

Recruitment

CASE STUDY

SSA: Recruiting for Careers, Not Jobs



The face of America is changing: our population is living longer and is more diverse than ever before. Aging baby boomers have created explosive workload growth for the Social Security Administration (SSA). SSA will take on responsibility for providing education and assistance services to 41 million Americans as they enroll in the new Medicare drug prescription plan over the next year. Meeting these demands would be a major challenge for any organization, but particularly difficult for one confronting the employee “retirement wave” that SSA faces. To meet the challenge, SSA is aggressively implementing an integrated recruitment strategy that has enabled it to hire over 9,000 persons over the last three years while also boosting workforce diversity.

PROVIDING INCOME SUPPORT TO THE ELDERLY, DISABLED, AND THEIR DEPENDENTS

The 65,000 men and women of SSA provide services to individuals at critical junctures in their lives – be it an unexpected disability, the untimely loss of a parent or spouse, or retirement from the workforce. Touching the lives of over 95% of Americans, these employees have a profound impact on our lives:

- One in six Americans receives social security benefits;
- About 98% of all workers are in jobs covered by social security;
- Social security comprises 5% of the nation’s total economic output; and
- In 2004, over 50 million Americans received benefits totaling nearly \$523 billion contrasted to 222,000 persons totaling \$35 million in 1940.

THE AGING OF SSA

Just as it encourages Americans to plan for their futures, SSA conducted its first agency-wide retirement analysis beginning in 1998. The first and subsequent SSA

SSA makes federal benefit payments to over 50 million Americans each month.

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SSA Employees Make a Difference: A Story From the Front Lines

An SSA Claims Representative in Massachusetts received a call from a beneficiary in dire straits: his disability payments were late, and he and his wife faced eviction from their home if the money did not come through quickly. Upon investigation, the SSA employee discovered that the problem lay with the beneficiary's attorney, who had failed to file the petition required. The employee convinced the attorney's office to fax the fee petition that day and posted the information to the man's record. The man's benefits were in his bank account within 48 hours after SSA took the initial call, and the couple escaped eviction.

retirement wave studies were in-depth looks at the workforce trends throughout the organization. The results demonstrated real cause for concern. Within ten years, the organization would lose up to 38,000 employees – more than half its workforce. If SSA leaders did not immediately implement aggressive recruitment and retention strategies, the agency would be unable to meet its responsibilities in providing income security benefits to millions of Americans.

To keep pace with staffing demands and backfill projected turnover, the Agency needed to recruit 3,000 new hires each year over the ensuing several years. SSA viewed this massive hiring effort as a unique opportunity to reshape and build its workforce to better reflect the diverse constituency it serves. If the agency could target its recruiting effectively, it could not only address its need for more bodies but also better respond to the needs of the public it serves – whether they spoke English, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, or Tagalog.

SSA's multifaceted recruitment was kicked off in 2001 with the creation of a new position in its Office of Human Resources dedicated solely to addressing this need. Serving as the central point of accountability in this effort, the National Recruitment Coordinator was empowered to oversee the development, implementation, and assessment of a new, agency-wide recruitment strategy and marketing campaign. Partnering with other SSA executives, human resource professionals and Equal Employment Opportunity staff, he developed and implemented an aggressive and integrated recruitment and marketing approach that centered on the following key elements.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE SSA RECRUITMENT AND MARKETING PLAN

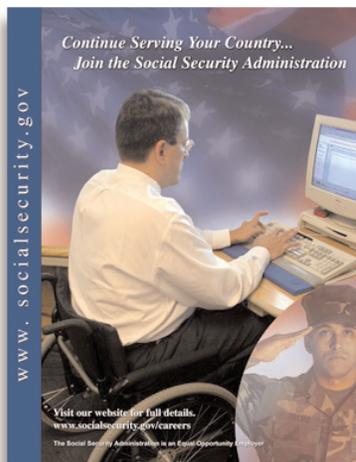
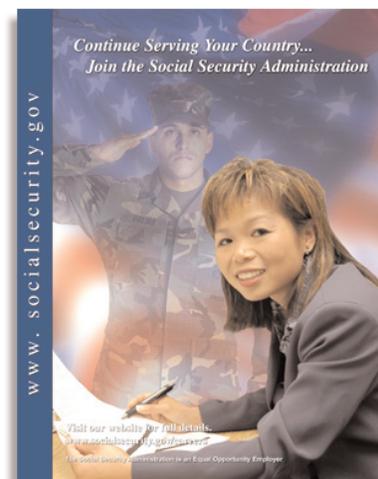
- Integrated marketing campaign with new “brand” materials
- New look and functionality for the internet/intranet to inform and communicate
- Coordinated nationwide and on-campus college recruitment
- Highly focused and practical techniques for diversity hiring
- Streamlined user friendly hiring process
- More effective and targeted assessment processes
- Maximum use of all available hiring and compensation flexibilities



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In the spring of 2002, SSA launched a comprehensive national marketing campaign that is the centerpiece of its recruiting effort. In collaboration with its Office of Communications, new and eye-catching marketing materials were developed, including posters, brochures, CD-ROMs and tabletop exhibits. A tagline, "Make a difference in people's lives and your own," was used to brand all the recruitment materials, which featured images of current SSA employees.

Recognizing that one size does not fit all, SSA tailored its recruitment materials to attract specific targeted groups, including veterans, persons with disabilities and Hispanics (see box below). The initial marketing campaign focused on three critical occupations - claims representatives, teleservice center representatives and information technology specialists. SSA is expanding the effort to include other occupations.

SSA'S TARGETED RECRUITING POSTERS*Disabled Veterans**Spanish Language**Veterans*

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Leveraging the Internet and Intranet

To complement the new recruitment materials, SSA revamped its Web site to highlight the diverse and challenging career opportunities available at the agency. Borrowing from the best public and private sector recruitment websites, the new “careers” section of the SSA website features detailed information on the many career paths available at the agency, the benefits of SSA employment, application procedures and special opportunities that exist for veterans, individuals with disabilities and bilingual applicants. Prospective employees can learn about the roles and advancement opportunities for the various positions: claims representatives who help others to make ends meet, investigators who pursue fraud and abuse cases, attorneys who handle appeals of benefits decisions, etc. The Web site also offers information on SSA recruiting events across the country.

SSA also constructed a resource-rich intranet that provides materials and support for the approximately 1,500 SSA managers, human resources specialists and new employees who serve in the SSA recruitment cadre. To ensure that they speak with one voice and are fully equipped for success, recruiters at every locale can access the latest recruitment information and materials from the dedicated intranet site. This internal site houses recruitment materials, the National Recruitment Guide, contact information for recruiting events and more.

SSA also recognized that its own employees are often the best ambassadors for communicating information about career opportunities with friends and acquaintances. In response, SSA developed a new site on its intranet – “Where Should I Refer Outside Individuals Seeking SSA Employment?” – to assist its employees in responding to questions from interested candidates.

Blanketing the College Campuses

SSA recruiters attend hundreds of career fairs at colleges and universities each year. They serve as SSA’s front line in establishing ongoing relationships with college career services offices not just for planned events, but throughout the year. To capitalize on existing networks, the recruitment office has formed a variety of partnerships

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“Diversity Works” is more than a catchy phrase at Social Security; it is a business imperative.

SSA boasts the most diverse workforce in the federal government – 70.8% women, 27% African Americans, 11% Hispanic, 3% Asian American, 1% American Indian and 2.4% persons with severe

as well as informal relationships with independent organizations such as the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU). Intern and co-op programs are also key recruiting tools.

Building a Team That Looks Like America

An integral part of SSA’s recruitment goal was to build a workforce equipped to meet the needs of its increasingly diverse customer base. Diversity is not viewed as a political ideal, but rather as a business necessity at all levels of the organization. Working with the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) community, the agency’s targeted recruitment and outreach efforts focused on attracting candidates to overcome specific areas of under-representation, such as Hispanics, Asian Americans and persons with disabilities.

Colleges and universities with diverse student bodies were targeted, and the recruitment teams included SSA employees from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The agency’s efforts in this area, including the development of specialized recruitment materials, attendance at minority-sponsored career fairs, and partnering with minority-oriented organizations have all contributed to SSA’s success in becoming a leader in the federal government in workforce diversity.

Using Technology to Improve the Hiring Process

If SSA hoped to hire over 3,000 employees a year, the agency needed to complement its marketing and outreach efforts by automating and modernizing the recruitment and hiring processes. Working collaboratively with personnel throughout the country, the specifications for an automated system were developed. Ultimately, use of the new technology and processes cut the time required to fill a position in half, from about seven weeks before automation to as little as three weeks. In addition, employees and managers are kept advised of where they stand during the process.

The system is designed to provide clearer, more instructive information to applicants. Features of the new automated hiring system include:

- An enhanced search engine so job seekers can search for a position in a variety of ways;

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- A resume-builder tool and online vacancy announcements that are shorter and easier to read;
- A universal resume development and submission function that is compatible with all agency automated application processing systems;
- An application tracking feature for applicants; and
- A data mining feature that allows federal managers to locate job candidates at the USA Jobs site.

SSA partnered with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to create a new system that enabled the recruiting team to generate vacancy announcements, post them on USAJOBS, accept applications via the Internet, analyze applicant competencies and qualifications, rate and rank job applicants, notify applicants of SSA's hiring decisions and manage applicant records.

Delivering Service and Protecting Investments through Effective Assessment Practices

Since many new employees are hired into frontline positions, finding candidates with the competencies required for success in customer service positions is critical to SSA's success from two perspectives. The first and more obvious of these is customer satisfaction. Reducing turnover among new hires through better selection was the second imperative. In the course of workforce planning efforts, SSA analysts noted that new hires are less likely to leave after they have been with the agency for two years. The higher turnover rates among relatively new employees not only placed additional burden on recruiters, but also resulted in a significant loss of training investment, as two or more years of technical training is typically required to develop fully productive claims representatives. To lose employees during that window was simply money down the drain, and a missed opportunity to solve its staffing problems.

To maximize their chances of making the right selection, SSA created a pilot program that uses a competency-based structured interview process to evaluate external candidates for claims representative positions. Managers in the pilot locations were trained in this process through two two-hour interactive video training sessions. The new approach was piloted in SSA's Atlanta, Chicago and San Francisco regions in



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2003. Initial feedback from managers is positive; SSA is continuing to evaluate the process pending the completion of entry-level training for the new hires.

Utilizing Hiring and Pay Flexibilities

To attract the best and brightest, SSA sought to be creative in utilizing hiring and compensation flexibilities. SSA has been a leader in using a full range of competitive and excepted service appointments, including the Outstanding Scholar Program and Spanish Bilingual/Bicultural appointing authorities, the Federal Career Intern Program, temporary and term appointments, reinstatement of former federal employees and preference for veterans with compensable disabilities. Compensation flexibilities are also used in a tailored manner depending on the position to be filled, the needs and qualifications of the applicant and whether the position is hard to fill. These flexibilities include paying for interviews, above-minimum starting salary and/or travel to first duty station, recruitment bonuses and special pay rates.

RESULTS

The newly implemented agency-wide recruitment and marketing strategy has enabled SSA to successfully hire over 3,400 employees per year for the past three years – in 2003, the agency brought on over 4,700 new hires. However, numbers alone are not the gauge of success. SSA has demonstrated in various ways its success in achieving its goals of recruiting a high-quality, diverse workforce:

- Customer satisfaction ratings among the highest in the public and private sector, with a rating of 81 out of 100 on the American Customer Satisfaction Index among retirement benefits recipients in 2003. The federal government average score on this index was 70.9.
- A workforce that truly reflects the face and voice of America, with employees speaking an astounding 98 languages, from Spanish to Arabic, from Vietnamese to Tagalog, as well as specialists in American Sign Language.
- Recognition for diversity accomplishments from organizations within and outside of government, including the League of United Latin American Citizens, OPM (in spring 2003 for Hispanic hiring), National Image, Equal



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Opportunity Publications, Baltimore City and the Ford Foundation, as well as the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

- A top-ten ranking in the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government, an analysis of the 2002 OPM Human Capital Survey responses, among minorities and federal employees under 40 years of age.
- Honorable mention for the 2003 President's Quality Award in recognition of their multifaceted approach to the strategic management of human capital. This award recognized SSA for developing and retaining a workforce of the future, ready to provide outstanding service to the American public.
- Recognition as the number one place to work for individuals with disabilities by *Careers and the disABLED* magazine in their Winter 2004 issue.

SSA is gearing up for an especially high volume of demand for customer service following the passage of the new Medicare prescription drug benefit. The agency is prepared to apply the lessons it has learned from previous recruiting and diversity initiatives to ensure success as it meets this new wave of demand for excellent customer service.

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNED***Take Charge from the Top***

Strong and visible support from agency leadership has been crucial in ensuring the success of SSA's ambitious recruitment plan. Leaders articulate expectations, track progress and hold individuals accountable for results.

Start With A Roadmap

SSA's recruiting success is not the result of luck, but of a well-researched approach. The Retirement Wave study and strategic human capital plan provided data that was integral to developing specific hiring and staffing goals. Having their objectives clearly laid out from the get-go has enabled the agency to assess its performance relative to its goals on an ongoing basis and to make mid-course adjustments to strategy as they move forward.

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Make Diversity Everybody's Business

SSA's longstanding emphasis on demonstrating the business case for diversity has successfully positioned recruiting and diversity as not just a recruiter's or EEO officer's concern, but rather as everybody's concern. As a result, agency leaders pay careful attention to diversity and recruiting and are more apt to fight for resources to support them because they understand that these interrelated concerns are integral to SSA's fulfillment of its mission.

Centralize Strategy, Distribute Responsibility

The agency's centralized recruitment strategy, which has provided the overall vision and strategy, coupled with having front-line managers and employees play a very real and crucial role in the recruiting effort, ensures that everyone is responsible for and shares in its success.

Leverage The Right Relationships

SSA benefits greatly from its dealings with external partners who effectively extend the agency's outreach to potential employees. Relationships with national organizations such as the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) and the Partnership's own Call to Serve network have enhanced SSA's ability to reach a diverse and public-service minded population of job seekers.

NEXT STEPS

SSA has updated its human capital plan to ensure that the roadmap is realigned for changes in mission and workforce experience. This entails ongoing attention to areas for potential improvement, refinement of recruitment materials and metrics for measuring success, and expanding its recruitment efforts to a broader complement of occupational groups.

SSA has also undertaken a study of employees hired in 1998-2000 to identify more effective ways of recruiting and retaining employees. This effort has provided them with baseline data to better measure future performance. The agency is enhancing its exit interview process to facilitate ongoing analysis of retention issues.

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CONTACT

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For media inquiries, please contact SSA's Press Office at (410) 965-8904 or press.office@ssa.gov.

