PUBLIC SECTOR WORKFORCE IN FLUX:

Staying Focused on Effective Recruitment and Hiring Practices

By Melissa Barker

The federal workforce may be changing by the day, but state and local government continues to serve the public by thinking outside the box in filling both traditional jobs and emerging positions in technology.

My local government clients in the West (California, Arizona and Colorado) have yet to see an uptick in job applications from former federal employees potentially searching for new places to land. Nor do they expect to receive a flurry of resumes, given the negligible overlap among federal and state/local agency jobs.

It also appears to be business as usual for the cities, counties and states considering return-to-office initiatives for new hires. Many are ahead of the curve in seeing the value of hybrid or alternative work schedules to attract and retain dedicated public servants.

There are exceptions, of course, notably Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, who **recently signed an executive order** to bring all state workers back to the office. California Gov. Gavin Newsom **has issued a similar directive** applying to that state's government employees.

One thing is for sure: With the rapid, global development of technology, all levels of government are juggling how to hire talented people with passions for their missions, while at the same time grappling with replacing retiring Baby Boomers.

The Value of Upskilling

One strategy that's gaining traction is upskilling trusted employees and slotting them into new in-demand jobs in artificial intelligence, intelligent automation and data governance. Government agencies have historically been supportive of continuing education, and so this is natural for them.

New York state is one example. New York has added to its proposed fiscal 2026 budget funding for 300 new employees to its Office of Information Technology Services, to bolster its cyber team. If approved this spring by the state legislature, the budget would offer free tuition to employees pursuing tech degrees.

Still, about half of state and local governments reported having more open IT positions than applicants last year. Part of the challenge is their inability to compete with the private sector on wages. But opportunities still exist to showcase the meaning of public-service work and play up opportunities for growth, benefits and job security.

State and local governments are also faced with the challenge of finding, retaining and recruiting qualified candidates to fill more traditional jobs that are in high demand. These include planners, chief building officials and engineers, and city managers who are retiring in droves.

Creativity and flexibility go a long way here.

In two small Arizona municipalities, Cottonwood and Wickenburg, I'm helping HR leaders craft and share compelling stories of their communities. Such storytelling has gone a long way in making the case for why prospective candidates would want to move there.

In Fountain, Colo., city officials employed a creative salary structure—a 5% increase after six months of employment, and another 5% raise after 12 months, with all job requirements being met or exceeded—to find a new senior planner.

The old days of saying, "Here's the midpoint of the salary range — do you want the job?" are gone, replaced by a narrative that paints a picture of how great small-town life can be. Sweetening the deals with attractive perks—relocation and retention fees, tax-advantage retirement savings and the like—are also being employed successfully by government recruiters.

Turning to Technology

AI is emerging as a helpful recruiting tool, too, especially in generating candidate interview questions. With the Colorado search, for example, we used ChatGPT to collect a list of companies with similar positions in order to create a job description for our search.

The World Economic Forum (WEF) predicts that the fastest-growing job during the next five years will be big-data specialist, with a projected growth of 115%. WEF's top five is rounded out by fintech engineer, AI and machine-learning specialist, software and applications developer, and autonomous and electric vehicle specialists.

Perhaps to no surprise, given technology advancements, the biggest decline in jobs now through 2030 is anticipated to be led by postal service clerks, with a 35% drop. WEF also predicted a significant decline in the need for cashiers, ticket clerks, administrative assistants and executive secretaries due to broadening digital access, AI and information processing technologies.

Filling these new economy jobs with the best and the brightest talent is imperative as state and local governments build a workforce of the future while navigating uncertainty at the federal level. ●

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