

Census 2000: Staffing the Nation's Largest Data Collection Workforce

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1. BACKGROUND: THE ENVIRONMENT OF CENSUS 2000

At the time of preparation for and implementation of the 21st decennial census, American society was moving into the 21st century. The time period was, and still is, marked by a high degree of fragmentation, polarization, and ambiguity in the political and social environment.

Accompanying this difficult political and social environment, that had a significant impact on census preparations, was a thriving economy with low unemployment. The economy fostered increasing immigration and growing diversity in the population and labor force. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that approximately 10 percent of the labor force is Hispanic and 11 percent is African American. The foreign-born U.S. population is estimated at over 24 million, or about 1 in 10 people (in 2000.) The unemployment rate in 2000 was about 4 percent nationally, customarily considered "full employment", and average hourly wages were over \$13.00 per hour.

Coupled with the challenging employment situation, and fragmented political environment, was the continuing political rhetoric promoting a downsized yet more responsive government and a negative image of Federal civil service employment. According to Paul Light, in *The New Public Service (1999)*, government is becoming the employer of last resort. Light believes that the Federal government has yet to articulate a clear vision of how to compete with the private sector for talent and, while the civil service system may have mainly stood still since 1978, the culture of work has changed dramatically.

In the face of a growing labor shortage the government hiring process still does not meet expectations. In the third annual survey of federal workers by The Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and the National Partnership for Reinventing Government, the government hiring process received the lowest ratings of the workplace issues studied. (Surveys taken in 1998, 1999 and 2000.)

This paper discusses the Census 2000 experience with hiring and staffing and provides insight into the question

about what type of approach to recruiting and hiring can function effectively in the difficult policy, political and labor force environment of today. It presents data on the characteristics of the census workforce and recruiting efforts as well as preliminary evaluation results from a survey of census workers contracted to WESTAT to study recruiting results, pay, and performance of census workers.

2. OVERVIEW OF CENSUS 2000

Census 2000 was planned and implemented in the midst of a partisan political debate, with litigation culminating in a Supreme Court decision which decided against the Census Bureau's plan to use sampling and adjustment to prepare the census counts which would be used to apportion the Congress. The Census Bureau had to make major changes to the design of the census in 1999, just months before the census deadline. The highly stressful and polarized environment of Census 2000 mirrored that of many other events of the time.

Although the Census Bureau was steeped in controversy and top management were burdened by political oversight, Census 2000 was a success, especially from the perspective of recruiting and staffing. The General Accounting Office (GAO), an investigatory arm of the Congress, cast doubt on the Census Bureau's readiness to conduct the census and criticized its staffing strategies. In February 1997, it placed Census 2000 as number one on its list of high risk government programs. But by the time the census was over, the Census Bureau had recruited and tested over 3.7 million applicants for short-term temporary jobs and hired over 800,000 in Fiscal Year 2000 alone, and over 960,000 over the course of Census 2000. In January 2001 the GAO removed the census from its "high risk" list, and stated in a letter to Commerce Secretary Mineta that the Bureau's success in recruiting the hundreds of thousands of staff needed for peak operations were both noteworthy and commendable. This noteworthy accomplishment took place in a year of historic economic prosperity and record low unemployment across the nation.

Other evidence that Census recruiting and staffing strategies were successful include the following

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comparison to the 1990 Census peak Field operation, Nonresponse Follow-up (NRFU).

1990	2000
Workload: 34,278,233	Workload: 42,382,492
Took 13 weeks to complete	Took 9 weeks to complete
Number of staff: 350,000*	Number of staff: over 550,000*
By 6/27/90 NRFU was complete in 19 states	By 6/27/00 NRFU was complete in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico

*Includes Enumerators, Crew Leaders, and Field Operations Supervisors

How did the Census Bureau do it?

- By learning from the experience of 1990 Census staffing problems
- By developing a multifaceted strategy which took into account the economy and lifestyle of potential applicants.
- By hiring a labor economist/consultant to study and recommend appropriate, locality -based pay rates.
- By using every possible hiring and personnel flexibility available to the Bureau.

Congress fully funded the 2000 census at the level requested by the Census Bureau, once the sampling issue was resolved by the Supreme Court. The cost for taking a “traditional census” without sampling and adjustment included significant additional funds for recruiting and staffing. Sufficient resources did make a difference.

The core recruiting and staffing strategies were developed by program managers in the Field Division, including several regional directors, experienced recruiters from the 1990 census and staff from Human Resource Division, Decennial and Field Staff. In essence a strategic plan and process were followed by the Census Bureau. The planning began with a clear understanding of the employment environment and the great challenge it presented. High recruiting goals were established, closely monitored and measured, and a small army of recruiters was dedicated to the task. Each of 520 Local Census Offices had an Assistant Manager for Recruiting, numerous recruiting assistants to help with recruiting and testing applicants, and clerks to answer telephone calls routed through a nationwide toll-free system.

A support system/infrastructure was also put in place which included:

- An Internet site
- Nationwide toll-free telephone jobs line
- Paid recruiting advertising campaign
- Several million dollars in materials (brochures, posters, mail stuffers, fliers, a postcard direct mail campaign and so forth.)
- Personnel “flexibilities” were incorporated into recruiting and staffing procedures.

3. IMPORTANT KEYS TO SUCCESS - STRATEGY 1 - LOCALITY-BASED COMPETITIVE PAY AND INCREASED NUMBERS OF POSITIONS

Setting very competitive, locally based pay was believed by the Census Bureau to be the most important strategy. Field managers, who had been through the 1990 census and experienced first hand its staffing problems, believed that pay was the key to success. It was important to be competitive locally, and therefore to be able to hire locally, so that census workers would work close to home in areas they were familiar with, and where their presence would likely be accepted by the community. The authority for setting pay and establishing the number of temporary positions needed for the census is spelled out in Title 13, United States Code, Sub-chapter II section 23.

"The Secretary (of Commerce) may establish, at rates of compensation to be fixed by him without regard to the Classification Act of 1949, as many temporary positions as may be necessary to meet the requirements of the work provided for by law."

Therefore the census did not have to deal with a significant constraint that most other federal government agencies and programs struggle with; the rigid federal pay schedule.

Field managers opted to take the private sector approach to pay. The private sector approach, as described by Mark Abramson and Carl Weinberg writing in the *Federal Times (October 18, 1999)*, is to utilize compensation strategies as a strategic weapon, as an offensive tool to survive and thrive competitively. Companies use compensation strategies to accomplish three things; recruit, motivate, and retain talented workers. Census managers had the same objectives in mind when they broke with this paradigm about wages. According to Abramson and Weinberg, normally the federal system does not support these objectives, it has historically viewed pay as a cost to be managed and contained, not as a strategic weapon.

This primary strategy, therefore, was to pay competitively for the local economy and to over hire up front to compensate for expected turnover and low hours worked by part-time staff. On average a census enumerator worked 4.3 days and 22 hours a week.

To develop a pay strategy, the Bureau contracted with WESTAT, a large statistical research company, and its senior labor economist, Dr. Louis Jacobson, to study pay problems with the 1990 census and develop a model for setting competitive locality-based pay for Census 2000. The research and pay setting strategy is discussed in the companion paper by Dr. Louis Jacobson, *Setting Pay for the 2000 Decennial Census (2001.)* Enumerators' hourly wages varied between \$8.25 (in places such as rural Arkansas and Oklahoma) to \$18.50 in New York City. There was a total of 32 different pay rates. In comparison, 1990 rates ranged between \$5.00 and \$8.00 per hour, there were only eight different pay rates, and a bonus system was in place. The Bureau revisited and tested a bonus pay system for 2000 but rejected it as being too complex and unnecessary. The basic highly competitive hourly rate was believed to be sufficient based on the recruiting and staffing results of the dress rehearsal census in 1998.

The locality-based pay strategy to support the goal of hiring and assigning workers close to their homes seems to be supported by results of the WESTAT survey of census workers. 81 percent of workers reported that they had some work assignments within 10 minutes of their home.

The expected number of positions needed was calculated based on past experience with high turnover and workers primarily working part-time. The Bureau coined the term "Frontloading" to describe its staffing strategy which was to over hire up front to compensate for turnover and part-time hours, a phenomenon that brings down total productivity and lengthens the duration of any data collection operation unless accounted for by increased staffing. For FY 2000 it was estimated that 860,000 positions would be created in 520 Local Census Offices (enumerators and crew leaders.) To support this level of hiring it was estimated that 3 million applicants would need to be recruited and tested. In addition 5,000 managerial, technical, and support positions were established and filled.

At the end of FY 2000 a total of 893,278 staff had been hired. For the entire decennial cycle (1997-2000), 965,312 had been hired. This compared roughly to 553,778 hires for the 1990 cycle (8/1989-2/1991). The result is a 60 percent increase in the number of hires as compared to 1990. The Census 2000 workforce was also quite diverse, meeting or exceeding the benchmark figures contained in the Civilian Labor Force Profile (for nonwhites.) Tables showing race, ethnicity, age, and gender are included in the Appendix (refer to tables 2,3, and 4.)

4. KEYS TO SUCCESS - STRATEGY 2 - IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL LABOR POOLS AND MARKETING TO THEM

The second major strategy was the jobs marketing strategy which included both the identification and targeting of the likely labor pools of potential temporary workers for Census 2000. Because the unemployment rate was low, about 4 percent nationally, the Census Bureau identified retirees, moonlighters (people with other full-time or part-time employment) and other individuals interested in "earning extra money" with a temporary, part-time census job, as the primary potential labor pool. Also, in accord with government initiatives for welfare reform, individuals transitioning from welfare-to-work were added to the main targets of census job marketing. Targeting these groups proved to be a successful strategy. The WESTAT evaluation found that the census workers surveyed reported the following labor force status (during the past year when they reported for their census job):

- 43 percent worked full-time
- 16 percent worked part-time
- 21 percent received a retirement benefit (indicative of being a retiree)
- Others were either students, volunteers, care givers, or not working.

Technology was used to help make information about jobs widely available and to make test scheduling relatively easy. A nationwide toll free jobs line was established which included jobs information from an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system. Callers were automatically routed to the census office covering their home address, for test scheduling. The system handled 7.3 million calls. 14.5 percent of census workers surveyed attributed this system as being among the two strongest influences on their decision to apply for the census job.

An Internet site was established to provide information about census jobs, including how and where to apply. The site had over 10 million accesses and had links from other important government sites such as The White House, the OPM jobs site (USAJOBS) and the Department of Labor employment and training site (DOLETA.)

Paid recruitment advertising was also a key strategy. Each of the 12 census regions was budgeted over \$1 million to place paid advertising. Over 6,500 ads were placed. A survey of census workers showed that over 11 percent responded that paid newspaper advertising was a strong influence on how they learned about the job and on their decision to apply for it.

Each Census region was also provided with a significant budget for direct mail advertising, primarily sending post cards to postal zip codes where other recruiting activities

had failed to generate an adequate applicant pool. Post cards seemed to work best in rural areas where other forms of advertising had less impact. Approximately 8 percent of census workers attributed the influence of the census post card mailing as being one of the two strongest influences on their decision to apply for the job.

In addition to paid advertising, many forms of non-paid marketing were utilized. These included putting the census jobs message in the census letter that preceded the mailing of questionnaires to most households in the United States, generating news stories about census jobs, and promoting jobs to census "partners" such as retirees and older workers organizations, community organizations, religious organizations, schools, local governments, and so forth.

5. KEYS TO SUCCESS - STRATEGY 3 - WAIVERS AND FLEXIBILITIES AND WELFARE-TO-WORK PARTNERSHIPS

Waivers were sought from public health, housing, and welfare assistance programs in order to ask them to exclude census wages from the calculation of benefits. (However, since major welfare programs had devolved to the states, and it seemed that the entire public assistance paradigm was shifting toward more constraints on benefits, many state programs and some Federal programs were reluctant at first to grant such waivers, although eventually 20 states did.) The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) granted waivers for housing assistance programs. Over 37,000 welfare recipients (of the TANF program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) were hired for Census 2000. This represented about 4 percent of the census workforce.

Under the strategy to target retirees, waivers were obtained related to calculation of benefits for federal and military retirees. Authority to waive the pay/retirement reduction, on a case-by-case basis, was delegated by OPM to the Census Bureau for the period 1998-September 2001. Retirees from the civil service (including postal workers) and retired military (permissible under the Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act) could receive census wages without reducing their retirement benefits. Military annuitant benefit reductions were ended for all federal agencies, not just for the census, by the National Defense Authorization Act of 2000.

Citizenship is required by Title 13 for permanent census employees but temporary employees are not required to be U.S. Citizens. The Department of Commerce granted the Census Bureau a policy waiver to hire noncitizens, but they were required to have legal I-9 documentation to be hired. Over 32,000 noncitizens were hired.

Census 2000 staffing was merit based. All applicants took a test and applicant information was passed through an automated background/criminal history check. The census test was also available in Spanish, but an English proficiency test also had to be taken. For purposes of selection, applicants had to pass the background check and then were ranked by test score and veterans preference. Census 2000 did not use a political referral or patronage system for filling jobs, as has been past practice. In the 1980 and 1990 censuses, the Administration/party of the President referred job candidates (primarily for management positions) to the Census Bureau. Prior to President Carter, the Congress took the lead on referring candidates for census jobs. For Census 2000, the Bureau was able to fill all jobs without a political patronage type of system.

6. EVALUATION OF RECRUITING CONDUCTED BY WESTAT

The Census Bureau traditionally performs a large number of evaluations of census operations and activities. Several hundred evaluations are in progress for Census 2000, including an evaluation of recruiting which was contracted to WESTAT. The evaluation answers a number of questions about how people learned about the census jobs, why they decided to apply, why they accepted the jobs when offered, what was the newly hired census employees' labor force status for non-census employment, what was the non-census income of census employees and what was their satisfaction with census hourly pay, etc.. Preliminary data are available on these questions. Data on how appropriately the recruiting goals were set, and how effective were the procedures to monitor the recruiting effort are forthcoming from WESTAT. WESTAT is also completing a closely related evaluation on the census pay rates.

WESTAT conducted a survey of 10,000 enumerators as they participated in training for their census job, and also conducted 5 additional small follow-on surveys. They conducted structured interviews with the management staffs of 30 Local Census Offices. Some of the survey results have been discussed in earlier sections of this paper. A question on how Census workers learned about the job and asked them to pick the two strongest influences on their decision to apply yielded results shown in Table 1 in the appendix. Word-of-mouth, Census mailings, and the Census "jobs line" were important as were a number of other sources.

Some other key findings from the preliminary data from WESTAT relate to pay and income of census workers. Fifty-five percent made more than \$10.00 per hour in their primary (non-census) job in the last 12 months, and of these 25 percent made more than \$15.00 per hour. This is a key finding because had the census paid a relatively low rate, such as \$10.00 per hour and less, it might not have attracted fifty-five percent of its workers

who were making more than \$10.00 per hour. Sixty-two percent said they were very satisfied with census hourly pay and 31 percent were somewhat satisfied. Tables 7 and 8 show these results.

Other results provide insight into why census workers said they applied for the job as these reasons relate to the marketing messages that were used. The flexibility of job hours and fitting into one's personal schedule were very important, as was needing the money. Ranked most important was that the job was valuable to the community and also valuable to the country as shown in table 5.

7. CONCLUSION

The Census 2000 recruitment program was unquestionably a major success. The Census Bureau received several awards related to this program, a Hammer Award from the Vice President's National Partnership for Reinventing Government for the success with Welfare-to-Work hiring, a Green Thumb award for success in recruiting and hiring seniors, and a Pericles Award for innovation from the American Management Association. The Census 2000 model for recruitment might well serve to inform other organizations, both public and private, on alternative ways to overcome the great challenge of recruiting and staffing in today's environment.

APPENDIX

Table 1

How Effective Were the Recruiting Sources?

Source: WESTAT Pre-NRFU Survey (ranked as the two strongest influences)

Source	% people learning about the job and the influence on their decision to apply
Friend/Relative	22.3%
Census Mailings	15.4%
Census Letter	7.6%
Post Card	7.8%
Telephone call to census (toll-free system)	14.5%
TV Ad	12.4%
Census Worker	11.6%
Newspaper Ad	11.2%
Census Recruiter	10.2%
Newspaper Article	9.1%
Poster	9.1%

Table 2

Race and Ethnicity Compared to the Civilian Labor Force Profile

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Workforce Profile Report D-284, October, 2000

Race/Ethnicity	Actual % Hired	Civilian Labor Force (1990)
American Indian	2%	Less than 1%
Asian	2%	2%
African American	20%	13%
Hispanic	11%	8%
White	64%	74%

Table 3

Age and of Census Workers

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Workforce Profile Report D-284, October, 2000

Age	All
39 or younger	42%
40-65	46%
66 or older	12%

Table 4

Gender of Census Workers

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Workforce Profile Report D-284, October, 2000

Gender	Percent
Female	62%
Male	38%

Table 5

Reasons Why Applicants Accepted the Job

Source: WESTAT Pre-NRFU Survey (10,000 observations)

Ranked "Very Important"

Valuable to community	66.4%
Valuable to country	61.1%
Fits into schedule	60.3%
Need the money	55.5%
Like setting own hours	54.5%

Table 6

Labor Force Status of Census Workers During the Past Year

Source: WESTAT Pre-NRFU Survey (10,000 observations)

Worked full-time	43.1%
Worked part-time	15.9%
Not working and/or retired	15.1%
Were looking for work	9.9%
Volunteer/care giver	8.7%
Student (full/part-time)	7.2%

Table 7

Non-Census Income of Workers

Source: WESTAT Pre-NRFU Survey (10,000 observations)

Hourly Rate of Pay From Primary Employer (not Census) -
Job Worked Most Hours in Last 12 months

<\$7.00/hr.	24%
\$7.00-\$9.99/hr.	21%
\$10.00-\$15.00/hr.	30%
>\$15.00/hr.	25%

Table 8

Satisfaction with Census Hourly Pay

Source: Post-employment WESTAT Telephone Survey (1,200 observations)

Very Satisfied	61.7%
Somewhat Satisfied	31.3%
Somewhat Dissatisfied	5.3%
Very Dissatisfied	1.8%

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