



# NEXT GENERATION PROFESSIONALS: AN INSIDE LOOK AT WHAT MATTERS TO THEM

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## TAKEAWAYS

- › The “business as usual” approach to building the public sector workforce is no longer relevant and should be replaced with a contemporary method to reflect the changing workforce.
- › Young professionals in the public sector are seeking an inclusive, diverse, and collaborative work environment with access to leaders and opportunities to grow, all the while in their role to make a difference in their communities.



Most residents are only barely familiar with the behind-the-scenes operation of the local government organization that keeps them safe, provides clean drinking water, takes the waste away, maintains the roads they drive on, and provides numerous other services they take for granted every day.

As individuals long wedded to the local government management profession, the four of us wondered how younger, relatively recently-employed local government workers viewed their roles, their employers, and their future. This article provides a glimpse into their perceptions of local government as a career choice and how these young professionals would choose to enhance their workplace.

Their perceptions highlight the opportunities and challenges for today’s managers in response to significant changes in the workforce that are acutely felt in the public

sector. Such changes include demographic shifts in the workforce as well as evolutionary changes in the workplace (see Figure 1).

Managers who want to build their twenty-first-century workforce need to discard the “we’ve always done it that way” approach in favor of progressive and practical strategies and tools to optimize talent.

Government leaders at all levels also need to adopt the mindset that government is an employer, thus competing with a variety of public, nonprofit, and private sector organizations for talent in the marketplace. In that regard, the human resources department should not go it alone on this quest. Instead, leaders need to make a strong commitment to ensuring that workforce-related issues and opportunities attract the best talent.

In an effort to capture preferences about the local government workplace and workforce, we developed the *2015 Local Government Workforce Survey (LGWS)* to collect information from a group of younger, next-generation staff members. Our team

developed and validated the survey questions and administered it in February 2015. The team conducted the basic analysis in March.

Survey participants included graduates of the Leadership ICMA program, the Alliance for Innovation NextERA members, the Emerging Local Government Leaders (ELGL) devotees, and the current and former Arizona State University Marvin Andrews Fellows. The survey was sent to approximately 250 individuals, with 107 providing responses.

### Recruitment Practices

People today aren't simply looking for a job. They want careers with meaning and impact. Government service can provide that. Fully two-thirds of the respondents to the survey stated "making an impact on community/public service" as the top attraction to serving in local government" (see Figure 2).

This high percentage stands to reason considering those who responded to the survey are involved with public-oriented professional associations. Consider, however, what might be the response in your workforce if employees were asked the same question?

HR directors and managers might keep in mind that creating a qualified talent pool is no longer about sourcing specific candidates for specific jobs. Rather, it's about generating a pipeline of valuable skill sets in all staff members.

This allows your organization to recognize its skill gaps and then effectively find and reach the owners of those skills. Using social media channels and Web-based hiring sites have become common practice as powerful media for communicating an organization's brand that relates to attracting and hiring top candidates.

There also is an increasing emphasis on mobile recruiting. According to research conducted in 2013 by Glassdoor.com, 82 percent of all job seekers are currently using smartphones to search for job openings.<sup>3</sup> Almost half of active

**FIGURE 1.**

## DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS AND EVOLUTION OF THE WORKPLACE

- According to the Pew Research Center (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/01/16/this-year-millennials-will-overtake-baby-boomers>), for the first time, millennials now outnumber baby boomers in the workplace, 76 million to 75 million. As baby boomers continue to retire and millennials continue to enter the workforce, this gap will widen.
- The millennial generation may have different work motivations and expectations for greater work/life balance.
- The workforce will be more culturally and ethnically diverse and include more highly educated women, military veterans, and people with disabilities.
- Expectations are likely to increase for customized benefits, mobility of benefits, and flexible work options.
- According to the *State and Local Government Workforce 2014 Trends* research conducted by the Center for State and Local Government Excellence of members of the International Public Management Association for Human Resources and the National Association of State Personnel Executives, the local government workforce shows:
  - » In 2014, 19 percent of the government workforce reached age 61, the current average retirement age. By 2018, this figure rises to 28 percent of those currently working.
  - » There is a surge in public-sector retirements, referred to as the "silver tsunami": 49 percent of local governments reported higher levels of retirement in 2013 compared with 2012.
- The historical, long-term arrangement between employer and employee—sometimes referred to as "life-time employment" where the employer provides steady employment, attractive benefits, and wages in exchange for an employee's long-term effort and tenure—is changing to one more akin to the private sector.
- The service economy is shifting to the knowledge economy, emphasizing the changing nature of work toward more scarce and highly skilled jobs rather than lower-skilled, transactional work.
- The digital workplace and the rise in mobile technology is redefining the nature of work and the means of collaboration, and it is facilitating work in and from almost any location.

candidates have applied for a job on their mobile device. The public sector will need to create mobile applications in order to appeal to the on-the-go job seeker.

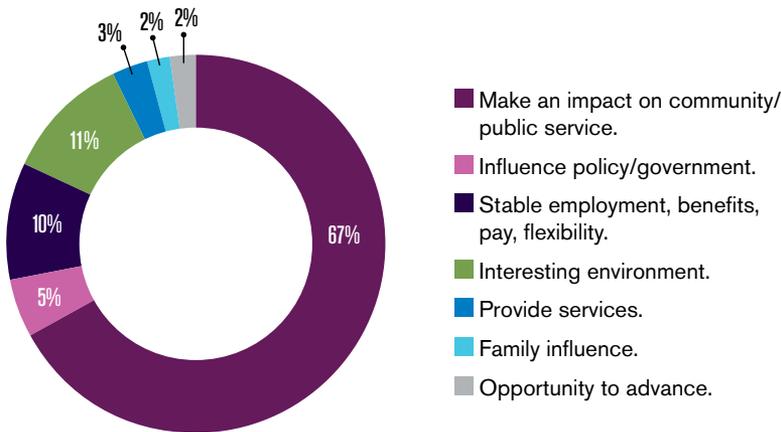
What does your hiring process say about your organization?

First impressions are a critical part of the hiring process. The world is full of smart, skilled, and passionate people who are blue-chip prospects. These people won't be interested in your organization,

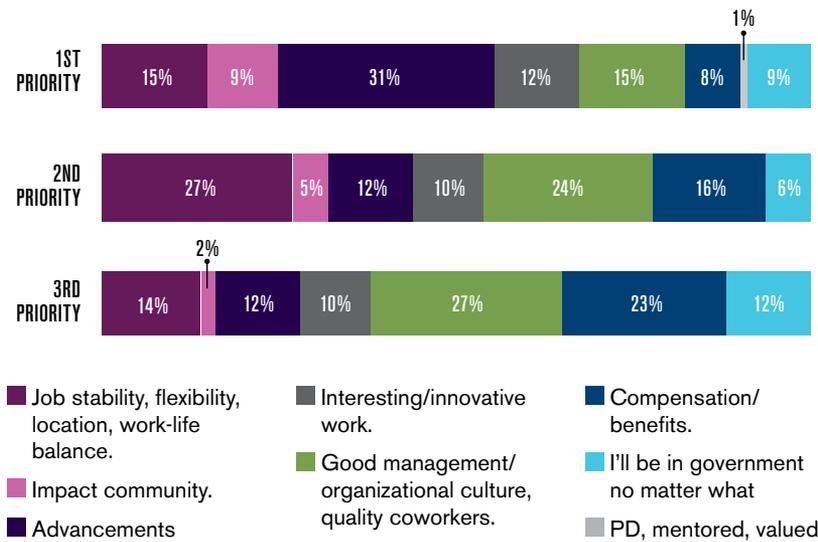
however, if the job announcement is a boring job description.

In hiring a new budget management analyst, for instance, the job description could state "ability to understand statistics and research data." Or it could say something more like this: "Want to make an impact on your community by helping to fund services that will benefit your neighbors and friends?" Or, "Bring your skills to bear

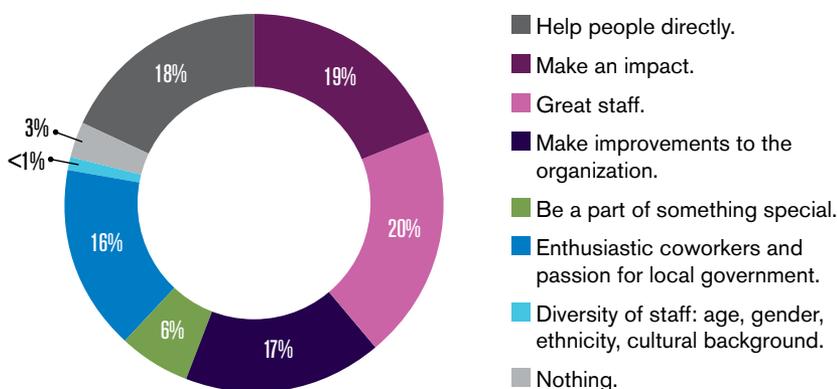
**FIGURE 2. What Attracts People to Work for Local Government.**



**FIGURE 3. Reasons to Continue Careers in Local Government.**



**FIGURE 4. Workplace Inspiration Factors.**



in innovative ways to enhance the quality of life for residents in your community.”

A second example is for a treatment plant operator position: “Conduct regularly scheduled tests of water quality to ensure compliance” (boring) or “Provide safe quality water for people to bathe their little ones” (exciting!).

Innovative local governments, including Sedgwick County, Kansas, and Decatur, Georgia, have created effective job announcements and advertisements by moving away from the traditional “legal ad” format to appeal to those with an adventurous spirit who don’t just want a job, but who want to make a difference.

In addition to better appealing to a candidates’ sense of wanting to serve, local governments must also recognize that timeliness is important when recruiting. While public sector agencies may have a series of written exams and performance tests that are required as part of their hiring process, accelerating the speed in administering these processes is important in maintaining the interest of talented candidates.

Showing genuine interest in the candidate and being willing to modify the interview process to make it stimulating and interesting will set you apart as an employer of choice. This point was confirmed by LGWS respondents in Figure 6, citing the need to reform hiring processes as one aspect of the workplace that they feel needs to be changed.

Finally, remember that a candidate who is a proper fit with your organizational culture is the best way to ensure the new employee—and the organization--will succeed. One county human services department in California modified its interview process to allow multiple staff at all levels to participate in the questioning of candidates.

It went further by allowing staff and the candidate to interact during a two-hour session observing the work of the job for which the candidate had applied. The result was a much better educated candidate on what the organizational mission is and a highly participatory workforce that helped to select the candidate who would best complement the team.

A big benefit of this approach is that it ultimately reduced turnover and influenced higher employee morale.

### Retention of Top Performers

Conventional wisdom says that employees will depart if they are discontented but that money will make them stay. This is likely an oversimplification. People stay in a job—or leave it—for a variety of motives.

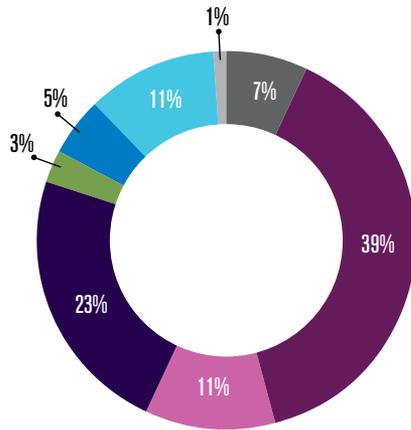
This theory was clearly seen from respondents' answers to *LGWS* in Figure 3, where more than twice the number of respondents said that good management, culture, and quality of coworkers were more important to them than compensation and benefits.

It goes without saying that employees want to be well compensated, but savvy managers should recognize that staff members are searching for other kinds of satisfaction, primarily related to professional growth and opportunities to make a positive difference to the organization of which they are a part.

Managers must also recognize that younger employees are often undergoing a continuous job search and seeking potential opportunities that are a better fit for their lifestyle and career plans. According to *Fortune*, almost 90 percent of employees<sup>1</sup> are already looking for work outside their current occupations, and research from *Career Builder* shows nearly one-third of employers expect workers to job hop on a much more extensive basis than they have historically.<sup>2</sup>

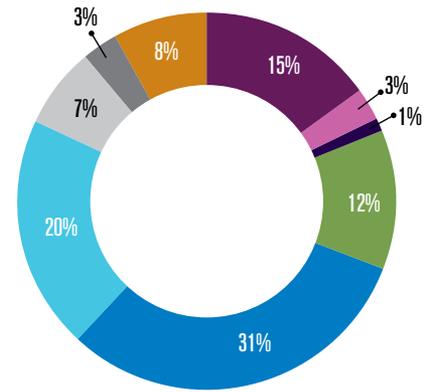
Another common management belief that must be reexamined is the general feeling that high employee turnover is bad and low turnover is good. In monitoring turnover in your organization, it is much more important to measure “regrettable” turnover—the number of departing employees whom you would desire to keep.

**FIGURE 5. Workplace Demotivating Factors.**



- Outdated technology and programs. Working with inefficient infrastructure.
- Negativity towards ideas that would require more work. Hearing “no” too often.
- Small size of community.
- Organizational aversion to effective change.
- Poor management and oversight.
- Partisan politics interfering with productivity.
- Team members who are hesitant to fully participate and support activities of the organization.
- Disconnect between capacity of administration and expectations of community.

**FIGURE 6. Workplace Changes Needed.**



- Resource improvement: technology, amenities.
- Reform human resources: (bonuses, pay for performance) and hiring and firing.
- Diversity (age, gender, ethnicity) is needed in local government.
- Local governments need to be financially sustainable.
- Creativity/high quality of work should be rewarded.
- Organizational culture: more employee input, communication.
- Collaboration: interdepartmental, top to bottom, citizen.
- Ethics/fair treatment/transparency.
- N/A.

Exit interviews are important, but you also should do retention interviews. Meet with employees you consider as your top talent and ask them one question, “What more can we do as an organization to challenge you?” Most likely, you will discover that top performers value and seek several key organizational factors:

- **Flexible work programs.** Such innovative organizational approaches as job sharing, flexible hours, and telecommuting can help your organization be more attractive to women, millennials, and older workers.

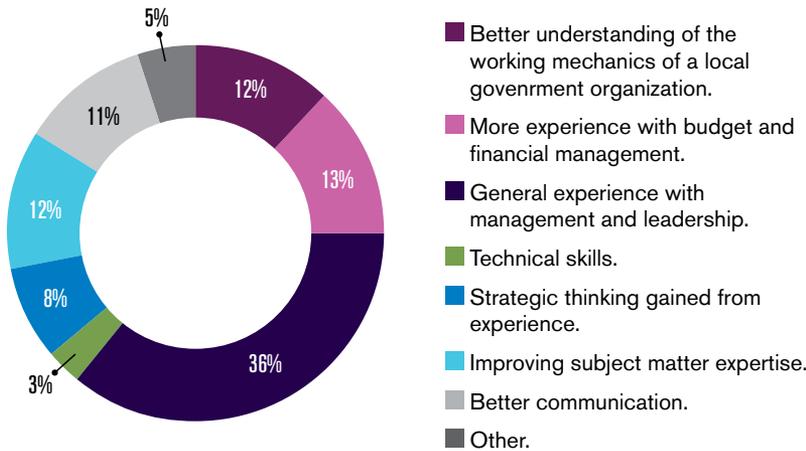
*LGWS* responses (Figure 3) underscore the importance young profession-

als place on a workplace that allows flexibility in work tasks, hours, and workplace location, the second highest organizational factor that would keep them in a career in local government.

- **Relationships.** Based on a survey of 7,272 U.S. adults, Gallup’s *State of the American Manager* report concludes that people may go to work for an “organization,” but one in two left their job because of a failed relationship with their manager or supervisor.

*LGWS* reinforces these Gallup results, highlighting the aspects of the workplace that inspire today’s younger local government workers. As Figure 4 demonstrates, 36 percent of respondents indicate that

**FIGURE 7. Skills Needed for Career Advancement.**



younger employees is poor management and oversight of the organization. These are important calls to action for managers of the future in retaining quality employees in their organization.

• **Professional development and growth.** LGWS respondents indicated that they value investment by the organization in them as employees. Openings for upward mobility are only a portion of the equation to retaining top performers. Equally important is the investment organizations make in professional development and growth opportunities for all employees (see Figure 7).

Leadership and professional development and training were the top responses by 45 percent of the survey respondents to the question, “What could your workplace do in order to help you advance in your career.” If not already in place, a local government might develop a series of educational courses that focus on equipping employees with the requisite leadership, management, and supervisory skills to better perform their jobs.

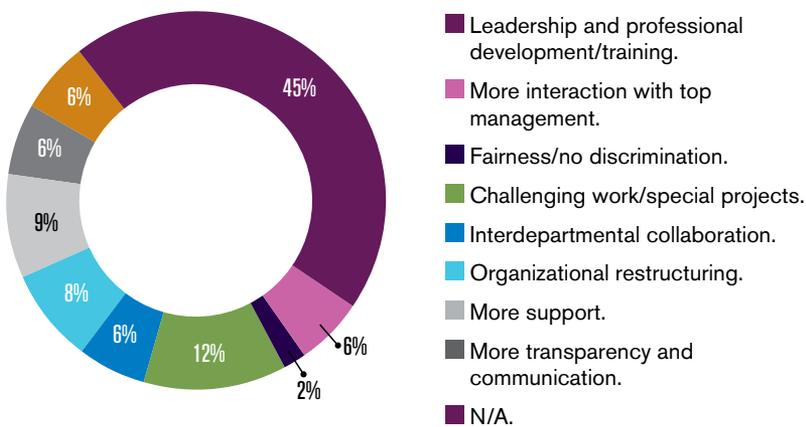
Many local governments now have in place leadership academies for their up-and-coming staff. These training activities focus on team building, emotional intelligence, and understanding the political and cultural influences of the organization and community.

They also enhance specific skills like facilitation, brainstorming, creative problem solving, public speaking, budgeting, project management, communications, and effective supervisory practices.

• **Experiential learning.** When asked about the skills they need to improve to advance in their careers, more than one-third of the respondents said “general experience with management and leadership” (see Figure 8).

Employees will increase their capabilities and position themselves for future opportunities, not just by learning new skills and actively engaging in a mentoring partnership, but also by participating in a series of targeted employee-learning activities. Rotating job assignments, “acting” roles, and shadowing are attractive

**FIGURE 8. Workplace Assistance Needed for Job Advancement.**



great staff or enthusiasm of coworkers is a huge motivator.

If employees report that their managers’ expectations are unclear or that their managers provide insufficient equipment, materials, or other resources, the likelihood of a regrettable turnover increases.

• **Workplace culture.** A workplace culture based on an inspirational set of organizational values is key to retaining top employees, as are management practices that emphasize shared decision making. These values include an organizational commitment to trust, creativity, team work, and employee involvement in decision making, which

can be powerful motivators if they are part of day-to-day workplace behaviors and not just words on a page in an employee handbook.

Managers must not underestimate the importance of a strong organizational culture, and they need to recognize their role in being vigilant about fostering a great workplace culture as a strategy to retain top-performing employees. Figure 6 shows that nearly one-third of LGWS respondents want to see an organizational culture that focuses more on employee input and communication throughout the organization.

Figure 5 illustrates the most commonly reported factor that demotivates

pursuits to top performers who want to stretch themselves.

## Anticipating Change

In addition to focusing on new strategies for recruitment and retention of younger staff, managers must also proactively work to prepare their workplaces for the future. Effective strategies include:

- **Engage in proactive workforce planning.** Analyze the demographics of your workplace and estimate as best you can the projected attrition, not only among older workers but other age groups as well. Today's younger workers are mobile and good managers need to develop a plan to transfer the mission-critical tacit knowledge prior to employee departures, regardless of age or tenure.

- **Partner with learning institutions.** Local governments should pursue the opportunity to partner with local educational organizations to provide staff development opportunities and contribute to the enhancement of local government services. Educational and training programs and certifications are only some of the benefits such partners can bring to your organization.

Local institutions also can provide inexpensive and enthusiastic talent through internship and apprenticeship programs that can help to develop a pipeline of future workers.

- **Evaluate paid-time-off (PTO) policies.** These policies serve as the foundation on which flexible work arrangements can be built. A study of innovative local government organizations as well as the use of external evaluators can be particularly useful in these reviews and can help suggest appropriate adjustments for your organization that will increase the likelihood of attracting or keeping younger and mid-career workers.

- **Provide cultural awareness training.** This type of training serves two

purposes. First, it appeals to the desire among younger employees starting their government service for an open and diverse workplace.

Secondly, the training sends a signal to all employees that the workplace can serve as a platform for discussing such challenging issues as different cultural communication styles, how to give and receive feedback, and how different cultures review and assess employee performance.

## There's Good News

The *LGWS* results bring good news as well as direction for local government managers who heed the feedback from younger employees who will soon become tomorrow's leaders. Let's listen to their messages so that we can more effectively prepare our organizations for this next generation of public servants and the exceptional work they will do to provide service to our communities. Here are some ideas.

- Stress how the nature of local government work impacts our communities and allows employees to engage in performing interesting and challenging work that benefits many people.
- Make a quality first impression on potential new employees through the job announcement and the interview process. Develop an effective onboarding procedure for new employees.
- Expect your mid-level managers to be quality trainers, mentors, and advisers to new recruits. Provide training if they are not proficient in these skills.
- Train and involve younger employees in broader organizational activities through professional development and experiential learning opportunities.
- Have senior management meet periodically with new employees and listen to—and act upon—their good suggestions.
- Rethink some of the more bureaucratic processes that are holdovers from bygone days. Where possible, simplify those that frustrate employees.

- Consider using newer employees to look with fresh eyes at ways to streamline those processes or better connect with and serve residents.

- Invest in your employees—both those who are new and those who are experienced. They will notice and appreciate it, and you will be the beneficiary.

- Cultivate a reputation for being “Best in Class” as a local government employer. Word will get around that your community is the place to be for future public leaders.

At a time when much of the rhetoric about local government work is vitriolic and portrayal of public servants on television shows reinforces false impressions of officials as corrupt or simply stupid, it can be easy for managers to overlook the many positive developments on the horizon as young professionals stand ready to assume the mantle of civic leadership.

Younger individuals are being drawn to public service to have a positive impact on their communities. The only barrier we face to realizing the benefits of this talented and motivated workforce is a blind adherence to doing business as usual. **PM**

## ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://fortune.com/2014/08/05/job-search-career-change>.
- 2 <http://www.careerbuilder.com/share/aboutus/pressreleasesdetail.aspx?id=pr824&sd=5/15/2014&ed=05/15/2014>.
- 3 Survey data is based on Glassdoor survey conducted online from August 14-22, 2013, among more than 1,100 employees and job seekers.



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