

Job Grading Appeal Decision
Under section 5346 of title 5, United States Code

Appellant: [appellant et al.]

Agency classification: Boiler Plant Operator,
WG-5402-9

Organization: Boiler Plant
Engineering Section
Facilities Management Service
[city] Health Care System,
Department of Veterans Affairs
[city and state]

OPM decision: Boiler Plant Operator,
WG-5402-9

OPM decision number: C-5402-09-05

/s/ Jeffrey E. Sumberg
Jeffrey E. Sumberg
Deputy Associate Director,
Center for Merit System Accountability

March 7, 2008

Date

As provided in section S7-8 of the Operating Manual: Federal Wage System (*Operating Manual*), this decision constitutes a certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials of the Government. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under conditions specified in section 532.705(f) of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations (addresses provided in the Introduction to the Position Classification Standards, appendix 4, section H).

Although the job description (JD) of record contains major duties performed by the appellants, it is not adequate for job grading purposes since it does not fully describe the appellants' duties and responsibilities; and is not clear about who they must call in emergencies when working alone as shift operator. Therefore, the human resources office (HRO) needs to revise the appellants' JD to reflect the full scope of the appellants' assignments and supervisory controls to meet the required standard of adequacy discussed in the *Operating Manual*, Subchapter 6-6. The HRO must also submit a compliance report containing the corrected JD and a Standard Form 50 showing the personnel action taken. The report must be submitted within 30 days from the effective date of the personnel action to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) field office which accepted the appeal.

Decision sent to:

[appellant et. al]
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Facilities Management Service
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Introduction

On May 15, 2007, the Chicago Oversight and Accountability Group, formerly the Chicago Field Services Group, of OPM accepted a group job grading appeal from Messrs. [appellants] who occupy identical additional jobs (hereinafter referred to as job) currently graded as Boiler Plant Operator (BPO), WG-5402-9. The job is located in the Boiler Plant, Engineering Section, Facilities Management Service (FMS), [city] Health Care System (city)HCS), Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), at [city and state]. [appellant] was designated as the lead appellant. We received the initial agency administrative report (AAR) on May 31, 2007, the appellants' comments on the initial AAR on June 25, 2007, and the complete AAR on August 31, 2007. We have accepted and decided this appeal under section 5346 of title 5, United States Code.

To help us decide the appeal, we conducted a telephone audit with the lead appellant and a co-appellant on September 13, 2007, and telephone interviews with their acting immediate supervisor and the section chief on September 17, 2007. In deciding this appeal, we carefully considered the audit and interview findings and all other information of record furnished by the appellants and the agency.

Background information

Based on a BPO job grading appeal decision in 1994, OPM directed the VA to conduct a consistency review of the grading of all jobs where operator-in-charge/shift responsibility was a grading element in the controlling Federal Wage System (FWS) job grading standard (JGS). As a result of the consistency review requirement, the VA issued HR Management Letter (HRML # 05-97-02), dated June 12, 1997, covering the following occupations: Utility Systems Operator, 5406; Boiler Plant Operator, 5402; Air Conditioning Equipment Operator, 5415; and Utility Systems Repairer-Operator (USRO), 4742.

On July 5, 2005, the agency recommended that the job of BPO, WG-5402-11 [XX# xxxx-xxxx-X] in [city and state], among others, be re-evaluated by the local HR office using criteria from HRML # 05-97-02. The resulting rewritten JD (with same [XX# of xxxx-xxxxX] for the appellants' BPO job was downgraded to WG-9, and the appellants were subsequently downgraded in October 2005. On June 6, 2006, the job was evaluated by the classifier at VISN 11 because the appellants believed the previous grading did not credit the special conditions for their work as "operators-in-charge." However, the re-evaluation determined that the BPO duties of the job were correct and the title, series, and grade remained unchanged. The appellants then filed a formal job grading appeal with the agency requesting the job be upgraded to "Boiler Plant Operator (BPO), at least to the WG-5402-10 grade level." On March 9, 2007, the VA issued a final agency job grading decision stating the job was properly graded as BPO, WG-5402-9. At the appellants' request, the agency forwarded the appeal to OPM on March 22, 2007.

General issues

The appellants and their supervisor certify the accuracy of the [XX (# xxxx-xxxxX)], but the appellants do not agree with the agency's final grade-level determination. They believe their work as journey-level BPOs exceeds the present grade 9 level because of the added complexity

of working with boilers that are at least 40 years old which makes installation of replacement parts and on-going maintenance very difficult. They believe they should receive additional grade credit, as provided in the 5402 JGS, for acting as the “operator in charge” when they work alone on either of two of the three daily shifts and have full responsibility for boiler plant operations.

The appellants also make various other statements about their agency and its evaluation of their job. Implicit in the appellants’ rationale is a concern that their job is graded inconsistently with jobs at other VA medical centers performing similar work graded at the 10 and 11 grade levels as mechanics and USROs. By law, job grading decisions must be based solely upon a comparison between the actual duties and responsibilities of the job and the appropriate JGSs (5 U.S.C. 5346). Since comparison to JGSs is the exclusive method for grading jobs, we cannot compare the appellants’ job to others which may or may not be graded properly as a basis for deciding this appeal. Therefore, we have considered the appellants’ statements only insofar as they are relevant to making that comparison. Because our decision sets aside all previous agency decisions, the appellants’ concerns regarding their agency’s job grading review process are not germane to this decision.

In adjudicating this appeal, our responsibility is to make our own independent decision based on the proper grading of the appellants’ job. A job is the duties and responsibilities that make up the work performed by an employee. Appeal regulations permit OPM to investigate or audit a job, and decide an appeal on the basis of the actual duties and responsibilities currently assigned by management and performed by the employee. An OPM appeal decision grades a real operating job, and not simply the JD. Therefore, this decision is based on the work currently assigned to and performed by the appellants.

The appellants also believe that the 5402 JGS is outdated and does not give sufficient weight to their work on maintenance and replacement of parts. However, the content of a JGS is not appealable (section 532.701 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations).

Based on our fact-finding, we find the official JD, while it contains many of the appellants’ duties and responsibilities, is inaccurate and outdated because it does not contain several key aspects of the job, including the policy change describing the reliance on other shops to provide some assistance to the BPOs. It shows the appellants are supposed to report to a Utility Systems Repairer-Operator (USRO) Supervisor, but that job no longer exists. The JD is not clear about who the appellants must call in emergencies when working alone as shift operator. Subchapter S6-6 of the *Operating Manual* requires agencies to provide sufficient information to allow proper grading of JD’s when OPM JGSs are applied. Therefore, the agency needs to revise the appellants’ JD to reflect the full scope of the appellants’ assignments and supervisory controls to meet the required standard of adequacy.

Job information

The appellants report through the Lead BPO to an acting supervisor who occupies a Supervisory General Engineer, GS-801-12. The second-level supervisor is the Chief of the Engineering Section, a Supervisory General Engineer, GS-801-13. These organizations all report to the Chief

of the Facilities Management Service (Supervisory General Engineer, GS-801-14), who lives on-station.

The appellants start, stop, operate, and perform operational maintenance on the facility's three large 40,000 pounds/hour steam water tube boilers, one 15,000 pounds/hour fire tube boiler, and one 11,000 pounds/hour water heat recovery fire tube boiler to ensure efficient operation of the boiler plant facilities during their assigned shifts. They operate and maintain all equipment related to steam generation, including feed water pumps, condensate pumps, turbine motor, fuel oil service pumps, air compressors, dryers, condensate return tank, chemical feed pumps, and the like. The facility currently has one Lead BPO and the four appellants (previously five employees occupied the IA job) who are responsible for boiler plant operation on eight-hour rotating shifts in order to provide 24 hours a day, seven days a week coverage. The Lead BPO prepares the work schedule and assigns shifts.

Occupation, title, and standard determination

The agency allocated the appellants' job to the 5402 for Boiler Plant Operating occupation and titled it Boiler Plant Operator (BPO) with which the appellants do not disagree. However, they do not believe their agency has credited them adequately for their repair work, which they believe falls "under the Power Boilers Mechanic title."

The FWS JGS for Heating and Boiler Plant Equipment Mechanic, 5309, covers the installation, maintenance, repair, and modification of steam or hot water boilers. However, after a careful review of the record, we find the appellants' repair work is not covered by that occupation, because their work does not involve installing, maintaining, repairing, troubleshooting, and modifying single and multiple fuel heating and power boilers and associated auxiliary and pollution control equipment, hot air furnaces, and similar equipment systems as described in the JGS.

Rather, the appellants' job is concerned primarily with the operation and operational maintenance of single- and multiple-fuel water or fire tube boilers. Since the published 5402 JGS must be used for grading non-supervisory jobs concerned primarily with the operation and operational maintenance of single- and multiple-fuel water or fire tube boilers in automatic or manual modes to produce steam or high-temperature hot water to provide heat for buildings, to operate industrial and institutional facilities and equipment, and to generate electricity, it must be applied to grade this job. This JGS also covers the operational maintenance and repair the appellants perform on a regular part of the boiler plant operation functions. Based on the following grade-level analysis, we find the job is properly title *Boiler Plant Operator*, the prescribed title for jobs in the 5402 series above the WG-8 level.

Grade determination

The 5402 JGS uses four factors for grade determination; i.e., Skill and Knowledge, Responsibility, Physical Effort, and Working Conditions. The JGS defines two grade levels, 8 and 10, and the appellants question how their job can be evaluated at the grade 9 level; i.e., "we

haven't been able to find a WG-9 operator standard from O.P.M." This issue is directly addressed under Grade Levels in the JGS:

This standard does not describe all possible levels at which jobs may be established. If jobs differ substantially from the skill, knowledge, or other work requirement of the grade levels described in this standard, they may warrant grading either above or below these grade levels based on the application of sound job grading methods.

The appellants believe the agency has not given them full credit for the difficulties they encounter in working on the different boilers. In particular, they say the age of the boilers requires continuous upkeep and maintenance. As such, some replacement parts need to be modified or adapted to fit as some parts are no longer available or produced. The task of troubleshooting in an older plant often forces the BPOs to create a work-around or alternative solution. The appellants also indicated they receive little help from the outside shops such as the plumbing and electrical section in completing this work. These concerns will be addressed in our grade-level analysis.

They also believe their "steam plant capabilities exceed the operational limit of the WG-9 standard," and refer to "V.A. PDL for WG-8, WG-9, and WG-10" saying "[a]ll three...list pollution control equipment in them." Information from the agency indicates "PDLs" are standardized JDs that can be extracted from an agency automated classification system. Since "PDLs" are not OPM-published JGSs, they may not be used for grading the appellants' work as discussed previously in this decision. The appellants' reference to and reliance on "plant steam capabilities" is misplaced. Plant steam capacity as an aspect of boiler plant operation work was eliminated as a job grading criterion when the current 5402 JGS, issued in 1991, replaced the previous 1969 JGS.

Our assessment of each factor follows.

Skill and knowledge

Grade 8 boiler plant workers (BPW) require a working knowledge of the structure and operating characteristics of boilers and associated auxiliary equipment. They know the location and function of numerous pumps, valves, regulators, gauges, recording instruments, controls, power operated dampers, conveyors, and other equipment associated with clean, safe, and efficient boiler operation. Grade 8 BPWs have knowledge of fuel handling and distribution equipment and systems, fuel firing mechanisms, feedwater treatment systems, electrostatic precipitators, flue gas scrubbers, and lime slurry systems. They have a basic knowledge of the chemical and physical characteristics of fuels and principles of combustion, steam generation, and heat transfer. Grade 8 BPWs have a working knowledge of the relationship between fuel quality and efficient combustion characteristics. They have a working knowledge of water tending, analysis, and basic chemical treatments and have a general understanding of the individual and combined effects of chemical additives.

Grade 8 BPWs are knowledgeable of basic operations necessary in start-up, shutdown, and restart procedures and in casualty control and have skill in adjusting various conditions such as air temperature, draft, and other furnace conditions. They have skill in interpretation of meter and gauge readings. Grade 8 BPWs are able to recognize malfunctioning equipment and systems and potentially dangerous operating conditions. They have skill in the use of handtools, electric and pneumatic power tools, and specialized tools of the trade. Grade 8 BPWs have skill in applying preventive maintenance procedures and performing limited operational repairs such as cleaning equipment, greasing and oiling moving parts of machinery, repainting equipment, tightening packing bonnets and glands on valves and pumps, repacking valves, replacing pumps, and assisting higher-grade workers in more difficult repairs and replacements.

Grade 10 BPOs apply a comprehensive knowledge of all operational phases of power boiler plant operations (e.g., water treatment, fuel systems, steam generation, and pollution control) and their interrelationships for efficient and economical generation of steam or high temperature hot water (HTHW). They apply knowledge of the principles and theories pertaining to combustion, heat transfer, and steam or HTHW generation in the operation of power boiler plants. In addition, they apply a thorough knowledge of the structural and operating characteristics of single- and multiple-fuel power boilers and associated auxiliary and pollution control equipment or systems (e.g., computerized or microprocessor control systems, fuel handling and distribution equipment and systems, fuel firing mechanisms, feedwater and boiler water treatment systems, steam and electrical pumps, pressurization systems, compressors, electrostatic precipitators, and flue-gas desulfurization systems) to properly operate, adjust, troubleshoot, and maintain the equipment and systems. Grade 10 BPOs apply a thorough knowledge of water treatment procedures and water analysis, using standard chemical tests. They have a thorough knowledge of water treatment equipment and systems (e.g., cation/anion exchange units for demineralization of feedwater). They have a thorough knowledge of chemical and physical aspects of sulfur-containing fuels (e.g., oil, coal, and lignite), the chemical reactions involved in combustion, and the relationship between fuel quality and combustion efficiency.

Grade 10 BPOs have a practical knowledge of environmental law and a thorough knowledge of procedures or adjustments during combustion to control pollutants in flue emissions (e.g., control combustion time, stack temperature, and excess air flow). They have a thorough knowledge of the steam or HTHW distribution systems, user requirements, casualty control procedures, and how to bypass a section of the stem to maintain service. Grade 10 BPOs are knowledgeable of maintenance requirements (e.g., cleaning fuel guns, lubricating equipment, and power cleaning water tubes) and procedures necessary to perform operational repairs of limited-to-moderate complexity (e.g., repair or replace valves, gauges, water pipes, and refractory linings). In some work situations, operators at this level may have basic knowledge of electricity to test and replace wires, switches, and other basic electrical components.

BPOs at this level have skill in procedures and adjustments necessary to start, operate, and maintain a power boiler facility (i.e., power boilers and auxiliary and pollution control equipment) to meet load demands and maintain efficient levels of combustion and compliance with pollution laws. They have skill in operating power boilers from cold starts through normal operation and hot or emergency shut downs. Grade 10 BPOs can stabilize boilers in a closed system when one boiler starts to go down while maintaining safe levels and efficient combustion.

They have skill in the operation and adjustment of associated auxiliary and pollution-control equipment. They have skill in reading and analyzing information from gauges, meters, recorders, analog displays, and computer generated data to determine the operational status of the facility and necessary adjustments. Grade 10 BPOs can make individual and sequential adjustments to a variety of controls and equipment to achieve and maintain maximum efficiency of equipment and systems being operated. They are skilled in specialized combustion techniques and adjustments to firebox variables such as fuel flow or feed, fuel/air ratio, temperature, combustion time, and over-air or under-air feeds to control chemical pollution in flue gas emissions and maintain combustion efficiency. Grade 10 BPOs apply skill in setting and adjusting flame patterns in power boilers with single or multiple burners to ensure safe and efficient combustion. They have skill in adjusting various combustion settings to compensate for varying qualities or conditions of fuels.

The appellants' work exceeds the skill and knowledge described at grade 8 since the appellants do not *assist* BPOs, but *independently* operate, adjust, stop, and maintain single- and multiple-fuel heating/power boilers. However, the appellants' work does not fully reach grade 10. Grade 10 BPOs run multiple fuel boilers *and* their associated pollution control equipment. The grade 10 level described in the 5402 JGS is based on specific types of boiler operations (i.e., fuels burned) and the corresponding levels of skill, knowledge, and responsibility necessary to operate boilers and associated pollution-control equipment efficiently and control the formation of pollutants. Our fact-finding revealed that because clean-burning natural gas and #2 oil which are used to fuel the facility's boilers burn cleanly, the appellants are not required to operate any complex pollution control equipment as one would anticipate at grade 10. As a result, the pollution controls usually found at grade 10 are neither present nor required. Similarly, the appellants' operational repair and maintenance work does not meet the grade 10 level since the plant equipment they service is not fully reflective of that operated at the grade 10 level as discussed previously. The complexities caused by the age of the boilers and equipment they operate are fully considered in, and integral to, the operational maintenance and repair work performed on boiler plant systems operated at the grade 9 level. Since the appellants' boiler plant work does not fully meet grade 10, but substantially exceeds the grade 8 described in the JGS, grade 9 is credited.

Responsibility

Grade 8 BPWs receive work assignments from a supervisor or a higher-grade worker in the form of written or oral instructions. The instructions outline the work to be performed and the methods and materials to be used. Workers at this level are responsible for observing meters and gauges to insure proper combustion and prescribed temperatures, pressures, and emissions and for performing routine operator maintenance of equipment. They are responsible for performing work in accordance with local, state, and Federal pollution control requirements. Problems are reported to a higher-grade worker or supervisor. Work at this level is checked through observation of work methods and procedures. A higher-grade worker or supervisor is available for advice and assistance on any work problem encountered and checks to see that assignments are completed according to instructions and established practices.

Grade 10 BPOs receive work assignments from a supervisor or a higher-grade operator who is in charge of the facility or work shift. They work within established instructions that may include special facility procedures to be followed during emergencies, equipment failure, or system malfunction. They are familiar with the total plant layout, including drawings and circuit diagrams of the boilers and auxiliary and pollution control equipment, in order to locate problems and determine appropriate action necessary to maintain adequate steam or hot water production. Predetermined methods and procedures are typically found at grade 8. Grade 10 BPOs, however, make more independent decisions and judgments (e.g., pollution and combustion control adjustments, troubleshooting techniques, equipment maintenance and repair) and take immediate action to prevent interruptions of plant operations and report emergencies or dangerous conditions. They typically have primary responsibility for checking boilers and auxiliary pollution control equipment to ensure the operational efficiency of equipment and safety of personnel. Technical assistance on difficult or unusual problems is usually available from the supervisory chain or a higher-graded employee. The supervisor occasionally observes operational efficiency, production reports, and adherence to established operating techniques and procedures.

Grade 10 is not met. While the appellants are responsible for monitoring and dealing with the complete boiler plant operations, the system that they operate does not have the pollution control equipment and the attendant decision-making requirements anticipated at grade 10. Therefore, grade 9 is credited since the appellants' BPO responsibility exceeds grade 8, but does not fully meet grade 10.

Physical effort and Working conditions

Since the description of these factors in the JGS is the same at both defined grade levels, these factors do not have an impact on the grade of the job and will not be addressed further.

Preliminary summary

Because the *Skill and knowledge* and *Responsibility* factors exceed grade 8, but do not fully meet grade 10, the BPO work is properly evaluated at grade 9.

Special additional responsibilities

The appellants believe their job warrants additional grade credit for their boiler plant shift work which requires them to work alone which makes each one a *de facto* "operator in charge".

The 5402 JGS describes normal boiler plant operation. However, it also provides guidance for determining the grade level in certain plant operating situations under special circumstances. As in the instant case, most boiler plants run on a 7-day, 3-shift plan and BPOs may be assigned to a specific shift or alternate, working on all three shifts, including weekends. On second and third shifts and on weekends, one BPO is typically designated as the "operator in charge" of the complete plant (i.e., the primary steam or hot water generating facility) including ancillary facilities, stand-alone, and satellite boilers which may be geographically dispersed.

The 5402 JGS states that when positions are clearly working under these special circumstances, one additional grade may be credited to plant operator positions at the full-performance level, whether they work alone or with a small group of plant operating employees. In order to receive additional grade credit for “operator in charge” responsibilities, the JGS states a job must clearly meet all five of the following responsibilities:

1. The operator must be working at the full-performance level and must be assigned shift responsibility on a regular and recurring basis. Only one operator on a shift can be assigned this responsibility.
2. The operator follows written instructions supplied by the supervisor or by the “operator in charge” on the previous shift.
3. The “operator in charge” typically performs duties that are more responsible and require a slightly higher level of skill and knowledge than the full-performance level operators who are on duty where a supervisor is available. This includes a thorough knowledge of the entire utility system and the user requirements to locate problems and initiate immediate corrective action.
4. In the absence of written contingency procedures, the “operator in charge” has responsibility to decide whether to shut down the operation or attempt to bypass problems until corrective action has been completed if the equipment still in operation can handle the load; and
5. The “operator in charge” has responsibility to determine what work must be done and has the authority to approve overtime or call in necessary maintenance personnel. The operator is responsible for relaying instructions to the next shift operator including problems encountered and actions taken.

The appellants’ job meets conditions 1 and 2. It meets condition 1 because the appellants are assigned shift responsibility on a regular basis and work at the full-performance level, and with the four BPOs rotating on shifts and on a regular and recurring basis, there is only one operator with shift responsibility. The job meets condition 2 because the appellants follow written instructions or log information supplied by the previous shift operator, which includes a boiler chart for alerting in red notation any repair or safety precaution taken. At the start of each shift, the BPO also relays instructions to the next shift operator including any problems encountered and actions taken.

However, the record shows the appellants’ job does not fully meet conditions 3, 4, and 5.

Condition 3 is not met because the appellants apply the same skills and knowledge when solely responsible as a shift operator in the boiler plant as during the day shift when the supervisor is available. The appellants say they act as “operators in charge” while they rotate through a regular shift schedule. However, in discussions with their supervisors, we found that while the BPOs are assigned to shift work where they do have the authority to shut down a boiler in an emergency, local procedures require them to contact the Chief, Facilities Management by

telephone in such cases. The appellants say there are times during shifts when needed adjustments require a second pair of hands. However, the record shows these tasks are generally performed during shift change when two operators are present. Outside of general maintenance of the system, the replacement of parts is usually made when two BPOs are available. Therefore, these shift functions do not require a higher level of skill and knowledge than the full-performance level operators

Condition 4 is not fully met. Although the appellants have the authority to decide whether to shut down the operation or attempt to bypass problems, standard operating procedures are in place to handle emergency situations, and an operating manual is available for reference concerning boiler operation.

Condition 5 is not fully met. The shift operator can call in necessary off-duty maintenance personnel. However, the second-level supervisor indicates the appellants do not have the authority to approve overtime, even though that authority is listed in the official JD. The appellants indicate procedures require them to contact the facility operator who is to contact a higher-level official (the USRO). In emergencies, a shift appellant working alone first calls mechanics from other shops, e.g., the Air Conditioning (AC) shop, and then only for parts. This does not meet the intended purpose of call-in intended for Condition 5; i.e., the call-in of other maintenance personnel to perform emergency repairs. If necessary, a second-level call is made to security or police. In addition, the Facilities Chief lives on station and can be called at any time. Even the absence of that specific position at the activity would not change the fact the appellants are not authorized to exercise the full range of authority required for the crediting of this condition.

In conclusion, although the appellants' boiler plant shift duties and responsibilities reflect some of the conditions required for additional grade credit, *all* five of the above conditions are not met, as required by the JGS. Because all conditions associated with being operator-in-charge are not fully met, the job may not be granted additional grade credit.

Summary

The appellants' BPO work is properly evaluated at the grade 9 level.

Decision

The appellants' job is properly graded as Boiler Plant Operator, WG-5402-9.