The Standard Occupational Classification System

What is the SOC System?

The Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system was developed by agencies of the federal government in order to meet their need for a single job classification system to be used for all federal statistical reporting.

The current, 2000, version of the SOC system, like past versions, is hierarchical. It is composed of 23 major occupational groups. These 23 major groups are, in turn, divided into 96 minor groups. Each major group contains from 2 to 9 minor groups with three or four being the typical number of minor group members in the major group. The minor groups contain a total of 449 broad occupations. The broad occupations, in turn, are divided into 821 detailed occupations. [Respective counts for the immediately previous version, SOC 1998, were: 23, 98, 452, and 822.] Some broad occupations contain only a single detailed occupation. Most contain several detailed occupations.

The SOC System allows all legitimate, compensated work performed in the United States to be classified into one of its categories. The system also allows statistical reports to be prepared at different levels of specificity, depending on the level of classification (i.e. major, minor, broad, detailed) chosen for analysis. For those who wish greater detail than that provided by the SOC, there is a provision for locally expanding the system.

Why Use the SOC System?

When the Commission on Reform of the Classified Compensation Plan chose to move to broad-banded career groups, it realized that there would be a loss of detailed information regarding the work performed in the Commonwealth's public service. The Technical Advisory Committee learned from other states, which had adopted a broad classification model, that they experienced difficulty in matching internal jobs with external jobs and vice versa. This meant that there would be problems in comparing the Commonwealth's jobs with the general world of work. Furthermore, a staff member of the House Appropriations Committee requested that the new personnel system provide a means of matching state jobs to the occupations reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in the U.S. Department of Labor (USDoL). The designers of compensation reform were faced with a need to adopt the best practices of a broad classification system in order to maximize flexibility, while providing a mechanism for linking the state's public service with several external reporting systems and providing a means for job seekers to match their experience with state job openings.

Because federal agencies, including the BLS, are using the SOC system, the system is generally available for use, it is universal (i.e. it allows classification of all jobs), it is easily understood, and it may be adapted to local needs, the SOC appeared to offer the best means for providing specificity within a broad classification system. It, therefore, was chosen for this purpose.

What are the Practical Benefits of Using the SOC?

These were touched on briefly above. This section will expand those comments and group them into categories.

Responding to and Using Employment Surveys – The Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) and BLS conduct several employment surveys. One, the Occupational Employment Survey (OES), occurs annually. Each large employer is surveyed every year. Small employers are surveyed once every three years. A typical survey form is 45 pages long. In the past, state agencies were spared the burden of responding to these forms because the responses could be prepared from the class codes in PMIS (Personnel Management Information System). The change to Role codes meant that positions were not identified with enough detail to accurately respond to this survey. Attaching SOC codes to positions will allow the data for state government to be collected without requiring agencies to complete the usual survey forms. Also, state agencies often respond to requests for employment data from other employers or seek information from them. SOC codes will facilitate such exchanges of information. Furthermore, SOC codes will facilitate matching agency data with data reported by other government agencies, other individual employers, and private publishers of salary and employment data.

Acquiring Applicants – The SOC is the basic classification system used by employment services in state employment security agencies, such as the VEC. It also underlies the systems used by America's Job Bank (AJB, http://www.ajb.org/, which now includes the features formerly found separately in America's Talent Bank). Agencies' use of SOCs will facilitate listing jobs with the VEC and use of AJB. It will also make it easier for job seekers to find state employment because it reflects a more popular and usual understanding of jobs and their titles.

Staffing and Career Management – The additional detail provided by the SOC will allow agencies to better use and apply career information from sources such as the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* and O*NET, an automated resource that replaced the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* (DOT). [See web sites below.] It will facilitate identifying relations within and between Roles and assessing career advancement options. It will aid agencies in formulating staffing and competency-based plans and assist in identifying related positions and similar employees when reductions in staffing are required. Furthermore, the practice of assigning SOC codes to positions will enhance state HR professionals' understanding of their agency's staff in terms of the broader world of work.

Monitoring Occupational Evolution – New occupations emerge. Old occupations expire. A job classification system needs to reflect these changes. The federal agencies supporting the SOC have agreed to keep it updated. The 1998 issuance was an update to a previous version. The 2000 version followed it and contained only minor changes, representing a fine-tuning of a relatively new system that all agencies had just recently accepted. A major revision effort will begin in 2005 and will be published in time for use in the 2010 census. These events indicate that using the SOC will provide a means of keeping pace with changing occupational categories.

How Will We Initiate SOC Use?

Many HR staff in state government have not had an opportunity to learn the SOC system. They are not prepared to associate SOC codes with all the positions in their agencies and the workload would be excessive. The initial loading of SOC codes, therefore, will be accomplished by a crosswalk from the former class codes. As mentioned above, the class codes were the basis for responding to the OES in the past. This approach does have a shortcoming because in some cases the SOC allows more detailed reporting than did the former class codes. For example, the SOC allows identifying file clerks, data entry keyers, and word processors, in addition to other specific office support workers. The former Office Services series was so general that all these persons were reported as general office clerks. This is the crosswalk that will occur for those positions. Later, as agency HR staff review positions, they may choose to assign more specific SOC codes. The mass crosswalk from class codes, the codes now in the SOC field in most PMIS position records, to SOC codes will occur in 2002.

So SOC Codes Will Provide More Detail?

Yes and no. Jobs can be described in three dimensions: Content (e.g. human resources, finance, procurement), Level (e.g. entry worker, senior worker, supervisor), and Application (or Industry – e.g. health care, law enforcement, education). The former classification system allowed detail involving all three. The Career Groups with their Roles aggregate jobs to a great extent along the content and application dimensions and to a lesser extent along the level dimension. This aggregation is desirable in order to emphasize administrative flexibility. SOCs allow more detail along the content dimension than do Roles. In some cases they also allow more detail than did the former classifications, but not always. For example they will allow more content detail than did the former Office Services series; but, though they allow more detail than the present Financial Services (FS) Career Group (CG), the SOCs allow less detail than the tax administration group under the former state classification system. In the past that group was divided into tax collectors, examiners, auditors, and customer service staff. These jobs were pooled with others to make the current FS CG. (The tax auditors went into the Auditing and Management Services CG.) The SOC allows the tax jobs to be identified within the group. However, the SOC alone does not allow all the formerly distinct jobs to be identified. Therefore, there is a provision to extend the SOC code in order to record such distinctions if an agency wishes to do so.

The SOC was also not developed to allow detailed reporting of levels. This explains, in part, why it does not distinguish tax examiners from tax auditors. It also does not distinguish between professionals and their immediate supervisors, while the Role structure may or may not make this distinction. Here again, if an agency wishes to collect detailed level information, it may use the SOC extension to do this.

How Do I Use an Extension?

First let's think about a major classification issue, the amount of aggregation or disaggregation that is desired. In the past, Virginia had a system that used 2000 classes. It reduced that to one using 300 Roles. The *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* described 13,000 jobs. They have been substantially replaced by the 820 detailed occupations in the SOC. Virginia has allowed each SOC code to be extended by four additional digits.

If extensions were formed without coordination, a confusing collection of codes would result. Therefore, if an agency wishes to extend an SOC code in order to meet its reporting, monitoring, or planning needs, it should contact its DHRM compensation consultant. If the SOC code is one used by several agencies, the consultant will work with the agency, other DHRM staff, and other interested agencies, to develop a coding scheme that will meet the agency's need and have the most utility and efficiency for all concerned.

Where Can I Get More Information About the SOC and Other Resources?
        DHRM plans to add SOC information to its web site, so check there. Also, if there is sufficient interest, DHRM will schedule training on the SOC. A manual on the SOC is available in print and CD-ROM formats from the National Technical Information Service (NTIS). See their web site:

        http://www.ntis.gov/product/standard-occupational-classification.htm

Additional SOC information and classification resources are on the BLS website:

        http://stats.bls.gov/soc/home.htm   -- general information

        http://stats.bls.gov/search/soc.asp   -- detailed definitions: keyword search

        http://stats.bls.gov/soc/soc_majo.htm   -- detailed definitions: structure search

Information on O*NET can be obtained from:

        http://www.doleta.gov/programs/onet/

O*Net Online is at:

        http://online.onetcenter.org

The on-line copy of the Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH) is available at:

        http://www.bls.gov/oco

        [Note: The current, 2002-2003, OOH is based on the SOC system. It also cites the associated SOC-based O*NET codes.]

Contact your agency's DHRM compensation consultant for additional information on the SOC or any question regarding position classification and compensation.