



# Feds Say: What About Contractors?

By Michael Hardy Jul 25, 2011

While members of Congress propose measures to freeze salaries and otherwise cut the costs associated with the federal workforce, many feds are wondering: What about contractors? After all, feds argue, contractors also have to be paid — often more than federal employees because the companies have to cover overhead and turn a profit.

If saving money is really the goal, the cuts can't apply just to federal employees, some feds say.

"Many of these Congress members 'speak with forked tongue,'" one reader said. "They cry, 'Let's reduce the federal workforce, but don't get in the way of hiring contractors to do the full-time tasks/requirements that clearly still need to be executed.' Either the task/job/requirement is valid, or it is not."

William Dougan, president of the National Federation of Federal Employees, made the point in a column he wrote for Federal Computer Week in June. "Today, the federal contract workforce stands at about 10.5 million, which is roughly five times the size of the federal civilian workforce," Dougan wrote. "By focusing exclusively on federal employees, lawmakers are excluding about 80 percent of the positions funded through federal agencies. There must be a shared sacrifice by government and industry if lawmakers are serious about downsizing."

Many readers agreed, but some offered additional insight. For example, contract employees are usually limited in what they can do under the terms of a contract, while agency managers can assign their employees to a wider range of tasks — a dangerous power in the hands of a bad manager.

"In my career as a government IT specialist, I've been pulled from important software development so I could spend two weeks answering phones during the Christmas rush," one reader told us. "I've been assigned inventory tasks that a GS-5 would be considered overpaid for. This often makes it appear that the contractors are more efficient [because] someone contracted to write software is allowed to do so, while her civil-service counterpart has to take time away from the project to manage the office's environmental program."

However, others pointed out that contractors often bill the government for less than full-time work because they have multiple clients and spend only the time needed on each job. In such cases, the cost of contractors might be less than the cost of insourcing the work to agency employees.

"The issue is saving money, not jobs," wrote one reader in explaining that view. "To reduce government, you must reduce spending. America doesn't care how many people do the work, only what it costs."