

Commonwealth of Virginia  
Department of Human Resource Management

**Determining If SOC Extension Codes Are Needed**

The Standard Occupational Classification System provides a means of classifying all legitimate, paid work performed in the United States of America by the use of 821 classifications (detailed occupations). Unfortunately, this system may not provide as much detail as some users require. For example, some users may find SOC 13-2011 Accountants and Auditors overly broad and may wish to be able to distinguish accountants from auditors. Extensions to the SOC system could be used for such a purpose.

Another document, “Assigning SOC Extension Codes,” describes Virginia’s four-digit extension to the SOC, how it is structured, and how to obtain an extension code. The present document discusses how one might determine that an extension code is needed.

As mentioned above, extension codes may be needed when the SOC does not supply a sufficiently detailed occupation to allow workers who are performing different duties to be distinguished accordingly.

Agencies may have a variety of reasons to distinguish workers. One may be an external reporting requirement, such as one imposed by an accrediting or oversight body. Another may be the need to identify different salary benchmarks within an occupation. Yet another may be an agency’s wish to closely monitor career progression or specialty assignments. If this need is long-standing, it is appropriate to determine how it has been met in the past. If it has been through position classification, then SOC extensions may be the best way to continue to meet the need. Another approach might make use of the optional data fields provided to PMIS users for agency-specific purposes. However, if the classification interest extends beyond a single agency, then using the optional data fields is probably not the best approach, and the SOC extension code may be better because all agencies will be able to see the resulting extensions and determine if they wish to use them.

Often, it is clear that where the SOC combines titles, such as accountants and auditors, and agencies have traditionally distinguished these groups, then an extension code is appropriate.

On the other hand, some distinctions made in the past may no longer be needed. For instance, Virginia used to distinguish between Registered Nurses (RNs) and Public Health Nurses (PHNs – who were also RNs). Is this distinction still needed? Historically, the distinction was between those who worked in hospitals and those who worked in public health districts. Since PHNs work in the Health Department, it should be that agency’s determination if the distinction between PHNs and RNs is necessary. Yet, one may note that SOC 29-1111 Registered Nurse may not be sufficiently detailed

because it does not distinguish staff nurses, nursing supervisors, certified nurse practitioners, and practice specialties, such as obstetrics, psychiatry, and pediatrics. In this case the need for extension codes would be best determined by the several employing agencies with the help of a coordinator who would design a single set of extension codes to capture all their needs.

SOC 29-1111 Registered Nurse is only one example of a specific, detailed occupation that may require extension codes. Others might be 11-9033 Education Administrators – Post Secondary, which includes directors of student affairs, deans, and registrars, and 11-9111 Medical and Health Services Managers, which includes medical records administrator, director of occupational therapy, and director of medical social work. The more problematic cases, however, involve the SOC detailed occupations designated as “All Other.” Examples are 13-1199 Business Operations Specialists, All Other, and 43-4199 Information and Record Clerks, All Other. From a central standpoint, the decision to add extension codes to these SOCs might arise from a review of the former job classifications that appear under these SOCs. An experienced analyst’s judgment may be sufficient, especially in terms of an initial listing of appropriate extensions. Here again, however, one recognizes that the initial list may need revision to meet agency needs.

There may be a case where a distinction that has not been made in the past is now needed. Human resources specialists in the operating agencies and in DHRM will be required to apply judgment in determining if the SOC-extension system is the best way to meet this need. For example, an agency may wish to track the different programming languages used by its computer programmers (SOC 15-1021). Is this a proper use of SOC extension codes? How do we identify those who use more than one language? Is the distinction between position and employee data important here?

The need to make a distinction may not require an extension code. An agency may decide that it wishes to identify its data entry operators, who have been assigned SOC 43-9061 Office Clerks, General. However, a review of SOC detailed occupations would show that an extension code is not needed because SOC 43-9021 Data Entry Keyers exists.

How might we identify distinctions that we have not used in the past but that may be needed now? One is to consider other classification systems. Do these systems make distinctions which would be useful to us? If so, then we may wish to adopt them. As noted above, the SOC may make such distinctions; but, when the SOC itself provides the distinction, an extension code is not needed.

A published job classification system that provides extensions to the SOC is O\*NET 3.1. However, the mere existence of a distinct job in some classification system does not require us to adopt it. In the case of O\*NET extensions, we acknowledge them and assign Virginia’s codes so that they don’t conflict with the O\*NET codes, but we may choose not to use the O\*NET extensions. For instance, the O\*NET provides six extensions to 47-2031 Carpenters. The O\*NET carpentry specialties are 1) construction, 2) rough, 3) assembly and repair, 4) ship fitting, 5) boat building, and 6) brattice building.

These are distinctions that one may wish to know when hiring carpenters, but they probably are not needed in the position records of state agencies that employ carpenters. In determining if such distinctions should be made, we must rely on the expert judgment of classification analysts or the reasonable arguments of agencies.

We also should acknowledge the contributions and needs of other HR professionals. For example, those concerned with career development may produce models that benefit from a classification system which supports them. In such cases extensions to the SOC may be the best way to record the model's application.

The considerations above lead us to the following questions for determining the need for an extension to the SOC.

1. What distinction is contemplated and what benefits are derived from it?  
This question initiates the formulation and justification of a proposed extension.
2. Is this distinction best recognized through a position classification approach?  
If "No," then using the SOC or its extensions is not the solution.
3. Has the distinction been made in the past OR is their evidence that the distinction needs to be made?  
The first part of the question allows past practice to support the distinction. The second part of the question allows new practices to be introduced. It also offers an opportunity to assess past practice. What evidence exists for continuing past practice?
4. Does the SOC have a detailed occupation that already captures the distinction?  
If "Yes," then there is support for the distinction, but an extension code is not necessary to record it.
5. Will other agencies benefit from the distinction?  
If "Yes," there is support for using the SOC-Extension system to record the distinction. If "No," use of the SOC-Extension system may still be justified, but an agency-specific approach may be better.
6. Does another classification scheme recognize the distinction?  
If "Yes," then there is additional support for making the distinction. Of course, it may be the other classification system itself (such as one found in a published salary survey) that led to proposing the distinction.
7. Can we adopt the distinction made in the other system for our use?  
If "Yes," then problems of titling and definition are solved.
8. What extension codes should we use and what titles and definitions are needed to make the distinction?

If we adopted from another system, then the title and definition requirements should be met. If we adopted from the O\*NET, then the first two digits of the extension code are set. Otherwise, we need to formulate code, title, and definition. See the “Assigning SOC Extension Codes” document for an explanation of the coding scheme.

9. Do the adopted or formulated definitions clearly distinguish different jobs and capture the distinction that was initially proposed?  
If “No,” then the distinction is either not necessary or has been formulated inadequately and needs to be refined. We may need to go through the questions again. If “Yes,” then we close the inquiry.

The considerations and questions presented in this document should be sufficient to guide an HR professional, who is familiar with position classification, in determining if an extension to the SOC should be established. If such an extension is supported, one should contact a compensation consultant at the Department of Human Resource Management (DHRM) in order to arrange the adoption of the extension.