act as the demand signal for aligning support structures (e.g., experience teams or departments).⁷¹ Ensuring leadership buy-in may also help communicate near- and long-term cultural shifts among staff involved in recruiting, hiring, and onboarding phases and serve as change agents for candidate experience teams to emulate. Organizational alignment with candidate experience initiatives also necessitates a variety of new training for all individuals the candidate may interact with during their hiring process, including recruiters, interviewers, assessment or skill testing personnel, and HR/onboarding staff. Such training would ideally incorporate a greater understanding of the process from the

⁷¹ Interviews F, G.

candidate's point of view, how best to communicate with candidates in process, and targeted diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) training to ensure process equity.⁷²

Establish Relevant Metrics

Interviews with private-sector SMEs highlighted the importance of measuring candidate experience during each phase of the hiring and onboarding process. There are a variety of existing customer service and recruiting metrics that have been adapted to help organizations address process deficiencies. One interviewee noted that informal feedback capture through email and through recruiting reports can be helpful to address some negative aspects of the experience but may not be as helpful as formal capture.⁷³ Net Promoter Scores (NPSs) are frequently used as a measure to understand whether new or existing employees would recommend their organization to candidates seeking a position at their company.⁷⁴ Likert-based surveys (e.g., 1–5 points or “stars”) are another way organizations seek to uncover candidate experience obstacles at different stages in the hiring process.⁷⁵ Available website information, application accessibility, job description clarity, and information about the company are frequent touchpoints used by organizations to assess needed improvements. Some organizations are also providing candidate rating scores for recruiters and interviewers to better understand needed training (or to provide incentives to high-performing staff).⁷⁶

Our interviewees also noted some challenges in devising relevant metrics. For example, operational-level metrics are helpful in understanding discrete process issues, but many organizations struggle to develop overarching impact, or outcome, metrics that incorporate measures of performance.⁷⁷ Conversely, some organizations may focus too much on developing strategic-level metrics that do not provide the types of granular insight necessary to address individual candidate touchpoints. Interviewees also noted that finding the right balance between data capture and the frequency or length of the survey question can be diffi-

⁷² One former USG employee noted that “you need to have contact numbers that are not individual-based. All individuals are individual points of failure. You need a network of people, someone to be able to catch that. Being able to always get ahold of someone through email or chat application or phone call, any one or all of those things would be very useful.” Interview H.

⁷³ Interview G.

⁷⁴ Interview F. Also see Net Promoter, “What Is Net Promoter? A Trusted Anchor For Your Customer Experience Management Program” webpage, undated.

⁷⁵ One interviewee familiar with federal hiring processes reported that the Department of Agriculture had planned on putting a candidate experience–related survey at the bottom of initial onboarding emails that would allow new employees to relay their overall hiring experience, but they were unclear on the status of that effort. Interview I.

⁷⁶ Interview F.

⁷⁷ One interviewee noted that, “It goes back to duration; it’s great if a process has 5 different touchpoints and you might say all 5 are lovely interactions but then the candidate might say it [was bad] because it took 22 days and 10 different places to go.” Interview F.

cult, necessitating well-constructed survey questions that do not affect candidate time commitments.⁷⁸

Simplify Job Descriptions, Establish Branding

Our discussions with the private sector highlighted the need for organizations to promote clarity, employee value propositions, unique benefits, potential career paths, and office culture within posted job descriptions. One interviewee noted that including flexibility in working location (e.g., hybrid opportunities), philanthropic or other CSR reports, and educational opportunities are key factors among emerging job-seekers.⁷⁹ Another interviewee agreed that flexibility in working location may generate 5 to 10 times as many applications as a posting that requires a single working location.⁸⁰

Ensure Process Transparency and Consistent Communication Throughout the Hiring and Screening Journey

One interview with an individual who recently transitioned to Big Tech from a USG position highlighted several factors that contributed to a positive candidate experience. First, the process from application to onboarding lasted approximately two months. Once the individual applied to the private-sector organization, they were contacted the same week by phone (as an initial screening mechanism), interviewed three weeks later and onboarded by the end of the second month.⁸¹ The interviewee reported that the first screening phone call was conducted by someone who was very friendly and informative. Once the initial screening was complete, the individual was provided with access to a candidate dashboard to track progress through the hiring process. The dashboard continually pushed updates related to screening requirements (conducted by a third party) and assessments and tests (preparatory information), and continued to “ping” the individual as subsequent steps were completed.⁸² The interviewee also noted that having an “active” recruiter during the process greatly improved the experience by having informal conversations about the process, ensuring understanding of forthcoming hiring phases, and providing preparatory information about skill-based testing via

⁷⁸ Interview F, G.

⁷⁹ Interview F.

⁸⁰ One interviewee noted that one USG organization did not make in-office requirements clear until candidates had already proceeded through the SSC hiring stage; that organization reportedly lost several qualified candidates. Interview I.

⁸¹ Several USG vetting SMEs concurred that an SSC candidate experience framework would ideally incorporate front end (prehire) and post-initial vetting phases to create a comprehensive experience. Interviews A, B, C, and D.

⁸² For example, the interviewee reported that the dashboard would say

“You’re at step one, here’s resources to prepare you for the next step.” I was applying for a job with technical requirements and I actually had to test technical requirements so there were study materials in there so I could be prepared for next phases. When you pass, it notifies you and there’s a new blip in the system with material for your new phase. (Interview J).

email and texts whenever the interviewee had questions.⁸³ One USG vetting SME with former private-sector experience noted that “I think focusing on both ends is absolutely key. . . . There should always be someone from personnel security going out to talk with folks as part of that team. That way they can answer questions on the spot, out in the field and dispel the myth of ‘I’d love to work for you, but one mishap in my background would disqualify me.’”⁸⁴

Expectation-setting may also increase candidate retention during the hiring process. One interviewee noted that although ensuring seamless transition (e.g., timeliness) between hiring phases is important, perceptions of the process may be even more important for the candidate—and perhaps less costly to address.⁸⁵

Use Tools and Platforms to Maintain Awareness

All the private-sector interviewees with whom we spoke noted the importance of using candidate dashboards and applicant tracking systems to increase process transparency, keep candidates engaged, and provide insights to company hiring managers.⁸⁶ Institutionalizing dashboards could also allow hiring managers to see where the majority of candidates discontinue applications and could be programmed to automatically “ping” candidates with information updates. One interviewee familiar with the unique hiring requirements posed across different federal departments and agencies suggested having one universal “front-end” dashboard “transparency tracker” for all candidates, while each USG entity could then develop its own application programming interface (API) on the “back end” to suit unique organization requirements. This would allow the USG to create a universal candidate experience for future employees, while allowing USG organizations the opportunity to present the candidate with unique agency insights (e.g., culture, benefits).⁸⁷

Create a Welcoming Onboarding Experience

Our interview with a senior HR and benefits manager in the private sector highlighted several practices for consideration for the onboarding phase. First, new employees should receive a “warm welcome” that could include company-branded clothing (“swag”), coupons for lunch during their first week, and a comprehensive onboarding presentation of office cul-

⁸³ The interviewee noted that the recruiter felt more like an “advisor” than a recruiter and always replied within one business day to any questions the interviewee had. Interview H.

⁸⁴ Interview A.

⁸⁵ For example, one interviewee noted that “if a Disney ride has long lines but they post a sign that says 45-minute wait, then if it only takes 20 minutes, people are happy when they get to the front because it was much faster than they thought. And people who don’t care to wait don’t get in line. None of that sped up the ride or increased the capacity of the ride, which might cost more, it just made better expectations for people to cross.” Interview F.

⁸⁶ One USG customer experience strategist noted that, “The government could do a lot more to sell itself in the JOA [job opening announcement]. Because private sector is 100 percent selling itself.” Interview D.

⁸⁷ One interviewee noted that the “world is going away from a software structure, to a place of data plus APIs plus front end digital that’s cheap and easy to customize.” Interview F.

ture, organizational structure, key leadership, performance management expectation, benefits, compensation, and potential future long-term career paths.⁸⁸ While “remote” onboarding can present challenges to organizations, there are a variety of practices that have enabled a positive onboarding experience, such as sending company laptops with preloaded applications with POC information for IT assistance. The onboarding team at this organization also ensures that all new hires are partnered with individuals or teams of existing employees who can assist with acculturation and relevant training.⁸⁹ The onboarding team also ensures that new hires are surveyed after 30, 60, and 90 days to capture needed hiring process reforms and evaluate future workforce needs.⁹⁰

Create Open-Source Opportunities for Candidates Awaiting SSC Initial Vetting

One interviewee with former DoD and IC experience now working within the private sector noted that one way to increase candidate experience could be to rapidly onboard in-process candidates into open-source positions during SSC processing. This would allow a more immersive hiring experience for the candidate and fulfill short-term hiring needs for USG organizations. The interviewee also suggested that performing research or analysis in an unclassified role, to the extent that is feasible for the hiring organization, would also address emerging generation desires to work remotely and may allow hiring and screening while candidates are still pursuing undergraduate education.⁹¹

Summary

This chapter highlighted prominent characteristics to consider when creating candidate awareness, attraction, and consideration in the pre-initial vetting phase. We also discuss relevant findings from the literature on managing the candidate experience during the SSC process and offer some insights on the post-initial vetting phase that may provide a more comprehensive view of the end-to-end candidate experience. This chapter also highlighted key candidate experience challenges and enablers within select private organizations that informed the development of our proposed candidate experience framework.

⁸⁸ Interview G.

⁸⁹ One interviewee reported exploring a mentor-based program that might be used to match new hires with mentors. Akin to an “online dating application,” it uses algorithms to find potential matches. Interview G.

⁹⁰ For example, some candidates may report wanting a remote work schedule, increased tuition assistance, or additional benefits to address mental health concerns. This allows the organization to address existing employee needs and to operationalize existing employee desires in job descriptions for candidates thinking about applying.

⁹¹ “It would be useful to get people in before they’re cleared, and people have suggested this for a while. There’s a ton of open source intelligence jobs that don’t require a clearance. Any topic will have tons of unclassified work that can serve as a basis for future classified work. . . . It kills two birds with one stone. . . . Fix the pipeline process, create a remote workforce, improve unclassified intelligence.” Interview H.

A Tailorable Framework: Improving the Candidate Journey Through the SSC Process

Overview

This chapter presents a tailorable candidate experience framework that could assist in creating a positive candidate journey through the USG's personnel vetting process. While the primary focus of our proposed framework is to improve candidate experience during the vetting process, our literature review and subsequent interviews with USG and private-sector SMEs highlighted that any proposed framework should consider candidate experience at a holistic level. That is, developing a framework should consider an end-to-end mapping of the candidate's journey to ensure an accurate depiction of all obstacles an applicant may face throughout their interaction with organizational touchpoints.

Therefore, SSC stakeholders might consider the information in this chapter as a starting point for (1) understanding how best to think about the candidate to increase process retention as they make their way through the federal hiring process and (2) understanding the hiring and screening process from the candidate's point of view. While the inputs, outputs, and outcomes presented in this chapter are presented as a generalized model, our baseline framework could be tailored to suit individual department and agency needs.

Framework Development Methodology

The suggested SSC candidate experience framework presented in this chapter is derived from relevant private-sector practices gleaned from our literature review, interviews with USG personnel vetting SMEs (including a customer experience strategist), and discussions with private-sector personnel.¹ We socialized our in-progress observations and draft framework

¹ For example, elements of OMB Circular A-11 HISP Designation memo (OMB, 2021), the VA's Customer Experience Cookbook (VA, 2020), and the Department of Education's Integrated Student Experience (Wensil, 2015) greatly informed the development of our proposed framework.

with the PAC PMO, which provided additional strategic insights for incorporation. Finally, we incorporated comments from our internal and external quality assurance reviewers to ensure a holistic approach in forming the framework presented below.

We used the outputs of our cumulative observations and findings to construct a three-step process that could be used by USG entities responsible for maintaining a positive candidate vetting experience throughout the hiring process. First, departments and agencies should consider developing relevant candidate experience categories to capture the range of factors, actions, objectives, interactions, platforms, and metrics suited to unique organizational needs. We provide suggestions for this type of categorization below in **Step 1**.

The second step will require USG organizations to conduct an informal end-to-end mapping of the hiring process. While we have provided a generalized view of the federal hiring process to help organizations think about the types of steps required for mapping in **Step 2**, such steps could be reworked to meet unique organizational hiring processes as needed.

The last step in developing a tailored candidate experience framework would simply be combining Steps 1 and 2 into a formalized candidate experience framework to help guide alignment of staff and resources required to help achieve candidate experience objectives. We have provided two worked examples within **Step 3** to help guide completion of a holistic candidate experience framework that includes inputs, outputs, and outcomes necessary for continuous refinement.²

Step 1: Develop Relevant Candidate Experience Framework Categories

The first stage of a formalized candidate experience framework could use the set of suggested framework categories presented in Table 4.1. Using our suggested categories provides a baseline for further USG department and agency development.

The first category, USG Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations, would allow organizations to (re)examine or reflect on foundational aspects of the candidate's experience from an empathetic viewpoint; for example, asking "How do candidates know we exist?" could lead organizations to list recruiting events, branding, online presence, and other factors relevant to attracting a passive candidate.

The second category, Possible Candidate Activities, could further place recruiters, investigators, adjudicators, or other SSC support staff in the role of a candidate to understand specific process barriers, candidate emotions or behaviors, or other factors for consideration

² A candidate experience framework should not be viewed as static, but rather as a tool for continuous learning and improvement based on candidate feedback.

TABLE 4.1
SSC Framework Categories

Suggested Framework Category	Definition
USG Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations	Range of factors that the USG could further develop when developing organization-specific candidate experiences
Possible Candidate Activities	Example candidate actions during journey through the hiring process
Possible Candidate Goals	Example candidate objectives during journey through the hiring process
USG Touchpoints (Human/Technology)	Example list of candidate interactions with USG systems, platforms, and personnel
USG Candidate Experience Objectives	Example proactive actions/activities the USG might consider to improve candidate experience within a specific hiring/screening phase
Possible Candidate Experience Metrics	Example performance and effectiveness measures/methods the USG might consider to improve overall processes
Possible Candidate Experience Obstacles	Example factors that may inhibit overall candidate experience across a specific hiring/screening phase

when developing candidate personas that could be illustrated (e.g., a graphic showing different types of backgrounds or unique circumstances) on application portals.³

The third category, Possible Candidate Goals, provides an additional layer of complexity to our proposed framework. This category may help highlight underlying motivations that were prevalent through our literature review; although a candidate may have the objective of achieving “job security” or a “well-paid” position, underlying motivations may include funding for advanced education, needing to work from home due to health or child care considerations, or other motivators that may increase employee retention long-term.⁴

The fourth category, USG Touchpoints, is needed to fully capture and understand each moment the candidate may interact with a hiring agency, an interviewer, a background investigator—or any other platform used for candidate engagement. Capturing the full range of interaction mechanisms can help to highlight existing platforms, discover gaps where SSC stakeholders could increase engagement with applicants, or identify specific personnel for future candidate experience training.⁵

The fifth category, USG Candidate Experience Objectives, is where organizations should state key candidate experience team missions during a specific phase. For example, in the

³ PAC PMO has developed a series of initial candidate personas/vignettes that we have incorporated within the development of this framework.

⁴ This also aligns with our private-sector onboarding observations presented in Chapter 3.

⁵ The USG may also need to think about how best to increase engagements that involve personally identifiable information on nonapproved USG devices to meet the demand of emerging generations.

pre-initial vetting phase, one objective may be to identify negative “reviews” (e.g., blogs, social media) to understand key process obstacles and complaints that can be addressed to further streamline the hiring and vetting process.⁶ In the initial vetting phase, another objective might include “pushing” daily or weekly status updates to candidates who have submitted their background investigation paperwork. Such objectives could ultimately inform overarching organizational candidate experience metrics, which might include “Have we ensured consistent communication throughout the vetting process?” and “Does our current method of engagement promote process retention?”

The sixth category, Possible Candidate Experience Metrics, provides organizations with the opportunity to develop and refine specific measures that can be used to identify problematic processes or activities, inform organization-unique candidate experience objectives, and serve to externally promote organizational efficiency and effectiveness for future candidates.⁷ Including a metrics category also can help highlight the need for data collection during each phase of the candidate journey to inform senior-level decisionmaking.

The final category that we have developed as a baseline for USG departments and agencies desiring a positive candidate vetting experience will likely be informed organically through population of the other suggested categories. Possible Candidate Experience Obstacles are the factors that either inhibit or detract from the overall candidate experience. As shown through our literature review and interviews, a candidate may have an excellent recruitment and hiring process experience—all of which might be negated during a poor onboarding experience, or misalignment between job description and actual day-to-day job activities. We note that not all identified obstacles can be mitigated by SSC stakeholders (e.g., delays in job application and initial organization outreach). However, having a comprehensive understanding of the type of obstacles candidates face throughout the process can better position SSC personnel to address and/or understand candidate concerns once the conditional offer has been made.⁸

⁶ Or to serve as a standby team ready to assist with background investigation form questions.

⁷ For example, organizations could operationalize candidate experience data collected into “satisfaction” or other roll-up graphics for presentation on externally facing websites.

⁸ For example, investigators might be able to gain immediate rapport (increase trust) with a candidate who faced a long initial job application by saying, “I heard you had to wait over six-months after you applied to X organization, which really concerns me and unfortunately is something that we are unable to control . . . but don’t worry, we will be taking great care of you during your upcoming vetting process!” Or, “I was told that you had a really horrible experience during your initial job interview—can you tell me a little bit more about that so we can communicate your concerns back to the hiring organization that submitted your background investigation request?”

Step 2: Map the Candidate's Journey

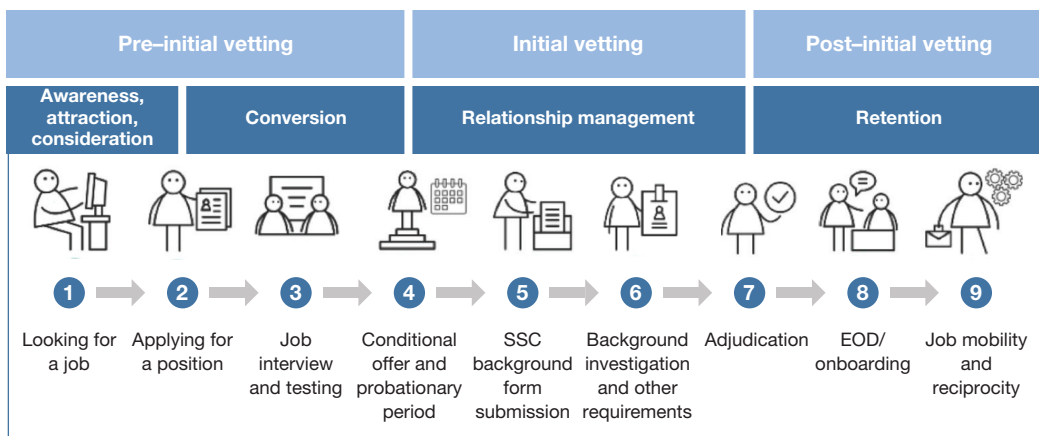
Once organizations have conducted the difficult, but important, task of cataloguing and categorizing organization-specific experience inputs, outputs, and outcomes, the next step should be to map the candidate's journey through the federal hiring process—a mapping that will eventually align with the categories identified in Step 1.

The USG federal hiring process can be conceptualized across nine key phases, as shown in Figure 4.1. Although we provide a general overview of this process from a USG perspective in Chapter 2, Figure 4.1 begins to differentiate the approach from a candidate's point of view. The generalized steps presented in this section served as the entry point for framework development. Because there is no existing SSC framework for candidate experience, we have categorized the federal hiring process into the following three phases:

- **The “Pre-Initial Vetting” Phase** includes Steps 1–4: looking for a job, applying for a position, hiring organization interviews and testing, and the conditional offer period.
- **The “Initial Vetting” Phase** includes Steps 5–7: submission of background investigation forms, the background investigation (and other investigative requirements, such as a background investigation interview or polygraph), and the adjudication stage.
- **The “Post-Initial” Vetting Phase** includes Steps 8–9: EOD and onboarding, and job mobility/reciprocity.

In the subsections below, we provide general candidate experience considerations during each of the three vetting phases and list some possible Strategic Considerations (Framework Category 1) for organizations to think about during the general federal hiring steps that we have identified.

FIGURE 4.1
A Candidate's Journey Through the Federal Hiring Process



Pre–Initial Vetting Phase

Step 1: Looking for a Job

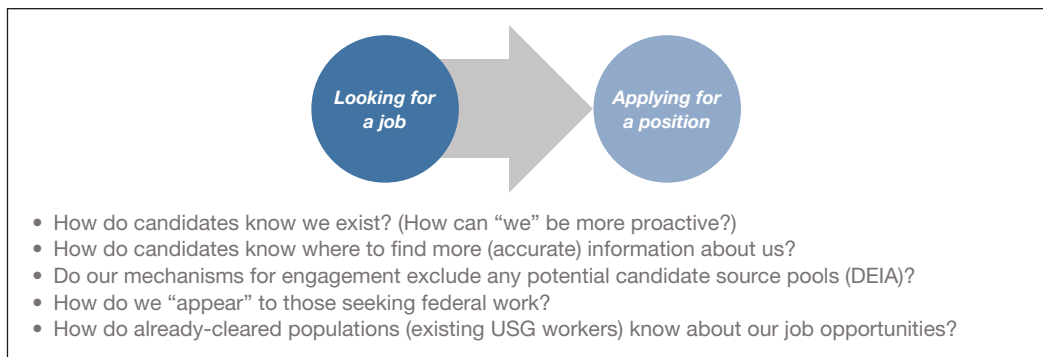
Providing a holistic candidate experience would ideally begin prior to the formal job application stage.⁹ Organizational branding, CSR and EVP statements, website accessibility, and engaging visuals that help communicate organizational values and culture are key enablers for attracting candidates to USG organizations they may know little about and creating awareness of advertised positions, especially for passive candidates who may be weighing application complexity requirements across several opportunities. Adding the job-seeking stage into a comprehensive candidate experience framework also requires organization to be more proactive in addressing mis- and disinformation about the organization—and as a method to refine subsequent processes based on online or word-of-mouth reporting about the hiring process. Including this stage within an SSC framework may help to generate (or promote) increased transparency of SSC processes and information about departments or agencies that candidates may not even know exist. Figure 4.2 provides additional questions that an organization could consider as it approaches Step 1, and Figures 4.3–4.10 provide relevant questions for Steps 2–9. Additional potentially relevant questions are provided in Appendix A.

Step 2: Applying for a Position

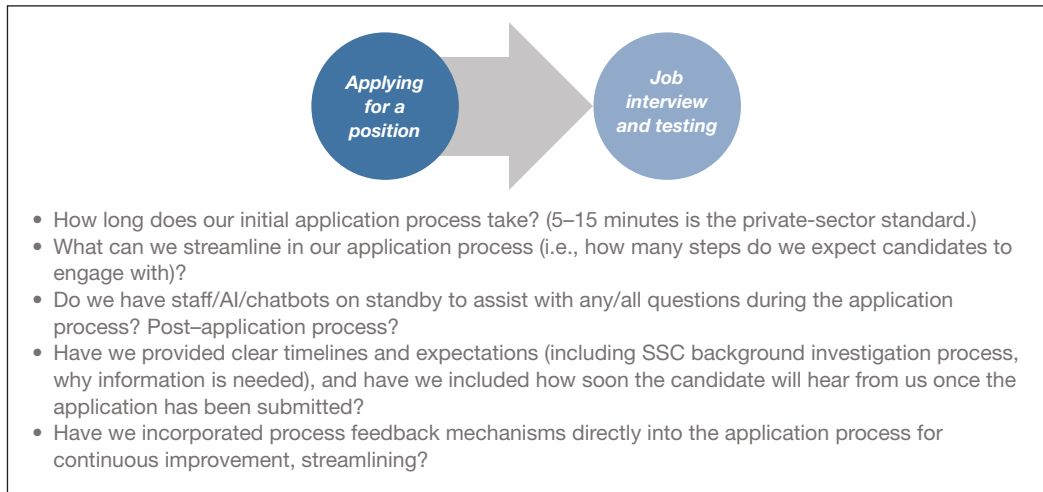
“Tipping” passive candidates to active candidates (from awareness, attraction, and consideration to conversion) serves as an important next step from a candidate’s viewpoint. The candidate, having carefully considered the factors presented in Chapter 3, will now be actively engaged in the hiring process. Ensuring that enabling processes are in place (e.g., outreach teams to answer questions, dashboards, process benchmarks or “sign posts”) may help retain candidates despite potentially long hiring timelines that may accompany SSC screening. Managing relationships through proactive candidate engagement, capturing application

FIGURE 4.2

Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 1



⁹ As evidenced through our literature review and interviews.

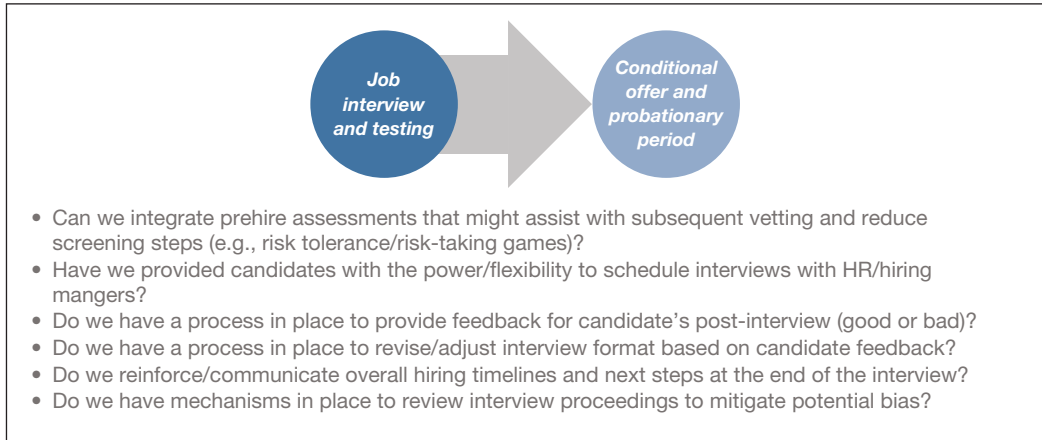
FIGURE 4.3**Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 2**

process-related data (e.g., measuring the value and accessibility of information provided on application portals), and presenting candidates with adequate preparatory information could foster a positive relationship with candidates. The candidate may seek to complete applications from a personal smartphone—and could discontinue applications that take longer than 15 minutes to populate. Candidates may also have a variety of questions that are expected to be answered in real time, or near real time. While there is no existing overlap between the organizational application process and screening or vetting communities, synergies may exist that would reduce process burden on candidates long-term.¹⁰

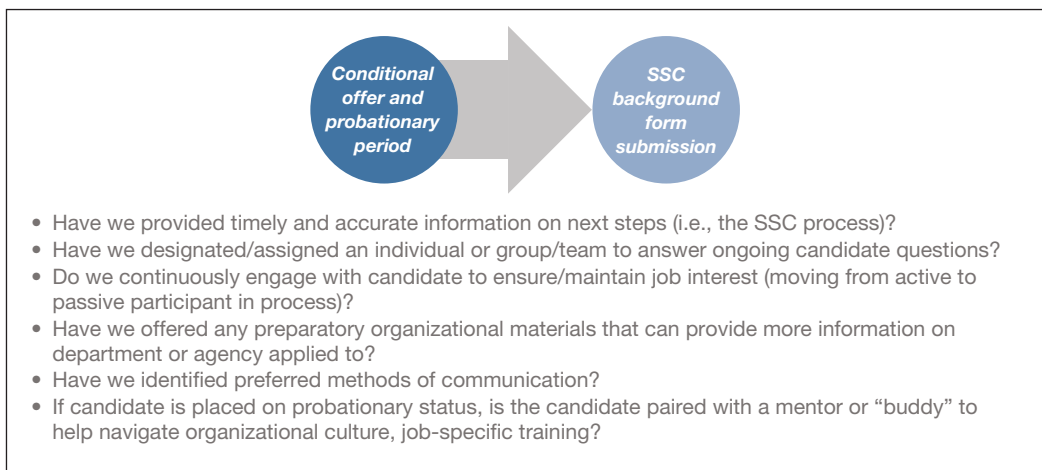
Step 3: Job Interview and Testing

The literature and our interviews across USG and private-sector personnel have noted potential efficiency gains in combining (or at least integrating at some level) individual background or skill screening during front-end interview and testing, although this practice traditionally is outside the purview of the SSC community. Candidates at this stage of the hiring process may have interview- or test-related anxiety and may actively search (or talk to existing employees) about what to expect to allay concerns. Candidates may also feel undervalued (or worse, ignored) when organizations do not respond promptly after interviews or job-related skills testing appointments.

¹⁰ For example, building initial screening questions into job postings or applications may help prepopulate information within background investigation forms.

FIGURE 4.4**Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 3****Step 4: Conditional Offer and Probationary Period**

The final step before submitting candidates for personnel vetting may arrive in the form of a conditional offer (i.e., contingent upon successful security or suitability adjudication) or a probationary period that provides prospective employees with unclassified work duties, depending on the department or agency. Although USG organizations might not be in a position to fully commit to conditional employees, there are several opportunities for engagement that can help transition candidates into the vetting phases. Much like in previous stages, ensuring two-way information exchange, expectation-setting, and providing lists of POCs

FIGURE 4.5**Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 4**

for candidates who may have questions about the vetting process (before experiencing it) could create a positive experience.

Initial Vetting Phase

Step 5: SSC Background Form Submission

Our literature review and interviews highlighted that successful applications are those that (1) are easily understood and do not require “hunting” for additional information, (2) can be completed within a short period, (3) retain the ability to allow data automation (e.g., from uploaded resumes) and automatic messaging for missing data fields, (4) can be tracked by both the candidate and the hiring manager, and (5) are accessible by mobile phone. Providing examples of prefilled questionnaires, posting answers to frequently asked questions, and ensuring candidate access to investigators or background form administrators via texting, phone, or video chat can help individuals who are not familiar with SSC processing.

Step 6: Background Investigation and Other Requirements

The type, frequency, and efficacy of interaction between candidates and SSC stakeholders from the moment of background investigation submission and adjudication is critical to our proposed framework. This is a period during which a candidate has moved from actively engaging with the hiring organization and initial interactions with assigned investigators to a passive waiting period. Organizations should understand that passive candidates in the SSC phase could be active candidates at external companies—meaning that proactive relationship management could (or should) become a key mission for both hiring organizations and investigative service providers.

FIGURE 4.6

Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 5

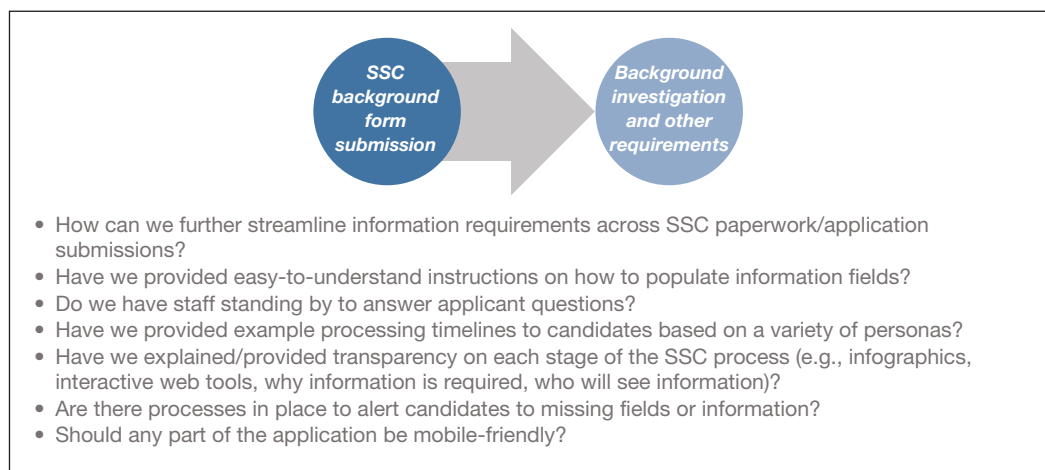
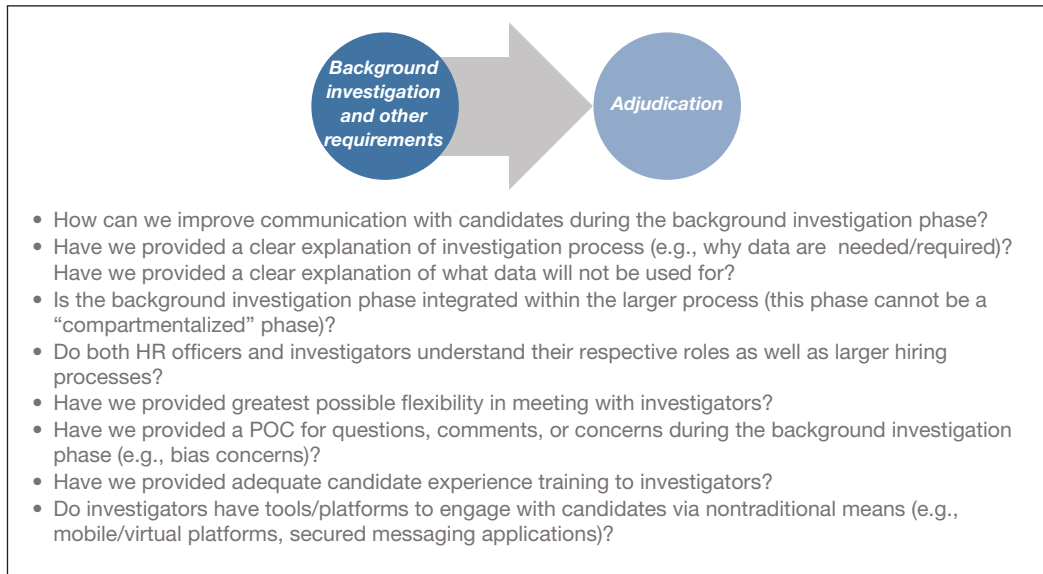


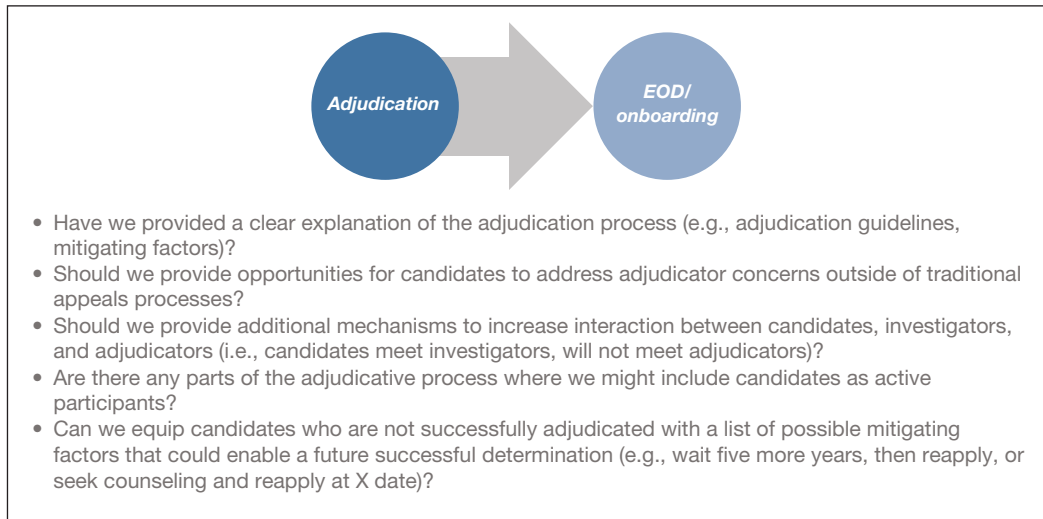
FIGURE 4.7**Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 6****Step 7: Adjudication**

Candidates do not typically have much access to or interaction with adjudicators or support staff within authorized adjudicative agencies.¹¹ To a candidate, this may be the one person (or team) who may ultimately decide the fate of any future employment with the USG.¹² Findings from the literature suggest some ways to create a positive experience during the adjudication phase—especially for those who do not receive a successful adjudication. Supplying candidates with adjudicative guidelines (in an easy to understand graphic or PDF brochure) and relaying the importance of adjudication to those unfamiliar with the process can serve as one example of information “push.”¹³ Candidates who are rejected during this phase also might benefit from correspondence that does not focus solely on the reasons why their clearance (or suitability) determination was unsuccessful. For example, equipping rejected applicants with additional USG positions in their interest areas could assist in creating a positive experience for rejected applicants. SSC stakeholders might also consider providing potential timelines

¹¹ One example of an exception could be during the appeals process.

¹² For example, clearance or suitability denials must be listed on subsequent background investigation forms.

¹³ One way to promote the importance of adjudication might be to publish case studies or produce videos that highlight where the adjudication process screened out someone who could have caused irreparable harm to U.S. national security. Candidates could also be presented with “fake” cases as a form of online game to see how they would adjudicate an individual. This might also provide data to SSC stakeholders on how emerging generations perceive the severity of certain adjudication guidelines.

FIGURE 4.8**Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 7**

for when an applicant might become eligible to hold a sensitive position, or a list of resources for candidates to mitigate particular adjudicative concerns at a later date.¹⁴

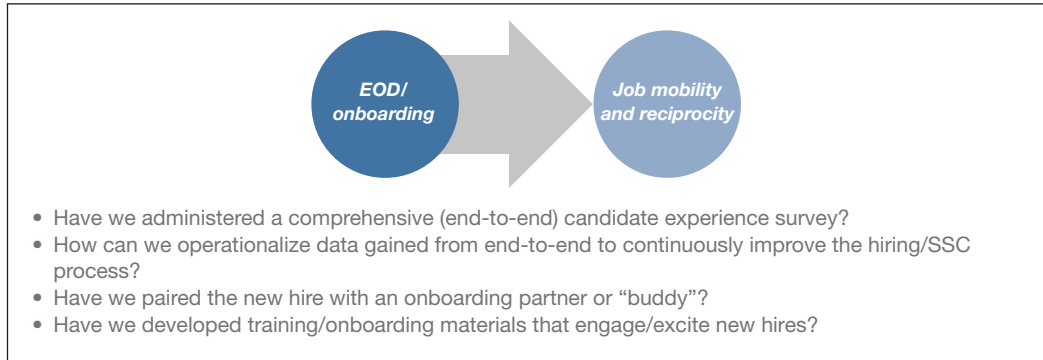
Post-Initial Vetting Phase

Step 8: EOD/Onboarding

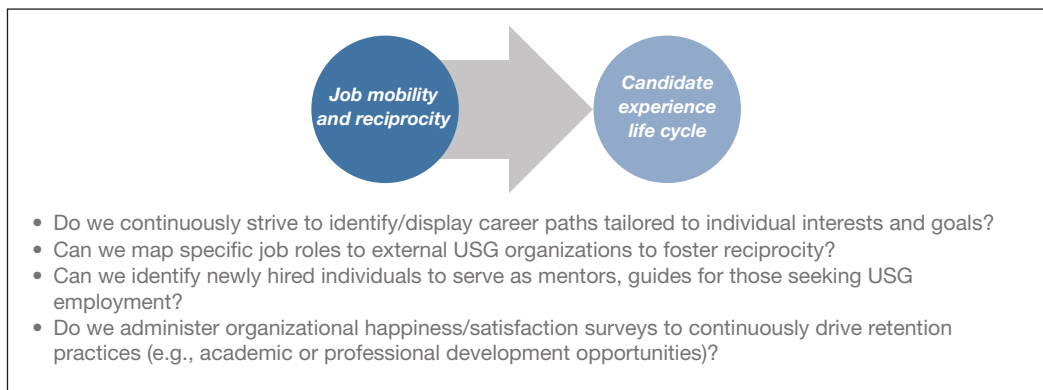
Providing an exceptional candidate experience should not end once an individual receives a successful background determination and receives EOD or onboarding instructions.¹⁵ Failing to provide a seamless transition between these stages, not capturing survey or feedback data that can be used to enhance the overall hiring process, or expecting the new hire to know who to talk to for guidance and support can negate any previous efforts instituted across previous phases. The candidate will require frequent engagement with a mentor or “onboarding buddy,” will expect engaging training materials, and could already be thinking about career next steps.

¹⁴ For example, questions on existing background investigation forms may list “within the last seven years” as a caveat for certain types of information. Providing future timelines for when the provided information (e.g., criminal history) may no longer be relevant can show that the USG is invested in the future workforce. Additional resources might include providing POC listings for mental health counselors or substance-abuse clinics that are near the candidate’s location if those areas posed a concern during the adjudicative process.

¹⁵ Bradt and Vonnegut have noted that “Every day is day one” (George B. Bradt and Mary Vonnegut, *Onboarding: How to Get Your New Employees Up to Speed in Half the Time*, John Wiley & Sons, 2009).

FIGURE 4.9**Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 8****Step 9: Job Mobility and Reciprocity**

Although we have listed job mobility and reciprocity as the final stage of the continuous candidate journey, we note that this step could occur across Steps 1–4 of the hiring process if the candidate is already an active member of the USG workforce. Therefore, future retention of skilled talent may depend on repeated interaction of this process throughout their career if moving from one USG organization to another. While increased SSC reciprocity between agencies can help promote a continuous vetting experience, the USG might also consider mapping job or career categories across departments or agencies that could be displayed to existing employees in line with relevant private-sector practices showcasing career trajectories. USG organizations might also consider operationalizing individuals whose survey data reflected a positive candidate experience (e.g., via surveys and data collected in previous phases) to serve as organizational advocates for those thinking about joining the organization or as a resource for those already in-process.

FIGURE 4.10**Example Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations for Step 9**

Step 3: Assemble Populated Framework Categories with Journey Mapping to Create Holistic Candidate Experience Framework

The candidate experience framework will likely develop organically once organizations have identified relevant candidate experience framework categories and mapped the candidate's journey from the pre-initial vetting phase through the post-initial vetting phase (specific to unique organization requirements). We again note for practitioners that the "final" framework should be considered a "living" entity (e.g., tool, platform, policy)—one that allows for continuous refinement through data collection and is responsive to emerging candidate needs. In Tables 4.2 and 4.3, we provide two hypothetical worked examples below that illustrate how an organization might approach Step 3 using inputs from Step 1 and 2.¹⁶

Two Worked Examples Using Suggested Framework Approach

The first example (Table 4.2) illustrates hypothetical inputs an organization (or candidate experience team) might develop when mapping a candidate's job search through the job application stage. The framework categories presented in the left-hand column are derived from Step 1, and the framework factors (right-hand column) depict a range of factors that organizations might develop to inform the overall intended candidate experience.

The second worked example (Table 4.3) focuses on the vetting phases as the candidate transitions from the background investigation step to adjudication. While the framework categories will remain the same (to help standardization across identified phases), the inclusion of federal hiring process categories (e.g., moving from a conditional offer to the submission of background investigation forms) will help practitioners differentiate between the types of framework factors to consider when developing a holistic candidate experience framework.

Summary

This chapter has provided our proposed candidate experience framework based on our cumulative research observations and findings. Our suggested framework provides SSC stakeholders with a method and a model for how to think about candidate experience within the context of the federal hiring context. As evidenced through the literature and our interviews with USG vetting and private-sector organization SMEs, candidate experience within the SSC process cannot be considered in isolation from the federal hiring process; because SSC responsibilities extend into the post-initial vetting phase (i.e., within a continuous vetting and clearance or suitability reciprocity context), ensuring seamless transition and engagement between all three phases can promote a more comprehensive experience. Using the

¹⁶ Additional worked examples appear in Appendix A.

steps identified in this chapter, ensuring continuous data-driven process refinement, and providing a sense of empathy for candidates could improve retention throughout the SSC processes.

TABLE 4.2
Pre-Initial Vetting Phase, Worked Example (Look for Job/Apply to Job)

Framework Category	Possible Framework Factors
USG Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have we (re)evaluated our job announcements for relevancy and accuracy? • How do candidates know we exist? (How can we be more proactive?) • How do candidates know where to find more (accurate) information about us? • Do our mechanisms for engagement exclude any potential candidate source pools? (i.e., DEIA considerations) • What is motivating candidates to seek work right now? • How do we “appear” to those seeking federal work? (e.g., branding) • How do already-cleared populations (existing USG workers) know about our job opportunities?
Possible Candidate Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to friends/family who may work in or know more about USG organizations, departments, and agencies • Perform internet searches on the department or agency to find out more • Attend on-campus recruiting/job fairs • Search social media and LinkedIn sites for connections
Possible Candidate Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Traditional Employee</i>: Do I have the skills or qualifications needed for this job? • <i>Emerging Generation</i>: How can I identify with this organization? Does this company share any of my values? Is this organization diverse? Does this organization exhibit elements of CSR (solving external issues)?
USG Touchpoints (Human, Technology)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media presence • USG external websites (e.g., USAJobs, USAStaffing, individual agency websites) • USG internal websites (applicant tracking systems) • Recruiter
USG Candidate Experience Goals/Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify, seek out negative “reviews” (blogs, Twitter, social media) to understand key obstacles and complaints • Develop variety of candidate personas to “test” candidate experience
Possible Candidate Experience Metrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EVP • Virtual vs. In-person recruiting sessions (cost/benefit analysis)
Possible Candidate Experience Obstacles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative news/social media coverage (USG sentiment/general level of institutional trust) • Process/institutional rumors • Not advertising in nontraditional venues (DEIA considerations) • Glassdoor, other “complaint” career-oriented blogs

NOTE: It may also be useful to differentiate between “traditional” and “emerging generations” when thinking about possible candidate goals.

TABLE 4.3

SSC Phases, Worked Example (Background Investigation/Adjudication)

Framework Category	Possible Framework Factors
USG Candidate Experience Strategic Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we increase communication with candidates during the background investigation phase? • What information can we routinely send to keep candidates informed during the background investigation phase? • Have we provided a clear explanation of investigation process (e.g., why data are needed/required)? Have we provided a clear explanation of what data will not be used for? • Have we provided the greatest possible flexibility in meeting with investigators? • Have we provided a POC for questions, comments, or concerns during the background investigation phase? (e.g., bias concerns) • Have we provided adequate candidate experience training to investigators? • Have we provided opportunities for candidates to address investigator concerns prior to the adjudication phase? • Do investigators have tools/platforms to engage with candidates via nontraditional means? (e.g., mobile/virtual platforms, secured messaging applications)?
Possible Candidate Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waiting! • Calling friends to see if they have been contacted • Hedging (other job offers, interviews) • Checking in on status of background investigation or speaking with investigator
Possible Candidate Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand status • Maintain contact with hiring organization
USG Touchpoints (Human, Technology)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR, investigative service providers, investigators • Email/other system/status updates • ATS/CRM • Calls, texts, emails (for updates, questions)
USG Candidate Experience Goals/Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication (“push,” not just “pull”) • Hire candidate (vetting in vs. vetting out) • Understand whole-of-person/mitigating factors for issues that arise • Ensure clear, consistent communication via multiple platforms • Push daily or weekly information on status • Designate SSC candidate experience “champions” to answer questions, provide guidance • Develop methods to maintain/gauge continued candidate interest in position • Provide communication/tools for candidate SSC form application tracking
Possible Candidate Experience Metrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move away from sole focus on time-in-process (shortening vetting timelines) • Interaction with investigators (Likert, star rating, think Uber) • Drop-off rates • Questions/guidance response rates
Possible Candidate Experience Obstacles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person requirements (e.g., investigator interviews, fingerprinting) • Lack of communication with investigator or hiring organization • Maintain contact with hiring organization • Reluctance to provide information (e.g., DEIA considerations, unknown use of data)

Observations, Suggestions, and Conclusions

This chapter provides a summary of observations, suggestions, and conclusions based on the information provided throughout this report.

Observations and Suggestions

Observation 1: The USG has not institutionalized an approach across the federal hiring and screening processes for creating a positive candidate experience. While the USG has designated HISPs with additional customer service oriented responsibilities that provide external services to the U.S. public, such designations do not focus on organizations that provide internal hiring or screening services for positions requiring background investigations. Some HISP-designated organizations (e.g., the VA and the Department of Education) have developed informal customer experience frameworks to help guide federal departments that can inform the development of an SSC-relevant framework.

Suggestion 1.1: Use the proposed tailorable SSC candidate experience framework to further operationalize Federal Personnel Vetting Engagement Guideline end-state objectives. The engagement guidelines provide the impetus for a new vetting culture that promotes increased candidate interaction and process transparency across executive branch agencies. Using the provided framework can further help SSC practitioners plan for each of the inputs, outputs, and outcomes (via a candidate journey mapping) necessary to allocate candidate experience training, funding, and resources in the execution stage (planning, programming, budgeting, and execution [PPBE]).

Observation 2: Connections between candidate experience and its importance to ensuring U.S. national security workforce continuity are critical in fostering SSC stakeholder buy-in. A lack of formalized candidate experience policy has led to underprioritization of applicants within hiring and screening processes. The USG would likely benefit from a formalized candidate experience strategy and framework that could help organizations prioritize candidates within existing hiring and screening processes, but, absent a stronger demand signal from senior leadership, progress on providing a more comprehensive candidate experience across organizations may languish in lieu of other vetting modernization priorities. Wide-scale incorporation of candidate experience practices will also likely require a change

in overall vetting culture, which could result in such practices becoming more aligned with relevant private-sector practices.

Suggestion 2.1: Deploy foundational change-management techniques to emulate desired process changes. For example, developing candidate experience teams (or designating individual candidate experience “champions”) can help communicate candidate experience objectives, track compliance and candidate feedback, recommend process changes, and serve as role models across organizations seeking to institute new candidate experience initiatives. A new candidate experience team could also work closely with senior leaders to develop more robust candidate experience strategies based on initial framework development.

Suggestion 2.2: Develop relevant candidate experience metrics across all vetting phases. A holistic SSC candidate experience framework cannot exist in isolation from the prehire or posthire context as outlined in our report. Working with front-end recruiters, HR, and onboarding support staff may highlight additional considerations that could benefit candidates throughout the hiring process. Working across phases may also help highlight cross-cutting metrics that could increase data-informed process refinement. Organizations could use OMB Circular A-11 (HISP designations) as a reference to build from when constructing candidate-centric performance and effectiveness measures.

Suggestion 2.3: Institute data-collection platforms and standardize data collection to inform candidate experience metrics. Candidate experience metrics should allow organizations to generate insight on cross-cutting SSC process challenges and enablers for continuous process refinement. The FEVS may serve as a baseline model for collecting relevant candidate experience metrics.

Continuous data collection (e.g., candidate feedback and surveys throughout the hiring journey) could help identify areas for targeted candidate engagement and identify new opportunities for increased transparency. Routine data collection and analysis may also help to showcase the value of candidate retention to senior leaders and support staff and generate needed stakeholder buy-in.

Suggestion 2.4: Incorporate best practices in talent acquisition as part of formalized candidate experience strategy. Any formal candidate experience strategy might also incorporate (1) organizational branding and marketing focused on acquiring new workforce generations with desired emerging skill sets, (2) ensuring that hiring requirements and job postings for positions requiring background investigations are continuously evaluated and refined to meet hiring needs, and (3) individual (or organizational) hiring manager workforce shaping strategies that can help outline future organizational needs and align the desired candidate experience.

Observation 3: There is no consistent or formalized training across the USG on how to ensure a positive candidate experience. Although the Federal Personnel Vetting Engage-

ment Guidelines highlight the need for increased interaction with candidates during screening processes, our interviews highlighted that no formal candidate experience training exists for background investigators, interviewers, or adjudicators.¹

Suggestion 3.1: Develop a candidate experience training curriculum based on stated candidate experience outcomes within the developed candidate experience strategy. The development of a formal candidate experience strategy in Suggestion 2.4 can be used to help identify and align requisite training with relevant SSC personnel. A candidate experience training curriculum could also continuously incorporate insight gained through data collection and analysis to ensure that SSC personnel continue to meet candidate needs.

Observation 4: The private sector’s hiring and screening process will likely retain several advantages (e.g., timeliness, location flexibility) over the USG’s for the foreseeable future. This necessitates the importance of increasing candidate engagement and process transparency throughout the SSC phases we have identified to ensure a seamless candidate experience.

Suggestion 4.1: SSC stakeholders should consider engaging with pre- and post-initial vetting personnel (e.g., recruiters, web designers) to develop more-effective engagements across the awareness, attraction, consideration, relationship management, and retention stages. Including SSC stakeholders earlier in the candidate’s hiring journey may highlight additional process efficiencies (e.g., prescreening assessments) to reduce overall candidate burden. Incorporating data and other feedback gained during the onboarding process may also enhance hiring and screening processes over time.

Conclusions

The USG will need to proactively recruit, hire, screen, onboard, and provide continuous career-growth opportunities—while simultaneously providing an exceptional candidate experience—to attract and retain new generations with unique skill sets to the national security workforce. To attract and retain the talent it needs, the USG requires the ability to understand why candidates are (or are not) attracted to government work, why and when they choose to abandon their applications, and why they choose to depart from federal service to seek employment elsewhere. Having adequate candidate experience tools can help government hiring and security managers understand the needs of the candidates they are seeking to hire and the employees they are hoping to retain.

This report provides a baseline for understanding candidate experience within the SSC context. While the framework we have provided is comprehensive (in the sense that we have identified specific vetting phases, federal hiring stages, categories, and strategic consider-

¹ One investigative provider has instituted “patience training” to help investigators field questions from candidates. Interview B.

ations to guide future departments and agency framework development), there is still work to do. Responsibility for constructing and populating a formalized candidate experience framework that incorporates organization-specific requirements (tailoring) will lay with the USG, and the departments and agencies that may implement this approach. However, the research and insights we have provided throughout this report are intended to help position the USG to create a more positive hiring and screening process and promote a more trusting and more transparent relationship between the USG and emerging generations of the U.S. public.

Potential Strategic Questions, by Vetting Phase and Step

This appendix provides some additional strategic questions by vetting phase, building from the information provided in the worked examples in Chapter 4. The questions in Table A.1 are intended to guide those seeking to implement a candidate experience framework. The questions, organized by vetting phase and step, are generalized across the federal hiring process, since we cannot account for the unique hiring and screening needs of all USG organizations requiring a background investigation.

TABLE A.1
Potential Strategic Questions, by Vetting Phase, Candidate Stage, and Step

Vetting Step	Candidate Stage	Strategic Questions
Pre-Initial Vetting Phase		
Step 1: Looking for job	Awareness, attraction, consideration	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How do candidates know we exist? (How can we be more proactive?)2. How do candidates know where to find more (accurate) information about us?3. Do our mechanisms for engagement exclude any potential candidate source pools (i.e., DEIA considerations)?4. What is motivating candidates to seek work right now?5. How do we “appear” to those seeking federal work (e.g., branding)?6. How do already-cleared populations (existing USG workers) know about our job opportunities?7. How do we help candidates learn more about our organization, our mission, our culture/values, and the jobs we are advertising?8. How do candidates know about what job openings we have?9. How do we keep candidates interested/informed about our work (during/post-site visit)?10. Have we set realistic expectations for the hiring process/SSC process (what would I want to know?)11. Do we continuously reassess job requirements (e.g., education, training, certification)?12. How can we generate/maintain passive candidate interest?13. Can we connect candidates with employees in role sought for informal discussions?14. How early can the candidate express interest (e.g., high school, during degree)?

Table A.1—Continued

Vetting Step	Candidate Stage	Strategic Questions
Step 2: Applying for a position	Awareness, attraction, consideration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How long does our initial application process take? (5–15 minutes is the private-sector standard.) 2. Can we streamline our application process (i.e., how many steps do we expect candidates to engage with)? 3. Do we have staff/AI/chatbots on standby to assist with any/all questions during application process? Post-application process? 4. Have we provided clear timelines and expectations (including SSC background process, why information is needed), including how soon the candidate will hear from us once the application has been submitted? 5. Have we incorporated process feedback mechanisms directly into the application process for continuous improvement, streamlining? 6. Have we (re)evaluated how much information is actually required for initial submission/consideration? 7. Is our application process connected to applicant tracking systems/dashboards that allow candidate interaction (uploading required documents, saving incomplete applications)? 8. Have we personalized rejection letters that can aid the candidate in future job searches (e.g., list of other jobs that may be relevant or in line with commensurate candidate skills)?
Step 3: Job interview and testing	Awareness, attraction, consideration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have we integrated prehire assessments that could assist with subsequent vetting and reduce screening steps (e.g., risk tolerance/risk-taking games)? 2. Have we provided candidates with the power/flexibility to schedule interviews with HR/hiring managers? 3. Have we tailored the interview to accommodate virtual processes? 4. Do we have a process in place to provide feedback for candidates post-interview (good or bad)? 5. Do we have a process in place to revise/adjust interview format based on candidate feedback? 6. Can we incorporate additional interview questions to see whether candidates might be able to fill a variety of positions? 7. Have we provided candidates with clear preparatory materials for their job interview (address, directions, online link)? Do we have staff available to assist with candidate reschedules or technical issues? 8. Do we reinforce/communicate overall hiring timelines and next steps at the end of the interview? 9. Do we have mechanisms in place to review interview proceedings to mitigate potential bias (independent quality assurance)? 10. Have we personalized rejection letters that can aid the candidate in future interviews (e.g., personalized feedback that can help the candidate excel in future USG job interviews)?
Step 4: Conditional offer and probationary period	Awareness, attraction, consideration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have we provided timely and accurate information on next steps (i.e., the SSC process)? 2. Have we designated and assigned an individual or group/team to provide guidance/answer ongoing candidate questions? 3. Do we continuously engage with candidate to ensure/maintain job interest (moving from active to passive participant in process)? 4. Have we offered any preparatory organizational materials that can provide more information on department or agency applied to? 5. Have we identified candidate's preferred method of communication? 6. If candidate is placed on probationary status, is the candidate paired with a mentor or "buddy" to help navigate organizational culture, job-specific training?

Table A.1—Continued

Vetting Step	Candidate Stage	Strategic Questions
Initial Vetting Phase		
Step 5: Background form submission	Conversion/ relationship management (passive/ active/ passive)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can we further streamline information requirements across SSC paperwork/application submissions (Trusted Workforce 2.0)? 2. Have we provided easy-to-understand instructions on how to populate information fields? 3. Do we have staff standing by to answer applicant questions? 4. Have we provided example processing timelines to candidates based on a variety of personas? 5. Have we explained/provided transparency on each stage of the SSC process (e.g., infographics, interactive web tools, why information is required, who will see information)? 6. Are there processes in place to alert candidates to missing fields or information? 7. Should any part of the application be mobile-friendly? 8. What tracking mechanisms are in place for the candidate to view real-time status? 9. Can we prefill any of the information fields based on previous USG applications submissions—or based on open source information (e.g., previous addresses)? 10. How do we maintain/motivate candidates to remain in process (e.g., organizational newsletters, updates)? 11. Are there any methods for reducing/mitigating candidate anxiety in this stage (e.g., legal advice, mental health-related questions)?
Step 6: Background investigation and other requirements	Conversion/ relationship management (passive/ active/ passive)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can we increase communication with candidates during the background investigation phase? 2. What information can we routinely send to keep candidates informed during the background investigation phase? 3. Have we provided a clear explanation of investigation process (e.g., why data are needed/required)? Have we provided a clear explanation of what data will not be used for? 4. Have we provided the greatest possible flexibility in meeting with investigators? 5. Have we provided a POC for questions, comments, or concerns during the background investigation phase (e.g., bias concerns)? 6. Have we provided adequate candidate experience training to investigators? 7. Have we provided opportunities for candidates to address investigator concerns prior to the adjudication phase? 8. Do investigators have tools/platforms to engage with candidates via non-traditional means (e.g., mobile/virtual platforms, secured messaging applications)?

Table A.1—Continued

Vetting Step	Candidate Stage	Strategic Questions
Step 7: Adjudication	Conversion/relationship management (passive/active)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can we increase communication with candidates during the adjudication phase? 2. What information can we routinely send to keep candidates informed during the adjudication phase? 3. Have we provided a clear explanation of the adjudication process (e.g., adjudication guidelines, mitigating factors)? 4. Have we provided a POC for questions, comments, or concerns during the adjudication phase? 5. Have we provided adequate candidate experience training to adjudicators? 6. Have we provided opportunities for candidates to address adjudicator concerns outside of traditional appeals processes? 7. Can we provide additional mechanisms to increase interaction between candidates, investigators, and adjudicators (i.e., candidates will meet investigator, will not meet adjudicator)? 8. Are there any parts of the adjudicative process where we can increase candidate agency (power over vs. power with)? 9. Can we equip candidates who are not successfully adjudicated with a list of possible mitigating factors that could enable a future successful determination (e.g., wait 5 years, then reapply, or seek counseling and reapply at X date)?
Post-Initial Vetting Phase		
Step 8: EOD/onboarding	Retention (passive/active)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have we administered a comprehensive (end-to-end) candidate experience survey? 2. How can we operationalize data gained from end-to-end to continuously improve hiring/SSC process? 3. Have we paired new hire with onboarding partner or “buddy”? 4. Have we developed training/onboarding materials that engage/excite new hires?
Step 9: Job mobility and reciprocity	Retention (active)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do we continuously strive to identify/display career paths tailored to individual interests and goals? 2. Have we mapped specific job roles to external USG organizations to foster reciprocity? 3. Can we identify individuals to serve as mentors, guides for those seeking USG employment? 4. Do we administer organizational happiness/satisfaction surveys to continuously drive retention practices (e.g., academic or professional development)?

List of Interviewee Affiliations and Interview Protocol

Table B.1 provides the affiliations of our ten interviewees. The rest of this appendix reproduces the interview protocol that we used as the basis for our engagements with the USG and the private-sector interviewees.

TABLE B.1
List of Interviewee Affiliations

Interview	Interviewee Background
Interview A	USG personnel vetting SME
Interview B	USG personnel vetting SME
Interview C	USG personnel vetting SME
Interview D	USG customer experience strategist
Interview E	HISP SME
Interview F	Senior member of customer experience-focused firm
Interview G	Senior onboarding experience strategist with the private sector
Interview H	Former USG employee with recent private-sector experience
Interview I	Senior federal hiring contract manager
Interview J	Former federal research contractor with recent IC experience

Recruitment and Consent—USG Discussions

Creating a Positive Candidate Vetting Experience

The RAND Corporation is conducting a study on behalf of the Performance Accountability Council (PAC) Program Management Office (PMO) that is intended to provide a thorough understanding of the types of organizational characteristics that factor into a decision to pursue a career in government service. Due to rapidly evolving social and cultural norms, government organizations will need to consider characteristics not typically accounted for across government positions. The key objectives of this project are to: 1) identify prominent (and emerging) factors for consideration when attracting, hiring, and engaging new gen-

erations of the national security workforce; 2) highlight relevant private sector engagement practices that maintain candidate interest during recruitment and hiring processes; and 3) develop a tailorable candidate-experience framework that incorporates a customer-centric approach and adopts the unique needs and requirements of department and agency missions.

The purpose of our discussion with you today is to learn more about your experiences with ongoing candidate experience initiatives and any other information that you feel may supplement our research efforts. We expect the discussion will take no more than 60 minutes.

RAND will only use this information for research purposes. Your responses are completely confidential and your identity will not be connected to your responses in any way.

We appreciate and value your participation. If you are willing to participate in this study, please remain in the room. If there any questions that you prefer not to answer or if you would prefer to cease your participation at any time, you should feel free to do so.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the project leaders.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or need to report a research-related injury or concern, you can contact RAND's Human Subjects Protection Committee.

Thank you!

Candidate Vetting Experience USG Protocol

1. **Can you tell us about your current role in your organization and your primary responsibilities?**
 - a. Is the hiring and onboarding function centralized in your organization or embedded in different departments (e.g., is HR a distributed function or within its own stovepipe)?
 - b. Have you noticed any recent organizational shifts (e.g., policy or guidance) to conform with TW 2.0 requirements or end-states?
 - c. (*If familiar with TW 2.0*) Do you feel that TW 2.0 initiatives provide adequate guidance for improving overall candidate hiring experiences?
 - d. If not, what additional mechanisms might you suggest to improve the overall hiring experience?
2. **Existing Hiring Data Collection**
 - a. Can you describe how, or if any hiring effectiveness or efficiency data is collected during the hiring phase?
 - b. Do candidates have opportunities to provide feedback on the hiring process once hired? In a general sense would you be willing to share any trends in feedback provided by candidates?
 - c. Are there any other periodic reviews of hiring processes to determine candidate satisfaction?
 - d. Are you aware of any metrics at your organization, or at other organizations that seek to measure candidate experience?

- e. Do you conduct any sort of cost-per hire assessments?
- 3. **Existing Chokepoints/Hiring Process Issues**
 - a. In your view, what are the biggest issues in the USG's hiring/vetting process?
 - b. Are there any existing processes (e.g., paperwork, wait times) that tend to discourage in-process candidates?
 - c. Are any parts of the hiring-workflow automated?
 - i. Might there be future areas for automation?
 - d. Are there certain legal standards or organizational guidance that you feel inhibit your current process?
 - e. Do you have any additional recommendations or mitigation strategies to address the issues you have identified?
- 4. **Job Postings**
 - a. How do you determine when to post a position? How long do job postings normally remain open?
 - b. How do you determine where to post a position?
 - c. Do DEIA initiatives factor in to where positions are advertised?
 - i. Are there additional mechanisms or platforms to advertise outside of traditional channels (e.g., USAJobs)?
- 5. **Application Review and Interviews**
 - a. Do you review applications through a rolling process (as they come in) or batch (periodically)?
 - b. How do you conduct initial reviews for minimum qualifications?
 - c. Are there any procedures or technologies in place designed to reduce unqualified applications?
 - d. Have any parts of the hiring process moved to the virtual realm in the wake of COVID? (e.g., texts, phone calls, video-chats, AI bots)
 - i. (If so) Have you recently noticed any of these processes migrate back to more traditional USG hiring processes? (e.g., in-person interviews, paper-based applications)
 - e. Do you use any vendor services to assist with application or candidate screening?
- 6. **Candidate Communication**
 - a. How are job-candidates informed about their current hiring status?
 - b. Do you feel that current communication with candidates in-process is adequate?
 - c. Might you suggest any additional mechanisms for keeping candidates informed of hiring progress?
 - d. Do you use, or are you aware of any platforms or technologies to enable communication between candidates, investigators, and/or hiring managers?
 - e. Do you share applicant information (e.g., transferrable skills or experience) with other USG departments or agencies?
 - f. What is the attrition rate in your hiring process? What are the main causes of attrition?

7. **Extending Initial Offer**
 - a. How do you determine how many initial offers to make per position?
 - b. Are there any factors that cause delays in making initial offers (e.g., salary negotiations, cost of moving/relocation)?
 - c. What is the acceptance rate on initial offers?
8. **Is there anyone else in this space who you think we should speak with?**
9. **Before we close the discussion, is there anything else you want to add or think we should know but haven't asked?**

Annotated Bibliography for Chapter 3

This annotated bibliography highlights key challenges, enablers, and relevant private-sector practices that we used to inform the development of our framework in Chapter 4. This annex is not an exhaustive list of every source that might pertain to candidate experience, though it is intended to provide a selection of literature that we identified as the most relevant publicly available sources.

This annotated bibliography informs all vetting phases presented in our candidate experience framework (pre-initial vetting, initial vetting, and post-initial vetting). Each of the sources listed below briefly highlights noted candidate experience challenges, enablers, and relevant community practices (as applicable) that helped to inform the list of strategic questions by phase that appear in Chapter 4 of this report.

Bryan Adams, “6 Simple Steps to Revitalizing Your Candidate Experience,” ERE Recruiting Intelligence, September 9, 2016

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Mismatch between how organizations “believe” they deliver an “exceptional candidate experience” vs. candidate perceptions of the process
- Ignoring candidate needs
- Maintaining candidate enthusiasm after applying

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Understand prospective candidate personas (using “storyboards”)
- Develop relevant experience metrics/map each process touchpoint from candidate’s point of view
- Make the process convenient for candidates
- Provide elements of control and create “moment to remember”
- Provide preparation materials that can make candidates feel more confident

Wade Burgess, “A Bad Reputation Costs a Company at Least 10% More per Hire,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 29, 2016

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Factors for bad reputation: job security, dysfunctional teams, poor leadership

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Branding matters (need to understand baseline public reputation)
- Factors for good reputation: stability, opportunities for growth, ability to work with others
- Understand “what inspires your workforce” to create EVP
- Use existing employees for referrals/assist with designing a better candidate experience
- Gain senior leader buy-in

Mara Calvello, “How to Provide a Winning Candidate Experience Every Time,” G2, February 8, 2021

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Addressing word-of-mouth hiring process complaints
- Long, difficult-to-understand application processes and requirements
- No “one size fits all”
- Understanding lags in communication negatively impact the candidate experience

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Short, “easy” application process
- Streamlining communication throughout recruiting and hiring phase
- Streamlining “landing page” (website and application portal)
 - Ensure career website is search-engine-optimized
 - Make application portals mobile-phone-friendly
- Identify candidate needs and career goals
- Easily understandable job descriptions
- “Exceptional communication”
- Highlight/preview process timelines
- Create an application process that may be completed in 5–10 minutes
- Ensure candidate experience in the hiring process is integrated with recruitment practices
- Preview work culture and potential for career advancement
- Job description may be first candidate touchpoint
- Give timely status updates—either a rejection or details for their next interview (date, time, location, directions, expected duration, software and how to join [if video])
- Give post-interview feedback as soon as possible

Johnny Campbell, “7 Insights for Creating Great Candidate Experiences,” SocialTalent, 2020

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Understanding personal motivations for employment and satisfying underlying objectives
 - (e.g., a desire for a higher salary to afford education for children)
- Reducing candidate “dissonance” (difference between expectations and reality)
 - “If you say you’ll reach out in 14 days, and you contact them in 20, this creates a painful dissonance between expectations and reality. But, if you say you’ll reach out in 14 days, and you contact them in 10, this creates a positive, pain-free experience”

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Relay EVP
- Communicate unique values—tailored to specific population segments
- “Showcase employee stories” on application portals
- Create process design that minimizes stress (“design out”)
- Engage candidate “senses”
 - LinkedIn sends “gold envelopes with cards to announce their job offers”
- Create a “memorable” hiring experience that is “candidate-centric and specific”
- Survey candidates to understand needs/desires
- Set clear timelines and expectations
- Provide candidates a “sense of control”

Career Plug, *2021 Candidate Experience Report*, September 2021

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Beating other company/organization hiring timelines

Key Observations for Framework Development

- ATS
- Creating “compelling” job postings
- Include listing of benefits as early as possible
- Phone/virtual screen prior to interviews
- Ensure ease-of-access to any incorporated technologies
- Relaying hybrid (virtual vs. in-office) flexibilities
- Letting candidates know what to expect during interview process
- Providing in-depth training for interviewers on how to provide a good experience

Deloitte, “Your Candidate Experience: Creating an Impact or Burning Cash?” webpage, undated

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Understanding where in the process to focus efforts to achieve maximum experience impact
- Understanding specific candidate wants and needs
- Understanding that every candidate will serve as a representation of the hiring process (word of mouth)

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Align candidate experience with organizational branding
- Creating a simplified application process
- Providing candidates with process (e.g., interview) details and “prompt” feedback
- Create a unified branding, sourcing, interviewing, hiring, and onboarding process
- Define/observe “key talent segments, understand their needs, and focus on ways to improve the experiences most important to them”
 - Prototype, test, refine, and pilot solutions before widespread adoption
- Customize (tailor) communication with candidates
- Create “detailed personal profile” to map out job searches and experience journeys
- Having recruiters serve as a resource for subsequent processes (explaining interview and screening processes)
- Making each candidate feel “special”

Ted Diaz, “The 7-Stage Framework for Developing an Award-Winning Candidate Experience,” ERE Recruiting, February 13, 2018

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Employer brand awareness
- Creating a friendly onboarding experience
- Maintaining courtesy with rejected applicants

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Use innovative engagement methods to excite candidates (e.g., virtual reality)
- Relay CSR initiatives to communicate mission
- Review blogs (e.g., Glassdoor) to understand and address process concerns
- Integrate technology (e.g., chatbots) to answer frequently asked questions in real time
- Provide virtual tours for candidates who are unable to travel
- Provide “constructive” feedback for candidates who are not selected
- Provide candidate experience training for hiring managers
- Call within 24 hours to confirm understanding/acceptance
- Confirm if there is hesitation in acceptance

- Provide electronic signoff option in offer letter
- Provide personal welcome video from the team with view of their new desk
- Share feedback with interviewees
- Make an effort to communicate with runners-up and candidates who did not qualify
- Understand the compensation package and how to explain the offer in its entirety
- Create concise job descriptions; consider “day in the life” videos to preview positions
- Create applications that can be filled out in five minutes or less
- Providing candidates with preparatory information (e.g., interviews, assessments)
- Keep in contact with new hire until EOD
- Provide feedback to interviewees to maintain a positive relationship
- Provide personal welcome video from current employees
- Communicate first-day expectations clearly. Understand the compensation package and offer in its entirety to give new hires solid expectations

Tracy Francis and Fernanda Hoefel, “‘True Gen’: Generation Z and Its Implications for Companies.” McKinsey Company, July 7, 2020

Noted Organizational Challenges

- New generations may quickly develop point of view based on informal mediums (e.g., social media)
- Gen Z more “pragmatic and analytical about their decisions than members of previous generations were”

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Sense of control
- Need to match emerging generation communication preference

Jordan Fuller, “How to Improve the Digital Candidate Experience,” *Recruitee Blog*, March 2, 2021

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Overcoming social-distancing restrictions

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Creating 100 percent mobile candidate experiences
- Implementing “seamless” UX interface for candidate engagement (screening through onboarding)
- Integrating screening and assessment features within UX design (e.g., AI, natural language processing)
- Conducting virtual “orientation, soft-skill, and technical training”

Gartner, “Measuring Equity in Candidate Experience,” 2021

Noted Organizational Challenges

- “Racially diverse candidates in the United States are more likely than white candidates to discontinue an application process due to two critical factors: diversity of the team and management style of potential manager”
- “LGBTQ+ candidates are more likely than heterosexual candidates not to apply for a job because they perceive they lack the education and years of work experience required”
- HR teams “should understand how segments of candidates differ in their reasons for discontinuing or not starting an application”
- “The percentage of women who are satisfied with their onboarding program (58%) is lower than the percentage of men (65%)”

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Post-application survey
- “Candidate satisfaction and rate of candidate withdrawal” metrics can highlight needed process changes
- Candidate experience is “the first impression of the organization to the job candidate”
- Metrics: (1) likelihood to recommend an organization to a friend, (2) ease of the application and accuracy of information received during the application, (3) ask applicants about barriers or negative interactions experienced

Andrew Greenberg, “What Is a Candidate Journey Map? (and Why You Need One),” Rally Recruitment Marketing, May 5, 2022

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Not applicable

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Define a candidate persona and candidate needs
- Identify specific touchpoints and common issues
- Submit surveys throughout candidate journeys
- Identify roadblocks, data challenges, negative reviews, or other problems
- Do not forget to monitor candidates after you hire them and look for ways to optimize long-term success in your workers, as well as just success in hiring

Greenhouse, “8 Ingredients for a Great Candidate Experience,” blog post, May 21, 2013

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Not applicable

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Incorporating “receptionist or interview coordinator” as part of your interview team
 - Can relay informal information to interview team (e.g., how they behave when they think no one is watching [or] was the candidate polite or condescending when interacting with the coordinator”)
- Send rejection emails as quickly as possible
- Surprising candidates on day of interview (e.g., sending a driver, having a “candidate concierge” to get water and food)
- “Always tell candidates what to expect next”
- Conduct candidate experience training for all staff included in hiring journey

Alex Haimann, “How to Design a Better Hiring Process,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 26, 2020

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Using traditional interview questions that are unreliable
 - (e.g., “What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses? Tell me about a time you overcame a challenge at work”)

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Provide opportunities for candidates to demonstrate skills
- Share interview questions with interviewee
- Test candidate communication in interviews according to three overarching categories:
 - Test for preparation
 - Test for “critical-thinking and tech savviness” (open-ended)
 - Test for “listening and communication skills” (“e.g., teach us something as if we know nothing about it”)
- Using team-based games with prospective peers
- Using “story-telling” based interviews to gain better understanding of candidate motivations and competencies

Harver, “Introducing the Two-Way Matching Framework: Candidate Selection at Scale,” May 19, 2021

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Delivering equal levels of process transparency to every applicant (at scale)
- Traditional hiring process has “one-way matching process” (information pull)
- The “recruitment funnel” (e.g., résumés, phone screenings, and interviews) can inhibit two-way information exchange

- Expecting candidates to evaluate job-opportunities “through their own research, testimonials from recruiters or hiring managers, and by asking questions when given the opportunity”
- Overcoming candidate expectations

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Two-way matching (information push and pull)
- Previewing job tasks and responsibilities (reduces “churn” once hired)
- Create EVPs to share organizational culture, advancement opportunities, and benefits
 - May sway candidate decisions to join one organization over another
- Implement realistic job previews and situational judgment tests (SJTs) to match the right candidates with the right positions
- Use job-assessment matching-technology to ensure candidates have the “right skills and competencies for roles, based on personality, cognitive ability, or other relevant criteria”
- Differentiate entry-level hires from senior-level hires to ensure a good experience
- Provide engaging and informative experience during all phases of recruiting and hiring

HireVue, “What Is Candidate Experience?” December 13, 2020

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Generational perceptions of organizational “ghosting” (time spent waiting)
 - Especially when application process takes a substantial period of time

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Having a “mobile-first” strategy
- Implementing texting platforms for “high-touch” engagement
- Use of chatbots to answer frequently asked questions
- Understanding candidate experience as “an impression of how companies value their people”
- Having application that takes five minutes or less
- Automating interview scheduling (reducing cost/time per hire)
- Integrate hiring software that can be layered with experience surveys/analytics
- Create measurements to understand how long each process takes
- Survey candidates and “monitor changes over time”
- Keeping survey questions as short and simple as possible

HireVue, “The 2021 Candidate Experience Whitepaper,” January 2021

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Pre-assessment phone screening

- “candidates start to look the same, and they often get taken off-script in a way that gives some candidates an advantage over others”
- Move to virtual hiring from in-person processes
- Understanding generational communication preferences (and expectations)
- “Balancing bots and bodies” (automation vs. human element)

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Chatbot used to answer application questions in real time
- Showcase organizational culture and teams on website
- Avoiding “over-emphasis” of credentials
- Being “realistic” about credentials
- Mobile-ready application portal
- Engaging game-based assessments that take less than 20 minutes
- Standardize prehire assessments
- Highlight “benefits and growth opportunities” as early as possible
- No jargon in job description or hiring process description
- “Time yourself applying to the job”—should take “5 minutes or less” to find what is needed and to submit
- Automated engagement—“at scale”

iCIMS, *The Candidate Experience Playbook*, 2017

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Creating immersive application experiences

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Post-job testimonials and career resource information
- Use ATS to extract resume info/ease data-entry burden)
- Create a job portal that allows application through social media platforms (e.g., LinkedIn)
- Use videos to “entertain and engage” candidates/post video interviews with existing employees about their position
- Create an application process that can be filled out in 15 minutes or less
- Personalize the hiring process to the greatest extent possible

Indeed, “Interviewing Millennials: Three Things to Consider,” webpage, undated

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Emerging generations may have more educational experience than work experience

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Use interviews to help candidate learn about organization (rather than one-way exchange)

JOBVITE, “Candidate Experience,” webpage, undated

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Not applicable

Key Observations for Framework Development

- ATS
- Having a customizable hiring process
- Using in-house referral system
- Video screening/hiring assessment
- Using “smart scheduling” to provide interview flexibility
- Maintaining record of candidate communications

Ramesh Krishnaram, “The 5-Star Candidate Experience,” LinkedIn post, February 19, 2022

Noted Organizational Challenges

- “Every day is day one”
- In-person onboarding (move to hybrid environment)

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Frequent check-ins post-EOD
- Set up your new hire with the basics within the first two hours of hiring
- Welcome call to “showcase the team’s excitement to get the applicant onboarded”
- Make your new hire “feel valued, motivated, and self-empowered and focused”

Sharlyn Lauby, “Four Ways to Improve the Candidate Experience,” Society for Human Resource Management, April 11, 2018

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Understanding that the “work isn’t over” even when a candidate strategy is complete
- Understanding emerging candidate trends (e.g., generational hiring considerations)
- Thinking that everyone already “knows about the company”

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Educating candidates to the greatest extent possible (even passive candidates)
- Branding, values, and culture easily displayed for job seekers
- Adding videos (e.g., testimonials, day-in-the life) to applicant portals

- Offering videos that preview the interview process/how to interview
- Ensuring mobile phone accessibility
- “Demystifying” the hiring process
- POCs available to answer process-related questions

Div Manickam, “Candidate Experience Reimagined,” Medium, July 5, 2021

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Timely communication with candidate

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Process transparency
- Ensure that hiring process is engaging
- Push information to candidate (e.g., “what is it that we do, who does what, and how to think about our core values and beliefs”)
- Reduce number of steps in process

Sandra Jeanquart Miles and Randy McCamey, “The Candidate Experience: Is It Damaging Your Employer Brand?” *Business Horizons*, Vol. 61, No. 5, 2018

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Tipping passive to active candidates
- Lag between application submission and initial organizational outreach
- Negative experiences may influence other candidates thinking about applying
- Recruiter response times
- Completing necessary activities between offer acceptance and first day of employment in a timely manner

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Viewing recruitment and organizational branding as a “continuous” process
- Promptly notifying candidates who are not selected with personalized correspondence and providing alternative career path entryways
- Assigning organizational candidate experience champions or teams
- Provide list of POCs for each hiring phase for questions and concerns
- Monitor Facebook, LinkedIn, and Glassdoor to gauge informal feedback
- Automated Tracking System
- Developing/using metrics to drive process improvement
- Build outreach messaging to maintain candidate interest during recruitment and hiring
- Provide candidates with “complete and accurate information at each stage of the process”

Jay Miller, “Five Ways to Improve the Candidate Experience,” *Forbes*, May 11, 2021

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Candidates sharing negative experience via social media, other career-oriented blogs

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Previewing job-position and culture/virtual hiring allows “in-office” preview
- AI-enabled qualification review
- Frequent communications/continuous feedback (both ways)
- Process transparency (especially with use of underlying technologies)
- Maintain engagement between job offer acceptance and first day via continued support and transparency

Monster.com, “Recruiting Strategies and Talent Acquisition,” undated

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Managing “online image” (i.e., bad reviews)
- Understanding that every interaction can “impact your company’s overall brand, favorably or not”

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Keeping candidates informed and gauging continued interest
- “Don’t dance around the truth” (timelines)

Morgan McKinley, “How to Create An Effective Candidate Experience and Why It Matters to Your Hiring,” January 3, 2022

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Not applicable

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Process details and length transparency, candidate dashboards, other recruiting-enabled technologies
- Challenging candidate skills during interviews/use interactive games
- Short, accurate job descriptions
- Limit number of interview processes
- “Onboarding is still part of the candidate experience”
- Visualize all steps of candidate journey

Partnership for Public Service, “Government for the People, Designing for Equitable and Trusted Customer Experiences,” November 2021

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Anticipating customer (candidate) needs
- Lack of organizational structure to support candidate experience initiative (even if there is a candidate experience strategy)
- Underrepresented populations are often left out in customer experience metrics
- Organizations frequently fail to “identify or address the underlying issues from the perspective of the customer”
- Designing “mechanisms for customers who complete transactions, rather than understanding why people struggle or drop out”
- Inability to “segment customer insights into different demographic groups or behavioral mindsets”

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Design application portals for accessibility (“universal access and accommodation”)
- Minimize requirements for “customers to seek help from a third party to access services or, when required, recognize those third-party needs”
- Incorporate customer experience into “core processes and functions, reviewing talent, technology, strategy and organizational processes and structures”
- Invest in “workforce for human-centered design, user experience, equity, data and evaluation”
- Non-traditional customer listening (social media, online forums, community meetings)
- Measure “success of self-service capabilities”
- Identify and map areas for proactive engagement
- Analyzing “customer insights by specific populations or mindsets, rather than generalizing about the average customer”

Perengo, “Job Seeker Journey: A Framework to Truly Understand the Job Seeker Experience,” Medium, May 31, 2018

Noted Organizational Challenges

- “People ignore design that ignores people”
- Not understanding the job-seeker point of view
- Relying on “requisition” based recruitment (places job seekers in “second-place” by listing “requirements and certifications” required)

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Proactive candidate engagement to identify job opportunities

- Modern UX/application portal that includes frequently asked questions and ability to connect to helpdesks
- Identify and understand candidate needs and motivations
- Having a well-defined customer journey map that includes a visual representation of:
 - Timelines, stages, or phases of the journey
 - Possible list of candidate emotions at each phase
 - Full listing of touchpoints/interactions with organizations

Paul Petrone, “9 Stats Key to Providing a Great Candidate Experience,” LinkedIn Business, December 28, 2015

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Requires dedication staffing/resourcing to attract candidates
- Interview stage may be only “glimpse” inside of organization prehire

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Communicate with candidate as close to post-interview as possible (by phone)
- Candidate flattery (inviting senior manager involvement, personalizing communications)

The Pipeline, “9 Proven Ways to Improve Candidate Experience,” webpage, May 3, 2019

Noted Organizational Challenges

- (From candidate’s perspective) applying for new job while already employed
 - (Stress related to not informing current employer during active job-seeking)

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Platforms that parse resumes to autofill job applications
- Providing clear explanation of steps and range of times/waits for each step
- Remain flexible to candidate’s schedule (may already be employed)
- Job description clarity
 - “72% of hiring managers say they provide clear job descriptions, but only 36% of candidates say the same”
- “Friendly” POCs on standby to answer process-related questions
- Identify unnecessary steps (especially “complicated” ones)
- Provide candidate experience training (e.g., hiring team, interview team)
- Personalize communications whenever possible

Qualtrics, “How to Design a Great Candidate Experience,” webpage, undated

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Unsuccessful candidates are quickly forgotten once disqualified, sacrificing a potential relationship that may help both of you in future opportunities

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Using CRM software to track and manage candidate interaction (distinct from ATS, which focuses on tracking application requirements)
 - Populate system with both active and passive (i.e., interested or turned down previous offers) candidates
- Run vacancies through CRM to find potential matches with active and passive candidates
- CRM system can contact candidates from your talent database for you
- Platforms like LinkedIn make keeping in contact easy
- Five stages of CRM: discover, attract, engage, hire, and nurture
- Raise awareness through branding and CSR statements
- Personalize communications (even automated ones) and maintain continuous engagement
- Nurture stage of CRM
- Foster relationships by giving feedback and maintaining communication

Recruiting.com, “The Case for Providing a Positive Candidate Experience,” undated

Noted Organizational Challenges

- “40 percent of candidates reject offers because another employer gave them an offer faster”

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Providing clear overview of process timelines and expectations
- Socialize EVP on website/landing page
- Mobile-friendly portals
- Surveying candidates to understand motivations and needs
- Designing career-site as a “welcome mat”
- Provide ample information resources to prospective employees
- Maintain “respectful” rejection process
- Application that takes five minutes or less to complete
- “Think like a job seeker”
- Prioritize consistent communication
- Establish trusting relationship with candidate

- Ask candidate for a review of their experience at the end of the interview process

Jon-Mark Sabel, “9 Key Takeaways from the Just-Released 2018 Candidate Experience Research Report,” HireVue, February 20, 2019

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Organizations that do not survey candidates until after being hired (or not at all)
- Relying solely on Social Media to communicate culture and hiring opportunities
 - “81% of companies use Facebook and 78% use Twitter to cater to candidates; only 17% of candidates use Facebook and 4% use Twitter to search for jobs”
- The time candidates spend in limbo after their final interview has stagnated

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Incorporating prehire assessments into online application processes
- Ensuring application portals are mobile-friendly
- Create video-based job descriptions (as opposed to text-based)
- Having an application process that takes less than 15 minutes to complete
- Minimizing manual data entry
- Provide texting capabilities to recruiters
- Show respect for the candidate’s time spent applying

Paul Slezak, “Why a Poor Candidate Experience Can Destroy Your Business,” RecruitLoop, September 12, 2016

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Unclear application instructions/directions and overly long applications
- “Irate” candidates sharing experience via social media platforms
- Do not expect that “no news” equals “good news”
 - (“Candidates aren’t mind readers”)

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Providing accurate salary and benefits information early in the process
- Personalized communications
- Providing clear timeline expectations for each stage of the process
- Put yourself in the “candidates’ shoes”

Keenan Steiner, “Bad Candidate Experience Cost Virgin Media \$5M Annually—Here Is How They Turned That Around,” LinkedIn Business, March 15, 2017

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Negative word-of-mouth reporting

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Using NPSs to measure candidate recommendations
 - Measure/survey candidates throughout hiring journey
- Gain “executive buy-in” for candidate experience priorities
- Training to create a “gold standard” interview
 - May include incentives/rewards for fostering positive candidate experience
- Track attrition

John Sumser, “Candidate Experience,” HRExaminer, undated

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Developing relevant candidate experience metrics
- “Candidate experience is validated by data not intuition”
- Understanding that each candidate is unique
- Putting the candidate first
- Mapping granular-level candidate experience obstacles

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Focusing on application accessibility over “fancy design”
- Ensure process transparency across all stages of the hiring process
- If not selected, ensure that candidates are provided a list of reasons and how to improve for future applications

VantageCircle, “Is Candidate Experience Different from Candidate Engagement?” blog post, April 7, 2022

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Not applicable

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Having an “attractive” website; include information about job opportunities, environment, and culture
- Refine/clarify job descriptions
 - “72% of hiring managers say that they provide clear job descriptions; however, only 36% of the candidates agree with this”
- Tailor process to individual and personalize communications (e.g., foreign language, accessibility needs)
- Communicating with candidates even if not selected for position to gain feedback
- Provide a hiring timeline/set expectations
- Ask for feedback at all stages of the process

Cortney Weinbaum, Richard Girven, and Jenny Oberholtzer, *The Millennial Generation: Implications for the Intelligence and Policy Communities*, RAND Corporation, RR-1306-OSD, 2016

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Little research on millennial behaviors (“what millennials actually do, how they perform, or what drives them into or out of a workforce”)
- Younger generations may have low trust in government

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Freedom to “work and play from anywhere, at any time, with no restrictions, over a traditional 8-hours-a-day, Monday to Friday workweek”
- Millennials may feel “incentivized to improve the relationship between these sectors with respect to intelligence sharing and partnerships”

Dave Zielinski, “Study: Most Job Seekers Abandon Online Job Applications,” Society for Human Resource Management, March 8, 2016

Noted Organizational Challenges

- Candidates abandon applications that take too long to complete
- Complexity of application (questions/wording)
- Overcoming “poor word of mouth from candidates frustrated with the process”

Key Observations for Framework Development

- Streamline application process (five minutes or less)
 - (Including short job descriptions)
- Remove “nice to have” application and interview questions
- Ensure mobile-phone compatibility

Abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
CRM	customer relationship management
CSR	corporate social responsibility
CX	customer experience
DEIA	diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
E.O.	executive order
EOD	entry on duty
e-QIP	Electronic Questionnaires for Investigations Processing
EVP	employee value proposition
FCXI	Federal Customer Experience Initiative
FEVS	Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey
GAO	U.S. Government Accountability Office
HISP	High-Impact Service Provider
HR	human resources
IC	intelligence community
IDEA	21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act
IT	information technology
LGBTQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other identities
NPS	Net Promoter Score
ODNI	Office of the Director of National Intelligence
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OPM	U.S. Office of Personnel Management
PAC	Security, Suitability, and Credentialing Performance Accountability Council
PMA	President's Management Agenda
PMO	Program Management Office
POC	point of contact
SEAD	Security Executive Agent Directive
SF	standard form
SME	subject-matter expert
SSC	security, suitability, and credentialing
USG	U.S. government
UX	user experience

VA U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

References

Adams, Bryan, “6 Simple Steps to Revitalizing Your Candidate Experience,” ERE Recruiting Intelligence, September 9, 2016.

Baluch, Anna, and Kelly Main, “14 Onboarding Best Practices (2022 Guide),” Forbes.com, October 12, 2022.

Bradt, George B., and Mary Vonnegut, *Onboarding: How to Get Your New Employees Up to Speed in Half the Time*, John Wiley & Sons, 2009.

Burgess, Wade, “A Bad Reputation Costs a Company at Least 10% More per Hire,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 29, 2016.

Calvello, Mara, “How to Provide a Winning Candidate Experience Every Time,” G2, February 8, 2021. As of April 24, 2023:
<https://www.g2.com/articles/candidate-experience>

Campbell, Johnny, “7 Insights for Creating Great Candidate Experiences,” SocialTalent, 2020. As of December 15, 2022:
<https://hiringsuccess.com/7-insights-for-creating-great-candidate-experiences/>

CareerPlug, *2021 Candidate Experience Report*, September 2021.

Code of Federal Regulations, Title 5, Administrative Personnel; Chapter I, Office of Personnel Management; Subchapter B, Civil Service Regulations; Part 250, Personnel Management in Agencies; Subpart C, Employee Surveys.

Code of Federal Regulations, Title 5, Administrative Personnel; Chapter I, Office of Personnel Management; Subchapter B, Civil Service Regulations; Part 731, Suitability.

Code of Federal Regulations, Title 5, Administrative Personnel; Chapter IV, Office of Personnel Management and Office of the Director of National Intelligence; Part 1400, Designation of National Security Positions.

Code of Federal Regulations, Title 18, Conservation of Power and Water Resources; Chapter I, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Department of Energy; Subchapter A, General Rules; Part 3a, National Security Information; Section 3a.11, Classification of Official Information.

Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Public Welfare; Subtitle A, Department of Health and Human Services; Subchapter A, General Administration; Part 46, Protection of Human Subjects.

Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, “Investigations, Adjudications and Clearance Processes at a Glance,” webpage, undated. As of January 9, 2023:
<https://www.dcsa.mil/mc/pv/mbi/gicp/>

Deloitte, “Your Candidate Experience: Creating an Impact or Burning Cash?” webpage, undated. As of December 14, 2022:
<https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/human-capital/articles/candidate-experience-creating-an-impact.html>

Diaz, Ted, “The 7-Stage Framework for Developing an Award-Winning Candidate Experience,” ERE Recruiting Intelligence, February 13, 2018.

Digital.gov, “21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act,” webpage, undated. As of December 8, 2022:
<https://digital.gov/resources/21st-century-integrated-digital-experience-act/>

Executive Order 12862, “Setting Customer Service Standards,” Executive Office of the President, September 11, 1993.

Executive Order 13526, “Classified National Security Information,” Executive Office of the President, December 29, 2009.

Executive Order 13571, “Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service,” Executive Office of the President, April 27, 2011.

Executive Order 13707, “Using Behavioral Science Insights to Better Serve the American People,” Executive Office of the President, September 15, 2015.

Executive Order 13985, “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government,” Executive Office of the President, January 20, 2021.

Executive Order 13932, “Modernizing and Reforming the Assessment and Hiring of Federal Job Candidates,” Executive Office of the President, June 26, 2020.

Executive Order 14058, “Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government,” Executive Office of the President, December 16, 2021.

Farrell, Brenda S., “Personnel Security Clearances: Additional Actions Needed to Implement Key Reforms and Improve Timely Processing of Investigations,” testimony before the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-18-431T, March 7, 2018.

Forrester, *2021 US Customer Experience Index*, 2021.

Francis, Tracy, and Fernanda Hoefel, “‘True Gen’: Generation Z and Its Implications for Companies,” McKinsey, July 7, 2020.

Fuller, Jordan, “How to Improve the Digital Candidate Experience,” *Recruitee Blog*, March 2, 2021. As of April 24, 2023:

<https://recruitee.com/articles/digital-candidate-experience>

GAO—See U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Gartner, “Measuring Equity in Candidate Experience,” 2021.

Greenberg, Andrew, “What Is a Candidate Journey Map? (and Why You Need One),” Rally Recruitment Marketing, May 5, 2022.

Greenhouse, “8 Ingredients for a Great Candidate Experience,” blog post, May 21, 2013. As of April 24, 2023:

<https://www.greenhouse.io/blog/great-candidate-experience>

Haimann, Alex, “How to Design a Better Hiring Process,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 26, 2020.

Hakamaa, Marko, “Understanding Your Position Designation Determination,” ClearanceJobs, November 23, 2013. As of June 15, 2022:

<https://news.clearancejobs.com/2013/11/23/understanding-position-designation-determination/>

Harver, “Introducing the Two-Way Matching Framework: Candidate Selection at Scale,” May 19, 2021. As of December 14, 2022:

<https://harver.com/blog/two-way-talent-matching-framework/>

HireVue, “What Is Candidate Experience?” December 13, 2020. As of April 24, 2023:

<https://www.hirevue.com/blog/hiring/what-is-candidate-experience>

HireVue, “The 2021 Candidate Experience Whitepaper,” January 2021.

iCIMS, *The Candidate Experience Playbook*, 2017.

Indeed, “Interviewing Millennials: Three Things to Consider,” webpage, undated. As of December 20, 2022:

<https://www.indeed.com/hire/c/info/interviewing-millennials-three-things-to-consider>

Indeed, “Onboarding Best Practices,” webpage, undated. As of December 30, 2022:

<https://www.indeed.com/hire/c/info/onboarding-best-practices>

JOBVITE, “Candidate Experience,” webpage, undated. As of December 19, 2022:

<https://www.jobvite.com/capabilities/candidate-experience/>

Jones, Yvonne D., “Human Capital: Improving Federal Recruiting and Hiring Efforts,” testimony before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs and Federal Management, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-19-696T, July 30, 2019.

Karnopp, Dean, review of George J. Klir, ed., *Trends in General System Theory*, Wiley-Interscience, 1972, in *Transactions of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers*, December 1972.

Krishnam, Ramesh, “The 5-Star Candidate Experience,” LinkedIn post, February 19, 2022. As of January 9, 2023:

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/5-star-candidate-experience-ramesh-krishnam>

Lamb, Debbie, “Onboarding Is the Key to a Terrific Candidate Experience—Sterling,” Sterling Talent Solutions, September 11, 2017.

Lauby, Sharlyn, “Four Ways to Improve the Candidate Experience,” Society for Human Resource Management, April 11, 2018.

Maguire, Joseph, Joseph Kernan, Dale Cabaniss, and Margaret Weichert, “Security Clearance, Suitability/Fitness, and Credentialing Reform: CAP Goal Action Plan,” President’s Management Agenda, December 2019. As of April 25, 2023:

https://assets.performance.gov/archives/action_plans/dec_2019_Security_Suitability.pdf

Manickam, Div, “Candidate Experience Reimagined,” Medium, July 5, 2021. As of April 25, 2023:

<https://medium.com/product-marketing-alliance/candidate-experience-reimagined-d388f217c2b7>

Miles, Sandra Jeanquart, and Randy McCamey, “The Candidate Experience: Is It Damaging Your Employer Brand?” *Business Horizons*, Vol. 61, No. 5, 2018.

Miller, Jay, “Five Ways to Improve the Candidate Experience,” *Forbes*, May 11, 2021.

Mitchel, Mason, and Noah Schreiber, “Everything You Need to Know About Onboarding in 2022,” *SmartRecruiters Blog*, March 22, 2020. As of June 5, 2023:

<https://www.smartrecruiters.com/blog/everything-you-need-to-know-about-onboarding-in-2020/>

Monster.com, “Recruiting Strategies and Talent Acquisition,” undated. As of January 9, 2023:

<https://hiring.monster.com/resources/recruiting-strategies/talent-acquisition/candidate-experience-best-practices/>

Morgan McKinley, “How to Create an Effective Candidate Experience and Why It Matters to Your Hiring,” January 3, 2022. As of December 15, 2022:

<https://www.morganmckinley.com/article/effective-candidate-experience-improves-hiring>

Net Promoter, “What Is Net Promoter? A Trusted Anchor for Your Customer Experience Management Program,” webpage, undated. As of January 4, 2023:
<https://www.netpromoter.com/know/>

ODNI—*See* Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

O’Keefe, Dennis, “11 Ways to Successfully Onboard Your New Hires,” Business.com, updated March 22, 2023. Accessed on December 30, 2022:
<https://www.business.com/articles/onboarding-best-practices/>

Office of Management and Budget, Circular No. A-11, “Preparation, Submission, and Execution of the Budget,” 2020.

Office of Management and Budget, “Designated High Impact Service Providers,” graphic, 2021. As of December 7, 2022:
<https://www.performance.gov/cx/assets/files/HISP-listing-2021.pdf>

Office of Management and Budget, Circular No. A-11, “Preparation, Submission, and Execution of the Budget,” August 2022.

Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Security vs. Suitability,” webpage, undated. As of January 16, 2023:
<https://www.dni.gov/index.php/ncsc-how-we-work/ncsc-security-executive-agent/ncsc-reform/ncsc-security-clearance-reform>

Office of the Director of National Intelligence and U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Federal Personnel Vetting Core Doctrine,” *Federal Register*, Vol. 86, No. 8, January 13, 2021.

Office of the Director of National Intelligence and U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Federal Personnel Vetting Guidelines,” February 10, 2022a. As of April 24, 2023:
https://www.dni.gov/files/NCSC/documents/Regulations/Federal_Personnel_Vetting_Guidelines_10FEB2022-15Jul22.pdf

Office of the Director of National Intelligence and U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Federal Personnel Vetting Engagement Guidelines,” February 10, 2022b. As of April 24, 2023:
https://www.dni.gov/files/NCSC/documents/Regulations/Federal_Personnel_Vetting_Engagement_Guidelines_10FEB2022-15Jul22.pdf

OMB—*See* Office of Management and Budget.

OPM—*See* U.S. Office of Personnel Management.

Partnership for Public Service, “Government for the People, Designing for Equitable and Trusted Customer Experiences,” November 2021.

Perengo, “Job Seeker Journey: A Framework to Truly Understand the Job Seeker Experience,” Medium, May 31, 2018.

Performance.gov, “Federal Customer Experience Blog,” undated. As of January 9, 2023:
<https://www.performance.gov/cx/blog/>

Performance.gov, “Office of Personnel Management: Federal Employment Services,” webpage, undated. As of April 24, 2023:
<https://www.performance.gov/cx/agencies/opm/>

Performance.gov, “Surviving a Natural Disaster,” webpage, undated. As of December 9, 2022:
<https://www.performance.gov/cx/projects/surviving-a-natural-disaster/>

Performance.gov, “President’s Management Agenda: Customer Experience Priority: Delivering Excellent, Equitable, and Secure Federal Services and Customer Experience,” webpage, undated. As of December 2, 2022:

<https://www.performance.gov/pma/cx/>

Performance.gov, “President’s Management Agenda: Priority 2—Customer Experience: Data,” webpage, undated. As of April 24, 2023:

<https://www.performance.gov/pma/cx/data/>

Performance.gov, “President’s Management Agenda: Workforce Priority: Strengthening and Empowering the Federal Workforce,” webpage, undated. As of January 9, 2023:

<https://www.performance.gov/pma/workforce/>

Performance.gov, “Transitioning to Adulthood,” webpage, undated. As of December 9, 2022:

<https://www.performance.gov/cx/projects/transitioning-to-adulthood/>

Performance.gov, “Seeking Employment After Service,” webpage, undated. As of April 24, 2023:

<https://www.performance.gov/cx/projects/seeking-employment-after-service/>

Performance.gov, “Mapping the Cross-Agency Customer Experience,” webpage, January 1, 2021a. As of December 9, 2022:

<https://www.performance.gov/cx/blog/journey-mapping/>

Performance.gov, “A Human-Centered Approach to Government,” webpage, updated January 7, 2021b. As of April 24, 2023:

<https://trumpadministration.archives.performance.gov/cx/projects/>

Performance.gov, “President’s Management Agenda: Priority 2—Delivering Excellent, Equitable, and Secure Federal Services and Customer Experience,” webpage, accessed September 27, 2022. Archived version available at:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20220927000532/https://www.performance.gov/pma/cx/>

Petrone, Paul, “9 Stats Key to Providing a Great Candidate Experience,” LinkedIn Business, December 28, 2015.

The Pipeline, “9 Proven Ways to Improve Candidate Experience,” webpage, May 3, 2019. As of December 15, 2022:

<https://pipeline.zoominfo.com/recruiting/9-proven-ways-to-improve-candidate-experience>

President’s Management Council, *The President’s Management Agenda: The Biden-Harris Management Agenda Vision—A Roadmap for Our Government to Deliver Results for All Americans*, 2021.

Public Law 115-336, 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act, December 20, 2018.

Qualtrics, “How to Design a Great Candidate Experience,” webpage, undated. As of December 15, 2022:

<https://www.qualtrics.com/experience-management/employee/candidate-relationship-management/>

Recruiting.com, “The Case for Providing a Positive Candidate Experience,” blog post, undated. As of December 15, 2022:

<https://www.recruiting.com/blog/the-case-for-providing-a-positive-candidate-experience/>

Sabel, Jon-Mark, “9 Key Takeaways from the Just-Released 2018 Candidate Experience Research Report,” HireVue, February 20, 2019.

SEAD—See Security Executive Agent Directive.

Security Executive Agent Directive 4, *National Security Adjudicative Guidelines*, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, June 8, 2017.

Slezak, Paul, “Why a Poor Candidate Experience Can Destroy Your Business,” RecruitLoop, September 12, 2016.

Society for Human Resource Management, “Employee Value Proposition (EVP),” webpage, undated. As of December 27, 2022:

<https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-glossary/pages/employee-value-proposition-evp.aspx>

Steiner, Keenan, “Bad Candidate Experience Cost Virgin Media \$5M Annually—Here Is How They Turned That Around,” LinkedIn Business, March 15, 2017.

Sumser, John, “Candidate Experience,” HRExaminer, undated. As of December 15, 2022: <https://www.hrexaminer.com/candidate-experience/>

Security, Suitability, and Credentialing Performance Accountability Council, “Trusted Workforce 2.0 Implementation Strategy Endorsement,” April 2022.

U.S. Department of Education, homepage, undated. As of December 7, 2022: <https://www.ed.gov/>

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Experience Office, *The CX (Customer Experience) Cookbook: A Collection of Key Ingredients and Recipes for Embedding Customer Experience in Federal Services*, November 11, 2020.

U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Defense Management: DOD Needs to Address Inefficiencies and Implement Reform Across Its Defense Agencies and DOD Field Activities*, GAO-18-592, September 2018.

U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Personnel Vetting: Actions Needed to Implement Reforms, Address Challenges, and Improve Planning*, GAO-22-104093, December 9, 2021.

U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Goal 3: Create a Human-Centered Customer Experience,” webpage, undated. As of February 6, 2023:

<https://www.opm.gov/about-us/strategic-plan/goal-3-create-a-human-centered-customer-experience/>

U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey,” webpage, undated. As of December 9, 2022:

<https://www.opm.gov/fevs/about/>

U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Data Reports,” webpage, undated. As of December 9, 2022:

<https://www.opm.gov/fevs/reports/data-reports>

U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Federal Investigation Forms,” webpage, undated. As of June 15, 2022:

<https://www.opm.gov/forms/federal-investigation-forms/>

U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Standard Form 85P-S: Supplemental Questionnaire for Selected Positions,” December 2017.

U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Results: Governmentwide Management Report*, 2022a.

U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Notice of Submission for a New Information Collection Common Form: Personnel Vetting Questionnaire,” *Federal Register*, Vol. 87, No. 225, November 23, 2022b.

USAJobs, “What Are Background Checks and Security Clearances?” webpage, undated. As of February 9, 2023:

<https://www.usajobs.gov/help/faq/job-announcement/security-clearances/>

VA—See U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Vantage Circle, “Is Candidate Experience Different from Candidate Engagement?” blog post, April 7, 2022. As of April 24, 2023:

<https://blog.vantagecircle.com/candidate-experience-vs-candidate-engagement/>

Von Bertalanffy, Ludwig, “An Outline of General System Theory,” *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, Vol 1, No. 2, August 1950.

Von Bertalanffy, Ludwig, “General Theory of Systems: Application to Psychology,” *Social Science Information*, Vol. 6, No. 6, 1967.

Weinbaum, Cortney, Richard Girven, and Jenny Oberholtzer, *The Millennial Generation: Implications for the Intelligence and Policy Communities*, RAND Corporation, RR-1306-OSD, 2016. As of April 24, 2023:

https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1306.html

Wensil, Brenda, “Federal Student Aid Customer Experience Journey,” U.S. Department of Education Customer Experience Office, July 2015. As of June 5, 2023:

<https://digital.gov/2015/08/14/federal-student-aid-customer-experience-journey-a-recap/>

Zielinski, Dave, “Study: Most Job Seekers Abandon Online Job Applications,” Society for Human Resource Management, March 8, 2016.



NATIONAL DEFENSE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The U.S. government will need to proactively recruit, hire, screen, onboard, and provide continuous career-growth opportunities—while providing an exceptional candidate experience—to attract and retain new generations to the national security workforce. This report explores how existing security, suitability, and credentialing (SSC) mechanisms might benefit from a formalized candidate experience strategy and framework to create a more positive vetting experience. Organizations that provide investigative and adjudicative services (e.g., investigative service providers, authorized adjudicative agencies) and other SSC stakeholders will need to increase engagement to promote, gauge, and maintain candidate commitment throughout initial personnel vetting. SSC processes may benefit from consideration of the adoption or adaptation of some of the hiring, onboarding, and retention practices from across the private sector that are focused on creating a more engaging candidate experience.

This initial examination provides a new way of thinking about the vetting process from the candidate point of view. The observations and suggestions provided in this report provide a framework to present the factors that may contribute to a positive candidate experience across the pre-initial vetting phase (factors that influence candidate awareness, organizational attraction, and job consideration), the initial vetting phase (candidate “conversion” to apply to a position and ongoing relationship management), and the post-initial vetting phase (including entry on duty, onboarding, retention, and future job mobility).

\$33.00

ISBN-10 1-9774-1095-2
ISBN-13 978-1-9774-1095-5



www.rand.org

9

7 8 1 9 7 7 4 1 0 9 5 5