

**Timeliness of Desk Audit and Vacancy Announcement Processing by  
the Bureau of Human Resources  
Report 01-08, June 28, 2001**

This report presents the results of the Office of Inspector General's (OIG) review of the timeliness of vacancy processing and desk audits at the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB).

**BACKGROUND**

The RRB is an independent agency in the executive branch of the Federal government. The RRB administers the health and welfare provisions of the Railroad Retirement Act (RRA) and the unemployment and sickness provisions of the Railroad Unemployment Insurance Act (RUIA). During fiscal year (FY) 2000, the RRB paid more than \$8 billion in retirement, survivor, sickness and unemployment benefits under the RRA and RUIA.

In order to fulfill its mission, the RRB employs a staff of 1,100 full and part-time workers at its headquarters in Chicago, Illinois and in 56 field locations across the country. The salaries of RRB employees are determined by a formal position classification system. This system is established in regulation and implemented government-wide by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). Each job is assigned to a grade based on the complexity of tasks in its description as well as the level of supervision received or given by the employee in performing his duties. OPM has also established policies and procedures that govern the full spectrum of personnel management responsibilities including preparing vacancy announcements, screening job applicants, performance appraisals and discipline.

The Bureau of Human Resources services the RRB's personnel management needs with a staff of ten full-time and five part-time employees. Within the Bureau of Human Resources, the Position Management and Classification Section administers the agency's position management, classification and pay programs. Position classification includes performing desk audits. A desk audit is a re-evaluation of a job's position classification based on the tasks and responsibilities that actually comprise the job which may differ from those considered when the job was initially filled. Desk audits may be requested by management or staff and may result in an increase, decrease, or no change in salary.

The Personnel Staffing Section manages the RRB's manpower program and is responsible for all personnel actions including vacancy announcements. When the agency identifies a vacancy, the Personnel Staffing Section is responsible for announcing the vacancy, responding to inquiries, and identifying qualified candidates. Selection of the successful applicant from among the qualified candidates is the responsibility of management elsewhere in the agency.

The OIG undertook this review in response to recent concerns raised by agency management about the processing timeliness of vacancy announcements and desk audits.

## **OBJECTIVE, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY**

The objective of this review was to assess the processing timeliness of desk audits and vacancy announcements by the Bureau of Human Resources. In order to achieve our objective, we:

- analyzed timeliness statistics for vacancy announcements processed during FY 1997 through FY 2000;
- analyzed timeliness statistics for desk audits processed during FY 1998 through FY 2000;
- interviewed management and staff in the Bureau of Human Resources; and
- obtained and analyzed available data concerning human resources management staffing trends in the Federal workplace.

Field work was conducted on-site at RRB headquarters during March through May 2001.

## **RESULTS OF REVIEW**

Our study of service delivery trends for vacancy announcements and desk audits indicates that timeliness appears to have been adversely impacted by staff reductions in the Bureau of Human Resources. In addition, the Bureau of Human Resources has not established timeliness standards against which to measure its performance.

A detailed discussion of our findings and recommendations follows.

### **Staff Reduction and Increased Workloads Adversely Impact Timeliness**

The time required to process vacancy announcements and perform desk audits has increased in recent years. This increase may be directly related to staff reductions in the Bureau of Human Resources and an increase in the number of service requests.

#### **Vacancy Announcements: Timeliness Declines and the Workload Increases**

Our analysis of available statistics showed that the total time required for processing vacancy announcements has increased since FY 1997. The process of filling a vacancy begins when the Bureau of Human Resources receives a service request from an organizational unit that has a position to fill. Once the request has been approved, the Bureau of Human Resources prepares and posts a vacancy announcement, receives and reviews the resulting applications, and assesses basic applicant qualifications. Selection of a successful candidate from the list of qualified applicants takes place in the organizational unit where the vacant position is located.

The average time required to fill a vacant position increased from 108 days in FY 1997 to 139 days during FY 2000. Most of this increase can be attributed to an increase in the time between receipt of a request to fill a position and the initial posting of the vacancy announcement. During FY1997, the time between receipt of the service request and public announcement of the vacancy averaged 12 days compared with 33 days in FY 2000, a 175% increase. In addition, during the same period, the workload of vacancy announcements increased by 44% from 93 in FY 1997 to 134 during FY 2000.

A detailed analysis of the timeliness and workload trends for vacancy announcements is presented in Appendices I and II respectively.

#### Desk Audits: Timeliness Declines

Our analysis of available statistics showed that the total time required for processing requests for desk audits has increased since FY 1998. The process of performing a desk audit includes a detailed study of actual job duties for comparison with the job description on which the present salary grade is based.

The increase in time required to process requests for desk audits is mainly attributable to the period between receipt of the request and start of the audit. The time elapsed between receipt of a request for a desk audit by the Bureau of Human Resources and the start of the desk audit process increased from 93 days in FY 1998 to 141 days in FY 2000. However, once begun, the time required to complete a desk audit, and report the results, did not vary greatly during that same period.

A detailed analysis of the timeliness trends for desk audits is presented in Appendix III.

#### Staffing Levels Decline in the Bureau of Human Resources

The Bureau of Human Resources staffing level decreased over the last five years by 25%. This decrease was felt in both the staffing and classification sections. The number of full-time equivalent employees in the staffing section decreased by 32% while the number of full-time equivalent employees in the classification section decreased by 25%. A detailed analysis of the staffing levels is presented in Appendix IV.

In addition to being smaller than in previous years, the classification section's current staff is less experienced. The current staff has 47 years less combined experience from the staff that was in place just four years ago.

We compared the RRB's human resources staffing level with the levels of other Federal agencies. We compared the ratio of total agency personnel to human resources staff for 112 agencies, including the RRB. A low ratio indicates more human resources staff in relation to total agency personnel.

Based on OPM employment figures for December 2000, the average for all 112 agencies was 42 to 1, or 42 agency employees for every 1 full-time human resources employee. The RRB's ratio is 84 to 1, double the average. That is, the RRB's human resources' staff services twice as many individuals per capita. Of 112 agencies in the study, only five had higher ratios of total agency personnel to human resources staff than the RRB. (Sixty-seven agencies had lower ratios. Thirty-nine very small agencies, most with total agency personnel counts under 50, reported no dedicated human resources personnel.) Based on this comparison, we can conclude that the RRB's Bureau of Human Resources is not overstaffed relative to agency size.

High ratios of total agency personnel to human resources staff, as experienced at the RRB, may indicate efficiency. However, when timeliness suffers to the extent that the consumers of the service complain, effectiveness is probably being sacrificed for efficiency.

Based on our analysis, we have concluded that a decreased staffing level, combined with the increased workload of vacancy announcements has caused processing delays. The Bureau of Human Resources has requested an increase in its staff and funding to outsource selected services. Accordingly, we have no recommendations.

### **Performance Standards for Timeliness Have Not Been Established**

The Bureau of Human Resources has not established performance objectives against which to assess the timeliness of its activities. The lack of performance measures makes evaluating timeliness subjective. Although sound business principles dictate that services be delivered within a reasonable period of time, in the absence of standards, reasonableness becomes an almost entirely subjective matter. The absence of standards makes it difficult to render an objective judgment and makes it easier to delay action.

In this age of performance measures in the Federal government, it is essential that activities basic to an operating unit's mission be measured. Performance measures are effective internal controls. Although the RRB has established performance measures for key areas of agency responsibility, this initiative did not address the

timeliness of human resource activity. The Bureau of Human Resources tracks timeliness, however these statistics are not circulated to higher levels of management in the monthly administrative report.

In the previous sections of this report we responded to management concerns about the reasons for declines in processing timeliness. We believe that the conditions identified by our review could have been positively impacted if the Bureau of Human Resources had used performance goals to report on the timeliness of its operations.

### Recommendations

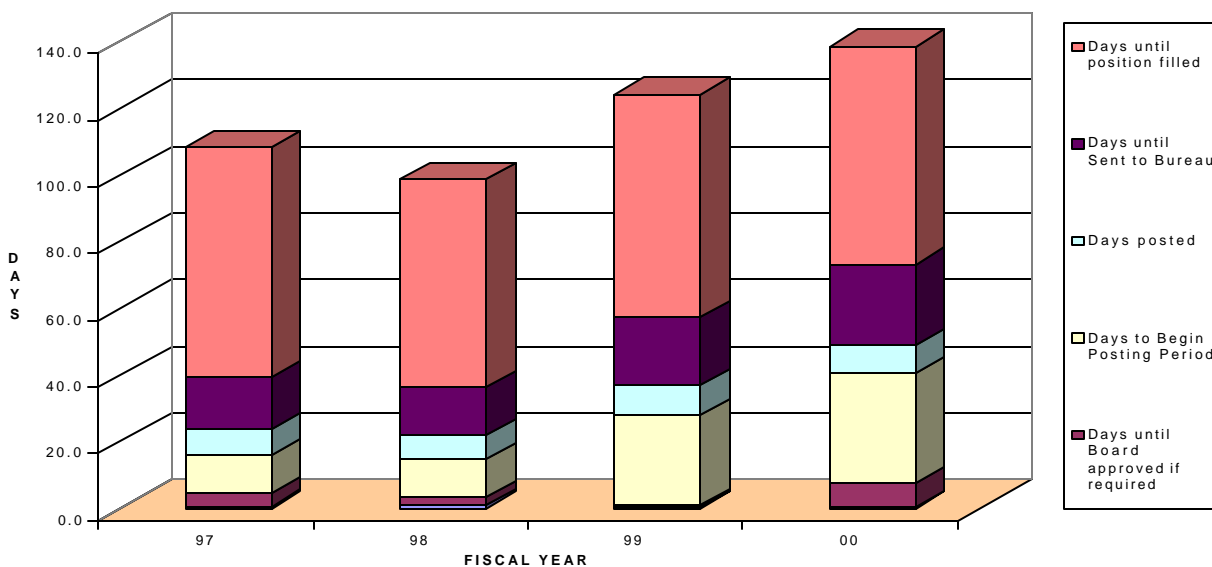
We recommend that the Bureau of Human Resources:

1. create performance timeliness goals for Human Resources services, and
2. report and track these goals in the monthly administrative reports.

### Management's Response

Management agrees with the recommendations. However, the acting Director of Human Resources favors development of such goals after the current problems have been addressed. Once the necessary decisions have been made on the proper staffing level for the Bureau of Human Resources, and new staff receives training/experience to perform at a productive level, the recommended goals will be established and monitored.

### Filled Positions Vacancy Announcement Timeliness



The average time required to fill a vacancy, from the initial request to post an announcement to completion of the selection process has increased 28% from an average of 108 days in FY 1997 to 139 days in FY 2000.

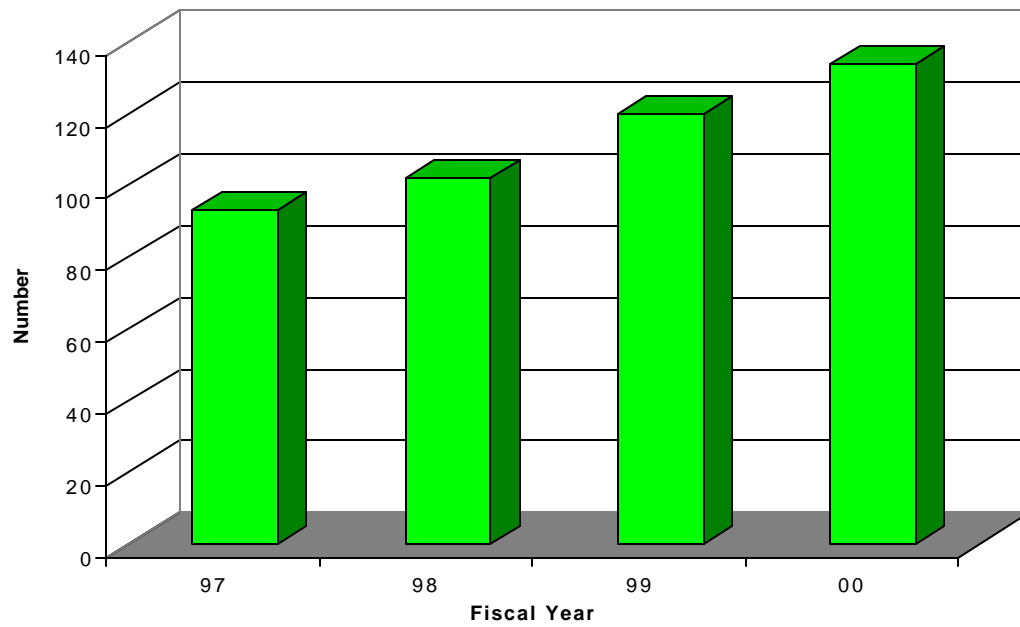
The average number of days between receipt of the service request in the Bureau of Human Resources and the public announcement of a vacancy increased by 21.5 days, or 184%, between FY 1997 and FY 2000. The time between receipt and posting averaged:

- 11.7 days in FY 1997,
- 11.3 days in FY 1998,
- 26.6 days in FY 1999, and
- 33.2 days during FY 2000.

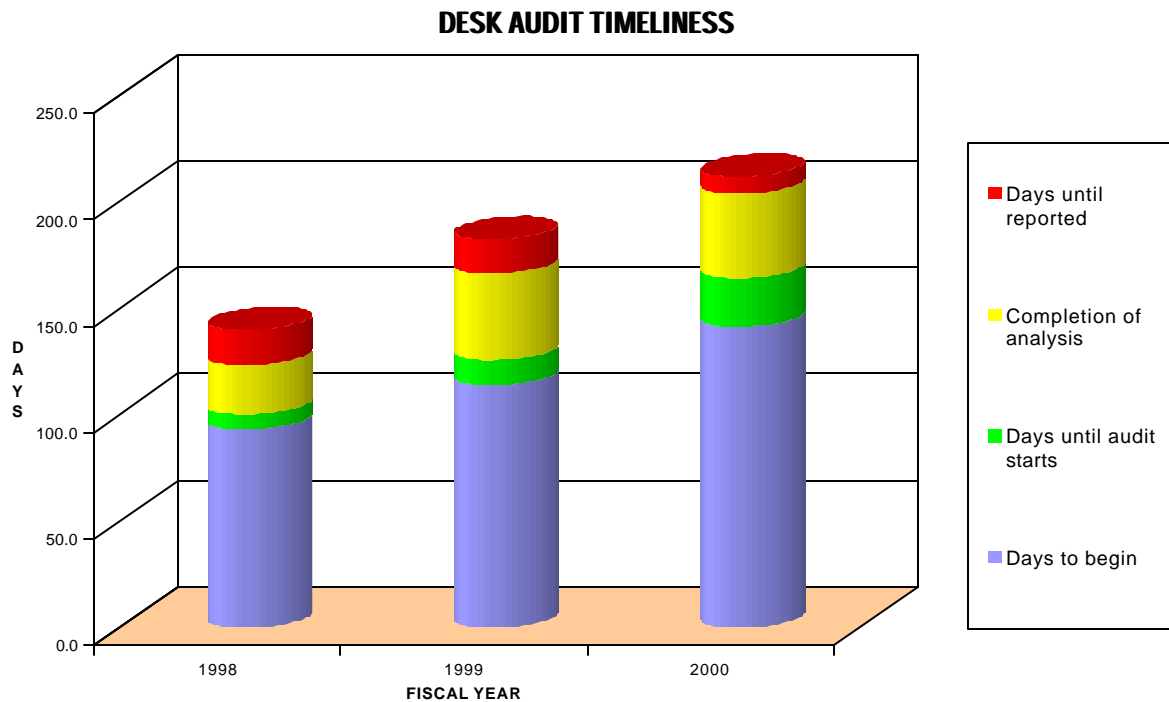
After posting of the job vacancy, the number of days to complete the selection process and forward a list of qualified candidates, increased from an average of 15.5 days in FY 1997 to 24.3 days in FY 2000.

It should be noted that not all requests to post require Board Member approval.

Posting Requests



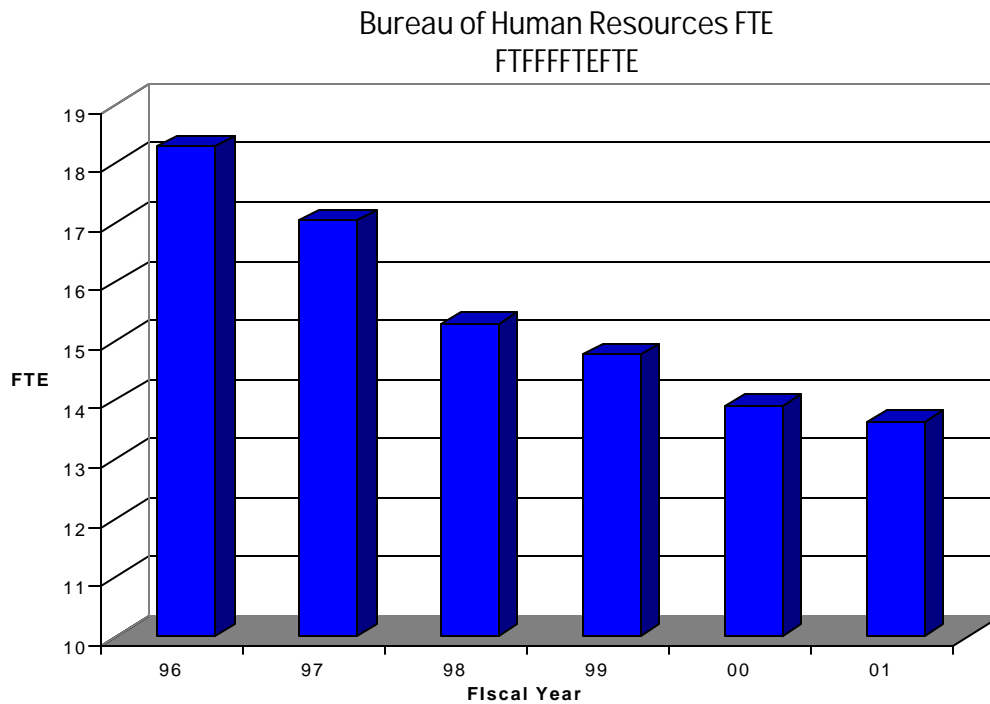
The posting request workload increased from 93 in FY 1997 to 134 in FY 2000, an increase of 44%.



The average number of days required for a desk audit, from receipt of the request by the Bureau of Human Resources to completion of their review, increased by 72 days, from 140 days in FY 1998 to 212 days in FY 2000.

Workload size has remained steady for desk audits. The Bureau of Human resources received 20 requests for desk audits during FY 1998, 22 in 1999 and 18 in FY 2000.





The Bureau of Human Resources staffing level has decreased over the last five years from 18.28 full-time equivalent employees (FTE), in FY 1996 to 13.63 FTE, in FY 2001, a loss of 4.65 FTE.

The Staffing section has been losing FTEs during the same period. In FY 1996, staffing had 4.2 FTEs. In FY 2001 they have 2.87 FTEs. This is a 32% reduction

FTEs in the classification section have decreased in recent years from 4.2 in FY 1996, to 3.8 in FY 1998, to 3.47 in FY 2000, and 3.2 as of April 2001. This is a 25% reduction in staff.