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Bill Van Note and his year with HUD: Learning how the government works

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"I think that with the expanding role of the federal government in the nation's economy it's important for everyone in the business community to learn as much as possible about how government works." That's how Washington partner Bill Van Note feels after spending a year with the Department of Housing and Urban Development as one of forty-six participants in the President's Executive Interchange Program.

The program, which was initiated in 1969, seeks to promote better mutual understanding between government and the private sector by bringing business executives into government and by allowing government employees to work in business for one year. The President's Commission on Personnel Interchange directs the operation and is assisted by a staff that scouts for potential candidates from business and government. "The program has several objectives," Bill explains. "In addition to encouraging a better working relationship between business and government, it provides executives with opportunities for professional growth and makes possible an exchange of management expertise and technical knowledge. This exchange is further enhanced when the executives return to their original positions and are able to share knowledge they have acquired with their colleagues. A long-range goal of the program is to develop a group of executives within the business community who could be called on to serve government in the future, either on advisory panels or in appointive positions."

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Bill Van Note
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Executive Interchange Program through Lou MacKenzie, partner in charge of the Washington National Affairs office. "In order to be considered for participation in the program," Bill pointed out, "a person must be nominated to the Commission's staff by a senior executive officer of his organization. Lou felt that both H&S and I could benefit enormously from the kind of close-up view of government that the program would give me."

Bill's association with the Washington office and with government began when the Firm was chosen to make a study of the accounting system of the United States Navy in 1970. Although he was with the Philadelphia office at the time, Bill was asked to participate as a consultant on the engagement and spent a good deal of time commuting between the two cities before he transferred to Washington in 1971, the year he became a manager. A native of Raleigh, North Carolina, Bill began his career with H&S in the Rochester office, after graduating from Clarkson College with a BBA in 1961. Bill developed an interest in management advisory services which was encouraged by Gordon Murray, and in 1966 he transferred to Philadelphia where he became part of that office's MAS team.

"I spent nearly five years on the Navy engagement," Bill recalls, "and it really sparked my interest in governmental affairs. So when Lou MacKenzie mentioned the possibility of my working in government for a year via the Executive Interchange Program, I considered it a golden opportunity to learn more about an area that I found intriguing."

After a series of interviews, Bill was

Worksheets required to prepare month-end fiscal reports for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Congress, Treasury Department and the Office of Management and Budget are reviewed by Bill Van Note (seated) and Roger B. Waller, chief of the Loans Branch, Low Rent Program Accounting Division, General and Program Accounting, Office of Finance and Accounting.

offered positions in four federal agencies. "I settled on HUD for several reasons," he explains. "First of all, the job description — which involved doing a study of the department's accounting system and making recommendations for change — was interesting and seemed particularly well suited to my background as a consultant. Also, considering HUD's heavy influence on the development of American cities, I felt it would be extremely worthwhile to learn as much about the department as possible. Another reason for my decision was the fact that my supervisor at HUD would be Fred Wyant, with whom I had worked when he was a project director with the Navy Department. I was greatly impressed with Fred's abilities at that time and decided that I could profit from further association with him."

Although the Navy engagement had given Bill some government experience, he found that it wasn't especially helpful when he began his assignment with HUD in June 1976. "I thought I might have a running jump on understanding the workings of the bureaucracy by virtue of my past experience," he recalls, "but the organization of HUD was so different from that of the Navy, that I had to spend the first several weeks studying the basic clerical operations of the department. Originally, the department intended for me to spend most of my time making a study of its accounting system, which was largely a manual operation, in order to assess its efficiency and effectiveness and determine future moves toward automation. At that time, however, HUD was just beginning to

implement section 8 of the U.S. Housing Act of 1937 as amended in 1974, and the amount of paperwork connected with the new regulations was staggering. So I ended up spending six to eight months developing an accounting-system design that could provide better information and relieve some of this paperwork."

Bill pointed out that the Department of Housing and Urban Development is relatively young compared with other governmental agencies. "It was formed in 1965," he explains, "and has two major roles — the insuring of mortgages, the function of the Federal Housing Administration, and the appropriation of funds for community development and public housing. The government's approach to financing public housing was radically changed by the enactment of section 8. Previously, funds had been used for the construction of low-income housing. The new law allows families to find housing on their own, and federal funds can be used to help pay the rent. So section 8 changed the face of assisted housing at HUD, and I spent a lot of my time trying to help HUD officials develop an understanding of the financial information needed to run the program effectively and trying to determine ways to reduce some of the red tape involved in implementing the new regulations. Once that was accomplished, I worked with a project team on developing a general design for a new assisted-housing accounting system for HUD."

In addition to his everyday duties at HUD, Bill was able to gain insights into governmental affairs through a number of meetings and seminars spon-



Bill Van Note (r.) and Frederick E. Wyant, director of General and Program Accounting for HUD, discuss Bill's progress on development of new program to automate payments for assisted housing amid some of the manual accounting records presently maintained by the agency.

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sored by the Executive Interchange Program. The Commission holds a one-week orientation meeting for all participants in the fall, and in the spring the executives attend a wind-up session where they discuss and evaluate their experiences. There are also weekly meetings in Washington where speakers such as Senator Barry Goldwater, Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall and *Washington Post* executive editor Ben Bradlee give participants a clearer idea of the people who run and influence government.

"I learned a great deal from talking to other people at these meetings," Bill says. "I was especially impressed by the discussions held during a two-week seminar we attended in Europe. These meetings with officials of foreign governments demonstrated to Interchange Program participants the importance of the United States to the world economy. They also pointed out the growing economic interdependence among nations."

At the end of their year in government or business, the executives are asked to fill out questionnaires evaluating their experiences. Bill's reaction is very positive. "Although time limitations prevented me from accomplishing all I'd hoped to at HUD," he comments, "the year was certainly well spent. I think that the knowledge I've acquired will be most valuable to me in continuing my consulting work at H&S. Our clients are required to respond to an increasing number of government regulations, and I think that the understanding of government processes I gained at HUD will enable me to serve their needs more effectively." ○