



## Getting the Right People

### How to Recruit and Retain Qualified Staff

By Neil Reichenberg

Recruiting and retaining qualified staff remains the most important workforce issue, and jobs in finance are among those that state and local governments have the most difficult time filling.

Recruiting and retaining qualified staff remains the most important workforce issue for the second consecutive year, according to the findings of the 2016 Workforce Trends survey conducted by the Center for State and Local Government Excellence. The survey, which is based on survey responses from the members of the International Public Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-HR) and the National Association of State Personnel Executives (NASPE), also found that jobs in finance are among those that state and local governments have the most difficult time filling.

#### ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

To address the recruiting and retention challenges, public-sector employers need to look at improving their branding and hiring processes (which have been criticized as being slower and not as flexible as the private sector), developing a robust program for bringing employees on board, improving employee engagement, and ensuring that growing and developing employees is an organizational priority.

In 2016, IPMA-HR undertook a cross-generational survey that looked at similarities and differences among baby boomers, generation X, and millennials that were working for ten public-sector organizations.<sup>1</sup> The responses were almost equally divided among the

three generations, who identified the following the top motivators for seeking public-sector employment:

- Good benefits
- Job security
- Pension
- Work-life balance
- Making a difference in people's lives

A little more than half of respondents (55 percent) indicated that they had a somewhat favorable view of working for government, while 32 percent had a very favorable view. Only 13 percent had either a somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable view of working in the public sector.

Referrals from friends, colleagues, or family members were the most common way for respondents to learn about their jobs, underscoring the fact that your employees can be your best recruiters. Websites of public-sector organizations and general job search websites were the next most common methods for learning about public-sector jobs. When asked to select the top three features that their current public-sector organization should emphasize to attract new employees from their same generational cohort, survey respondents most often chose the following:

- Known for retaining employees long term

- Positions with upward mobility or visibility to showcase their skills
- Offers competitive compensation packages

Medical benefits, pension, and job security were features that attracted them to the public sector.

More than 40 percent of the survey respondents found the government application process to be more cumbersome than the one used in the private sector. Additionally, more than half said that private-sector employers were far more likely to give them the chance to negotiate their salary than government employers.

On the positive side, nearly 90 percent of respondents indicated that they are likely or very likely to stay with their current organizations for the next year. The top three reasons they cited were:

- Great compensation
- Good supervisor/employee relationship
- Career development and advancement opportunities

The small number of respondents who indicated that they would like to leave during the next year cited a lack of career development and advancement opportunities, concerns with compensation, and a poor relationship with their supervisors.

## EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Conducting surveys to determine how engaged or connected employees are to their organizations is an important way to increase performance and identify employee issues and concerns. To ensure that engagement moves in

a positive direction, organizations can develop a strategy for communicating the survey results and taking action on the concerns raised.

A 2014 engagement study conducted by IPMA-HR found that 47 percent of state and local government employees are fully engaged. The top drivers of engagement identified were serving the public with integrity and feeling a sense of accomplishment.

Employee engagement matters because engaged employees are five times more likely to be very satisfied, five times more likely to recommend their place of employment to others, and four times less likely to leave. (See Exhibit 1.)

Feeling valued by their organizations was much less of a driver of engagement for employees, the survey found. In addition, workload dis-

tribution and staffing levels need to be addressed; less than 40 percent of respondents believe they have opportunities for advancement, which can have a negative impact on retention.

## PUBLIC-SECTOR INITIATIVES

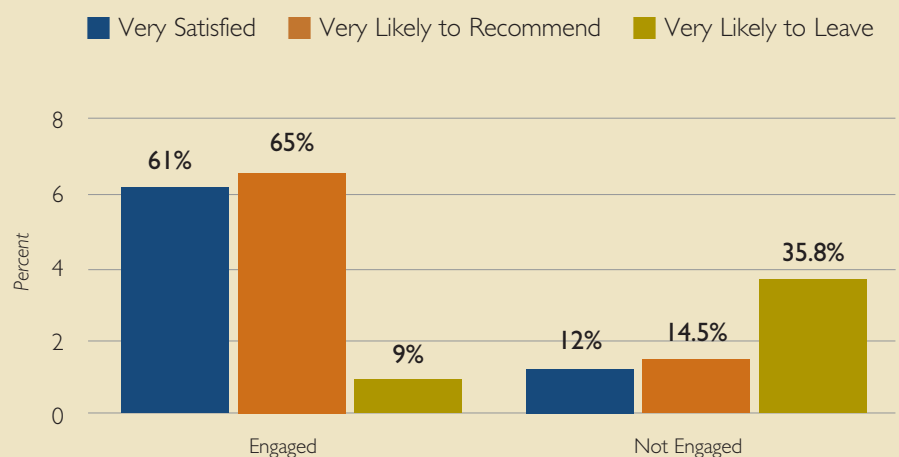
A number of state and local governments have developed programs to assist with recruitment and retention challenges. A few of these are highlighted below.

### Multnomah County, Oregon.

Multnomah County has undertaken an employer branding project, “This Work Matters,” which emphasizes the importance of the work done by county employees. The project was designed to standardize the look and feel of county recruitment materials, increase the appeal of county employment to diverse and talented candidates, distinguish the county as an employer of

### Exhibit 1: The Difference between Engaged and Unengaged Employees

*Engaged public-sector employees are five times more likely to be very satisfied, five times more likely to recommend their employers and four times less likely to leave.*



choice, resonate with current employees, and inspire pride in public service. The project resulted in an updated county jobs website, a new communications guide/digital brand toolkit for recruiters, and a revised LinkedIn employer page.

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**San Mateo County, California.** San Mateo County launched a management fellowship program in 2015 that is designed to recruit top talent and create a leadership pipeline. The program initially comprised a partnership between the county and one university that offered a Master of Public Administration program but has since been expanded to include several other universities. Graduating students are selected for management fellowships, paid positions lasting from one to three



years. The fellowship program allows individuals to work with senior county leaders on high-priority projects; network with other fellows and with current and emerging public-sector leaders; attend leadership conferences; and participate in training and development activities. In 2016, the county hosted 16 management fellows working in seven county departments. Participants were selected from more than 400 applicants from across the United States.

**San Jose, California.** San Jose recently reviewed its hiring process. The human resources department then developed a process to ensure consistency across the city and to speed up the amount of time it took, from 72 business days to 46 business days.

The city divided the recruitments into three categories:

- Standard — the department agrees to the streamlined process developed by the HR department.
- Expedited — the department agrees to use tools to accelerate the recruiting process and thereby get priority attention from the recruiting staff in the HR department. These tools could include using existing recruitment lists, reducing the number of days a job is posted, and reducing or consolidating the number of interviews conducted.
- Specialized — these are recruitments for positions that take longer and are more difficult to fill. The reasons for the delays could include the need for extensive background checks, or high-level or specialized positions such as department heads or subject matter experts.

The HR department only reports on expedited and standardized recruitments in its reporting of time to recruit. Specialized recruiting is reported separately.

**Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.** The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania established a Generational Taskforce to focus on recruitment, retention, and branding. The taskforce has about 80 employees from different agencies who are exploring why candidates are attracted to working for Pennsylvania and why employees stay.

The commonwealth started an internship program designed to attract potential candidates while they are still in college. The program, which started with 42 interns performing a variety of tasks, consists of 1,000 hours of work over a six-month period. There are scheduled networking events for the interns, and those who are successful during the initial six-month period can return for an additional six months. If interns find that their chosen areas of work are not a good match, the program provides the flexibility to find a better match.

The interns have helped with branding the Commonwealth as a desirable employer. One example: helping create online videos with current employees talking about why they enjoy their position with the Commonwealth and what they like about being in public service.

**Jefferson County, Colorado.** Jefferson County has been conducting employee engagement surveys since 2011 and has implemented a retention strategy around a “stay interview,” which is designed to learn what was working well and any areas of concern. The stay interviews ask such questions as:



- What made you want to work for Jefferson County?
- What do you like best about your job?
- What was your initial impression of Jefferson County during your first week of employment?
- What keeps you at Jefferson County?
- What one thing would you like to change about your job?
- Have you ever thought about leaving the county or your team?
- How can your team/division/department best support you?
- What do you want to learn here?

The county uses survey feedback in making adjustments to its retention strategy, creating an employer net-promoter score based on a single question from the employee engagement survey. This net-promoter score is based on the question, “How likely is it that you would recommend our organization to a friend or colleague?” The scale should include detractors, passives, and promoters.

When the county noticed a downward trend in the length of service for employees with less than two years of employment, they asked that category of employees why they continued to work for the county. A three-pronged approach using stay interviews, engagement survey data, and exit interviews provides the county with multiple dimensions that help explain why people come to work for the county and why they decide to stay with the county or leave the organization.

### **MORE EMPLOYEES RETIRING**

While overall government employment in the United States remains lower than it was before the recent recession, recruiting and retaining top employees is a growing challenge for the public sector. The 2016 workforce trends survey conducted by the Center for State and Local Government Excellence found that more employees are retiring as baby boomers continue to exit the workforce at an accelerated pace. Of the responding orga-

nizations, 54 percent reported more employees retiring in 2015 than in 2014. While 21 percent of retirement-eligible employees are delaying retirement, this is a significant decline from the 46 percent reported in 2009. The survey also found that hiring is a growing trend, increasing to 77 percent in 2016, as compared to 27 percent in 2013.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

As the economy improves and the number of jobs increase, employees will have more employment options — thus increasing the need for public sector employers to ensure that they are providing a positive work experience that affords the opportunity for employees to grow and develop. Governments perform important and wide-ranging work that has a positive impact on citizens and communities. To ensure that this continues in the future, government must remain an employer of choice that is able to recruit and retain the talent it needs. ■

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#### **Note**

1. The survey received 3,584 responses, a 48 percent response rate. The full report is available on the IPMA-HR website at [www.ipma-hr.org](http://www.ipma-hr.org).

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