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Your biggest career mistake could happen before you realize you made it

Employment attorney Shaun Southworth shares practical advice for federal employees to protect their careers.



Alex Witt

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Fed Thread

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Most federal employees don't spend much time thinking about employment law until they have to. On this episode of *Fed Thread*, founder and CEO of Southworth PC, Shaun Southworth, had some eye-opening counsel to federal employees: the best way to protect



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Southworth says one of the costliest mistakes he sees feds make isn't necessarily making the wrong decision; it's waiting too long to make one.

When employees receive notice of a proposed disciplinary action or another serious personnel matter, the emotional weight of the moment can make it difficult to think clearly. Deadlines begin running immediately, paperwork gets set aside, and valuable response time slips away.

His advice to protect yourself? Know your deadlines before time runs out unannounced.

Make your paper trail while the sun shines

Southworth recommends that every federal employee keep copies of important employment documents throughout their career, not just when trouble starts. That includes SF-50s, recent performance reviews, performance plans, and even what he calls a "kudos file," or emails recognizing good work that you might otherwise delete without a second thought.

If concerns ever arise, he also recommends keeping a thoughtful chronology of events while remaining professional in every communication.

Not every workplace conflict is a legal problem

One thing you might not expect an attorney to say that Southworth did is that you don't need an attorney for everything.

In many situations, he encourages employees to first improve communication with their supervisor, approach conflicts intentionally, and understand whether they're dealing with a workplace disagreement or a genuine legal issue. Knowing the difference can save time, money, and unnecessary stress.

Know your rights before you need them

Whether discussing workplace investigations, whistleblower protections, or common misconceptions about federal employment, one theme kept resurfacing: preparation beats panic.

Federal employees should remember two things above all else, Southworth says; "watch your paper and watch your clock."

some of the most common but costly mistakes federal employees make, you'll want to hear the full conversation.

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Alex Witt

Alex Witt is host of the Federal News Network podcast **Fed Thread**, focused on federal employee work, wellness, benefits and finances.

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A photograph of two women walking towards the camera on a dirt path in a park. The woman on the left is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt and bright blue leggings. The woman on the right is wearing a pink long-sleeved shirt and dark blue leggings. They are both smiling. The path is surrounded by green grass and trees.



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