

Attracting the best

Article at a glance

Baby boomers throughout the public sector are beginning to retire, creating a rare opportunity for the US government to increase the caliber of its employees.

To compete successfully with private-sector employers, government agencies must change their recruiting approach in four ways: prioritize talent management, make a compelling case for public-sector employment, develop targeted recruiting strategies, and streamline the hiring process.

Using this approach, the US government will be able to recruit the talent it needs to fundamentally reshape its workforce for the longer term.

In the pursuit of top talent, the US government faces stiff competition from private-sector employers. But with the right approach, government agencies can attract high-caliber individuals to careers in public service.

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Widespread retirement in the US public sector, like most crises, presents an opportunity as well as a challenge. On the one hand, the government faces the task of persuading legions of talented individuals to work in the public sector rather than take up more lucrative private-sector alternatives. On the other hand, the impending exodus presents a rare chance to increase the caliber of government employees.

The challenge of attracting capable individuals to public service is certainly not insuperable, as nations such as France and Singapore have shown. In both countries, civil-service jobs have historically been among the most sought after, and many young people aspire to attend the prestigious schools that lead to government posts. The US public sector does not have quite the same allure, but recent surveys indicate that the appeal of public service is beginning to increase—suggesting that the government can indeed attract high-quality talent.¹

Over the past two years, we have conducted many interviews with current and former government employees and people who work in government-focused think tanks or not-for-profit organizations. Based on these interviews and our work with several government agencies, we identified four changes that could substantially enhance the US government’s ability to acquire top talent. First, agency leaders must make talent management a priority. Second, they must make a more compelling case for government employment, emphasizing its many advantages—including interesting work, attractive benefits, job security, and upward mobility. Third, they should develop specific

¹ *Back to School: Rethinking Federal Recruiting on College Campuses*, Partnership for Public Service, May 2006; “The appeal of public service: Who... what... and how?” The Council for Excellence in Government, May 2008.

strategies to source a wider range of candidates, rather than the generic recruiting approach we generally see. Finally, they must modernize and streamline the hiring process.

Prioritize talent management

Several people we interviewed observed that senior government officials prioritize policy making over talent management and other managerial aspects of their jobs. One noted that the head of her agency “says all the right things about talent” but ends up distracted by policy issues.

Just as government officials generally fail to devote enough time to determining and carrying out a talent strategy, so too do most fail to hold their teams accountable for ensuring that the right people are in place. Many agencies treat recruitment as a purely process-oriented function to be left to HR. In one large government organization, hundreds of people focus entirely on the recruiting process; fewer than ten think about recruiting strategy. When senior executives do engage on talent issues, they tend to check boxes—is the agency hitting its hiring targets?—rather than tackle strategic questions.

Former US Secretary of State Colin Powell is widely credited with transforming the State Department’s talent-management practices. He increased the department’s recruiting budget more than tenfold, sought additional resources from Congress to make it easier for employees to do their jobs (for example, through training and by getting Internet access on their computers, often less straightforward in government departments than in corporations), and changed the evaluation process so that employees’ management capabilities—not just their intellectual and technical skills—were considered in promotion decisions. Employees at all levels talked about how these changes motivated them. In a ranking of the best places to work among 30 large government agencies, the State Department moved from 19th place in 2003 to 6th place in 2007, suggesting that the impact has extended beyond Secretary Powell’s tenure.²

Other agency leaders have personally involved themselves in upgrading the quality of their talent pools. For example, at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which has hired more than 2,000 new analysts since September 11, 2001, Director Robert Mueller has put in place an ambitious program to attract talented analysts and strengthen their training and development. All agencies should make talent a top priority and adopt best practices of the kind the State Department and the FBI have pioneered.

Make a compelling case

Many interviewees were frustrated that the government does not always clearly communicate the advantages of its own jobs. Some advantages are well known: generous benefits and job security. Potential candidates may know less about the opportunities for advancement, interesting and meaningful work, and the flexibility that is becoming more important as more people seek a healthy work–life balance.

Where the benefits of public-sector work are well known, the government should ensure that the details are understood by the kinds of candidates it wishes to attract and that these candidates realize how few companies offer a similar range of benefits: retirement

²The rankings, produced by the Partnership for Public Service and American University’s Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation, drew on responses from more than 221,000 civil servants in 283 government organizations.

savings plans, group life insurance, generous leave and vacation allowances (23 to 36 paid days off, not including sick days, compared with an average of 17 to 27 days in the private sector), and—perhaps most important—comprehensive and affordable health insurance.

Job security is likely to increase in importance to prospective candidates in a slowing economy. According to the Department of Labor, annual turnover in the US government is 7 to 8 percent, compared with 22 to 27 percent in the private sector.

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Better yet, this job security comes with career-advancement opportunities—resulting not only from the coming wave of retirements but also from emerging needs for expertise in areas such as high tech and national security. The government has also adopted some performance-based promotion schemes to supplement the traditional grade-based system. For example, the Presidential Management Fellows Program includes an accelerated promotion track.

There are also other kinds of benefits. Government employees often work at the cutting edge of a broad range of issues. A new lawyer might find himself immediately litigating voting-rights violations and participating in complex cases that a lawyer in private practice would wait years to handle. An accountant might be deployed to untangle new kinds of tax shelters. An engineer could work on designing mine-worker safety guidelines. Few employers offer less experienced workers equivalent opportunities to make an impact.

Finally, the government should emphasize job flexibility, which is greater in government service than in most of the private sector. Many agencies allow employees to fit 80-hour pay periods into eight days and take the other two days off. Family-friendly working options such as telecommuting, flexible work schedules, and part-time and job-sharing positions, combined with the availability of child care resources, will be attractive to a wide range of candidates—especially midlevel employees with families.

How should the case for government work be made? First, government literature can be improved, in style as well as content. When one agency translated employment materials from government jargon into language that laymen would understand, candidates expressed greater interest in government jobs. Other simple recruiting tactics that agencies should always use—but often overlook—include keeping HR materials up to date, ensuring that information on USAjobs.gov is complete and accurate, and providing links, resources, and contacts for applicants seeking additional information.

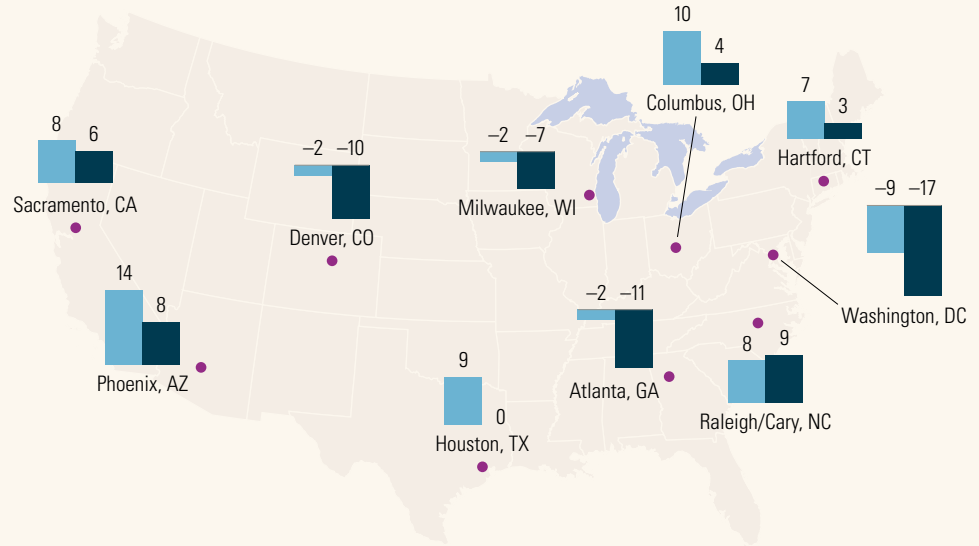
More creative possibilities should also be considered. One of the most effective ways to excite applicants about public service is to connect them with public-sector employees with similar backgrounds. “Applicant like” recruiters—for example, freshly minted

Exhibit
Salary competitiveness varies

The government offers more competitive wages than private employers in a number of metro areas.

Average annual public-sector salary in selected US cities, % difference from private-sector average

■ Accountant¹ ■ Accountant, managerial level²



¹Average salary defined as pay grade 11, step 5.
²Average salary defined as pay grade 13, step 5.
 Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics; IRS data

lawyers targeting law students or rookie analysts reaching out to aspiring analysts—generate significantly more interest from applicants because they allow applicants to visualize themselves in the job. We have found, for example, that public-sector employees in their twenties who give on-campus talks about their work and professional impact draw 50 to 100 percent more job applications than the standard career-fair booth manned by an HR manager or two.

Develop targeted strategies

Government agencies need a wide range of skills and capabilities, many of which are quite specialized. Too often, however, they rely on applicants to seek out government jobs rather than proactively identifying and targeting talent. When they are proactive, they usually recruit from nearby campuses or the total labor market in major metropolitan areas such as Washington or New York. We believe the government would benefit by recruiting more aggressively and casting a wider net, with regard both to where it looks for talent and to the kinds of candidates it seeks to attract.

Our research shows that in certain regions, the government has a competitive advantage over other employers. For instance, government accountants are paid at least 4 percent

more than private-sector accountants in about a dozen metro areas, including Phoenix, Arizona; Columbus, Ohio; and Raleigh, North Carolina (exhibit). By shifting some accounting jobs from Washington—where government salaries tend to be lower than private-sector salaries—to one of these other markets, agencies can more easily attract talented accountants. Nor should government agencies restrict themselves to cities. In college towns or smaller towns near one or more universities, the government is particularly likely to be able both to find high-quality talent and to offer competitive compensation.

Moving a department's operations to a small town is not unknown in the public sector. The Bureau of the Public Debt (BPD) moved more than 700 jobs from Washington to Parkersburg, West Virginia (close to both West Virginia University and Ohio Valley University), between 1992 and 1996, in part because it could not recruit enough accountants and computer specialists in the DC area. Time and again, good candidates accepted more lucrative jobs. Today, BPD is among the most attractive employers in Parkersburg. We know of at least one other government agency considering transferring certain IT-related jobs from metropolitan offices to a smaller city to attract higher-caliber candidates.

To make a broader approach to sourcing talent effective, agencies should also tailor the way they communicate their value proposition to people at three important points in the professional life cycle: junior employees, midlevel managers, and executives late in their career. For example, the Justice Department positions itself to new law-school graduates as an ideal place to start a legal career because a stint there is impressive to private-sector employers. Other agencies could use a similar strategy to attract new entrants. For midlevel hires, agencies should approach experienced midcareer professionals whose interests and needs are well matched to the flexibility and benefits that government jobs offer. For late-career hires, retirees—who bring deep skills and long experience to the job on day one—can be strong candidates. A recent survey³ found that many baby boomers are seeking “purpose driven” work; the government is extremely well positioned to fill this need, as well as to provide employee benefits important to boomers, such as comprehensive, affordable health insurance and flexible working arrangements.

We see public-sector recruiters beginning to court retirees from both government and the private sector more aggressively. The Office of Federal Procurement Policy is encouraging agencies to take advantage of legislation that allows government retirees to fill “critical vacancies” without disrupting their pensions. And a pilot program launched by IBM, the US Treasury Department, and the Partnership for Public Service aims to draw IBM retirees into federal service by making IBM employees aware of Treasury vacancies before they retire and by advising them on the federal hiring process.

As part of their strategy for sourcing talent, government agencies must tailor not only their recruiting messages but also the channels they use to communicate with the constituencies they are trying to attract, and they should move away from the one-size-fits-all recruiting approach that most agencies take. Market research (for example,

³ MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures Encore Career Survey, June 2008.

focus groups, surveys) and partnerships with other organizations can help agencies determine the right channels and refine their messages. For example, to target retirees more effectively, agencies can partner with the AARP and employers that, like IBM, have programs to help retiring workers transition into new careers.

Streamline the hiring process

The hiring process should demonstrate at every step that the government is a modern, thoughtful employer. Our interviewees suggested that agencies should simplify their recruitment and hiring processes, use better techniques to evaluate applicants, and communicate more effectively with candidates about the status of their applications.

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In many cases, the documents required for government job applications bear no relation to those typically required for private-sector or not-for-profit positions, which means applicants must start from scratch when assembling materials. Furthermore, job-application requirements vary across agencies. These burdens contrast with the streamlined hiring practices of corporations and not-for-profit organizations—and even governments elsewhere. The British Civil Service has a user-friendly application process, with a series of tests and a universal assessment from which candidates can be matched to positions in a number of different departments.

The complexity of submitting applications is not the only problem; unsophisticated applicant screening is also an issue. Our interviewees noted that many public-sector recruiters are poor at assessing candidates' strengths and weaknesses. Candidates who look terrific on paper can disappoint in practice. To predict job performance more accurately, all agencies could apply techniques such as cognitive exams and structured interviews, which are already in use at some agencies, including the State Department and the FBI.

The cognitive exam is typically a written test designed to measure a candidate's intrinsic skills, particularly those related to the job in question. The FBI's cognitive exam for special agents, for instance, assesses mathematical reasoning and knowledge, data analysis and interpretation skills, attention to detail, and ability to evaluate information.

A structured interview is one in which the employer asks precisely the same questions of every candidate for a particular position—questions directly related to the job and its specific requirements. Although many managers believe they can recognize talent when they see it, evidence suggests that doing well in an unstructured interview—in which the employer asks general questions about a candidate's academic or professional experience—does not always translate into strong job performance.

Once strong candidates have been identified, they should be encouraged in every way to accept an offer. Talented applicants typically have several offers to consider; their



experience as candidates for government jobs should heighten their appetite for public service, not diminish it. Even simple things, such as regularly updating candidates on the status of their applications, can reduce the likelihood that a candidate will pursue opportunities elsewhere. Agencies might also create a buddy system, in which candidates are encouraged to approach particular employees with any questions they may have. We have seen such programs successfully engage candidates, with a small investment of time on the part of current employees—many of whom are invigorated by the knowledge that they are helping to usher in the next generation.

One area not comprehensively addressed here is the pay gap, an issue that makes the government less competitive for certain positions, particularly senior-management jobs. Government agencies may not be able to afford across-the-board increases in compensation, but they can adopt market-based pay and pay-for-performance schemes in certain areas. They should identify the most important job categories and, as some agencies have successfully done, secure the legislative authority to introduce financial incentives and adjust their pay schedules.

Over the coming years, the US government will lose an enormous number of workers. By implementing the ideas we have outlined, it can fill these vacancies with highly capable individuals. Not only would this address the short-term challenge, it would also fundamentally reshape the government talent pool for the longer term. ●

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