

Public and Social Sector Practice

Transforming the US government's approach to hiring digital talent

Attracting digital talent to government jobs has been a challenge, with consequences felt throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Leaders can rethink their approach to build resilience for future crises.

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The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that having the right people in place is critical in adapting to and managing a national crisis. It has also highlighted the growing role of technology in reaching citizens and ensuring continuity of essential services in a time of emergency. Moreover, it is increasingly clear that some of the new behaviors employees and citizens alike are adopting are here to stay (for example, applying for benefits online, adopting digital financial tools, working from anywhere). But government has struggled to acquire individuals with digital skills who can make the most of this technology—and thus has had to scramble during this crisis not only to adopt new digital tools and technology but also to have workers use them productively and to support and maintain them.

Indeed, while pockets of elite technology talent exist at the federal level, the civil service as a whole struggles to competitively recruit many roles of increasing importance—including full-stack developers, UX designers, AI engineers, analytic translators, and data scientists. Not only is the

government struggling to acquire emerging digital talent, but it is also on the cusp of losing decades of institutional knowledge, expertise, and experience to civil service retirements. As of 2018, approximately 4.5 times as many civil servants in IT roles were over age 60 than under age 30—a gap that has more than doubled in the past decade (exhibit).

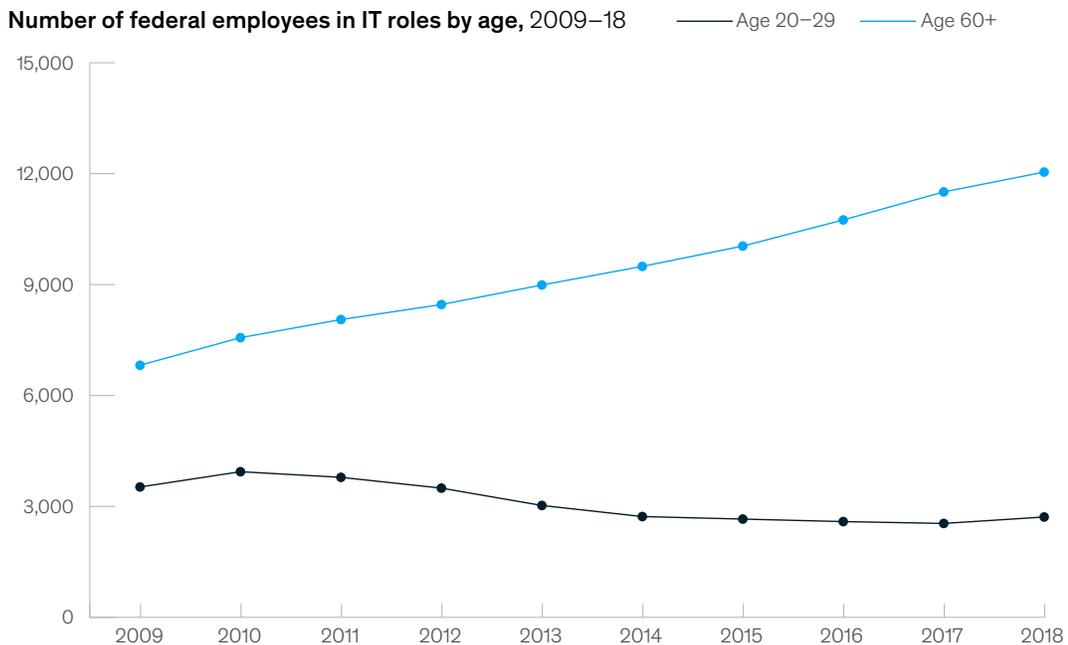
This trend is unlikely to reverse organically, as the very people the federal government needs are in high demand in the private sector. The opportunity is ripe to reconstitute the civil service as a younger, more agile corps through a shift toward better sourcing and hiring of digital talent. And in so doing, the federal government can build resilience for future crises.

A new approach to securing digital talent

Much of the discussion surrounding federal hiring centers on creating “silver bullets” to allow the government to hire more dynamically with sweeping new authorities or significant policy changes.

Exhibit

The number of federal IT employees has become heavily skewed by age.



Source: NextGov; US Office of Personnel Management

Such fixes are rarely implemented quickly. That conversation also overlooks the practical steps available to federal executives and senior managers to control their own destiny with respect to hiring. We see three practical steps agency leaders can take to transform how they source, hire, and onboard digital talent: rethink where and how you source top digital talent, elevate mission and impact as the value proposition instead of longevity and stability, and build an efficient onboarding process that inspires confidence and emphasizes transparency.

Rethink where and how you source top digital talent

Federal agencies cannot rely on existing tools to attract digital talent. The lengthy path to a government job today may not be daunting enough to deter the committed federal jobseeker, but it is far too cumbersome to retain the focus of someone with in-demand skills or a more casual interest in public service. As such, the federal government faces significant—but addressable—gaps in both its digital and in-person approaches to sourcing top talent.

Federal hiring platforms tend to reflect the complexity of the federal hiring process and lack key features of best-in-class job sites. These platforms tend to lack the predictive analytics that enable automated recommendations of vacancies to applicants based on their past activity or qualifications.¹ And job descriptions for federal positions remain notoriously difficult for outsiders to navigate—one analysis found a software engineer job description that was seven pages long, compared with one paragraph for a similar role at a major corporation.²

The federal government has recognized the need for coordinated investments in high-touch sourcing for in-person recruiting. A first-of-its-kind hiring fair hosted by the Chief Information Officers Council and featuring 500 federal vacancies across 31 agencies was held in Silver Spring, Maryland, in late

2017. While such events indicate welcome progress in the direction of more coordinated, personalized, and targeted sourcing, they are insufficient to solve the government’s digital talent problem. Truly addressing the root causes of the issue requires changing the approach to hiring along two dimensions—geography and orientation.

Geography

The federal government can no longer hope to achieve its tech talent sourcing goals by focusing solely on the National Capital Region (NCR). While the NCR remains a “superstar metro area” when it comes to share of innovation industries and talent (it is among the top 20 such metro areas in the United States), it is losing ground, according to the Brookings Institution. Five top innovation metro areas—Boston, San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose, and Seattle—accounted for 90 percent of the nation’s innovation-sector growth and nearly one-quarter of the nation’s total innovation employment between 2005 and 2017.³

Research led by the Greater Washington Partnership reemphasizes the human capital dimensions of this reality. Under current conditions, almost half of demand for tech roles and two-thirds of demand for tech-adjacent roles across sectors will go unmet in the NCR by 2025.⁴ Leaders across the region have recognized the need for an increased investment in how it attracts and develops digital talent, but these investments will likely take some time to produce results. The federal government must consider looking beyond its home base to fill its digital talent gaps and meet immediate needs.

Private-sector companies have long recognized the importance of physical proximity to innovation centers to sharpen their businesses, as have some forward-thinking corners of the federal government. The Defense Innovation Unit provides one high-profile example, with offices in Silicon Valley and Boston. The government could systematize and

¹ *Director’s Blog*, “New features make applying for federal jobs easier,” blog entry by Michelle Earley, February 24, 2016, [opm.gov](https://www.opm.gov).

² *Inspired to serve: The final report of the National Commission on Military, National and Public Service*, National Commission on Military, National and Public Service, March 2020, [inspiretoserve.gov](https://www.inspiretoserve.gov).

³ Robert D. Atkinson, Mark Muro, and Jacob Whiton, *The case for growth centers: How to spread tech innovation across America*, a joint report from the Brookings Institution and the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, December 2019, [brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu).

⁴ *The Capital Region faces a huge tech talent shortage*, a joint report from the Greater Washington Partnership and Capital CoLab, July 2020, [greaterwashingtonpartnership.com](https://www.greaterwashingtonpartnership.com).

scale these efforts to establish an aggressive hiring footprint in cities that feature a concentration of world-class tech talent. Places where such clusters overlap with an existing federal presence could be prioritized for ramping up outposts, hiring fairs, and high-touch outreach. It may no longer be as critical to convince this talent to move to the NCR; COVID-19 has demonstrated that professionals across sectors can be just as effective working remotely. Removing the relocation requirement is likely to substantially enlarge the talent pool who may pursue a federal job.

Orientation

Changing the way the federal government develops hiring leads is just as essential as changing its geographic outreach. Only 30 percent of the global workforce is actively searching for a job at present, leaving 70 percent who go unreached by the government's current efforts, which are almost exclusively targeted at the pool of active job seekers. Federal hiring platforms devote few resources to proactively cultivating a pool of qualified personnel who can be approached for vacancies. They tend to provide an open and useful resource for those familiar with the federal hiring process but offer comparatively little functionality for developing qualified leads, particularly for hard-to-source talent profiles.

Federal leaders can use advanced analytics to identify new or underutilized sources of talent, improving outreach while providing HR specialists with priority candidates to target with high-touch recruitment activities. At a more basic level, recruiters and hiring managers could source new leads if provided with a searchable record of previous applicants for similar jobs across agencies. Proactive outreach can also support diversity objectives—women, for instance, less likely to put themselves forward for a job unless they feel almost 100 percent qualified, while the threshold for men is closer to 60 percent. Encouraging leads to apply could expand and diversify the applicant pool.

Advanced analytics can also help create a more compelling value proposition for candidates. The value proposition for a role will often differ meaningfully by geography, role, and unique features of the job in question; a nurse considering a position with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in New England will have significantly different employment alternatives and preferences than a data scientist considering a VA job in the NCR. A data-driven understanding of these profiles and needs can help create more sophisticated positioning of job vacancies, allowing agencies to spend resources on sourcing activities—and producing a higher yield on those efforts.

Elevate mission and impact as the value proposition instead of longevity and stability

Younger workers place less emphasis on the idea of spending their career with one employer. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows individuals born late in the Baby Boom (1957 to 1964) held an average of 12.3 jobs, with nearly half of jobs held between ages 18 and 24.⁵ By contrast, research suggests that millennials expect to hold as many as 20 positions during their working lives.⁶

This enthusiasm for job-hopping—particularly prevalent among digital talent—represents a mismatch of expectations for traditional federal hiring. The stability of a multidecade career in public service, traditionally a major selling point for civil service jobs, is increasingly outmoded in the battle for digital talent.

Moreover, leaders in federal agencies increasingly cannot and should not compete with the private sector on compensation. The financial upside of a federal retirement is contingent on a career spent in government. Going toe-to-toe on salary with the private sector for top talent—especially candidates whose digital skills are in demand from the finance and tech sectors—will remain a losing battle.

⁵Number of jobs, labor market experience, and earnings growth: Results from a national longitudinal survey," Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 22, 2019, bls.gov.

⁶Jeanne Meister, "Job hopping is the 'new normal' for millennials: Three ways to prevent a human-resource nightmare," August 14, 2012, forbes.com.

Instead, federal leaders can play to their unique advantage: the mission and impact that digital talent can expect to have while in federal service. Just as private sector technology companies routinely attract top performers with the promise of changing the world, mission can and should be a point of differentiation for public-service roles aimed at digital talent.

Developing flexible career pathways is essential to delivering this value proposition to candidates. Forward-thinking federal leaders have already found success with digital talent models with tailored, flexible career pathways. The United States Digital Service (USDS), founded during the Obama administration as part of the lessons learned from the launch of [healthcare.gov](https://www.healthcare.gov), is predicated on bringing tech talent into government for two- to four-year tours. This value proposition works both ways. The federal government receives comparatively short, high-speed bursts of professional energy from designers, developers, and other top tech talent indexed against its toughest problems. In exchange, individuals in the service receive cross-agency exposure to high-priority public-service problems without committing their entire careers to federal service. The USDS provides an opportunity to have a tangible impact on mission before working in or returning to the private sector.

The USDS model is not perfectly scalable—its cross-agency mandate is difficult to replicate and federal leaders may find their individual agencies lack the same volume of high-visibility, high-impact problems that the USDS traditionally tackles. Many of the service's lessons, however, are worth studying and adapting elsewhere in the federal government.

In addition to building flexible career pathways, agencies should consider how to build internal mobility and project-based work into digital career paths. Professional rotations are a decades-old

practice in the private sector, providing high-potential hires with new responsibilities and exposure.

Finally, federal leaders can ensure their ways of working match the skills being sought. The USDS and others recognize that stifling talented individuals only leads to friction and mutual dissatisfaction. To attract and retain digital talent, leaders can tailor jobs and career expectations to accommodate the skill sets those individuals bring—instead of forcing talent to fit traditional federal practices and career pathways.

Build an efficient, transparent onboarding process that inspires confidence

At its core, hiring new federal employees is time-consuming, low-touch, and impersonal. The average time-to-hire for federal agencies in 2017 was 106 days—30 percent higher than the Office of Personnel Management's established target—and the trend is moving in the wrong direction. The average federal time-to-hire increased every year from 2012 to 2017.⁷ The most recent data, from fiscal year 2018, shows the government remains almost 20 days above its 80-day time-to-hire target.⁸

Cross-sector analyses suggest the public sector significantly lags behind private-sector companies in hiring and onboarding efficiency. A recent study by Glassdoor measuring just the interview stage of the hiring process found that the public sector took almost 2.5 times as long simply to interview candidates as the average across US industries.⁹ For agencies with especially sensitive requirements, such as defense and intelligence, hiring is even more protracted because of time-consuming background and security checks. The conditional offer of employment—a standard practice in federal hiring—is a double-edged sword during this period. When the onboarding process is opaque or stretches into months, talent may choose to withdraw in favor of other opportunities.

⁷ Mark Reinhold, *Examining federal managers' role in hiring*, US Office of Personnel Management, March 1, 2018, hsgac.senate.gov.

⁸ "OPM issues updated time-to-hire guidance," US Office of Personnel Management, February 25, 2020, opm.gov.

⁹ Andrew Chamberlain, "How long does it take to hire? Interview duration in 25 countries," Glassdoor, August 9, 2017, [glassdoor.com](https://www.glassdoor.com).

A lean, transparent onboarding process can inspire confidence and prevent attrition in the hiring process. Our work supporting agencies in improving new-hire experience shows that an onboarding process that falls victim to organizational siloes is often to blame for bottlenecks. When we measured end-to-end hiring processes, we often found that the actual “touch time” required to process an individual onboarding case was surprisingly low. Missed handoffs and broken linkages within the organization cause onboarding cases to languish, resulting in just a few hours of hands-on work sometimes taking months to unfold.

Leaders in the public sector should consider mapping out and redesigning their onboarding process with a customer-centric view, placing the experience of the new hire at the center of each step in the journey (see sidebar, “Lessons in hiring

reform”). The impact of a customer-back redesign can be revelatory, highlighting areas where small process changes or basic automation can radically enhance transparency and speed. Such investments can build the employee’s confidence while putting new personnel in their roles more quickly. In certain cases, this impact amounts to hundreds of additional full-time equivalents annually.

One federal agency faced a deteriorating hiring situation, with real consequences for mission. Seemingly positive developments—interest in positions at an all-time high, with a more than one-third increase in applicants in the past year—were triggering costly process failures. The sheer volume of new applicants threatened to overwhelm the longstanding manual process for screening, interviewing, and onboarding new workers. The negative impact on experience—

Lessons in hiring reform

Even the most elite pockets of the federal workforce can face moments of truth in their hiring processes. One agency, whose mission required its hiring managers to compete successfully for elite scientific talent, recently found itself struggling to do so effectively. The hiring process had become focused on policy instead of outcomes, promoting cumbersome and inefficient design choices. The systems and data that made up the hiring infrastructure were outdated and poorly suited to smart workflows and tracking key metrics. Perhaps most importantly, the culture of the hiring function lacked the essential customer orientation to address the needs of hiring managers and top talent.

Agency leaders launched an ambitious hiring-reform agenda to attack the root

causes of underperformance. They rigorously examined the existing process to lend facts and credibility to the widespread sense of systematic underperformance in hiring. They used their findings to build a new suite of performance measures to justify investment in digital tools and workflow solutions and measured improved performance to sustain their momentum. An end-to-end redesign of the hiring process focused on outcomes and placed the needs of the hiring manager at the center of the design process.

Most importantly, leaders recognized the need to invest in the people responsible for delivering hiring excellence. They understood that training and capability-building for HR specialists would be at the root of all progress in changing hiring

outcomes. They set an example at the top; communicated their expectations and vision clearly and proactively; and engaged their workforce continuously through focus groups, surveys, and recognition programs to reinforce and celebrate their culture change.

The changes put the agency on the path to reducing overall time-to-hire from an average of 150 to 550 days down to an average of 80 to 140 days. Their hiring process also became more transparent, measurable, and customer focused. The agency achieved a radical long-term change in its enterprise culture around hiring and performance excellence in HR.

both for applicants and HR specialists reviewing applications—was substantial.

Solving the problem required leaders at this agency to push their teams to reimagine the entire hiring process; no assumption or traditional practice was sacred. The interventions they developed ran the gamut from technology-intensive to deceptively ingenuous.

Automation technology helped diagnose the application backlog, allowing HR specialists to address bottlenecks. The agency also found value in simple changes such as shifting its onboarding to a larger conference room to increase throughput and completing requirements like computer accounts before an employee's first day. Leaders expect the cumulative impact from these seemingly intuitive changes to be dramatic: reducing time to hire by months, improving employee and new-hire experience, and putting the equivalent of hundreds of additional employees and contractors on the job each year.

Other federal agencies have experienced similar success. The VA faced four- to six-month backlogs for hiring critical frontline positions at the entry level. As part of the MyVA program, leaders deployed a series of interventions to reduce the hiring process to 30 days. A key to these improvements was using predictive analytics to trigger the hiring process (rather than simply waiting for a vacancy to occur) and eliminating unnecessary requirements. The

lesson is consistent—streamlining processes, eliminating bottlenecks, and adopting automation and analytics to anticipate and triage hiring needs can create significant improvement in end-to-end hiring for federal agencies.

Bridging the federal government's looming digital talent gap requires flexibility, innovation, and commitment. Leaders must recognize the wants and needs of those with sought-after skill profiles, tailor outreach to suit those preferences, and dramatically improve the hiring process if they hope to attract digital talent at scale. Inspiring and retaining qualified candidates requires that agency leaders deliver on a revitalized value proposition. This means curating professional opportunities that have real impact on mission, creating a culture of continuous professional development that helps keep skills sharp, and providing a career path that can include rotations in and out of federal service.

The competition for top digital talent is fierce. The steps required to attract these individuals are significant. The stakes are high. The outcome of our next national crisis will be shaped in no small part by the ability of this generation of federal leaders to rise to the challenge. With the requisite steps, the federal government can offer a distinctive value proposition that will enable it to compete and thrive in the battle for digital talent.

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