

Official Time Q&A

Q: What is official time?

A: Official time is the practice in which federal employees who are union representatives represent their coworkers on government time.

Q: Are employees on official time doing the union's business?

A: No. Union representatives are not allowed to use official time to conduct union-specific business, such as soliciting members, holding internal union meetings, electing union officers or engaging in partisan political activities.

Q: So what type of activities do employees on official time perform?

A: Employees are allowed to use official time only to perform representational activities. Such activities include creating fair promotional procedures, establishing flexible work hours, setting procedures that protect employees from on-the-job injuries, enforcing protections from unlawful discrimination, developing telework practices, providing workers with a voice in determining working conditions, and representing employees in grievances and disciplinary actions.

Q: Why doesn't the union pay for this representational work out of the dues it collects from members?

A: By law, federal employee unions are required to provide fair representation to all employees at the worksite, not just those employees who pay dues. Since the federal government is an open shop, meaning employees are not required to join the union, Congress established official time to ensure all employees would receive fair representation whether they belong to the union or not.

Q: Wouldn't it be cheaper to get rid of official time and have employees settle any disciplinary matters in court?

A: Not at all. In fact, official time is less expensive for taxpayers in the long run because it helps resolve conflicts that arise in the workplace without resorting to expensive and time-consuming administrative or legal procedures. Official time also gives agencies an easy way to include employee input into any mission-related challenges that agencies may face.

Q: Are there limits on much official time can be used by employee representatives?

A: Yes. The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 limits the amount of official time that can be used for representational responsibilities to what is deemed reasonable, necessary and in the public interest. The amount of time must be negotiated by the labor organization and the employing agency.