

A life's worth of lessons from three decades in civil service

BY JOHN TILDEN

I recently retired from a career in the U.S. executive branch. I started with the Social Security Administration four days after I graduated from the State University of New York at Binghamton and retired 31 years and two months later.

In 1991, I knew one thing for certain — I did not want to go back and live with my parents on Long Island after graduation. I was finishing a liberal arts degree. I got notice of a job posting to be a claims representative for the SSA. My grades were good enough that I could be hired under something called the “Outstanding Scholar Program” without taking any placement test. I filed, was called to interview, and, to my surprise, I was offered a position a few days after that. I had a job after college with my English degree!

I was the first new hire in my office in almost 12 years, and at age 22 the youngest in the office by far. I concentrated on learning the job, how to deal with those who would show up into the office to file for benefits, and to provide “world-class service.”

After three years, I was able to get a transfer to our central office outside of Baltimore and moved into computer support work, first hands-on, and then as a manager supporting applications and security architectures. I had started a career that used a deep technical skill set that I learned largely on the job.

In the mid-2010s, anti-fraud controls became a politically charged issue. I was lucky enough to work in a newly organized component dealing with anti-fraud specifically. Over the next seven years I exercised everything I'd learned up until then about being a project manager, supervisor, mentor, promoter, negotiator and presenter. One of those project management duties was overseeing the implementation and growth of a series of major anti-fraud controls.

I'm very proud that this last set of co-workers, who can't really talk about their work to friends and family, are responsible for having saved hundreds of millions of dollars from being stolen from the American public. They are still at work doing so.

When I realized that the daily grind of the job was starting to get to me, I remembered again that I didn't want to become that guy who put in less than his best. With the onset of the COVID pandemic, we had moved to working 100% from home. It was nice not to commute, but I grew to realize how much I missed human contact instead of just speaking on a headset all day long.

I put in my retirement papers; shockingly easy after a career filing many papers and reports.

I had some people say some genuinely nice things about me at my farewell, and the one that meant the most was an email that was sent to me by someone I didn't work with every day, a new employee who had been in my office less than a year.

"You made an immediate impression on me as a dedicated, kind civil servant ... down to earth, compassionate, and interested in the best intentions for the Administration. I remember the night after we met, I told my husband that I think I met the person I'm going to be in about twenty years."

I earned many awards in my career, but that paragraph means more to me than all of them.

I learned from many people over my career the right way to do things — front-line interviewers who made the person on the other side of the desk feel listened to; programmers who worked through their lunchtime to get something done that was needed that afternoon; managers who praised people for their work, deflected credit to their teams and fought for budget increases in hard times after years of being cut.

It's a sad fact of government work at a program level that you rarely get a chance to know if what you are doing is having an impact. It was gratifying to know that I left the agency having done some good, and that I had been a positive influence on a few people.

As you deal with your government at all levels, particularly in this new post-COVID-pandemic world we all live in, please do me a favor: Give that next civil servant you interact with the chance to show you the compassion and skills that most of them take pride in, day in and day out. I have faith that you will be rewarded much more often than be disappointed.

John Tilden (retired@tildens.net) recently retired from the Social Security Administration and continues to believe in servant leadership through example.