

Course Handout: Getting a Job in Government – What They Don't Tell You

Overview

This course offers practical guidance for anyone seeking a career in public service—whether on the Hill, in the executive branch, or within the Intelligence Community (IC). It unpacks the realities of government hiring, security clearances, and professional networking with clarity and candor.

Key Takeaways:

- There is no single path into government—hiring is fragmented, informal, and opaque.
- Many of the best roles are filled through referrals, fellowships, or special appointments.
- Resumes, clearances, and timing all matter—but relationships often matter more.

Entry Paths:

- **USAJobs:** Primary portal for federal positions. Use keyword targeting and resume formatting best practices.
- **Political Appointments:** Schedule A/C roles made through White House Liaison Offices (WHLO) or PPO.
- **Fellowships:** PMF, Boren, AAAS, Presidential Innovation, and others offer excellent entry points.
- **Hill Hiring:** Fast, informal, and often referral-based. Monitor job listservs and network actively.

Work Environment Types:

- **Personal Office:** Political, reactive, and fast-paced.
- **Committee Staff:** Policy-heavy, often cross-office.
- **Executive Branch:** Rule-driven, bureaucratic, structured.
- **Intelligence Community:** Clearance-intensive, long onboarding timelines, mission-critical work.

Resume Tips:

- **Hill:** One-page, punchy, politically aware.
- **Exec Branch/IC:** 2–3 pages, tailored to job posting, clear metrics and impact.
- Translate private sector or military roles into government-friendly language.

Security Clearance Basics:

- **Levels:** Public Trust, Secret, Top Secret/SCI, with optional polygraphs
- **Timeline:** Can take 6–18 months; interim clearances may apply
- **Tips:** Be honest, be thorough, and prepare for in-depth vetting

Interview Advice:

- Hill: Informal, trust- and vibe-based
- Agency: Panel interviews, structured formats
- IC: Behavioral interviews with a focus on judgment and discretion

Career Mapping Tips:

- Think in 2–3 job arcs
- Build experience through rotations or fellowships

- Your first job won't define you—your track record will

Networking That Works:

- Ask for advice, not jobs
- Use informational interviews to learn and connect
- Follow up with gratitude and updates—not repeat asks

Avoid These Mistakes:

- Submitting generic resumes
- Asking for a job on first contact
- Ignoring political dynamics
- Oversharing in clearance interviews
- Underestimating junior staff or assistant gatekeepers

Resources:

- USAJobs.gov
- Hill job listservs and Slack groups
- PMF and fellowship directories
- CRS Reports: Careers in the Federal Government
- Security and Democracy Forum's other course offerings

Next Steps:

- Draft both a Hill and federal resume
- Set up one informational interview this month
- Sign up for a fellowship or clearance-eligible opportunity

Remember: Getting in is hard—but it's possible. Be patient, persistent, and strategic.