



4 Ways to Bolster the Public-Sector Workforce

When it comes to recruiting and retaining employees, the struggle is real for government agencies. They face fierce competition from private-sector companies wooing workers with sizable salaries, flexible schedules and faster hiring processes. Still, government entities have an edge in some ways, such as giving people meaningful work – an increasingly sought-after factor – and invaluable training.

During a recent GovLoop online training titled “How Your Agency Can Invest in Its Workforce,” government and industry experts explained four main ways that public-sector entities can bolster the workforce.



92% of federal employees say it's important to them that their work contribute to the common good

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“Private-sector workers may have higher salaries, on average, but government workers get pay boosts in sometimes less obvious ways,” said Kirill Reznik, Financial Officer at the Maryland Department of Human Services.

“One is pensions, guaranteed paychecks well into retirement. Most private-sector organizations have moved away from pensions and toward 401(k) plans, which don’t have the same assurance,” he said.

That means, “you work 10, 15, 20 years – whatever those milestones are – you walk away with a guaranteed salary for the rest of your life,” Reznik said of government work.

Another is coverage of continuing education costs. The Maryland DHS recently executed a memorandum of understanding with its state employees union guaranteeing that departments will pay for license-renewal fees and the continuing education credits employees need to get them. “That may not be a lot, but for a social worker that’s making \$60,000, \$70,000 a year, that could be a significant chunk of money,” he said.

Tout the Work/Life Balance

“I think people come into public service knowing they are not going to make a lot of money,” said Wonzie Gardner, Chief Human Capital Officer at the National Science Foundation. The draw is “an intrinsic value of knowing, as a public servant, you’re working for the public good.”

But that doesn’t have to be mutually exclusive from flexibility. The pandemic changed the way people work, giving work/life balance a starring role in recruitment and retention. Now, “it’s not when you do it, but that you get it done,” Gardner said.

Where you work is also less important, as people trade cubicles in office buildings for other locations. “It affords us to get people from under-resourced areas; we get a broad spectrum of this quilt of America,” he said. “I think it’s a wonderful thing. It’s just that we’ve got to get out of our own way and make sure that we take advantage of all these new liberties we’ve got with this new work/life balance.”



Promote Technology

Younger generations are more likely to change jobs frequently, and government agencies need to offer them opportunities to not just climb the ladder but also move laterally along what Erick Allen, Principal for Value and Strategy at Cornerstone OnDemand, calls the lattice.

He recommends using technology to understand each employee and their skills to get “a clear line of sight for that internal mobility. It gives the employee an opportunity to be able to showcase themselves and find other jobs in the agency or any of the roll-ups.... It’s up to the employer to make that space comfortable for them to navigate, so that they don’t look outside of the walls of the agency or department.”

For instance, workers might want to move from a health-related to a transit job. AI can help.

“I think that’s really what’s going to revolutionize the workplace and help with retention and recruitment because one of the perceptions that a lot of younger workers have about government work is that it’s not as sophisticated [as private-sector work], it’s not leveraging technology, it’s not going to give them those skills that they’re not only looking to use, but have probably used, either in college or just in their day-to-day life,” Allen said.

Be Strategic, Creative and Compliant

Unlike the private sector, “federal hiring in particular is governed by a lot of rules...which make sure we have fair and open competition and that we hire on the basis of merit,” said Traci DiMartini, Human Capital Officer at the Internal Revenue Service. “Our hands are tied when it comes to things like compensation and benefits.... I often remind people what we really need to do is look at all the flexibilities that are in our toolkit and where we can allow people to work from and how they work.... We really need to get creative.”

Options include flexible work schedules and work sites, upskilling and reskilling, and using technology to handle menial work so that employees make the most of their know-how.

“This is a wonderful time to be a job-seeker,” DiMartini said. “It’s just a really great time to think about the world of work and most importantly, how we can invest in our most important asset, which really for all of us, are our employees.”