UNITED STATES OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT
Washington, DC 20415

The Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Heads and Acting Heads of Departments and Agencies

FROM: Scott Kupor, Director, U.S. Office of Personnel Management

DATE: November 9, 2026

RE: Issuance of Final Rule on Managing Senior Professional Performance

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The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) announces the issuance of its final regulations on Managing Senior Professional Performance, which are effective on November 18, 2026, and are accessible on the Federal Register website. The final rule creates a new subpart E in part 430 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, dedicated to senior professional (senior-level (SL) and scientific or professional (ST)) performance appraisal and removes senior professionals from their previous coverage under subpart B of part 430. Under these new regulations, the senior professional appraisal process will largely mirror the Senior Executive Service (SES) appraisal process. Among other things, the final rule eliminates separate senior professional appraisal programs, mandates quarterly progress reviews, allows any senior professional to request higher-level review of an initial summary rating regardless of rating level, and authorizes OPM to establish and enforce a standardized distribution of senior professional rating levels. The final rule also formalizes the role of the agency-level Performance Review Board (PRB), which now assumes responsibility for conducting the centralized review of proposed senior professional ratings and pay actions, as required under 5 CFR part 534, subpart E.

The sections below summarize the key changes made by the final rule and provide additional OPM guidance on implementing them.

I. Elimination of Senior Professional Appraisal Programs

Prior to this final rule, agencies managing senior professionals under subpart B of part 430 were required to develop both a performance appraisal system and an appraisal program under that system.[1] This two-tiered framework was ill-suited to the performance management needs of these high-level positions. The final rule eliminates the requirement for separate senior professional appraisal programs; agencies now need only a performance appraisal system. To align with changes made under the final rule, OPM will issue under separate cover an updated

[1] Under subpart B of part 430, an appraisal system is the framework of policies and parameters established by an agency, while an appraisal program is the specific procedures and requirements established under the policies and parameters of an agency appraisal system.

senior professional performance appraisal system and plan that encompasses all the policies, parameters, procedures, and requirements necessary for OPM approval and that is consistent with the criteria for performance appraisal system certification under subpart D of part 430. Furthermore, agencies are no longer required to submit OPM Form 1631 with requests for approval of their senior professional performance appraisal systems.

II. Quarterly Progress Reviews

The final rule increases the required frequency of progress reviews from at least once per appraisal period to at least quarterly. During each progress review, rating officials must inform senior professionals how well they are performing against their performance plans, provide advice and assistance on improving performance, and may discuss available development opportunities.

III. Higher-Level Review

Prior to this final rule, a Level 1 ("Unacceptable") rating of record required mandatory review and approval by a higher-level management official. The final rule replaces this narrow requirement with a process that mirrors SES higher-level review: any senior professional may request review of his or her initial summary rating by a higher-level official before the rating is forwarded to the PRB. The higher-level reviewing official may not change the initial summary rating but may recommend a different rating to the PRB. This expanded review opportunity, combined with PRB oversight, provides more robust procedural safeguards than the previous mandatory Level 1 review requirement.

IV. Standardized Distribution of Senior Professional Rating Levels

The final rule removes the prohibition on forced, or standardized, distribution of performance ratings for senior professionals and authorizes OPM to establish, and refine as needed, a standardized distribution of some or all rating levels which agencies must apply when rating their senior professionals.

Beginning with the closeout of the fiscal year (FY) 2026 senior professional appraisal cycle, agencies will be required to adhere to the OPM-established standardized distribution requirements set forth in annual guidance.[2] OPM recognizes that in extraordinary circumstances, an agency's actual performance outcomes may warrant a senior professional ratings distribution exceeding the established caps. In such cases, the agency may submit a request for waiver of the distribution caps using the template included in the annual guidance memorandum.[3]

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[2] OPM, *FY 2026 Standardized Distribution of Rating Levels and FY 2026 Performance Awards Guidance for Federal Employees* (Sept. 21, 2026).
[3] *Id.*

In accordance with 5 CFR 430.505(d), OPM excludes senior professionals appointed under Schedules C or G in the excepted service from standardized distribution requirements. Agencies should not include these appointees when calculating their senior professional rating limits.

V. The Role of the Performance Review Board (PRB)

Prior to this final rule, the centralized review of proposed senior professional ratings and pay actions required under 5 CFR part 534, subpart E, was conducted by a separate panel designated by the agency head. The final rule consolidates this function within the agency-level PRB under 5 CFR 430.511. Now, agencies that are subject to the Senior Executive Service and have ten or more senior professionals must use their established agency-level PRB to fulfill the centralized review requirements for senior professionals under 5 CFR part 534, subpart E. Agencies that are not subject to the Senior Executive Service and have ten or more senior professionals must establish a body equivalent to the PRB for this purpose. Agencies with fewer than ten senior professionals are not required to conduct centralized review.

This change enhances the integrity and efficiency of senior professional performance management by vesting centralized review authority in a single, experienced body with an agency-wide perspective. The PRB, or its equivalent, is responsible for making written recommendations to the approving official on senior professional ratings of record, performance awards, and pay adjustments. To fulfill these responsibilities, the PRB must review the rating official's initial summary rating, the senior professional's written response (if any), and the findings of any higher-level review. Additionally, the PRB, or its equivalent, is responsible for conducting senior professional rating calibration in accordance with its agency-established procedures and ensuring that the rating recommendations it submits to the approving official are consistent with OPM-established standardized distribution rating caps.

VI. Next Steps

To assist agencies with implementing these regulations, OPM is providing the attachments listed below containing the final rule, Q&A, a policy template, and a part 430 regulatory comparison matrix. Additional guidance and communication materials will be forthcoming, including updated Governmentwide performance appraisal systems and plans for SES and senior professional appraisal systems. Agencies should implement the updated Governmentwide Senior Professional Performance Appraisal System and Plan for **FY 2027 and beyond**, in accordance with OPM guidance. OPM is also currently updating the SL/ST Desk Guide with conforming edits and anticipates its release in early 2027.

Agency headquarters-level human resources offices may contact OPM at SESPolicy@opm.gov. Component-level human resources offices must contact their agency headquarters for assistance. Employees must contact their agency human resources office for assistance.

cc: Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCOs), Deputy CHCOs, Human Resources Directors, and Chiefs of Staff

Attachments:

Managing Senior Professional Performance Final Rule

Questions and Answers on 5 CFR part 430, subpart E Final Rule

Policy Template: Senior Professional Performance Management

Federal Performance Appraisal Systems: Regulatory Comparison Matrix