CHANGE ASSUMPTIONS OF THE

CIVIL SERVICE REFORM ACT

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FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY

Change Assumptions of the Civil Service Reform Act*

The Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) was passed in 1978 largely as the
result of intense efforts by the Carter administration. It was based on the
major premise that, although the federal workforce was "basically honest and
competent," it had become "...a bureaucratic maze which neglects merit, toler-
ates poor performance, permits abuse of legitimate employee rights, and mires
every personnel action in red tape, delay, and confusion" (Carter, 1976).
This paper will examine the factual and fictional aspects of these and other
assumptions made by the CSRA.

These assumptions can be placed into several major categories, including:
(1) assumptions, apparently unexamined, about the baseline conditions of the
federal sector; (2) beliefs about how change most effectively takes place in
organizations and social systems; and (3) the curious assumption of a rational
and (relatively) apolitical environment in which to create change. Each of
these areas is examined in this paper and, where appropriate, data are pre-
sented from our large sample of federal workers.

Briefly, a team of researchers from the Institute for Social Research was
one of three university-based groups contracted to evaluate the organizational
effects of the CSRA. Each research team was to study five organizations, to
be followed over a period of five years. Four different government agencies,
which varied considerably in mission, technology, and size, were represented
in The University of Michigan research sites. While we can obviously make
no claim that these samples were representative of the entire federal work-
force, there was no reason to believe that they were atypical. Moreover, the

similarity of responses across these geographically and technologically diver-

gent organizations lends credence to the idea that our samples were reasonably

characteristic of federal employees.

Assumptions about Baseline Conditions

Although Carter's CSRA was said to have been based on seven months of

work by a task force of more than 100 career civil servants who had carefully

explored the strengths and weaknesses of the existing Civil Service (Thayer,

1978), it is not evident that many of the basic objectives of the CSRA were

empirically well-grounded. In this section of the paper, we examine seven

fundamental goals of the CSRA using our baseline data to check the validity of

the assumed conditions explicit and implicit in the act.

The data base used in these analyses consists of responses to a question-

naire completed by more than 2,700 federal employees at all organizational

levels collected after the passage of the CSRA but before implementation of

most of its provisions. The data reported here are based on scales developed

from extensive factor analyses, and on single items (Organizational Assessments

of the Effects of Civil Service Reform, 1980).

A. Difficulty in Hiring Competent Personnel

President Carter's statement to Congress on the need for the CSRA stated

that the federal bureaucracy entangles every personnel action in "...red tape,

delay, and confusion" (Carter, 1978, p. 444).* Table 1 displays the responses

of supervisors in the agencies to six questions relevant to Carter's

assumption.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

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*All subsequent quotations are from Carter, 1978.

From these data, it is clear that most supervisors in our samples agreed in 1980 that it took too long to process the paperwork required to hire new employees. Although the mean values for the remaining items are nearer to neutral, most respondents tended toward agreement that the personnel system is problematic. A site-by-site analysis of these data, however, showed differences among the various agencies, with some demonstrating slight disagreement with these statements. Thus, the data seem to lend limited, but by no means unequivocal, support to the first assumption. Carter's rather categorical statement that this was a "serious defect" of the system is not well supported by our samples. It would be closer to the truth to say that supervisors (at least in our samples) perceived the so-called bureaucratization associated with hiring people as a real, but rather moderate, irritant.

B. Employee Motivation

By implication, the President and his advisors suggested that many federal workers were either incompetent or unmotivated. He said, for example, that "the public suspects that there are too many government workers, that are underworked, overpaid, and insulated from the consequences of incompetence" (p. 444).

Table 2 displays the mean responses to two scales and five single items

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concerning employees' perceptions of their work and organizations. Contrary to Mr. Carter's assumption, these data suggest that most employees report relatively high motivation and a rather positive attitude toward performing well on their jobs. They also believe that they have the requisite skills to perform their jobs well. Such data must be cautiously interpreted since the measures of motivation are based on self-report, but they have been well

validated in prior studies of thousands of predominantly private-sector em-

ployees. The federal employees do not appear to be responding in a substan-

tially different way. Moreover, and again contrary to prior assumption,

these workers report themselves to be at least as motivated, and perhaps more

so, by intrinsic outcomes as they are by such extrinsic factors as money and

security.

C. Effectiveness of Federal Managers

The creators of the CSRA also had doubts about the competence of many of

the managers of the federal government. Table 3 presents the results of five

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INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

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scales and two individual items often found to be good indicators of managerial

competence. Although the values are not extreme, most managers view themselves

and are seen by their subordinates as being generally effective, and as main-

taining a work atmosphere conducive to employee effectiveness and productivity.

There are two possible exceptions to this, however, in the nearly neutral

responses to items concerning whether management devotes more attention to

quantity than to quality of work, and whether supervisors are seen as taking

action to deal with low performers. Both of these areas, measured by single

items, were slightly less strongly endorsed than the remaining supervisor

scales. Nevertheless, the overall picture is one of a system that is generally

perceived by its members to be conducive to productivity and effectiveness.

D. Performance-Reward Linkages

The CSRA was intended to "provide incentives and opportunities...to im-

prove efficiency and responsiveness..." of the federal workforce (p. 444). It

was further assumed that managers had considerable difficulty rewarding the

best and most talented people. Table 4 presents scales and items that explore

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INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

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employees' views about whether the assumed lack of linkage between good per-

formance and positive outcomes occurred in our samples.

In this case, the data essentially support the assumptions. In general,

employees do not see a strong association between performing well and desir-

able outcomes such as opportunities for development or promotion. While their

response to the question of whether their direct supervisors provide them with

rewards is more favorable, even here the average response barely exceeds the

midpoint of the scale. In other areas, there is on average clear disagree-

ment with the desired contingency.

E. Poor Performance-Negative Outcome Linkages

The designers of CSRA believed that most federal workers are relatively

immune from negative consequences even if they fail to satisfy minimal stand-

ards. As Carter put it, "Managers are weakened in their ability to...fire

those who are unwilling to work" and "the sad fact is that it is easier to

promote and transfer incompetent employees than to get rid of them" (p. 446).

Respondents in our samples were asked whether they thought negative out-

comes were associated with poor performance. Results are displayed in Table

5. These data present a mixed picture, and only some of the data support the

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INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

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assumption. From these results, it is clear that most participants believe

that penalties for poor performance are applied inconsistently. Moreover,

most of the employees believe that their supervisors will not take formal

action against them for unacceptable performance. These data also suggest

that many employees are uncertain about what would happen to them, since items relating to being demoted, transferred, or fired showed near-neutral results, with a fairly large variance. There were also marked site differences, implying that blanket generalizations about the entire federal workforce are probably inappropriate. Finally, on the scale asking whether supervisors help poor performers to improve, the responses were near neutral, though in one agency the mean was slightly positive.

In general, then, the extreme conditions related to discipline that Carter's CSRA assumed do not appear to be very well supported by our data. Most respondents appeared to find the existing disciplinary system to be rather adequate.

F. The Need for Formal Disciplinary Action

Implicit in many of the statements supporting a need for CSRA was the idea that disciplinary actions, to be effective, must be formal, and that dismissal was appropriate much more often than had occurred prior to the CSRA legislation.

In Table 6, we present the responses of supervisors concerning the desirability of various approaches to dealing with poor performance. These data generally agree with the assumption that the procedures for taking formal disciplinary action are unclear and difficult to accomplish.

INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

Perhaps more important, and contrary to the designers' assumptions, the great majority of our sample believe that they can solve subordinate performance problems without recourse to formal action. Given this preference for informal action, it can be asked why emphasis was placed on the system for formal personnel actions rather than on devoting more attention to training

supervisors to be more effective in their informal role of helping poor performers to improve. The informal methods may be not only more cost-effective, but also more humane.

G. Labor Management Relations

President Carter also saw the need to improve labor management relations, with the goal of making the public sector more like the private sector in its labor-management activities. It is unclear whether the designers of the CSRA actually believed that labor management relations were less desirable than they might be. Some have suggested a more politically based motive for these provisions of the CSRA, e.g., strengthening the position of unions in the federal service to avoid their opposition to the act.

Table 7 shows the responses of federal workers to six scales related to

INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

labor-management relations. These data suggest that, although both workers and supervisors accept the need for unions and generally agree with their priorities, they give mostly neutral responses to questions concerning the overall quality of labor management relations in the federal agencies, and to items querying whether supervisors try to keep the union informed on matters that affect their interests. In addition, nonsupervisors generally do not trust management. Interestingly, supervisors' mean responses are also slightly negative on the question of trust, although less so than nonsupervisors.

Summary

The responses of more than 2,800 federal employees tend to support two of the above assumptions, to contradict two, and to present a mixed pattern for the remaining three. These data give some support to Carter's conclusion that the personnel system is time-consuming and somewhat cumbersome. There is also

generally strong agreement that clear linkages do not exist between high performance and other positive outcomes for the federal workers we surveyed. The data dispute the President's belief that federal workers are not motivated or dedicated to their jobs and suggest that, contrary to that assumption, government managers are seen by both themselves and their subordinates as being dedicated to high levels of performance and productivity. The data relating to the remaining assumptions are more ambiguous.

Assumptions about the Process of Change

Although it is still very premature to assess the success of the CSRA, few would argue that the act has had its intended dramatic influence on the federal sector. The results from our second administration of a research survey, which cannot be reported here, lend strong support to the view that very little change has occurred in our study sites as the result of the CSRA. One reason for this may be the assumptions made by the designers of the act about how persons and social systems can most effectively be made to change.

A basic concept in the literature of organizational change is that participation in the implementation of a change enhances the likelihood that it will be effectively implemented and supported. A comment about our baseline data is revealing in this regard. Although our study was to have begun in September 1979, delays by the funding agency prevented approval for three months. We thus began collecting data in the spring of 1980, almost two years after the passage of the act. This is noteworthy here only because our worries about not having good baseline data proved to be unfounded. Most of our early contacts at all but the highest levels of the organizations complained that they did not understand why they were selected to be interviewed because they certainly knew nothing about the CSRA. Thus, not only did we appear to have an authentic baseline, but this also suggests that no one at our sites

had any part in helping to design the changes they were to implement. Not surprisingly, except for the general (but not universal) desire not to offend the researchers, our respondents initially perceived the CSRA as a nonentity. Cynicism to the effect that "we've been through this one before" was commonplace.

We have already observed that the CSRA appears to have been created without benefit of a thorough, empirically based diagnosis. The act assumed that the government had a rather large number of incompetent or poorly motivated individuals, and that therefore the appropriate mechanism for change was to assist in their removal. (The training-and-improvement features of the CSRA have not yet been very extensively developed in our experience.) Changing individuals' behavior, so the intended scenario ran, would ultimately result in changing the grand bureauratic structure itself. The CSRA also assumed that all agencies and organizations should follow a similar process of change. While agency differences were accommodated in many important aspects of the act, no covered agency was permitted not to participate, or to work on personnel problems other than those mandated by the law. Although the role to be played by OPM was in many ways intended to be advisory, it was also controlling, since merit pay plans, performance appraisal systems, and executive selection and development plans had to be approved by OPM specialists. Considerable literature exists which suggests that institutional change is seldom accomplished when primary emphasis is placed on changing individuals, that ordering change is seldom congruent with internalized or long-lasting effects, and that change can seldom be successfully packaged and taken off the shelf like McDonald's hamburgers. Thus, the assumptions made by the CSRA about the process of changing were in many respects naive, perhaps mostly because no one involved with creating this law appears to have thought seriously about the most effective way to create long-lasting effects. Moreover, the problems

inherent in such approaches were noted in the literature from the start (e.g., Isbell, 1978; Thayer, 1978).

Some agencies did employ participative type approaches, in that representatives from field installations were part of the task forces responsible for creating their specific programs for implementing the reform act. More common, however, was the procedure of developing an agency plan at the headquarters level and distributing it for a (generally cursory) review by the field locations. An interesting aspect of the fact that our studies were based at the organizational level was that we were able to observe at the grass roots level the degree of attachment and involvement felt by individuals, an often crucial requisite for the success of such a change. The modal response to CSRA was that it was something to implement because it was a requirement; most did not actively resist it but, perhaps more deadly, ignored it. Obviously, it would be difficult to involve all employees in the development of every new government program. On the other hand, the failure of the bureaucracy to think seriously about how people change probably accounts in part for the expensive failure of many programs which begin with such good intentions. While it is not the purpose of this paper to suggest alternative ways of designing change, it does appear clear that simply passing a law is unlikely to have great and long-lasting impact.

Assumptions about the Environment

The final set of assumptions on which the Reform Act was based were curious ones, involving an apparent belief in an apolitical environment. Whatever else history may record of the Carter administration, ability to work within a political framework is unlikely to be high on any list of strengths. The very nature of the CSRA assumed that the federal government was in need of vast reform. The law, even in the somewhat watered-down version which

ultimately passed Congress, was intended to produce a major upheaval in a weather-beaten and somewhat corrupt system, an approach hardly designed to win over converts from the federal agencies. The law also mandated an external evaluation of the act, resulting in part in the five-year organizational studies reported earlier. While five years may seem a relatively short time period in a longitudinal research project, the history of a nation, or the life of a sequoia tree, it is something akin to light years in the political context. The anticorruption votes that helped to make Carter President and facilitated the passage of the CSRA in the first place were soon to be forgotten in the Reagan landslide. Ironically, Reagan was elected in part on a platform of controlling waste and fraud in government, views quite consistent with the spirit and intent of the CSRA. Yet Carter's legacy could hardly be Reagan's mandate, and OPM was to put CSRA, and particularly its careful evaluation, on the same level as research on promulgating pacificism or expanding the Department of Education.

Changes in presidential administration are only one of the political realities with which the CSRA has had to contend. Court rulings (e.g., the Weingarten decision and Wells v. Harris), GAO orders to withhold merit payouts, the PATCO firings, and a reconceptualization of the proper role of the Office of Personnel Management all had to be accommodated and served to dilute—permanently or temporarily—the implementation of CSRA. The assumption of an apolitical environment which could be "held off" for at least five years to determine whether the Reform Act would work was untenable. It is easy to say that this set of assumptions embodied the prior assumption of Carter's reelection, but if the intent was to make long-lasting change, the CSRA would have had to be more "administration-proof" (like deficit financing and Social Security). Thus, by the third year of our study, when many aspects of the CSRA were just beginning to be put into place, the research teams

suddenly had to consider whether the study would continue to be funded at all.[1] The uncertainty of the survival of many aspects of the Reform Act, (e.g., delegated authority) in the intended form created similar concerns on the part of many of our research respondents.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper has reviewed three major types of assumptions made by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. Empirically, the beliefs about prior conditions of the federal workforce were partly supported by a study of over 2,700 federal workers. In most cases, the conditions on which the CSRA were based were not nearly so extreme as the creators of the act had assumed. In some instances, the assumptions were not valid. Equally important for its eventual success, the Reform Act appeared to be based on rather little understanding of how people and organizations change. The creators of the act were also naively optimistic about the act's ability to withstand political influences long enough to be both successfully implemented and evaluated. The ultimate success of the CSRA may well be far less than it might otherwise have been if greater attention had been directed from the outset to issues such as those presented in this paper.

Footnotes

1. Subsequent to the writing of this paper, the intended five year assessment being carried out at The University of Michigan was terminated by OPM at the end of its third year.

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Table 1

Effectiveness of the Personnel Systems*

ITEMS	N	Mean[a]	Standard Deviation
It is difficult for me to get competent people to fill job openings.	518	4.4	1.75
It takes too long to process the paperwork needed to fill vacancies here.	521	5.5	1.47
The Personnel Office helps me find good people when I need them.	520	3.8	1.67
Most new employees who come to work for me have the skills to do their jobs.	520	4.3	1.64
I don't have enough authority to hire competent people when I need them.	520	4.3	1.85

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*All items on this table were completed by supervisory personnel only.

[a]Responses range from (1) Strongly Disagree - - -> (4) Neither Agree nor Disagree - - -> (7) Strongly Agree.

Table 2

Employee Work Orientation and Motivation

SCALES	N	Mean[a]	Standard Deviation
Intrinsic importance - (of doing well on your job and knowing how well you are doing.) - 2 items	2751	5.7	1.36
Extrinsic reward importance - (How important are the amount of pay you receive and your job security?) - 2 items	2740	5.5	1.39
Organization involvement (What happens to this organization is really important to me.) - 2 items	2762	5.8	1.01
ITEMS			
I have all the skills I need to do my job.	2683	5.2	1.51
Doing my job especially well gives me a good feeling.	2776	6.3	.82
I get upset when I fall behind in my work.	2770	5.1	1.53
I put in extra time on my job when I fall behind schedule.	2769	4.7	1.83
I generally produce high quality work on my job.	2773	6.0	0.83

[a]Responses range from (1) Strongly Disagree - - -> (4) Neither Agree nor Disagree - - -> (7) Strongly Agree.

Table 3

Managerial Effectiveness and Work Environment

SCALES	N	Mean[a]	Standard Deviation
Clarity of expectations about what goals one is expected to achieve (3 items)	2728	5.3	1.09
Work group openness and cooperation (4 items)	2273	4.5	1.12
Supervisory emphasis on productivity (2 items)	2657	5.0	1.27
Effectiveness of supervisor as manager (2 items)	2655	4.7	1.53
Interpersonal competence of supervisors (3 items)	2612	4.7	1.42

ITEMS

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Management devotes more attention to quantity of work than to how well I do it.	2749	4.0	1.89
My supervisor criticizes people who perform poorly.	2781	4.2	1.83

[a]Responses range from (1) Strongly Disagree - - -> (4) Neither Agree nor Disagree - - -> (7) Strongly Agree.

Table 4

Perceived Linkage between Performance and Rewards

SCALES	N	Mean[a]	Standard Deviation
Development contingency – (e.g., If you perform well, how likely is it that you will have an opportunity to develop your skills and abilities?) (4 items)	2775	2.8	1.30
Pay equity – (e.g., Considering what others in your area and agency receive, how fair is your pay?) (3 items)	2750	3.7	1.58

ITEMS			
Promotion decisions here are based on merit.	2773	3.3	1.76
My supervisor rewards me for good performance.	2787	4.2	1.97
If you perform your job especially well, how likely is it that you will get a cash award, an above-average pay increase, or a quality step increase?	2808	2.4	1.66

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[a]Responses range from (1) Strongly Disagree – – –> (4) Neither Agree nor Disagree – – –> (7) Strongly Agree.

Table 5

Outcomes Associated with Poor Performance

SCALES	N	Mean[a]	Standard Deviation
Perceived equity of the discipline system	2715	4.5	0.96
Superisor assistance to avoid poor performance	2630	4.1	1.51

ITEMS			
Some poor performers here get penalized while others are left alone.	2780	5.3	1.37
If your performance is unacceptable, how likely is it that your supervisor will start a formal personnel action against you?	2762	3.2	1.60
I will be demoted or transferred if I perform poorly.	2802	4.2	1.82
If I perform poorly, I will lose my job.	2802	3.8	1.84

[a]Responses range from (1) Strongly Disagree - - -> (4) Neither Agree nor Disagree - - -> (7) Strongly Agree.

Table 6

Ease, Clarity, and Usefulness of Formal Disciplinary Measures

SCALES	N	Mean[a]	Standard Deviation
Difficulty of taking formal adverse personnel action* (3 items)	510	4.8	1.34
Clarity of adverse personnel action procedures (2 items)	511	4.7	1.23
ITEMS			
I can usually solve subordinate performance problems without having to initiate a (formal) personnel action.*	514	5.4	1.04

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*Supervisory responses only.

[a]Responses range from (1) Strongly Disagree - - -> (4) Neither Agree nor Disagree - - -> (7) Strongly Agree.

Table 7

Labor-Management Relations

SCALES	N	Mean[a]	Standard Deviation
Constructive union-management relations exist in this organization*** (3 items)	2676	4.0	1.02
Overall acceptance of the necessity and priorities of the union***	2671	4.7	1.17
Supervisor acceptance of necessity and priorities of the union*	651	4.6	1.32
Management involvement of union (e.g., "I try to keep union leaders informed about changes...")* - 2 items	669	4.0	1.36
Trust of management** - 5 items	2279	3.0	1.10
Trust of management* - 4 items	507	3.8	1.30

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* Supervisors only
** Nonsupervisors only
*** All Respondents

[a]Responses range from (1) Strongly Disagree - - -> (4) Neither Agree nor Disagree - - -> (7) Strongly Agree.