

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear **CrossTalk** Editor,

In your December 2002 issue dedicated to engineers and scientists, two articles written by authors from the Air Force Materiel Command (AFMC) discussed the present plight of these occupations. Both articles discussed the problems in recruiting and retaining these skills for government service, especially for software engineering.

Also, within the last few months the secretary of the Air Force (SAF), and more specifically Lt. Gen. Stephen B. Plummer, principal deputy, Office of the Assistant SAF for Acquisition, has recognized the present and future problems of employing scientists and engineers. Plummer is principal deputy, Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition, Washington, D.C., and the military director, U.S. Air Force Scientific Advisory Board.

However, in comparing the AFMC effort to the direction of SAF, there appears to be a conflict between the initiatives. The AFMC indicates a salary increase is needed, whereas the SAF reports survey results indicating that engineers do not consider pay to be a big issue.

Frankly, I wonder who participated in the survey the SAF referenced. Pay is a huge issue! In August 2000, the AFMC software organizations were surveyed to answer a

question posed by Air Force Information Logistics: "Will the organic software functions be able to grow to meet the anticipated growth in software work?" The result of the survey at this Air Force base [Tinker] stated emphatically that salary is an issue that affects both hiring and retention.

At that time, the difference in salary between government and industry for comparable jobs ranged from 15 percent to 70 percent with government being lower. During the survey, we cited the Pay Comparability Act of 1990 and made the point very clearly that engineer and scientist pay should be in accordance with the law.

Shortly after this survey was performed, personnel in the information technology (IT) field, many of whom are in a nonprofessional job series and do not possess a college degree in computer science or engineering, received on average a 15 percent salary increase. In many cases this action caused IT personnel to be paid more than engineers, when their job responsibility was less. A request was made to include the software engineers into the IT salary action. No positive action occurred.

From that time until now, the situation has worsened. Our software organization has lost some of its better software engineering talent. Many of our former engineers have taken industry positions and have received significant pay raises. We foresee this to be an increasing trend if the government salary is not corrected to comparability with industry. In supporting two major weapon systems, there are partnering agreements between this software organization – the weapons manager, and his prime contractor for software support. The government software engineers work with contractor engineers to field common or integrated software products. It is more than a little distressing for government engineers to know what their counterparts are paid for equivalent responsibility.

Recently, we performed a study to determine the present salary difference between government and industry engineers. The results are tabulated in Table 1. As is seen, even with the severe economic downturn, the pay comparability situation is still very poor and appears to have worsened for personnel in management positions. In some cases, the government salary for software engineering management lags the average salary of industry by 70 percent to 80 percent.

Government software engineers deserve more than talk. Some amazing software capabilities have been created within the Air Force; two, specifically, are recognized as being world-class. The government functions compare favorably with anyone; they deserve to be paid commensurately. If an action is not implemented to overcome the pay differential between government and industry, it is safe to say these fine organizations will erode.

Here is something to think about: People organize to overcome unfair treatment by their employer. If pay disparity persists, government engineers and scientists are ripe for unionization.

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Table 1: *Salary Comparison*

| Equivalent Responsibility                                       | Salary Comparison Electrical and Electronics Engineers 1, 2 |           |                             |            |          |           |
|---|---|-----------|-----------------------------|------------|----------|-----------|
|   | NSPE  |           |                             | Government |          |           |
|   | 10 <sup>th</sup> Percentile                                 | Average   | 90 <sup>th</sup> Percentile | Step 1     | Average  | Step 10   |
| NSPE – V<br>= GS-12 <sup>2</sup>                                | \$58,441  | \$78,881  | \$97,010                    | \$54,275   | \$62,069 | \$70,555  |
| NSPE – VI<br>= GS-13 <sup>4</sup>                               | \$69,583  | \$88,444  | \$112,300                   | \$64,542   | \$78,753 | \$83,902  |
| NSPE – VII<br>= GS-14 <sup>5</sup>                              | \$72,150  | \$98,234  | \$133,500                   | \$76,271   | \$96,608 | \$99,150  |
| NSPE (non-supervisory)<br>= GS-13 <sup>6</sup>                  | \$53,292  | \$77,037  | \$93,260                    | \$64,542   | \$78,753 | \$83,902  |
| NSPE (5-9 prof supv)<br>= GS-13 <sup>7</sup>                    | \$72,000  | \$96,103  | \$135,000                   | \$64,542   | \$78,753 | \$83,902  |
| NSPE (10-49 prof supv)<br>= GS-13 <sup>7</sup>                  | \$79,550  | \$120,015 | \$169,000                   | \$64,542   | \$78,753 | \$83,902  |
| NSPE (≥50 prof supv)<br>= GS-14<br>Branch Chiefs <sup>8</sup>   | \$92,185  | \$172,448 | \$293,800                   | \$76,271   | \$96,608 | \$99,150  |
| NSPE (≥50 prof supv)<br>= GS-14<br>Division Deputy <sup>9</sup> | \$92,185  | \$172,448 | \$293,800                   | \$76,271   | \$96,608 | \$99,150  |
| NSPE (≥50 prof supv)<br>= GS-15<br>Division Chief <sup>10</sup> | \$92,185  | \$172,448 | \$293,800                   |            |          | \$115,633 |

Notes

1. This comparison utilizes information from the National Society of Professional Engineers 2002 Income and Salary Survey Report.
2. The general schedule pay scale and number of personnel within the Government Software Organization (GSO) are current as of 31 Oct. 02.
3. The GS-855-12 is the working level engineer in the GSO. Of the 397 GS-855s in the GSO, 25 are GS-855-12s.
4. The GSO employs 79 GS-855-13s consisting of approximately 1/3 supervisors, 1/3 team leads and 1/3 technical leads all utilizing the same pay scale.
5. The GS-855-14 position represents management at the branch level.
6. The GSO utilizes non-supervisor GS-855-13s as technical leads.
7. Most sections have a GS-855-13 section chief and team lead, and some GS-855-13 team leads are responsible for five to nine professionals supervised (prof supv).
8. There are seven GS-855-14 branch chief positions within the GSO.
9. The GS-855-14 deputy chief of the GSO manages half of the GSO, as well as standing in for the chief when necessary.
10. The GS-855-15 chief of the GSO manages 475 professionals, 531 total.