

## **Joint Secretary level posts vacant at Central Government**

The shortage of officers at the centre has become so visible that the DoPT in a candid acknowledgment of the shrinking pool asked the states to 'share the shortage'.

There are very few officers to fill up the key posts in the Narendra Modi-government. This is showing up in alarming numbers.

Every year since 2014, the number of joint secretary-level posts left untenanted has risen and "could affect the performance of the government", said an officer with knowledge of the trend. In the Indian government scheme of functioning, when the joint secretary assumes the role of chief executive officer (CEO) for a department, "she carries the institutional memory of the department as she holds the post for five years", said GK Pillai, former home secretary in the central government.

As compared to only nine vacancies for the joint secretary-level posts carried over to the next year from December 2013, the number had jumped to 14 by December 2015, according to records maintained by the department of personnel and training (DoPT). Worse, is the intra-year trend. In May 2013, the number of unfilled vacancies were only 11. But, by May the following year this number had risen to 14 and then to 24 by May 2015. This year in May the number has shot up to 35. The number of joint secretary-level posts which are likely to be carried over to the next year already looks uncomfortable.

## EMPLOYEE CRUNCH

	2013	2014	2015	2016
JS level vacancy as on 31 May	11	14	24	35
JS level vacancy as on 31 Dec	9	11	14	–
Director level vacancy 31 Dec	54	73	88	75
Shortlisted candidates*	42	46	113	83

Source: Department of personnel and training; JS: Joint secretary

\* Director level

## FACT SHEET

Cadre	Total authorised IAS posts	Actual strength	Proportionate CDR	No of officers at Centre	% of CDR
Andhra Pradesh	211	168	36	16	44
Karnataka	314	228	49	18	36
Madhya Pradesh	417	325	70	28	40
Maharashtra	361	276	59	21	35
Tamil Nadu	376	283	60	31	51
Uttar Pradesh	621	498	107	69	64
Bihar	342	212	45	33	73
West Bengal	359	244	53	22	41

Source: Department of personnel and training. CDR: central deputation reserve

To put a perspective to these numbers, every year about 90 officers of the rank of joint secretary move out from their posts in the [central government](#) in favour of promotions from the immediate-level-below of directors. And in a sign of deepening stress, even that supply line has got stretched. Till 2014, data from the department of personnel and training (DoPT), shows it had been shortlisting on an average 45 officers to be promoted to the rank of directors from the central government's feeder services. As the availability of officers above has diminished, the department too has had to soften the rules for postings as directors. "Keeping in view large number of vacancies in the grade of director and want of eligible officers - the competent authority - has relaxed the eligibility condition for promotion", an office memorandum issued in 2014 noted.

It did have a salutary effect but only for a year. A record 113 officers became ready to join as directors. This order though was acted more like a vacuum cleaner on the supply line of junior officers, to then dry it up once again in subsequent years. In 2015 the department has just been able to meet the demand for 75 vacancies at the same level, with a candidate list of 83 candidates. Each year, there are several drop outs so the department is scouring the bottom of the line to just meet the pending demands from various ministries. Central government rules say that no officer can become joint secretary at the Centre, unless they have put in a full term as a director or deputy secretary in one of the central ministries. This problem is much larger than the shortage of officers at the top.

The shortage has become so visible that the DoPT, which handles the posting of officers in central government ministries, has in an unusually candid acknowledgment

of the shrinking pool, asked the states to "share the shortage proportionately with the Centre".

The instruction was sent out by the department to the state governments recently. "There is a general shortage of Indian administrative service (IAS) officers at deputy secretary/director level (at the centre) and, therefore, you may like to recommend a sufficiently large number". In the Indian administrative set up, most of the joint secretary-level posts at the central government, numbering 462, are assigned amongst the officers of the IAS.

These posts are distinct from the ones filled by officers of specialised services like revenue, railways and audit. IAS officers are allotted to the states and union territories from where they come on line to the Centre to take up assignments in various ministries. Every state assigns a percentage of its cadre officers to a pool known as the central deputation reserve (CDR). These officers, when they join the central government, are allowed a special promotion, and additional allowance known as deputation pay as an incentive to be assigned as joint secretaries to the various departments.

As an aside, the messaging of this letter was considered terse and on the same day it was reissued to the state governments but with the offending paragraph deleted. The original letter went on to add that the CDR as determined by the states is not just low, "most of the states fail to achieve (even) the proportionate CDR by a wide margin". Instead of the usual repetitive stuff that clutters such letters, this one cajoled and even threatened the state governments in turns to make them sponsor more officers for central duty. "You would agree that the movement of the officers from the states to the Centre and back is also crucial for building up the capabilities at the state level and contributing towards developing national perspectives at the decision-making levels in the government of India", it noted.

A perusal of the data on state wise CDRs show the validity for this resentment. Andhra Pradesh for instance is supposed to offer 36 officers to join as joint secretary, and as director at the Centre. As of March 31, 2015, there were only 16 officers from the state, a CDR utilisation rate of 44 per cent. Madhya Pradesh was supposed to provide 70 officers but had allowed only 28, making it just 40 per cent of the CDR. Of the ten large states with IAS officer cadre strength of 300 and above, seven have missed the CDR margin by a wide berth. This has its own insidious effect.

Two states with poor development records, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have sent a disproportionately larger number of officers for central deputation. In 2016, the Centre has been able to get only seven IAS officers from all states so far. In the absence of IAS and its feeder service cadres, officers from the central services have made a pitch with the committee of secretaries to allow more of them to join in the deputation posts. It has begun to happen, though the general secretary of the central services officers' association, Jayant Mishra says it is yet to gather steam. There are also issues, like the sad spectacle of a revenue service officer who secured a posting to suppress extremism in the central part of India. It didn't take long for him to get transferred. Pillai says as long as these officers are selected on merit, there would be no issues, "but at times the selection has been made because of desperation".

According to former Boston Consulting Group (BCG) India chief Arun Maira, these problems have cropped up because the Indian government does not have an effective human resource department. "It is the largest recruiter of managerial level people in the country and yet has an insufficient degree of competence to manage those people", he says. He says the cadre management ability of DoPT needs vast refurbishing to handle the challenges that a posting at the Centre means. The officers face increased workload and performance pressure, he said. Pillai agreed and pointed out that the higher workload would continue for another few years till the larger recruitment to the all India services, including IAS and Indian Police Service (IPS) reinstated since 2010 takes effect.

It was during his tenure as home secretary, when the government agreed to raise the intake for IAS reversing a decade of government downsizing. "There is clearly a build up of stress among the officers, meanwhile", Maira said. Not only are there less officers to step up to the role of CEO in the various government departments, those finally made available are also arriving at their posts after long gaps. This makes the department run on junior staff without any obvious sense of direction for quite some time. The finance ministry, for instance, has surrendered options to join sub-committees of the prestigious Financial Action Task Force because of lack of officers in the department of economic affairs. Maira says, unlike earlier, more IAS officers prefer to be posted in the states where they are assigned, instead of coming to the Centre.

As the Union ministries push their top officers to take on more responsibilities, the attraction of being posted to the Centre has visibly diminished. The other unstated reason is the rise in the transfers among the joint secretaries across various departments. This reduces the time when they are effectively in charge of a particular line of work reducing their satisfaction levels. In the past two years, data shows there has been a nearly 20 per cent rise in the change in the posting orders for joint secretary and senior level officers. It is a tough job being an officer in the central government ministries, now.