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2021 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® Rankings show considerable decline in the engagement and satisfaction of federal workers

The annual analysis by the Partnership for Public Service and BCG offers insight into the federal employee experience during the first year of the Biden administration.

WASHINGTON – Federal employees continued to grapple with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and felt especially burdened by the ongoing transition from remote to in-person work, according to the 2021 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® rankings and data released today by the nonprofit, nonpartisan [Partnership for Public Service](#) and global management consulting firm [Boston Consulting Group \(BCG\)](#).

The 2021 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government employee engagement and satisfaction score is 64.5 out of 100, representing a 4.5-point decrease from 2020. This downturn came as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to disrupt the federal workforce during the survey period in November and December 2021. During this time, tens of thousands of civil servants faced uncertainty about returning to the office after more than a year and a half working remotely part or full time, while a sizable portion of the workforce remained on the front lines performing critical public services as the health crisis persisted.

The sizable drop in employee engagement and satisfaction came during President Joe Biden’s first year in office, during which the administration saw only 55% of its nominations requiring Senate confirmation fully confirmed. The leadership vacancy problem presents a major challenge for the administration, which has described federal employees as the “backbone of our government” and committed in the President’s Management Agenda to “make every federal job a good job, where all employees are engaged, supported, heard and empowered.”

“There has never been a time in which the capabilities of our government are more critical to our health and safety as they are today,” **said Max Stier, president and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service.** “Public servants are on the front lines of every major challenge facing our country and securing the organizational support they need to be successful is in the nation’s best interest. The 2021 Best Places to Work findings make clear that ensuring flexibility for employees and providing them with the support they need to do their jobs is key to improving the experience of the federal workforce.”

On a positive note, as federal agencies place greater emphasis on recruiting a younger generation of employees, workers under the age of 30 scored high on a range of workplace issues except for pay satisfaction, where they posted the lowest result of all age groups. Building on these successes is crucial to closing the talent gap as only about 7% of the federal workforce is younger than 30. The role of supervisors' support, and its impact on employee well-being during another pandemic year, is also worth celebrating: each category scored among the highest of those measured in this survey.

Although the private sector has faced many of the same workplace issues as the government during the pandemic, data provided by employee research firm Mercer found the 2021 private sector employee engagement and satisfaction score to be 79.1 out of 100 among its client survey participants, 14.6 points higher than the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government index.

“The observed decrease in public sector engagement occurred alongside the strongest job market for prospective private sector candidates in recent memory,” **said Brooke Bollyky, managing director and partner at BCG.** “While neither has yet to master the delicate balance of a post-COVID world, it is clear that the public sector is now being called on to support their employees in ways they had not envisioned previously to remain competitive with the private sector.”

Leading the 2021 Best Places to Work Rankings for large agencies is the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, which has held the top spot for 10 consecutive years. The Government Accountability Office maintained its lead among midsize agencies, and the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation ranked first among small agencies. The National Science Foundation’s Directorate for Education and Human Resources placed highest among agency subcomponents.

The 2021 rankings showed marked improvement at several federal agencies, which can offer a roadmap for federal leaders of what is working and how to create a rewarding and safe employee experience during this volatile time. The Department of Veterans Affairs was the only large agency to register an improved score in 2021, jumping from the eighth spot to the fifth. The U.S. Agency for Global Media improved by 11.7 points for a score of 64.7, the largest increase among midsize agencies, while the National Endowment for the Humanities was the most improved small agency in 2021, jumping from 25th to second place. The rankings also shed light on the agencies with both long-standing and new management challenges. The Department of Homeland Security ranked last among 17 large agencies for the 10th straight year. Meanwhile, the Federal Trade Commission fell from its number two spot in 2020 to 22nd place in the midsize rankings. The Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service dropped from 11th to 24th place—the largest drop among small agencies.

The top five agencies in each of the four groupings, and the most improved agencies, will be honored at an event on Wednesday, July 13, at 8:30 a.m. at the National Press Club. The event will feature remarks by Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough, Office of Management and Budget Deputy Director for Management Jason Miller and spokespeople from the Partnership for Public Service and Boston Consulting Group.

TOP FIVE LARGE AGENCIES		
#1	National Aeronautics and Space Administration	85.1 out of 100
#2	Department of Health and Human Services	74.4
#3	Department of Commerce	73.7
#4	Intelligence Community	73.4
#5	Department of Veterans Affairs	70.2
TOP FIVE MIDSIZE AGENCIES		
#1	Government Accountability Office	89.8
#2	National Science Foundation	86.0
#3	Federal Energy Regulatory Commission	84.1
#4	General Services Administration	82.4
#5	Securities and Exchange Commission	82.0
TOP FIVE SMALL AGENCIES		

#1	Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation	85.6
#2	National Endowment for the Humanities	84.9
#3	U.S. Office of Special Counsel	84.8
#4	U.S. International Trade Commission	80.4
#5	Surface Transportation Board	79.2
TOP FIVE SUBCOMPONENTS		
#1	Directorate for Education & Human Resources (NSF)	93.0
#2	Office of the Executive Director (FERC)	92.5
#3	Office of the General Counsel (FERC)	92.1
#4	Directorate for Biological Sciences (NSF)	90.7
#5	Office of Inspector General (SBA)	90.6

Additional Key Facts and Findings

- Federal workers were largely positive about how agency leaders addressed their well-being during the pandemic, resulting in a score of 85.2 out of 100, based on a series of COVID-19-related questions. But views on agency handling of “return to office” planning were less positive, with the score in a separate COVID-19 category—on the possible return to the physical office—standing at just 63, reflecting concerns about effective communication regarding future plans and employee safety.
- This uncertainty over the return to the physical office was expressed in November 2021, when fewer employees were teleworking every day (36.2%), compared with September and October of 2020, when 47.3% of employees teleworked full-time and 2020, just after the pandemic began, when 59% of employees teleworked.
- Supervisors drew a rating of 79.8 out of 100 when judged on their leadership, with senior leaders rated considerably lower at 56.1. Employees gave their work units a score of 84.9 out of 100 based on performance, and a score of 79.9 on the performance of their agency, but only 61.2 for satisfaction with pay and 59.9 for agency efforts to recognize good work through awards and advancement.
- Federal employees aged 30 to 39 had the lowest employee engagement and satisfaction score of any age group, while employees aged 60 and over registered the highest satisfaction. Low engagement and satisfaction scores were recorded for those identifying as LGBT as well as people with disabilities, Native Americans and Alaskans, and those who identified as being of two or more races.

The Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings, produced by the [Partnership for Public Service](#) and [BCG](#), offer the most comprehensive assessment of how federal public servants view their jobs and workplaces, providing employee perspectives on leadership, pay, innovation, work-life balance and other issues. Most of the data used to develop the Best Places to Work scores and rankings was collected by the Office of Personnel Management’s annual [Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey](#), which was administered during November and December of 2021 to a sample of permanent executive branch employees. This is the 16th edition of the Best Places to Work rankings, which began in 2003.

The 2021 rankings include 503 federal agencies and subcomponents, the most in the history of Best Places to Work: 17 large agencies, 25 midsize agencies, 29 small agencies and 432 subcomponents. A complete list of the rankings and accompanying data is available at bestplacestowork.org.

During the past 20 years, the nonpartisan, nonprofit Partnership for Public Service has been dedicated to building a better government and a stronger democracy. We work across administrations to help transform the way government works by providing agencies with the data insights they need to succeed, developing effective leaders, inspiring the next generation to public service, facilitating smooth presidential transitions and recognizing exceptional federal employees. Visit ourpublicservice.org, follow us [@PublicService](#) and [subscribe](#) today to get the latest federal news, information on upcoming Partnership programs and events, and more.

Boston Consulting Group

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