

# Equal Employment Opportunity: What It Means

**It is generally understood to mean the absence of discrimination. Correct—but it goes beyond that to positive measures**

It is the policy of the Government of the United States to provide equal opportunity in Federal employment for all qualified persons, to prohibit discrimination in employment because of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, and to promote the full realization of equal employment opportunity through a positive, continuing program in each executive department and agency. The policy of equal opportunity applies to every aspect of Federal employment policy and practice.

—Section 101  
Executive Order 11246, as amended  
Issued by the White House  
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Most people are aware that equal employment opportunity is the law of the land. How many know what it actually means?

One thing it is generally understood to mean, and does mean, is the elimination of discriminatory practices. The Federal Civil Service—and this includes NSA—has not been immune to the discrimination against minority groups and women that has in the past pervaded American life.

On the surface, one might infer that all is now well. Successive Executive Orders (notably 11246 and 11375) have expressly forbidden discrimination in Federal employment on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. But, as was true of the education world following *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the implementation and execution phase is slow—painfully slow to those groups that have felt the workings of discrimination for generations.

Unfortunately, laws alone do not erase discriminatory practices; neither do they automatically evoke changes of attitude. Attitudes do change, and laws help change them, but only after law has evolved into custom.

Such is the long-run effect of social laws. In the short run, they do produce some results by eliminating some of the rankest aspects of discrimination. But those who are bent on preserving the status quo can and do resort to subtle methods of thwarting the intent of the law, if not the law itself. And beyond this, there are many who, though not opposed to the elimination of discrimination, fail to come in on the side of equality simply because

manifestations of discrimination that are very real to the victim do not affect them personally.

Subtle discrimination is the most prevalent kind, as well as the most difficult to combat. It is the variety one may encounter in Government in promotion and external training boards; when the final decision has to be made between candidates who appear to be equally qualified, the conflict tends to be resolved in favor of the white male. The choice is declared to have been made by the application of a highly rational set of criteria. Upon closer examination, one finds that it was based on attainments that minority groups and women have commonly found it difficult to achieve—overseas assignments, line supervisory experience, attendance at service schools, managerial training. In short, the discrimination is so diffused that it is not visible to the practitioner, who tells himself that he is adhering to the merit system—and he is. Herein lies the heart of the matter: such unintended, and perhaps even unconscious, discrimination on the part of the individual becomes, in the aggregate, an overwhelming barrier.

### "Positive" EEO

As indicated above, there is more to equal employment opportunity than the elimination of overt discrimination. However desirable, that is essentially a passive act of correction. Equal—fully equal—employment opportunity can be achieved only by a positive program of constructive action. This is where we get at the heart of the problem.

EEO means, in essence, that every man and woman in Federal employment should have the maximum opportunity for self-fulfillment and an equal chance to progress in the career system. It means that no man-made barriers that thwart an employee's upward movement should be erected—or preserved. It means that every employee should have the same room to move from one grade to another and that, if it requires additional effort now to rectify past inequities that put him at a disadvantage, that effort should be made. Equal employment opportunity does not mean forgetting the present with a pledge to treat the next generation of Federal employees more equitably. EEO means developing positive corrective measures so that each generation of employees and, in fact, each employee, can contribute his utmost and be rewarded accordingly.

EEO does not mean destroying or neglecting the principles of the merit system or lowering standards. It does mean giving a more enlightened interpretation to these principles and creatively accommodating the system to present needs. To say that there should be more flexible criteria for determining qualifications for employment or advancement does not mean, however, to end competition—only unfair competition.

For the Negro, the problem is well defined. Because of a history of unequal opportunity, Negroes, in the main, occupy the lower rungs of the career ladder. The problem of some Negro employees is that they have not been able to develop latent talent because they are products of (what was at least in their time) an inferior, segregated educational system. Merely to disregard race at this point, though it solves the problem for some, does not solve it for the Negro who was discriminated against in the past in education, Agency training, assignments, and promotion. Many a Negro is, in effect, left permanently hamstrung. What can be done about it?

The objective now must be to narrow the gap between the individual's potential and his achievement. As soon as steps to equalize opportunity now are proposed, the arguments of "overcompensation" or "tampering with the merit system" are raised. But there is ample precedent for the Government's taking action to attempt to equalize opportunity, the most dramatic example being the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the

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G.I. Bill. The intent of this act was to guarantee equal employment opportunity for returning servicemen by ensuring that they had the chance to narrow or eliminate the advantage gained by those who did not have to leave their normal civilian occupations for military service.

The American woman's struggle for equality is in many ways similar to that of minority groups, but different in that the problem is one of "pure" discrimination—i.e., discrimination uncomplicated by great educational barriers, hypocrisy, or token measures. Women as a rule have been relegated to subordinate roles, and we are still burdened today with many myths about woman and her place in society—one myth being that that place is in the home. The fact is that many, probably most, of the 29 million American working women work because they have to; these are widows, divorcees, women whose husbands have left them with minor children, women whose husbands are unable to work, and women who have never married. But above all, a woman has the right to work—whether she needs to or not.

### *The Agency's Record*

What is NSA's record in EEO? It can be said that the Agency took some steps in the EEO area long before the Presidential impetus was placed behind it. There has been a gradual change of attitude within the Agency over the past fifteen years. As a result, gains have been evident in the opportunities available to all in the Agency. But it does not absolve us to say that the recognition we have accorded minority groups and women is better than in most agencies.

The central problem at NSA is to probe—and alter—the subtle forces that combine to restrict employment opportunities for minority groups and female employees. As a beginning, we must be willing to rethink and, where necessary, reshape management policies and practices which perpetuate these patterns of exclusion. We must identify—and take—every reasonable step to compensate for the inadequacies of past programs and policies.

Today, the degree of equality for Negroes and female employees can be detected in any sampling of civilian employment data. Looking at just the top of the iceberg, how many of our 149 supergrades are held by Negroes? None. How many by women? Three. Out of 425 GS-15's, how many Negroes? Five.

What, specifically, can be done at NSA? We must search out new patterns, new ways of going about recruitment, placement, job assignments, and promotion, at all levels. Above all, we must provide the training that is fundamental to advancement. We must develop positive

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approaches that go beyond the simple absence of discrimination.

At NSA, equal employment opportunity will become a reality only if this goal can be achieved: the promises in our rhetoric must be reflected in selections for schools, fellowships and scholarships, in training, in overseas assignments, in assignments to supervisory positions, committees, etc. Of course they must also be reflected in promotion statistics concurrently with the above meas-

ures—and increasingly as these measures take effect. Only then will the Agency have achieved what President Johnson described at the White House Conference on EEO in 1965: "... a day when Americans of every color, and every creed, and every religion, and every region, and every sex can be trained for decent employment, can find it, can secure it, can have it preserved, and can support their families in an enriching and a rewarding environment."

Non - Responsive

