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My View: Why younger people entering the workforce lean into public sector jobs

MELISSA BARKER
Contributing writer

Technology jobs are at the ready in Arizona, thanks to significant investments from semiconductor giants Intel and TSMC Arizona.

Yet, an interesting trend is emerging in the job market, with an increasing number of new college graduates heading down a different path, opting instead for careers in the public sector.

A recent survey conducted by Handshake, a popular networking and recruitment website for college students, noted that 7.4% of job applications from the Class of 2024 were for government roles, up from 5.5% last year.

The reasons: Jobs are plentiful and offer security and work-life balance.

In its June jobs report, the U.S. Bureau of Labor reported that total nonfarm payroll employment increased by 206,000. Government employment accounted for 70,000 of these jobs, far higher than the average monthly gain of 49,000 over the previous 12 months.

At the same time, jobs at for-profit companies that were once the envy of young workers are now being deemed risky, with 76% of those surveyed by Handshake reporting job stability as the top factor when considering working in government. "I don't need to worry about being laid off," was the sentiment shared by survey respondents.

Several municipalities opt for four-day workweek

As an executive recruiter who fills mission-critical roles for a host of public-sector clients, I can see how government organizations are building employee-centric work environments and creatively competing for candidates with private companies that often pay higher salaries.

A case in point: While a steady stream of major employees are returning to the office, the City of Sedona – like other municipalities in the Valley – continues to give employees four 10-hour workdays, ensuring them a three-day weekend.



Melissa Barker, Duffy Group

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Then there is the city of Page, which embraced workplace flexibility long before Covid-19 forced it onto employers' to-do lists. When Page implemented a 10-hour, four-day work week in 2017, residents accepted City Hall being closed on Fridays, and most town workers, except police and fire, were rewarded with three-day weekends, all year. That prescient perk has become a tool for successfully recruiting employees who place a premium on flexible schedules. Retention also improved, particularly among senior staff.

Along with a hybrid work environment, municipalities are investing in professional development to help workers grow in their jobs and move up the career ladder. Such upward mobility – an important consideration for candidates – isn't limited to individuals working in a particular department. Government employees can move into challenging new positions across their organizations.

Something else that government is doing to attract new college graduates is promoting their organizations' missions. It's a smart move, considering data from Mission Square Research Institute, which showed that respondents ranked doing meaningful work as their top priority above pay, location, profes-

sional development and other perks.

That's not to say that the government doesn't face barriers in attracting best-in-class candidates. The Handshake survey notes a perception among young workers that government hiring processes are laborious, communication between them and hiring managers is ineffective, and technology could be improved.

Even with more work to do, this growing sector – which represents 14% of the national labor force and about 13% of employment in Arizona – is capitalizing on ways to build its talent pool with young professionals eager to do the job.

Melissa Barker is vice president, practice development, at Phoenix-based Duffy Group, a global recruitment firm.

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