Focus on diversity

Government jobs offer solid careers for African American techies

Some are senior-level, some in the middle ranks, but all these professionals have put their skills to work in years of top-notch service.

“Our hiring programs have begun to attract a superb cadre of professionals with no letup in sight.” – Rick Stradford, Department of State

Angela M. Hutchinson
Contributing Editor

Corporate jobs in technology can pay very handsomely, but many companies are downsizing these days. While a government post may not offer the same salary as private industry, it usually offers much better job security. Many folks consider this the really big benefit of working in government, especially the Federal government.

“I believe that one of the main reasons why technology professionals choose to work for the Federal government is the stability it offers,” says Noemi Pizarro-Hyman, senior diversity recruitment advisor for the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). “In an unstable and uncertain job market, job security offers the peace of mind most people seek.”

In addition, government agencies welcome diversity. The DIA, says Pizarro-Hyman, “recognizes that valuing diversity raises employees’ level of comfort and enhances personal and working relations.” Differences among people, she says, “can be an asset to the agency.”

WorkforAmerica.com, a federal government jobsite, reports that in 2004 about 17.6 percent of federal government employees in all categories were African American, 7.6 percent Hispanic, 5.2 percent Asian/Pacific Islander and 1.9 percent Native American. The site also notes that minority employment with the feds has increased by better than 3 percent in the past decade.

The African American techies featured in this article are long-term professionals. They opted for work with the government, and have excelled at their jobs for many years.

Eugene Cole is a project controller at NRAO

Eugene Cole has more than thirty-four years of experience in R&D, engineering and construction. He’s worked in areas from maintenance to electronics, and has managed both heavy processing plant and civil construction.

He’s been with the National Radio Astronomy Observatory (NRAO, Charlottesville, VA) for more than twenty years. He’s currently working at the observatory’s Expanded Very Large Array (EVLA) radio telescope near Socorro, NM.
"The purpose of the project is to create an astronomical research instrument of unprecedented power and flexibility in the meter-to-millimeter wavelength bands," Cole explains. The EVLA instrument will be used by scientists from around the world for cutting-edge research. It's expected to provide new information about magnetic fields, cosmic sources in dusty regions, transient phenomena, even the formation of stars and galaxies.

EVLA is being built on the site of the mature Very Large Array (VLA) instrument, familiar to movie buffs as the radio telescopes in the film Contact. The current project will retain the antennas, array design and infrastructure of the VLA, but replace older systems with state-of-the-art electronics and software. This, says Cole, will increase its technical capacities by "at least an order of magnitude in every key observational area."

Cole oversees the EVLA budget and schedule, and helps the project manager determine performance indices. He provides estimate support data, makes cost studies and monitors project activities. He also evaluates potential delays and looks for mitigation strategies.

The EVLA refurbishment is a long-term project. It began in 2001 and won't be done for another few years. "In my mind that's a long time on any project," says Cole; "yet there is a wide palette of activity."

His daily face-to-face involvement with senior management, engineers, scientists and technicians "helps make my job easier," he says. "It's rewarding to know that I am a part of the team."

Cole's mother was a nurse and his father served in the U.S. Air Force. After high school Cole worked for a building contractor, then as an engineering clerk for a construction company. While working, he earned his AA in business admin at the College of San Mateo (San Mateo, CA).

He went on to a thirteen-year career in design and build, working for Sverdrup Corp on a design management project for the Arizona DOT, for Pacific Gas & Electric Co as a maintenance scheduler, for Kaiser Engineers as a cost/scheduling engineer and for Fluor Engineers and Constructors as a scheduler and cost estimator.

Then he joined NRAO. "I was hooked on what was being done at the observatory and haven't looked back," he says. "I like the New Mexico culture and its vast history. Just as the travel ads say, living here is somewhat enchanting."

NRAO is a small organization with about 600 employees spread over several facilities in Virginia, New Mexico and West Virginia in the U.S., plus one in Chile. "Gene was one of the first full-time African American professionals at the observatory. But in the last two years the contingent has seen a good increase," says Roy Norville, NRAO employment manager.

Cole believes it's very important for minorities "to enrich our understanding of the mechanisms of being technical professionals." To that end, he volunteers his time to attend conferences of groups like NSBE, spreading the word about the technical opportunities in the field of radio astronomy.

In his off time, Cole sings, plays the bass guitar, goes skiing, hiking and bicycling, and works as a licensed emergency medical technician. In his remaining spare time he's building a new home near Socorro, NM.

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