

Sustaining the Federal HR Workforce

Insights on Retaining Federal HR Specialists



THE CHAIRMAN



U.S. MERIT SYSTEMS PROTECTION BOARD

1615 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20419

September 8, 2026

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

In accordance with the requirements of 5 U.S.C. § 1204(a)(3), I am pleased to submit this U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) publication, *Sustaining the Federal HR Workforce: Insights on Retaining Federal HR Specialists*. We are submitting this publication electronically, and it will be available on the Studies page of our website at www.mspb.gov/studies.

This report examines factors associated with Federal human resources specialists' intention to remain in their current positions. Drawing on MSPB's 2023 HR Workforce Survey, it describes how job satisfaction and day-to-day workplace conditions relate to stay intention among Federal HR specialists.

The report finds that job satisfaction strongly predicts stay intention and that meaningful work and a respectful, cooperative work environment stand out as important drivers of job satisfaction. The findings also point to the value of career development, learning opportunities, credible recognition, supportive supervision, manageable workloads, and access to the tools and resources needed to succeed. The study identifies relationships observed in the 2023 survey; it does not directly measure turnover or current workforce conditions.

MSPB offers this publication to assist policymakers, agency leaders, human capital executives, and supervisors as they strengthen the conditions that support HR workforce stability. Retaining experienced HR professionals helps preserve the expertise, consistency, and capacity needed for fair, lawful, and effective personnel decisions. I believe you will find this report useful as you consider issues affecting the Federal workforce.

Respectfully,

James J. Woodruff II
Chairman

Henry J. Kerner
Vice Chairman

Enclosure

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Executive Summary

Federal human resources (HR) specialists help agencies carry out some of the most important parts of the civil service system. They support recruiting, hiring, classification, performance management, employee development, discipline, and separation. In each of these areas, they help agencies apply the Merit System Principles in daily decisions.

That role is challenging. Agencies are managing hiring reform, workforce restructuring, changing HR technology, and long-standing skill gaps, while many HR offices are undergoing the same changes as the offices they are supporting. When agencies lose experienced HR specialists, the problem is not just one less staff member. The agencies may also lose judgment, institutional knowledge, and the capacity needed to carry out personnel actions fairly, consistently, and on time. For that reason, retaining skilled HR specialists is both a workforce issue and a merit protection issue.

This brief examines what drives federal HR specialists' intention to stay in their current jobs. It uses data from MSPB's 2023 HR Workforce Survey, which included HR employees in the 20 Chief Financial Officers Act agencies. For this analysis, the focus was on HR specialists who were not planning to retire from the federal government within the next two years. The study used statistical models to examine the relationship between stay intention, job satisfaction, and a range of workplace conditions. The models also accounted for differences in education, years of federal HR experience, leadership status, and HR certification¹. This approach allowed the analysis to focus on workplace conditions that leaders may be able to improve, rather than on employee background characteristics.

The report's first main finding is straightforward: job satisfaction is a strong predictor of whether HR specialists intend to stay. HR specialists with higher job satisfaction were much more likely to report stronger stay intention than those with lower job satisfaction, even after accounting for the control variables in the model. This matters because stay intention is an early signal of workforce stability. Agencies often recognize retention problems only after employees leave and work begins to pile up. By that point, operations may already be slower, managers may receive less support, and experienced staff may be harder to replace. The findings suggest that agencies can reduce this risk by paying close attention to the working conditions that shape job satisfaction before turnover creates larger performance and compliance problems.

The second major finding is that two workplace conditions stand out as the strongest drivers of job satisfaction: meaningful work and a respectful, cooperative work environment. HR specialists were more satisfied when they felt that their work was worthwhile, made good use of their skills, and contributed to a larger purpose. They were also more satisfied when they felt respected at work and when teamwork existed in their work unit. These two factors were more influential than many other workplace supports when all of the variables were examined together. This finding suggests that retention is not only about compensation, staffing numbers, or process improvements. It is also about whether HR specialists believe that their work matters and whether they can do that work in an environment marked by respect, cooperation, and professional trust.

Other workplace conditions still matter and should not be overlooked. HR specialists reported stronger job satisfaction and stronger stay intention when they had manageable workloads, opportunities for growth, fair recognition and rewards, supportive supervisors, and adequate staffing and resources. These factors may not be as strong as meaningful work and work climate when examined together, but they play an important supporting role in retention. The report's third set of analyses shows that many of these conditions are shaped by everyday management practices. Employees were more positive about growth when they could see a path to advance, improve their skills, and receive encouragement from others. They were more satisfied with supervisors when supervisors understood the work and offered constructive feedback on their job performance. They were more positive about recognition when awards and rewards seemed fair, transparent, and tied to performance.

Taken together, the findings show that retention is driven less by who employees are and more by how they experience their work. In other words, agencies are more likely to keep HR specialists when they create workplaces that combine purpose, respect, support, and reasonable demands. This matters because federal HR offices are currently operating in a high-pressure environment. HR specialists are expected to interpret and implement complex policy changes, support

¹ This report defines HR certification as holding a professional HR certification, for example, SHRM or HRCI. This does not include delegated examining certification.

agency leaders, modernize HR systems, and keep up with heavy workloads. At the same time, some agencies have reduced HR staffing and still face skill gaps. In this environment, losing experienced HR specialists can slow hiring, increase rework, reduce consistency, and weaken oversight of merit-based personnel actions. Research discussed in the brief also suggests that turnover in mission-support functions like HR can create broader organizational risks, especially when expertise is hard to replace.

The report therefore recommends action at several levels. Oversight bodies such as OPM and OMB can reduce avoidable administrative burden, strengthen development pathways for HR specialists, and monitor HR capacity and stay intention alongside traditional turnover measures. Agency leaders can treat HR capacity as mission-enabling infrastructure, protect critical HR positions during change, improve systems and tools, and create conditions for high-quality work. Federal Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCOs) and HR directors can build clearer career paths, manage workload pressures, strengthen supervisory capability, and make recognition practices more transparent and credible. HR supervisors can help by protecting time for skilled work, addressing incivility early, coaching employees regularly, and giving staff visible ways to grow. Across all of these groups, the message is the same: investing in the day-to-day conditions of HR work is a practical way to improve retention and protect merit.

The brief ends with two broader conclusions. First, retaining HR specialists is not only about filling vacancies. It is about maintaining the expertise and working conditions needed to carry out federal personnel work fairly, accurately, and consistently. Second, agency leaders should recognize that retaining HR employees is more effective than replacing them after they leave. When agencies improve job satisfaction, strengthen work climate, and support quality work, they are more likely to retain experienced HR staff before serious capacity problems emerge. Future research can build on this work by examining burnout, emotional strain, change fatigue, and the relationship between HR workforce stability and measurable indicators of merit system risk. Even now, however, the practical lesson is clear: protecting HR capacity helps protect the merit system itself.

Recommendations by Stakeholder

Top actions to strengthen HR specialist retention and protect merit

Oversight Bodies (OPM/OMB)

- Track governmentwide HR capacity & stay-intention indicators
- Standardize/simplify high-volume requirements; align timelines
- Fund HR development pathways (certs, rotations, communities)
- Publish implementation playbooks for major policy changes
- Encourage surge staffing/shared services during demand spikes

Agency Leaders

- Staff HR to workload; protect critical HR billets; plan for retirements
- Limit ‘drive-by’ urgency; Create conditions for quality work
- Invest in modern tools (case management, automation, knowledge base)
- Set respectful collaboration expectations for managers
- Reward quality & risk reduction—not speed alone

CHCOs & HR Directors

- Create career ladders, rotations, stretch assignments
- Use staffing models/service standards; manage demand intake
- Train supervisors in coaching, technical QC, merit-risk spotting
- Expand consultative HR work beyond transactions where feasible
- Institutionalize transparent recognition and promotion criteria

HR Supervisors

- Triage requests; set intake rules; push back on false urgency
- Address incivility quickly; model collaboration
- Provide regular coaching and technical feedback (case reviews, job aids)
- Make growth visible (skills maps, mentoring, rotations, training/details)
- Recognize quality outcomes

Human Resources, Retention, and Merit

Human resources (HR) professionals are central to the Federal merit system. As agencies implement rapid reforms, retaining experienced HR specialists is both a workforce challenge and a merit system priority.

HR Specialists are Essential to Merit

Federal HR specialists play a central role in ensuring that the workforce operates in line with the Merit System Principles (MSPs). They support every stage of the employee lifecycle, including recruiting, hiring, onboarding, training, promotion, performance management, conduct, and separations. Because these activities directly affect personnel decisions, HR specialists are essential to maintaining merit and avoiding Prohibited Personnel Practices (PPPs) (MSPB, 2023).

Merit System Principles do not operate on their own. Managers and HR specialists must apply them in daily decisions about hiring, classification, performance, and discipline (MSPB, 2016). When HR offices lack staff or critical skills, their ability to support merit-based decisions can weaken. This increases the risk of Prohibited Personnel Practices and inconsistent outcomes. Strong implementation of merit principles helps agencies act fairly, comply with requirements, and build employee trust.

Federal HR is Under Exceptional Strain

We recently published two reports examining the role of federal Staffing Specialists and the challenges they face in carrying out their responsibilities. The first report described the unique duties of federal Staffing Specialists and highlighted how their role differs from that of their private-sector counterparts, particularly in their responsibility to uphold the Merit System Principles (MSPs) (MSPB, 2026a). The second report presented findings from our HR Workforce Survey and explored Staffing Specialists' perspectives and experiences in the federal workplace (MSPB, 2026b). The survey revealed that although Staffing Specialists are deeply committed to upholding the merit system, they face a variety of challenges that can make fulfilling this mission more difficult.

Despite their essential role, concerns about federal HR staffing levels, workforce capacity, and skill gaps have persisted for decades. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has repeatedly identified strategic human capital management as a governmentwide high-risk area. GAO has also pointed to long-standing skill gaps that limit agencies' ability to recruit, develop, and retain the workforce they need (GAO, 2025). In 2023, GAO also noted that OPM's own workforce shortages and skill gaps could limit its ability to help agencies close governmentwide skills gaps (GAO, 2023a)

MSP #1

Recruitment should be from qualified individuals from appropriate sources in an endeavor to achieve a work force from all segments of society, and selection and advancement should be determined solely on the basis of relative ability, knowledge and skills, after fair and open competition which assures that all receive equal opportunity.

MSP #5

The Federal work force should be used efficiently and effectively.

MSP #6

Employees should be retained on the basis of adequacy of their performance, inadequate performance should be corrected, and employees should be separated who cannot or will not improve their performance to meet required standards.

Beyond staffing and capacity concerns, HR professionals are increasingly expected to serve as strategic partners to agency leadership. However, several barriers can impede their ability to fulfill this role, including limited training opportunities, the complexity of HR laws and regulations, ineffective technology, administrative burdens, heavy operational workloads, insufficient strategic workforce planning, and inadequate staffing levels (MSPB, 2020, 2025; Partnership for Public Service, 2021).

In response to these challenges, OPM released a comprehensive Human Resources Management Competency Model and related professional development tools in 2024 to help strengthen HR capabilities, improve retention, and reduce skill gaps across the federal HR workforce (OPM, 2024; OMB & OPM, 2024). OPM and OMB also urged agencies to reduce unnecessary administrative burden on HR specialists while providing them with the data, tools, access, and guidance they need to perform their roles effectively.

However, governmentwide workforce restructuring initiatives have required HR specialists not only to interpret and navigate new hiring, classification, performance management, and separation policies, but also to implement them under compressed timelines and heightened levels of scrutiny. For example, OPM guidance issued in May and November 2025 directed agencies to establish Talent Teams and Strategic Hiring Committees, revise job announcement formats and candidate assessment processes, modify ranking and selection procedures, and reduce hiring timelines to 80 days or less. In addition, numerous Executive Orders, agency reform initiatives, and OPM policy directives have imposed new responsibilities on federal HR organizations. These demands are expected to persist, as the President's Management Agenda identifies downsizing and restructuring the federal workforce as a continuing governmentwide priority (CRS, 2025a, 2025b; GAO, 2026; OMB, 2025). As a result, many HR specialists are being asked to manage a growing volume of complex, high-stakes work while simultaneously leading the implementation of significant workforce reforms.

At the same time, HR offices themselves are experiencing staffing reductions, expanded workloads, new technology requirements, and evolving expectations for HR specialists to serve as strategic partners. Like other occupations across the federal government in 2025, HR staffing levels were reduced in some agencies (GAO, 2026; OPM, n.d.). However, OPM continues to identify HR as a governmentwide mission-critical occupation and asks agencies to track vacancies under strategic human capital reporting requirements (OPM, 2025).

The Partnership for Public Service (2011) has long cautioned that federal agencies often invest heavily in hiring while giving less attention to retaining experienced employees. Its research emphasizes that retention depends on effective HR policies and sound management practices, especially during periods of hiring constraints or organizational change. In high-skill roles like federal HR, losing experienced staff can also reduce institutional knowledge and service quality until expertise is rebuilt (Allen et al., 2010; Galan, 2023; Kwon & Rupp, 2013). Federal workforce reviews note that retirement eligibility and ongoing skill gaps can create capacity risk even when current attrition looks stable (GAO, 2003, 2023b). Research also suggests that turnover in mission-support functions like HR can create effects beyond the loss of one position by slowing hiring actions, straining compliance and oversight, and reducing the ability to apply workforce rules consistently (MSPB, 2020).

The Federal Government Needs a Plan for Retaining HR Talent

Agency leaders need a deliberate plan to retain employees in this mission-critical role. To help agency leaders navigate this moment, we examined data from the 2023 HR Workforce Survey to identify the workplace factors most strongly associated with HR specialists' intent to stay in their current roles. This analysis provides data-based insights into the drivers of retention and the conditions that can either strengthen or weaken HR workforce stability.

Agency leaders are being asked to manage significant workforce changes at a time when key HR challenges remain unresolved. HR specialists were already under significant pressure before workforce reductions began in 2025. They must keep up with complex and changing laws and policies while managing limited staff, insufficient training, and outdated technology (MSPB, 2020). Workforce reductions may have intensified these pressures. If agencies do not address both new and long-standing drivers of attrition, they are more likely to lose experienced HR specialists—placing added strain on operations and increasing risks to the effective application of the merit system.

This research brief provides the evidence agencies need to strengthen HR specialist retention by addressing the following research questions:

- 1. What contributes to HR specialists’ intention to stay in their jobs?
- 2. What can agencies do to strengthen retention among HR specialists?

Methods

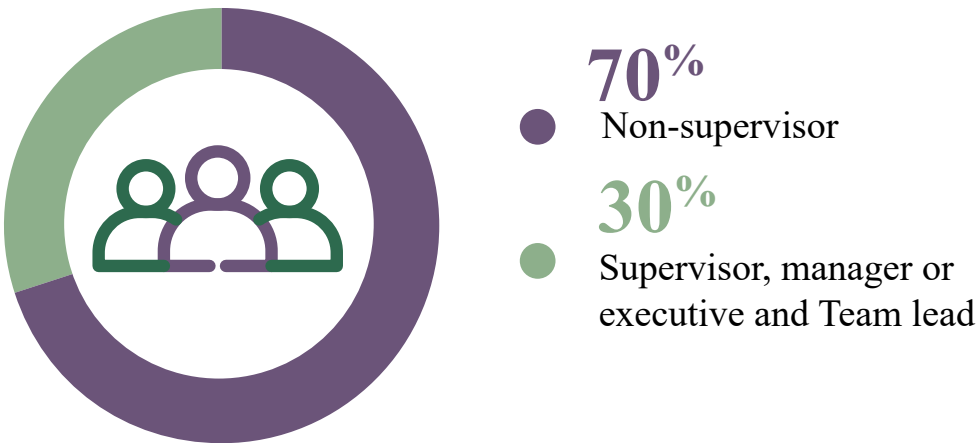
In 2023, MSPB conducted the HR Workforce Survey to support two priorities in its Research Agenda: (1) HR technologies and (2) preparing the HR workforce for current and future demands. This research brief focuses on findings related to the second priority. Findings related to HR technologies were published separately in *Leveraging Technology to Improve Federal Human Capital (2025)*.

MSPB surveyed all federal civilian Human Resources Specialists (0201) and Human Resources Assistants (0203) employed by the 20 Chief Financial Officers Act agencies. Participation was voluntary. Slightly more than 34,000 permanent HR employees were invited to participate, and data were collected between February and June 2023. After data quality checks, the response rate for this study was 29 percent. Analyses found no meaningful unit level or item level nonresponse bias.

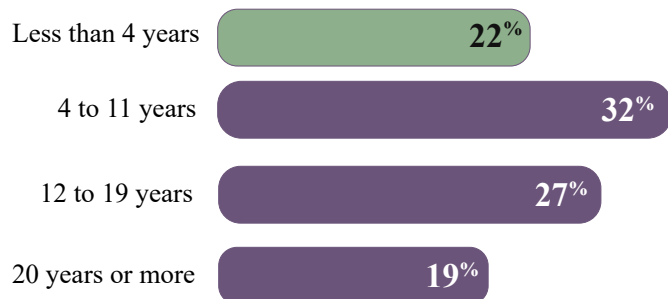
For this research brief, we examined survey questions related to HR employees’ intention to stay in their current jobs and their views of their work and workplace. The goal was to identify workplace factors that are associated with stronger or weaker intentions to stay.

This study focused on HR specialists who had not been planning to retire from the federal government in the next two years. To be included in this study, respondents had to have reported that they were HR Specialists and had to disagree, strongly disagree, or report neither to the question, “Do you plan to retire from the federal government in the next two years?” Among the target sample, seven in ten reported that they work in non-supervisory roles (70.0%) and the majority (77.9%) reported that they had at least four years of experience in Federal Human Resources. Nearly three-quarters (71.5%) held a bachelor’s degree or higher.

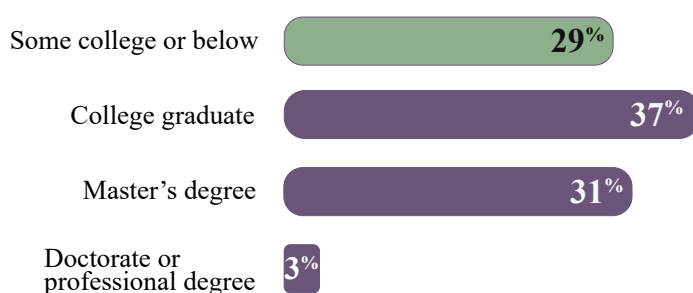
Leader Status



Years work in Federal HR



Education Level



Findings

Analysis Roadmap

To help agency leaders understand better what keeps HR professionals in their jobs, a three-step analysis was conducted. The goal was to give leaders a clear roadmap for where to focus attention and resources to improve retention.

Our analysis focused on the following three main ideas:

1. **Stay intention** – how strongly HR professionals say they plan to remain in their current job.
2. **Job satisfaction** – how satisfied they are with their job overall.
3. **Workplace factors** – day-to-day working conditions that shape people's experience, such as meaningful work, respect at work, workload, and growth opportunities.

We used statistical models to identify which workplace factors are most strongly linked to job satisfaction and intent to stay. These methods help estimate how different workplace conditions affect retention while accounting for differences among employees. A full description of the methods and statistics is provided in the technical appendix.

We also accounted for differences among employees, such as education, years of experience, HR certification status, and whether they were in a leadership role. This helped ensure that the results focused on workplace conditions rather than personal background differences. In practical terms, this approach helps identify the parts of the work environment that agency leaders are most able to improve.

Finding 1: Job Satisfaction Strongly Predicts Stay Intention

In the first model, we tested whether job satisfaction predicts how likely HR professionals are to say they plan to stay in their current job (low, medium, or high stay intention). (See Appendix for full description of survey items and technical analyses).

The results of this model showed HR specialists with higher job satisfaction had nearly three times the odds of reporting a higher level of stay intention compared with those with lower job satisfaction, controlling for tenure, education, HR certification status, and supervisory status.

In simple terms, HR specialists who are satisfied with their jobs are much more likely to stay. For managers, this means that efforts to strengthen job satisfaction are likely to support retention and reduce turnover costs.

Finding 2: Meaningful Work and Positive Work Climate Drive Job Satisfaction

The finding that job satisfaction strongly supports retention is well supported in the literature (Meier & Spector, 2015) and the purpose of the first model was simply to examine whether that same association is present among federal HR specialists. The second model was intended to create more concrete insights for agency leadership to learn what workplace factors substantially contribute to high job satisfaction (and by association, high employee retention).

When examining what predicts HR specialists' job satisfaction while holding constant education, years in federal HR, HR certification, and leadership status, two factors stood out most. Higher job satisfaction was most strongly associated with (1) meaningful work—work employees see as worthwhile and well matched to their skills—and (2) a respectful, cooperative team environment. Other workplace conditions, such as growth opportunities, manageable workload, fair recognition, clear expectations, supportive supervisors, and adequate staffing and resources, also mattered, but not as strongly as meaningful work and a positive work climate. Here, meaningful work refers to the extent to which employees see their work as personally significant, worthwhile, and connected to a broader purpose or positive contribution (Rosso et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2012).

Finding 3: Growth, Recognition, and Supervisor Support Are Shaped by Everyday Management Practices

To further understand drivers behind retention, we conducted additional analyses to investigate the root cause of HR specialists' stay intention. In this set of logistic regression analyses, we looked at what workplace experiences are most strongly linked to three things that matter for job satisfaction: growth opportunities, satisfaction with supervisors, and recognition and rewards. The results suggest these are shaped by specific day-to-day practices, not just personal preferences or chance. In practical terms, HR specialists feel more positive about growth when they can see a real path to advance, get chances to build skills, and have someone who supports their development. They are more satisfied when supervisors understand the technical work of employees well enough to provide constructive feedback and have a clear sense of how employees perform. Employees also feel better about recognition and rewards when they believe awards are tied to performance in their work unit (not favoritism or unclear criteria).

Putting It All Together: Building Strong HR Retention Roots

Taken together, these findings point to a consistent story about what shapes federal HR specialists' experience at work and their willingness to stay. Across analyses, job satisfaction and stay intention were driven less by individual credentials or tenure and more by how HR specialists experienced their day-to-day work and work environment. Related studies reach a similar conclusion. Job satisfaction and advancement opportunities are key predictors of intent to leave, which means heavy workloads and limited career growth can increase future turnover risk (Pitts et al., 2011; Hur, 2024). Burnout research also links high demands and low resources to exhaustion, disengagement, and turnover-related outcomes (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

In our study, HR specialists were more satisfied and more likely to intend to remain in their positions when they believed their work was meaningful and made good use of their skills. This sense of purpose was closely intertwined with perceptions of the work climate. Respectful, cooperative team environments emerged as a particularly strong influence, suggesting that how HR work is carried out—and with whom—matters as much as the work itself.

At the same time, these findings do not suggest that more traditional workplace support is unimportant. Factors such as manageable workloads, opportunities for growth, fair recognition, clear expectations, supportive supervisors, and adequate staffing and resources were all associated with higher satisfaction and stronger stay intentions. However, their influence was modest when compared with the effects of meaningful work and a positive work climate. In other words, structural supports appear to function best when they reinforce, rather than substitute for, a workplace where HR specialists feel valued, respected, and able to contribute their expertise.

From Findings to Action: Recommendations for Strengthening HR Retention and Ability to Protect Merit

Building Strong HR Retention Roots



Our results show that job satisfaction is strongly associated with HR specialists' intention to stay. This matters for merit system protection because HR specialists help agencies apply staffing rules consistently, run fair hiring processes, and treat employees and applicants equitably. When HR specialists stay, agencies benefit from experienced staff who understand complex requirements, spot risks early, and provide steady guidance to managers. Over time, this continuity can reduce errors and rework, shorten processing delays, and lower the chance of uneven treatment across hiring, pay, performance management, discipline, and other personnel actions. For leaders who care about merit, fairness, and effective personnel management, HR specialist stay intention is an early signal of whether agencies will have the stable capacity needed to uphold Merit System Principles. For that reason, turnover should be monitored not only by how many people leave, but also by what expertise and oversight capacity is lost when they do.

Merit-based hiring and workforce restructuring depend on skilled HR professionals. Agencies need experienced HR specialists to help hiring managers interpret and apply new rules, onboard employees into mission-critical and legally required roles, modernize HR systems, and update HR operations to meet new requirements. Because HR work affects fairness, consistency, and compliance across the agency, improving HR specialists' intention to stay is both a workforce issue and a merit protection issue.

Below we present concrete recommendations based on our findings. There are actions that oversight bodies such as OPM and OMB, agency leaders, CHCOs and HR directors, and HR supervisors can all take to ensure HR specialists (1) do meaningful work that uses their skills and (2) work in a respectful and cooperative climate.

Oversight bodies (OPM/OMB)

- Set and track governmentwide indicators for HR capacity and stay intention (e.g., workload, time-to-hire pressure points, training access), and use them alongside turnover rates in oversight reviews.
- Reduce avoidable administrative burden by standardizing high-volume requirements, simplifying guidance where possible, and aligning reporting timelines so HR offices are not pulled in multiple directions.
- Fund and expand development pathways for HR specialists (e.g., certifications, rotational assignments, and communities of practice), with priority on mission-critical staffing work and merit protections.
- Issue clear, practical implementation playbooks for major policy changes (hiring reforms, restructuring, reductions in force) so HR specialists can advise managers with confidence and consistency.
- In budget and workforce guidance, encourage agencies to resource HR functions at levels that match demand, including surge staffing options and shared-service support when needed.

Agency leaders (e.g., Secretary, Deputy Secretary/Administrator, COO, CFO)

- Treat HR capacity as mission-enabling infrastructure by staffing and resourcing adequately, protecting critical HR billets during reorganizations, and planning early for retirement waves in key HR roles.
- Create conditions for quality work by clearly defining HR specialists' decision space, limiting "drive-by" urgent requests, and setting priorities that allow specialists to complete accurate, high-quality work.
- Invest in modern tools and support (case management, staffing automation, training platforms) to reduce rework and frustration and to make it easier to deliver timely, consistent service.
- Signal that respectful collaboration is a performance expectation for managers by addressing poor behavior toward HR staff and reinforcing shared accountability for fair, merit-based hiring.
- Recognize and reward high-quality HR work (accuracy, fairness, service, and risk reduction)—not just speed—through awards, promotion opportunities, and public leadership support.

CHCOs and HR Directors

- Build clear development and advancement paths (career ladders, rotations, stretch assignments) so HR specialists can grow without leaving the occupation or the agency.
- Manage workloads by setting clear priorities, using standard tools and templates, and creating simple ways for employees to get HR support. This can help reduce overload and prevent work from piling up during busy periods.
- Strengthen supervisor capability by training HR supervisors in coaching, feedback, technical quality control, and merit-risk spotting; hold supervisors accountable for work climate and retention.
- Increase the "meaningful work" signal by clarifying role expectations and expanding consultative work where feasible (e.g., workforce planning, assessment strategy), not only transactional processing.
- Institutionalize fair recognition by using transparent criteria for awards and promotions, celebrating quality and integrity outcomes, and routinely sharing HR contributions to mission and merit outcomes.

HR Supervisors (Branch Chiefs, First Line Supervisors, Team Leads)

- Protect time for high-skill work by triaging requests, setting clear intake requirements, and pushing back on unnecessary urgency so specialists can focus on accuracy and fairness.
- Create a respectful, supportive climate by addressing incivility quickly, modeling collaborative behavior with customers, and ensuring new staff are welcomed and coached.
- Provide regular coaching and technical feedback (case reviews, peer learning, job aids) so employees feel competent, supported, and able to do the work well.
- Make growth visible by mapping next-step skills, pairing staff with mentors, rotating work across action types, and recommending staff for training and details.
- Recognize contributions in real time by tying praise and awards nominations to specific quality outcomes (e.g., clean audit trail, consistent rating, timely consult that prevented a merit risk).

Topics for future research

Further research focused on federal HR specialists is needed. As agencies implement ongoing modernization and hiring reforms—often under surge conditions—more evidence is needed to identify which job designs, supervisory practices, workload strategies, and investments most effectively strengthen job satisfaction, stay intention, and the merit-protecting capacity of the HR function. Several questions are deserving of future inquiry:

- Which elements of “meaningful work” most matter for federal HR specialists (e.g., consultative vs. task work, decision latitude, skill utilization) and how job design affects satisfaction over time.
- The role of supervisor capability (coaching, technical quality control, climate management) in retention, and the most effective approaches to developing HR supervisors.
- How HR workload surges (hiring reforms, reorganization, RIF planning, emergency hiring) change retention risk and decision quality—and which staffing models work best under different conditions.
- How HR technology and process modernization (case management, automation, training platforms) affects workload, job satisfaction, time-to-hire pressure, and consistency in rule application.
- Linking HR capacity indicators to measurable merit outcomes (e.g., error/rework rates, appeals/grievances, audit findings, PPP-related allegations) to better quantify “high-impact” HR turnover.
- Examining the prevalence and drivers of burnout, emotional exhaustion, and change fatigue among HR professionals, particularly in roles involving high-stakes personnel actions.
- Understanding how sustained exposure to stress and complex decision-making affects well-being and performance could inform interventions to support resilience and retention.
- Assessing whether lower HR workforce stability is associated with measurable indicators of merit system risk, such as increased appeals, higher error rates, or more prohibited personnel practice (PPP) concerns.

Examining these relationships could help identify early warning signals of weakened merit protections and inform strategies to strengthen oversight and accountability.

Closing

Our report findings point to practical conclusions with direct merit-system implications: agencies are most likely to sustain fair, consistent, and legally sound personnel actions when they retain experienced HR specialists who can apply complex rules with judgment, advise managers, and spot risks early. Our analyses suggest that HR specialists' intention to stay is strongest when their work is meaningful and utilizes their skills, when they operate in a respectful and cooperative climate, and when workloads and HR system demands are manageable—supported by visible growth opportunities, fair recognition, capable supervision, and adequate staffing and tools. The recommendations in this report translate these drivers into concrete actions that most leaders can take to strengthen HR retention capacity and, in turn, help safeguard Merit System Principles and reduce Prohibited Personnel Practice risk over time.

This focus is consistent with recent governmentwide hiring reforms aimed at improving the end-to-end hiring experience for applicants, hiring managers, and HR professionals. OMB and OPM have emphasized data-driven strategic workforce planning and analytics, clearer and more user-friendly hiring processes, and steps to minimize avoidable HR burden. In that context, strengthening HR specialists' job satisfaction and stay intention is a prerequisite for implementing reforms effectively and equitably at scale, sustaining service quality during hiring surges, and maintaining the consistency and documentation needed to uphold Merit System Principles.

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Appendix A: Descriptive Statistics

HR Specialists

Table 1

Question 3: What is your job title/series?	Percent
HR Specialist (0201)	100%

Plan to retire

Table 2

Question 37_9: During the next 2 years, do you plan to...Retire.	Percent
Strongly Disagree	57.3%
Disagree	30.8%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	11.9%

Demographic Information

Table 3 - Years work in Federal HR

Question 6: How many years have you worked in Federal human resources?	Percent
Less than 4 years	22.1%
4 to 11 years	32.2%
12 to 19 years	27.0%
20 years or more	18.7%

Table 4 - Educational level

Question 8: What is the highest level of education you have completed?	Percent
Some College or Below	28.5%
College Graduate	36.8%
Master's Degree	31.3%
Doctorate or Professional Degree	3.3%

Table 5 - Leader status

Question 11: What is your supervisory status?	Percent
Supervisor, manager or executive	18.2%
Non-supervisor	69.9%
Team lead	11.9%

Table 6 - HR certification status

Question 12: Do you currently hold a professional HR certification? (e.g., SHRM, HRCI. Please do not include delegated examining certification here)	Percent
Yes	8.3%
No	85.4%
Working on it	6.3%

Stay-intention levels

For the first analysis, whether job satisfaction predicts how likely HR professionals are to say they plan to stay in their current job, we assigned levels of stay intention based on responses to the following two questions:

Table 7 (2 items)

Level of agreement:	Yes	No	Don't Know/Not Applicable
Question 35_1: Are you actively searching for a new job?	21.9%	74.9%	3.2%
Question 35_2: Are you casually searching job postings for anything that looks interesting?	54.6%	43.5%	1.9%

Table 8

Stay-intention levels	Percent
Low stay intention*	22.0%
Medium stay intention**	37.4%
High stay intention***	40.6%

*Low stay intention: Assigned to respondents who answered “Yes” to the question, Q35-1: actively searching for a job.

**Medium stay intention: Assigned to respondents who answered: “Yes” to the question, Q35-2: casually searching job postings, or “No” to the question Q35_1: actively searching for a job and “DK/NA” to Q35-2: casually searching job postings

***High stay intention: Assigned to respondents who answered “No” to both questions, i.e., Q35-1: actively searching for a job and Q35-2: casually searching job postings.

Job satisfaction

Table 9

Question 54_6: Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements... I am satisfied with my job	Percent
Strongly Disagree	4.2%
Disagree	7.0%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	13.8%
Agree	42.4%
Strongly Agree	32.6%

Meaningful work

“Meaningful work” is a composite variable created from the following two questions.

Please see Appendix B for the results of confirmatory factor analysis.

Table 10 - Meaningful work (2 items)

Level of agreement:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Question 53_3: The work I do is meaningful to me.	0.8%	2.3%	6.5%	39.2%	51.1%
Question 53_7: My job makes good use of my skills and abilities.	4.5%	7.8%	10.7%	41.3%	35.7%

Table 11 - Meaningful work score distribution

Total	Mean	St. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
6505	4.166	0.814	1.00	5.00

The score is an average response to the two responses.

Team environment

“Team environment” is a composite variable created from the following two questions.

Please see Appendix B for the results of confirmatory factor analysis.

Table 12 - Team environment (2 items)

Level of agreement:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Question 54_3: Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements... I am treated with respect at work.	2.9%	4.2%	8.6%	40.9%	43.4%
Question 54_5: A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my work unit.	3.4%	5.4%	9.3%	39.8%	42.1%

Table 13 - Team environment score distribution

Total	Mean	St. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
6463	4.147	0.904	1.00	5.00

The score is an average response to the two responses.

Professional development support

Table 14

Question 26_3: To what extent...does your organization support your professional development.	Percent
No Extent	5.7%
Less Extent	11.6%
Some Extent	33.8%
Great Extent	48.9%

Clear expectations

“Clear expectations” is a composite variable created from the following two questions.

Please see Appendix B for the results of confirmatory factor analysis.

Table 15 - Clear expectations (2 items)

Level of agreement:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Question 38_1: Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements... I know what is expected of me on the job.	1.8%	3.8%	6.2%	42.1%	46.0%
Question 38_2: Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements... My performance standards accurately document what is expected of me.	3.6%	7.8%	10.7%	39.2%	38.7%

Table 16 - Clear expectations score distribution

N	Mean	St. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
6850	4.140	0.886	1.00	5.00

The score is an average response to the two responses.

Adequate staffing and resources

“Adequate staffing and resources” is a composite variable created from the following two questions. Please see Appendix B for the results of confirmatory factor analysis.

Table 17 - Adequate staffing and resources (2 items)

Level of agreement:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Question 24: My work unit is able to hire HR staff with the right skills.	10.7%	5.1%	15.3%	40.6%	28.3%
Question 41_1: Please indicate your level of agreement: I have the resources to do my job well.	3.9%	10.9%	12.4%	46.9%	25.8%

Table 18 - Adequate staffing and resources score distribution

N	Mean	St. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
6884	3.751	0.963	1.00	5.00

The score is an average response to the two responses.

Manageable workload

“Manageable workload” is a composite variable created from the following two questions. Since the response format of these two questions are different, responses were converted to z score. Please see Appendix B for the results of confirmatory factor analysis.

Table 19 - Manageable workload (2 items)

Question 39_2: How would you describe your current workload?	Percent
Too high	42.4%
Reasonable	56.1%
Too low	1.6%

Table 20 - Manageable workload (2 items)

Question 45_6: The number of HR systems I am expected to understand and use for my job is manageable	Percent
Strongly Disagree	4.0%
Disagree	9.4%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	15.7%
Agree	54.1%
Strongly Agree	16.8%

Table 21 - Composite variable score distribution

N	Mean	St. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
6855	0.025	0.792	-1.89	2.71

The score of this composite variable is an average z score of the two questions

Satisfaction with growth opportunities, recognition and reward, and supervisor

Table 22 - Satisfaction with growth opportunities (3 items)

(3 items) Level of agreement:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Question 25_1: I am satisfied with the prospect for future personal and professional growth in my organization.	7.4%	10.9%	13.9%	39.7%	28.0%
Question 54_2: Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements... I am satisfied with the recognition and rewards I receive for my work.	8.0%	13.7%	17.8%	35.5%	25.0%
Question 53_5: Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements... Overall, I am satisfied with my supervisor.	4.4%	4.8%	9.8%	30.7%	50.4%

Career path and career development support

Table 23 - Clarity of career path (5 items)

Level of agreement:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Question 25_3: My career path is clear to me.	5.1%	9.2%	18.2%	38.8%	28.8%
Question 25_5: I see a path to advance my career in my organization.	9.2%	13.1%	19.4%	33.0%	25.3%
Question 25_4: I feel I am in control of my career path.	5.0%	8.5%	15.3%	40.1%	31.0%
Question 25_2: I have someone at work who encourages my career development.	5.8%	8.5%	13.4%	35.0%	37.2%
Question 33_1: I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization.	5.0%	9.1%	20.0%	40.5%	25.5%

Supervisors' understanding of job performance and feedback

Table 24 - Understanding of job performance (3 items)

Level of agreement:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Question 38_3: My supervisor has a good understanding of my job performance.	4.2%	6.2%	9.4%	34.4%	45.8%
Question 38_5: My supervisor understands enough about the technical subject matter of my job to provide direction and advice.	6.0%	6.5%	10.2%	30.6%	46.8%
Question 38_4: My supervisor provides constructive feedback on my job performance.	5.4%	7.8%	12.4%	31.8%	42.6%

Performance-based recognition and rewards

Table 25

<i>Question 54_1:</i> Recognition and rewards are based on performance in my work unit.	Percent
Strongly Disagree	6.2%
Disagree	9.1%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	15.2%
Agree	41.4%
Strongly Agree	28.2%

Appendix B: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results of Composite Variables

Table 26 Model Fit Statistics

Model Fit Statistics	
X ² (df)	555.5 (37)
p value	<.0001
CFI	0.985
TLI	0.967
RMSEA	0.048
SRMR	0.024

Table 27 Standardized Factor Loadings

Standardized Factor Loadings			
Factor Membership		Observed Item	Standardized Loadings
Meaningful work	=>	Q53_7 [My job makes good use of my skills and abilities.]	0.904
Meaningful work	=>	Q53_3 [The work I do is meaningful to me.]	0.572
Team environment	=>	Q54_3 [I am treated with respect at work.]	0.858
Team environment	=>	Q54_5 [A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my work unit.]	0.792
Clear expectations	=>	Q38_1 [I know what is expected of me on the job.]	0.779
Clear expectations	=>	Q38_2 [My performance standards accurately document what is expected of me.]	0.838
Resources	=>	Q41_1 [I have the resources to do my job well.]	0.734
Resources	=>	Q24 [My work unit is able to hire HR staff with the right skills.]	0.529
Overload	=>	Q39_2 [How would you describe your current workload?]	0.405
Overload	=>	Q45_6 [The number of HR systems I am expected to understand and use for my job is manageable.]	0.614

*Note: All factor loadings are statistically significant, p value <.001

Table 28 Standard Factor Correlations

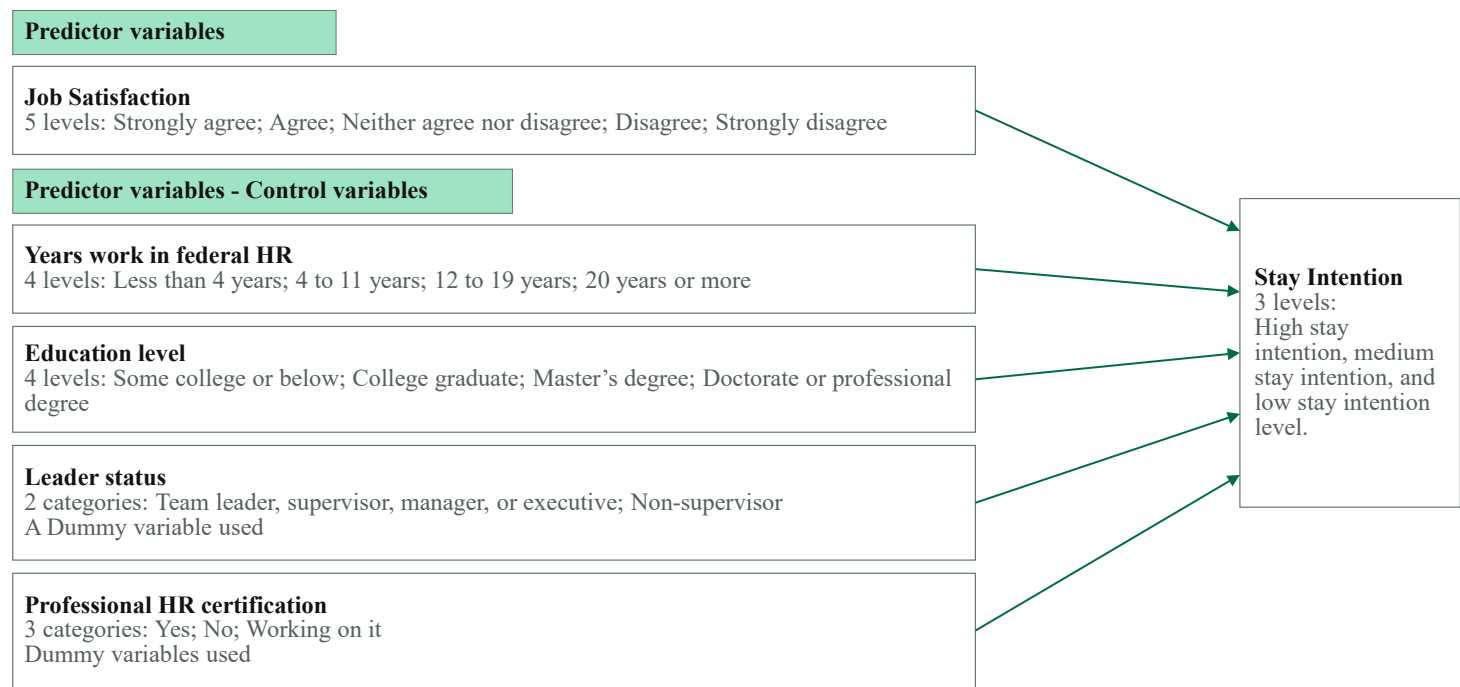
Standardized Factor Correlations					
	Meaningful work	Team environment	Clear expectations	Resources	Overload
Meaningful work	1.000				
Team environment	0.765	1.000			
Clear expectations	0.679	0.674	1.000		
Resources	0.734	0.735	0.783	1.000	
Overload	0.486	0.485	0.547	0.900	1.000

*Note: All correlations are statistically significant, p value <.001

Table 29 Reliability Statistics

Reliability Statistics			
	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Meaningful work	0.675	0.718	0.572
Team environment	0.810	0.811	0.682
Clear expectations	0.794	0.791	0.654
Resources	0.558	0.575	0.409
Overload	0.391	0.416	0.271

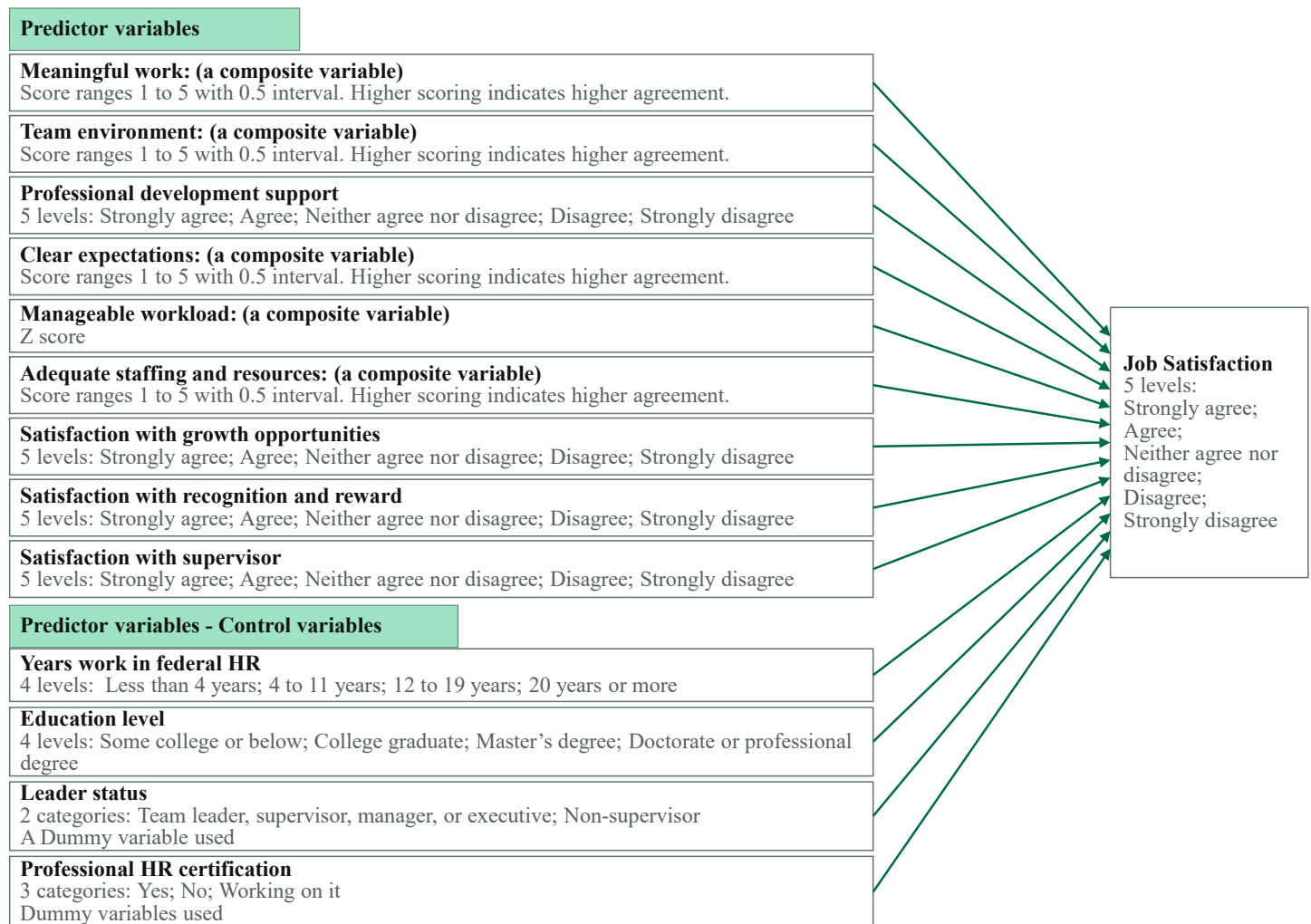
Appendix C: Regression Model 1: Stay intention and job satisfaction



Ordinal logistic regression model results

Model 1	$X^2(6) = 1850.404, p = .000, \text{ with Nagelkerke } R^2 = 0.293$
Coefficients	Job Satisfaction ($\beta=1.089$), Years Work in Federal HR ($\beta=-0.049$), Education ($\beta=-0.076$), Leader Status ($\beta=0.063$), Yes, have Certificate ($\beta=0.182$), and Working on Certificate ($\beta=0.333$)

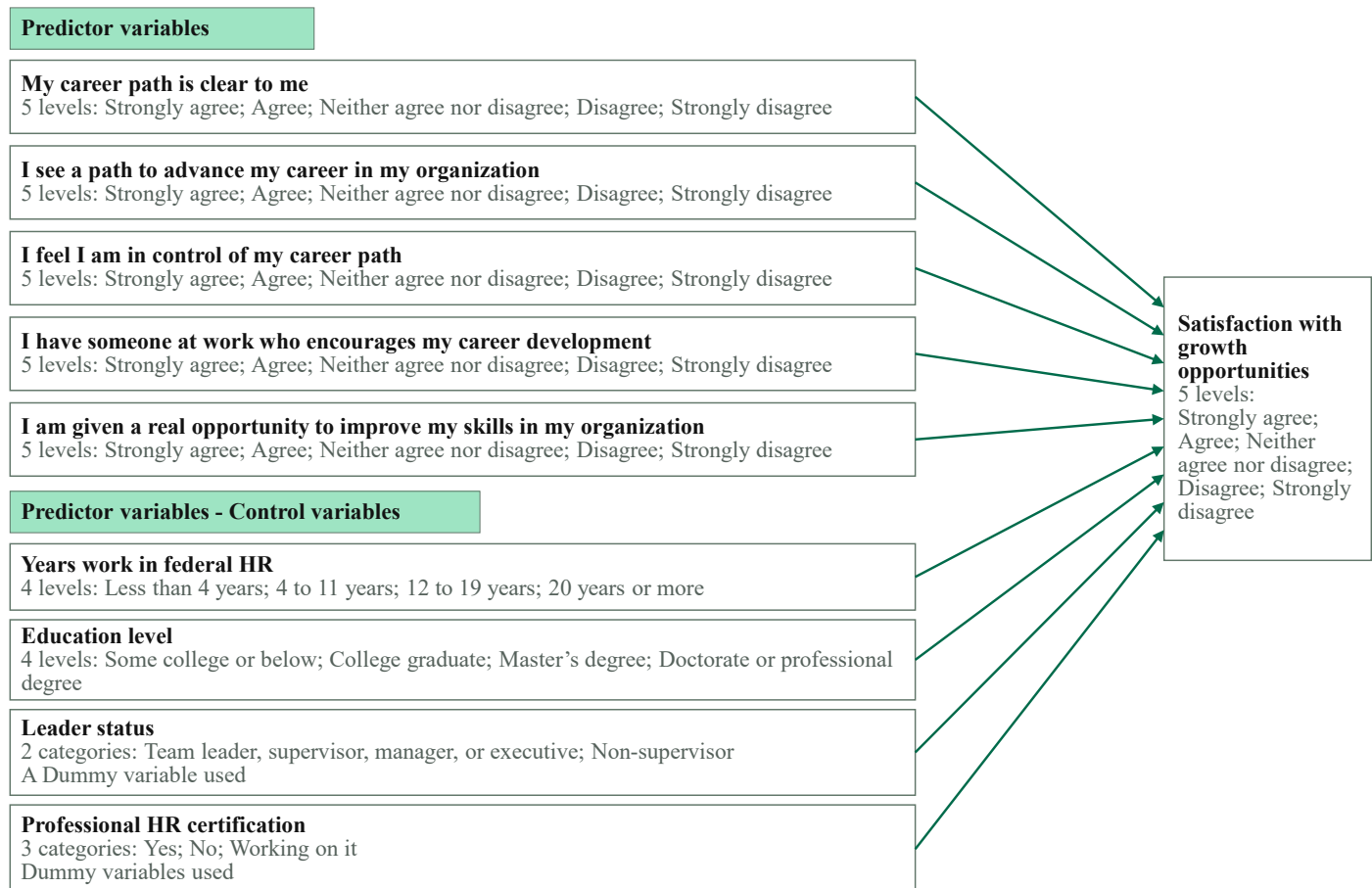
Appendix D: Regression Model 2: Job satisfaction and predictors



Ordinal logistic regression model results

Model 2	$X^2(14) = 6524.31, p = .000, \text{ with Nagelkerke } R^2 = 0.718$
Coefficients	Meaningful work ($\beta=1.467$), Team environment ($\beta=1.014$), Professional Dev Support ($\beta=-0.035$), Clear expectations ($\beta=0.228$), Manageable workload ($\beta=0.302$), Adequate staffing and resources ($\beta=0.199$), Sat w Growth Potential ($\beta=0.514$), Sat Recognition ($\beta=0.274$), Sat w Supervisor ($\beta=0.209$), Years Work in Federal HR ($\beta=0.07$), Education ($\beta=-0.024$), Leader Status ($\beta=-0.02$), Yes, have Certificate ($\beta=-0.25$), and Working on Certificate ($\beta=0.087$)

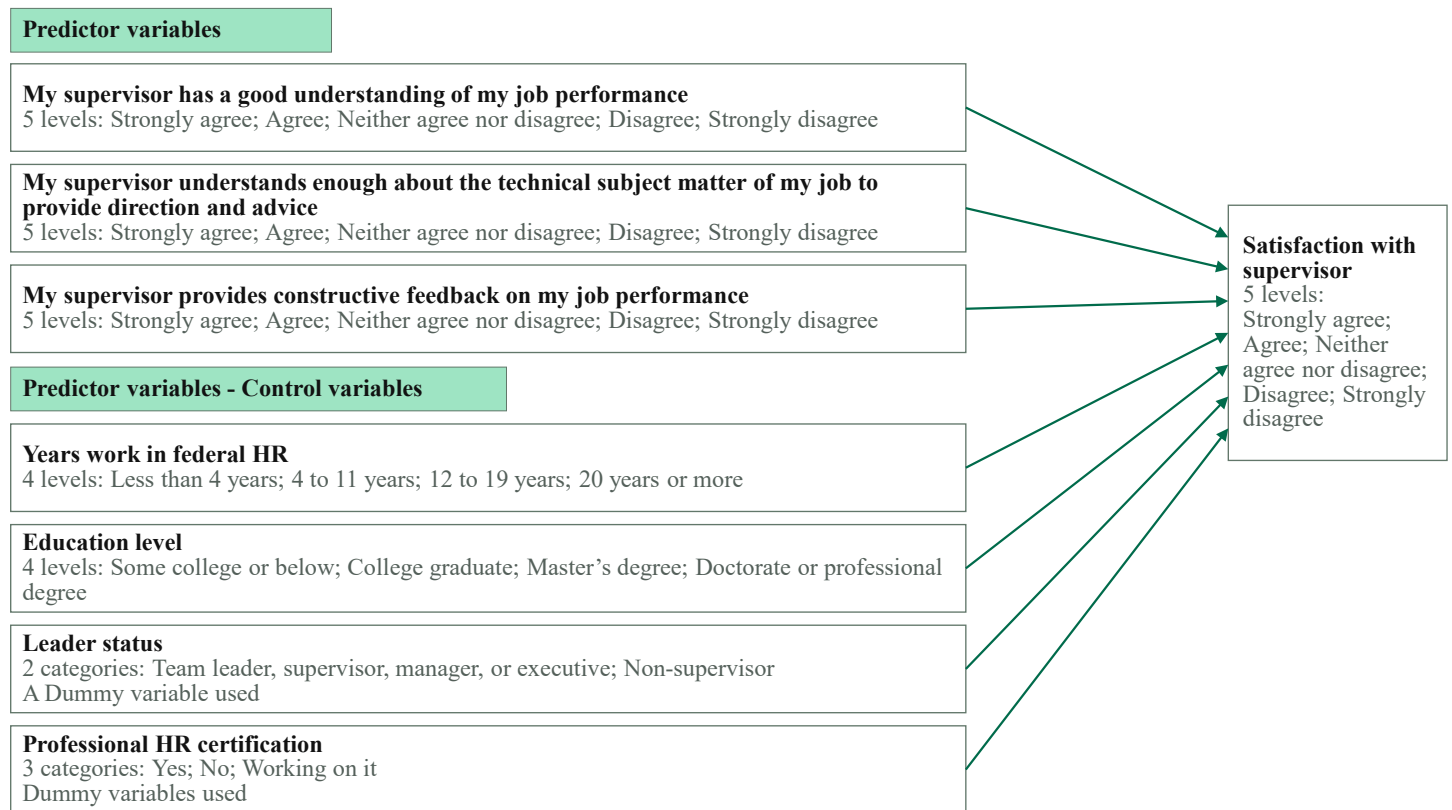
Appendix E: Regression Model 3: Satisfaction with growth opportunities and predictors



Ordinal logistic regression model results

Model 3	$X^2(10) = 7195.078, p = .000, \text{ with Nagelkerke } R^2 = 0.708$
Coefficients	Clear Career Path($\beta=0.341$), Career Advancement($\beta=1.286$), Control of Career Path($\beta=0.337$), Career Dev Encouragement($\beta=0.400$), Career Dev Skills($\beta=0.481$), Years Work in Federal HR($\beta=-0.116$), Education ($\beta=0.060$), Leader Status($\beta=0.132$), Yes, have Certificate($\beta=-0.042$), and Working on Certificate($\beta=-0.026$)

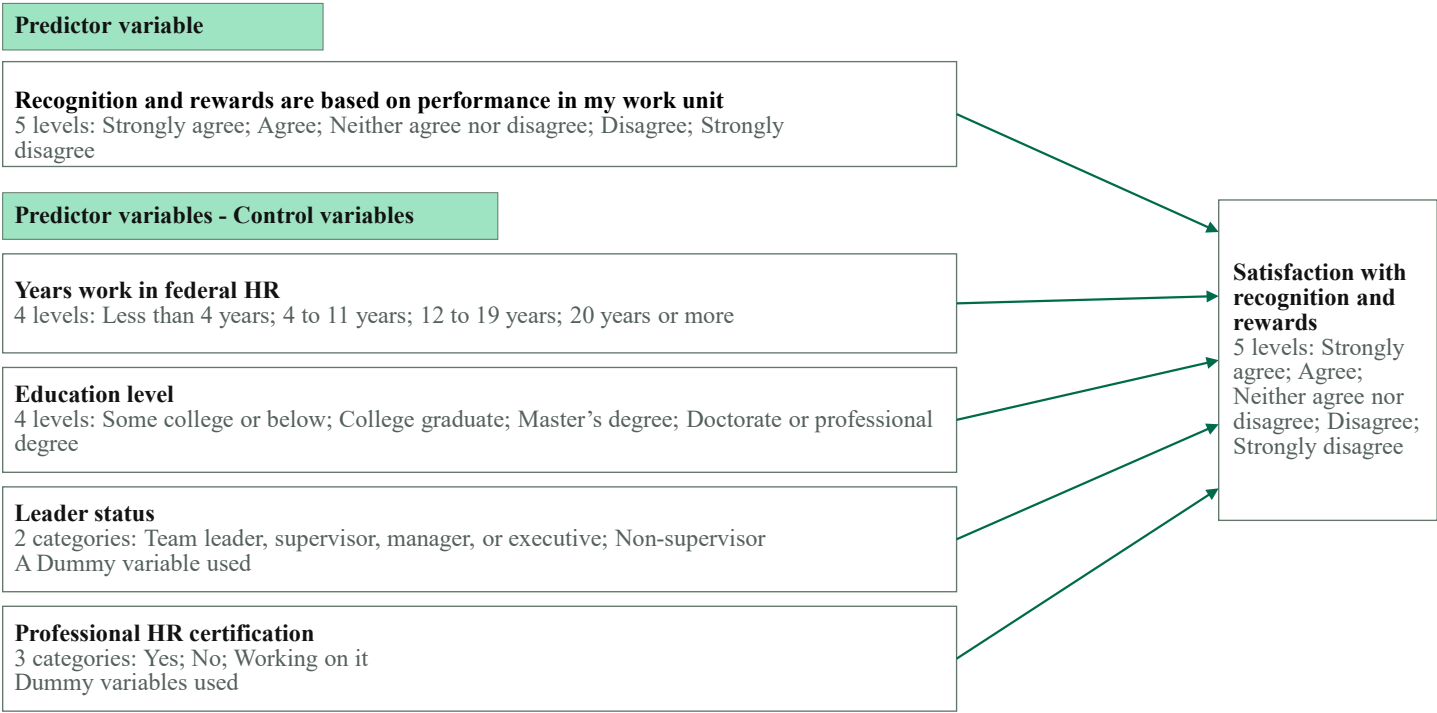
Appendix F: Regression Model 4: Satisfaction with supervisor and predictors



Ordinal logistic regression model results

Model 4	$X^2(8) = 4745.629, p = .000, \text{ with Nagelkerke } R^2 = 0.585$
Coefficients	Sup understands job performance ($\beta=0.565$), Sup understands subject matter ($\beta=0.596$), Sup provides feedback ($\beta=0.943$), Years Work in Federal HR ($\beta=-0.065$), Education ($\beta=-0.015$), Leader Status ($\beta=-0.156$), Yes, have a Certificate ($\beta=-0.054$), and Working on Certificate ($\beta=0.035$)

Appendix G: Regression Model 5: Satisfaction with recognition and reward and predictors



Ordinal logistic regression model results

Model 5	$X^2(6) = 5953.196, p = .000, \text{ with Nagelkerke } R^2 = 0.666$
Coefficients	Recognition based on performance ($\beta=2.324$), Years Work in Federal HR ($\beta=0.039$), Education ($\beta=0.018$), Leader Status ($\beta=-0.110$), Yes, have a Certificate ($\beta=0.008$), and Working on Certificate ($\beta=0.126$)