

Federal and Postal Job Scams

Federal and postal job scams are among the biggest rackets in employment, preying on consumers who are unemployed or underemployed and can least afford to be "taken." But the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is working to protect consumers by tracking down and stopping companies that make deceptive claims about federal and postal jobs.

Gregory Ashe, an FTC attorney, says that by placing ads, the companies deceptively imply that jobs are available. This deception can continue in the sales pitch job seekers get when they call a company for more information. In addition, he says, the companies often deceive applicants into thinking that purchasing their materials will improve their employment chances.

"There's a lot of misrepresentation about what job seekers will get for their money," Ashe says. "There are plenty of folks who don't realize that there's no single Civil Service exam, that most federal jobs don't require a test and that federal employment information is available for free."

It's not illegal to sell information about federal jobs, but it is illegal to misrepresent what's being offered. Based on the number of complaints filed with the FTC's Consumer Response Center and the nation's Better Business Bureaus, many people believe that they've been deceived. For example:

- A woman earning minimum wage at an Indiana grocery store saw an employment ad as a springboard to a better-paying job with good benefits. She spent almost \$80 for a worthless packet because of company claims that buying the materials was the only way to get hired.
- In Georgia, a man responding to a postal job ad agreed to buy a postal exam study booklet and a description of jobs available, only to learn how infrequently the postal exam is actually given. And he never even received the postal job information he had paid almost \$160 for.
- A Texas woman called a company's toll free number to find out about Park Ranger jobs in Colorado and ended up buying an information packet for \$39. She declined the postal job materials the company pitched her but received them anyway, along with an unauthorized charge on her credit card.

When these and other victims called the companies for the refund guaranteed if the job seeker was not hired, their calls were transferred to a voice mail black hole.

Lydia Parnes, acting director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection, stresses it's not necessary for consumers to pay for information about job vacancies with the US government or the Postal Service.

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Federal agencies and the Postal Service never charge application fees or guarantee a hire. And although the Postal Service requires applicants to take a test, it typically offers free sample questions and study materials.

In addition, Parnes says it's deceptive for anyone to guarantee that a person will get any particular score on the postal entrance exams or that a high score means someone will get a job.

The FTC, the US Office of Personnel Management and the US Postal Service caution consumers to watch out for:

- Classified ads or verbal sales pitches implying an affiliation with the federal government, guaranteeing high test scores or jobs, or stating, "no experience necessary."
- Ads that offer information about "Hidden" or unadvertised federal jobs.
- Ads that refer to a toll free phone number. Often, an operator encourages the caller to buy a booklet containing job listings, practice test questions and entrance exam tips.
- Toll-free numbers that direct consumers to other pay per call numbers for more information. Under federal law, any solicitations for these numbers must contain full disclosures about the cost. The solicitations also must make clear any affiliation with the federal government. The caller must have the chance to hang up before incurring charges.

In closing, postal job information is available at post offices. In many areas, the Postal Service offers a job information hotline with current hiring announcements.

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