

How to Effectively Communicate Government Workforce Reforms: In Brief

Quick tips & facts about HR reforms across federal, state and local governments



Executive Summary

At the federal level, workforce reforms are one of the biggest human capital changes that agencies face right now. They are responding to an April 2017 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) memo that calls on agencies to plan for near- and long-term reductions across the civilian workforce. OMB said it would begin tracking progress on a governmentwide reform plan in February 2018.

At the state and local levels, hiring managers are working through their own challenges, including recruiting and retaining employees and shaping their future workforces as seasoned professionals retire.

In this In Brief, we provide an overview of key workforce reforms happening at all levels of government, and tips for effectively communicating those changes to employees.

A woman with dark hair, wearing a dark blazer over a grey top, is speaking and gesturing with her right hand. In the background, a whiteboard has four sticky notes: a yellow one with 'People Business', a pink one with 'More & More', a blue one, and a yellow one with 'Company problem'.

"One of the biggest issues is people not understanding what's happening, especially when there is transition and there is a new set of priorities for the organization. So having a communication strategy for which HR is part of the discussion with all the key stakeholders in the organization is key."

Bettina Deynes

Vice President of Human Resources and Diversity at the Society for Human Resource Management



Hiring & Workforce Reductions

Reducing the size and cost of government is a priority for the Trump administration. Meanwhile, state and local governments are focused on retaining and recruiting employees.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Three days into his role as commander-in-chief, Trump ordered a hiring freeze of federal civilian employees. An OMB memo followed, and it tasked agencies with developing plans to reduce the civilian workforce, maximize employee performance and focus on opportunities to eliminate activities or restructure and merge them.

2,087,747 federal civilian personnel were on-board as of September 2017, compared with 2,097,038 in 2016.*

**The Postal Service and national security and intelligence agencies are not included in these totals.*

STATE & LOCAL GOVERNMENT

While federal agencies look to decrease the size of the workforce, state and local governments are doing just the opposite. Recruiting and retaining qualified personnel is a top priority, according to the Center for State & Local Government Excellence's (SLGE) 2017 workforce trends survey.

74 percent of 283 respondents said they hired employees in the past year. Source: SLGE

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING HIRING & REDUCTIONS

1. Communicate — a lot

Get ahead of the rumors. If you don't, people will explain to themselves what's going on. You've got to help them get the right explanation.

2. Maintain a recruiting presence

Even if hiring is slow or at a standstill, you will eventually need to replace people who leave. You have to have a pipeline.

3. Keep the discussion going

When leaders or HR professionals don't feel they have all the information, the tendency is to stay quiet. Instead, they should share as much information as possible.

4. Be mobile

Management by walking around is an extremely valuable tool. Make it a priority to meet people and show a genuine interest in who they are and what they do for the organization.



Employee Training

Training budgets are often seen as nice-to-haves. But at a time when agencies are expected to increase performance while reducing the size and cost of their workforce, training is a necessity.

MAKING THE MOST OF FREE TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

1. **The Open Opportunities program** matches federal employees with growth opportunities across government, including marketing and data visualization projects.
2. **iTunes U** provides access to free educational content, including public courses and collections from leading universities.
3. **GovLoop Academy** offers interactive, self-paced courses. Most are 30 minutes, and topics include human-centered design, conflict management and analytics.

TIPS FOR CREATING INTERNAL TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

1. Provide on-the-job training

Be deliberate about the assignments you give employees and make certain that you tell them those long-term projects are training opportunities.

2. Develop formal mentorship and coaching opportunities

While mentoring focuses on giving helpful advice, coaching is more action-focused. For example, coaching questions may focus on why you feel you don't have a good relationship with your boss, rather than telling you how to respond to your boss.

3. Don't wait until the budget is reduced

Invest your time in creating programs for mission support staff to get more experience. This doesn't have to be formal training.



Succession Planning

Succession planning is one of those critical tasks that organizations know they need to do. But few do it well — if at all.

The Office of Personnel Management is using feedback from its 2017 Senior Executive Service Exit Report to improve government succession planning, as well as recruitment, engagement and retention. The report found:

- ***61 percent of senior executives leaving government said their agencies had no formal succession-planning for executives.***
- ***56 percent of executives said their agency made no efforts to involve them in preparation of their successor.***

TIPS FOR IMPROVING SUCCESSION PLANNING

1. Think outside the box

Rethink current and future job descriptions. There may also be benefits to training employees to act as generalists who know a little about a lot of things instead of a lot about one thing.

2. Start preparing readiness candidates

One way is by working with leaders to see who could potentially fill positions before they become vacant. What type of development are those candidates receiving?

3. Identify your exposure in terms of potential skills gaps

What's the impact if key employees retire or resign? How would your agency respond?

4. Determine what development opportunities are in place

If your organization conducts employee engagement surveys, use that data to gauge sentiments about career opportunities and the ability to be promoted.



Tackling Human Capital with IT

There's no shortage of technology to meet government's most pressing human capital needs. But procuring and integrating those technologies with clunky and outdated systems creates significant challenges for agencies.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

In a memo, OMB told federal agencies to look at workflows or positions that new technologies can automate. The memo mentions database administration, invoice processing, and financial management as potential processes that can be automated or contracted to the private sector.

75 percent of employees reported that they apply workarounds to duplicative, complicated bureaucratic processes at least a few times a year. — State Department Deputy Secretary John Sullivan

STATE & LOCAL GOVERNMENT

State and local governments are also making strides to better align HR functions with new technology advances, such as cloud computing and analytics. But adoption varies by state, city and county.

TIPS FOR TACKLING HUMAN CAPITAL WITH IT

1. Use plain language

If you're not sure what's acceptable, use the "mom test." If you were to explain IT and HR changes to your mom, would she understand?

2. Explain the "so what"

Employees want to know why they should care and what tech changes mean for them. One way is to frame communications as a Q&A.

3. Create a change management & communications strategy

Use multiple channels, including email, blog posts, town halls, manager-employee conversations, department visits and posters to inform staff and address concerns.

4. Respond to rumors with facts

Don't let the fear of change linger. Be proactive when communicating the facts, and do so in a format that reaches all employees.

5. Show empathy

One reason why change fails is leaders don't take into account how it affects people personally. Take actions that show employees they have your support. For example, consider hosting listening tours to hear from employees.



Buyouts & Retirement

Federal agencies are hard-pressed to reduce the size of their workforce while also battling the impacts of lost institutional knowledge. Meanwhile, state and local governments are heavily recruiting younger professionals to replace seasoned workers as they retire.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Several agencies are offering early retirement packages and buyouts to align with workforce reductions set by the Trump administration.

The president's budget proposal includes a decrease of 24,000 full-time equivalents in 2018 across 17 of the government's 24 largest agencies.

STATE & LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Buyouts are not as common at the state and local levels, but there have been discussions about them. At least one state is using buyouts to reduce the unfunded liability of its employee retirement system.

45 percent of respondents said that retirements are higher now than they were in 2015. Source: 2017 SLGE survey

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING BUYOUTS & RETIREMENTS

1. Be strategic

It's crucial that agencies think strategically and critically as they offer buyouts or early retirements.

2. See yourself as a resource

In some ways, HR professionals have more power than they realize. They have an opportunity through the way they communicate with employees to help ease concerns and navigate change during a difficult time.

3. Be transparent

It's a two-way street. Employees should be empowered to ask questions, but ultimately HR should offer a lot of information up front and be as transparent as possible about what's happening.

4. Stay mission-focused

When reshaping the workforce, always return to the mission. What does your mission have to be? Determine what talent you need to achieve your core mission.

Conclusion

Managing workforce changes requires proper planning, commitment and communication across government agencies. It requires a partnership between business units and HR departments to ensure employees are informed and encouraged to express their concerns. Employees should be empowered to ask questions about hiring, training opportunities and other issues. Simply put, conversations about workforce reforms should be a two-way street.

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