

**Question:** We are getting lots of pressure from department heads and certain employees to have job classifications that are specific to their department. Can you help me explain to them why this is not necessarily a good idea?

**CompDoctor™:** Well of course we can! Needless to say, it is a whole lot easier if the jobs in question only exist in one department (jobs such as police officer or firefighter, for example). However, we are not sure that even we are smart enough to come up with a rational explanation for department specific classes when the body of work is performed in two or more departments across the organization.

Over the past couple of years, we have seen some pretty creative classifications created in order to deal with issues having nothing whatsoever to do with classification. In most cases, we see this kind of arrangement in agencies that have a large number of bargaining units that are established by department. For example, one large agency had plumbers in multiple units because one particular unit did not want to have plumbers from another unit bump into their unit. As we all know, plumbing systems in one building differ from the plumbing systems in other buildings. Consequently, the work requires different skill sets that justify a higher or lower rate of pay. As a result, the plumbers in one unit would not be qualified to work on the systems serviced by the other unit. In another large agency, all of their bargaining units were based on department and not job family or level. As a result, clerical and administrative support jobs that were virtually identical ended up in 16 different bargaining units. Because the unions were unwilling to collectively negotiate the compensation level for the jobs that crossed departmental boundaries, the agency had to negotiate the rate of pay 16 different times, which resulted in differing salaries for the same job depending on the terms and conditions of the contract involved. This also took several years since the various contracts came due at different times. The consequence of all this is that the agency has created a system where employees can apply for jobs in other departments simply to get an increase in pay even though they are doing the same or comparable work. Sounds eminently logical to us since recognized business practice is for an agency to pay multiple rates for the same job thereby creating competition for personnel within the organization (who says you always have to compete with

By Jim Fox and Bruce Lawson,  
Fox Lawson & Associates LLC

# Comp Doctor™

other agencies?). Here you can compete with yourself and always come out the winner!

One state government that we know well actually has three different personnel systems: one for the university system, one for the schools and one for everyone else. Because the three systems have different requirements, the result is that the same job (accountants, personnel analysts, systems analysts, etc.) all are paid differently, thereby creating internal competition.

Oops; your question is why is this not a good idea, and here we are telling you how one group can use the classification system to leverage pay for their employees to the detriment of the organization. If you will give us the contact name at the agency or agencies that want to do this, we will send them an invoice for our advice.

Silly us, that is not their problem; it is yours. So, how is this a bad idea from your perspective? Well, the biggest problem is that when you try to figure out the market value of a given job, the narrower the job, the tougher it is going to be to get good market data. If you cannot match the job in the marketplace (at least five good data matches in your defined labor market for the job in question), then the job has no definable market value (at least that is the conclusion one must reach when applying the criteria established by the U.S. Department of Justice in recent federal consent decrees related to potential violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act). Using the earlier example, you will probably not be able to match an airport plumber versus a regular plumber in the labor market. Have fun trying to deal with that problem.

Another reason this is not a good idea is that the changing demographics in our society are such that it is going to be hard enough to find qualified personnel for many public sector jobs in the years to come. The more narrowly you define the job, the tougher it will be. Just imagine how hard it is going to be to find skilled personnel in general but then limiting your search to only department specific skilled personnel. While this may give your recruit-

ment staff (or outside headhunter) job security, it sure will not help you get the talent you need.

As you can imagine, the narrower you make your job classification structure, be it to address department specific issues or to satisfy a specific employee who feels that his or her job is so unique and special that it must be classified differently than others will only serve to make your system more difficult to manage over the long term. The advantages of a simpler classification system structure (one that crosses department lines) far outweigh a structure that is specific to departments. This is not something that department heads and employees necessarily want to hear but it really is time to wake up and smell the coffee. The labor market is changing and

organizations really do need to accommodate those new realities.

*The Comp Doctor™ is the team of Jim Fox and Bruce Lawson of Fox Lawson & Associates LLC, a compensation and human resources consulting firm that specializes in assisting governments in fixing their compensation and classification systems. They are seriously irreverent about their specialty. You may find them on the Web at [www.foxlawson.com](http://www.foxlawson.com). If you have a question you would like to have them answer, please write to them at [jfox@foxlawson.com](mailto:jfox@foxlawson.com) or [blawson@foxlawson.com](mailto:blawson@foxlawson.com). They will try to include it in the next issue of Comp Doctor™. —N*

## Selection continued from page 25

observe the work of, or be mentored by individuals in the field. Public sector organizations can reach out to the schools by making their STEM professionals available to students for field experiences.

Increases in diversity in the STEM occupations can be achieved through the appropriate design of educational programs. However, such efforts do require time and money. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, they require cooperation between universities, schools, funding agencies, organizations employing STEM professionals and the community as a whole.

*Dennis Doverspike, Ph.D., ABPP, is a professor of psychology at the University of Akron. He is chair of the Professional and Scientific Affairs Committee of the IPMA Assessment Council (IPMAAC), which is a section of IPMA-HR and the leading organization of applied personnel assessment professionals actively engaged in practice, research and training in personnel assessment to meet the needs of both public and private organizations. Doverspike may be reached by e-mail at [dd1@uakron.edu](mailto:dd1@uakron.edu). —N*