

VIEWPOINT

Picking Appointees

Not all political positions are the same, and not just any smart person is right for the job.

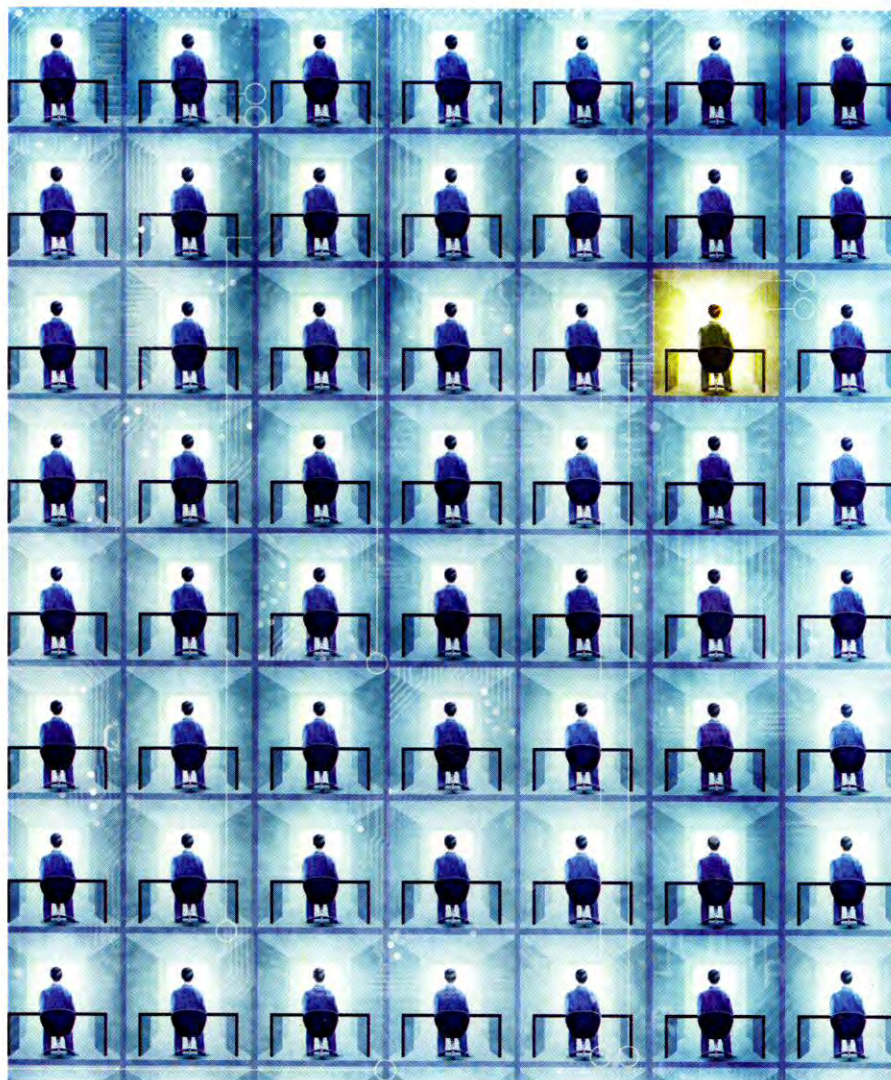
By Paul R. Lawrence and Mark A. Abramson

In the push to make government work more effectively, much attention has been devoted to attracting top talent to career civil service jobs. But it's just as crucial to bring in political appointees who have the right experience for agencies' unique management challenges.

Political executives are the quarterbacks of government. They call the plays (with some help from their coaches at the White House and department headquarters). Their organizations look to them for leadership. In January 2013, regardless of who wins the presidential election, a new set of appointees will be arriving in Washington, and they will be key to the success of government as a whole.

The Office of Presidential Personnel, which identifies candidates for political jobs, faces a major challenge in selecting the right people for the right position. Too often the presumption is that all political positions are the same and that any smart person could fill them. But the specs for appointee positions are varied, and each demands a particular professional background. There is no doubt that nearly everyone on the long list of candidates for presidential appointments has a distinguished career and impressive academic credentials. The question is whether they have the right set of skills for the organization they are selected to lead. Instead of basing the selection process on department or policy issues—such as health, defense or natural resources—the search process should focus on an agency's management challenges.

When politicians talk about running government like a business, they generally are talking about production agencies like the Social Security Administration, the Homeland Security Department's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and the Education



Department's Office of Federal Student Aid. These agencies produce clear outputs and outcomes, such as applications processing and benefits disbursement.

Leading a production agency requires interaction with front-line staff and an understanding of what they do. Just ask Bill Taggart, who left the banking industry to become chief operating officer at

FSA in 2009. It was Taggart's challenge to implement new legislation that shifted responsibility for administering federally insured student loans from private entities to FSA. "We needed to think like a manufacturing plant," says Taggart, who recently left the agency and is now chief executive officer at Atlanta Life Financial Group. "You have to get down on the floor, wander around, see folks and engage them . . . I visited FSA regional offices. I was the first COO that many of the regional office staff had ever seen."

Think of the factory floor, where industrial efficiency conjures up images of Frederick Winslow Taylor and scientific management. Factory managers track inputs, outputs, accuracy and cycle time. Based on his legal career in intellectual property, David Kappos, director of the Patent and Trademark Office, quickly understood the inputs and outputs at his agency. Confirmed in August 2009,

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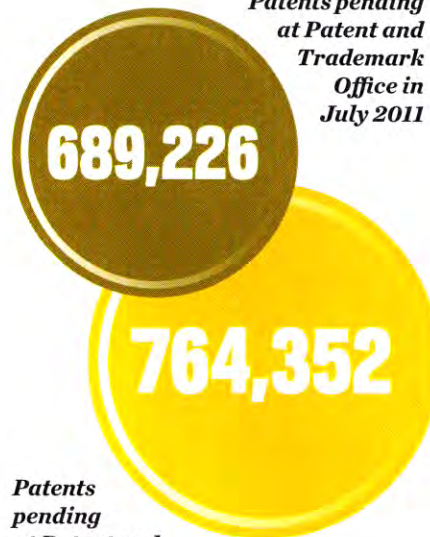
BILL TAGGART, FORMER COO AT FSA

METROPOLIS/GETTY IMAGES

Kappos launched an initiative to reduce the backlog of patents pending to less than 700,000. In January 2010, the number of patents pending peaked at 764,352. To track the agency's progress on measures including backlog, production and the time it takes to process patent reviews, Kappos monitors a dashboard of indicators. In July 2011, patents pending dipped to an all-time low of 689,226.

Before coming to PTO, Kappos spent most of his career at IBM working closely with the agency and the intellectual property community. Likewise, Taggart's tenure at Wachovia Corp. proved invaluable in preparing him for guiding student lending operations. Both executives had firsthand experience on the front lines of running a business.

Many political appointees have strong policy backgrounds, but often their experience in the private sector is limited or nonexistent. Business leaders have been selected from time to time, but the sub-Cabinet has been largely dominated by policy types. During the 1990s, political hiring began to shift from policy ex-



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perts to experienced managers, but more are required. The selection of Charles Rossotti in 1997 to head the Internal Revenue Service, for example, was exactly what was needed at that time to respond to the agency's technology problems and outdated systems. Rossotti, co-founder of a technology consulting firm and a former Defense Department analyst, was ideally suited to reform the IRS through new technology and an increased focus on customer service.

It's not enough for political executives to have distinguished resumes; they should have experience managing operations that relate to their agencies' missions and management challenges. That's the best hope for running government like a business.

Paul R. Lawrence, a principal at Ernst & Young LLP, and Mark A. Abramson, president of Leadership Inc., are co-authors of the forthcoming Paths to Making a Difference: Leading in Government (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).