

THE NEXT GOVERNMENT WORKFORCE

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Historically, government at all levels has relied on decent pay, generous benefits and stable employment to attract workers. As a result of the economic downturn, each of these attractions has been significantly diminished, leaving public leaders scrambling.

Other factors are at work, from the political pressure to be leaner and more efficient to the expansion of interest in work-life balance programs to the explosion of social media. The sum of all these moving parts is that for government to build its 21st-century workforce, old models must be discarded in favor of "next practices"--contemporary, progressive and practical strategies and tools to attract, retain and optimize talent.

Here are four approaches government leaders should embrace or expand to translate the headwinds of disruptive change into a tailwind:

1. Composition of the workforce. As the economy continues to slowly improve and with it government revenues, there's a belief among some public managers that elected officials will be receptive to adding new government jobs to the payroll. This is a fantasy. Of course, elected officials must be committed to meeting constituent expectations, but the political reality is that it won't be accomplished anytime soon by growing the public workforce. The question, then, is how those community needs will be met.

One method is through the provision of a "contingent workforce." Savvy leaders get that what they need is to challenge the conventional notion that government always needs an FTE--a full-time equivalent--to provide a service. Do you really need an FTE? Instead, how about sharing employees between government jurisdictions? How about your agency employing that planner three days a week and another jurisdiction using him or her for two days? Yes, you'll have to figure out arrangements about benefits, workers' comp and the like, but it can be done.

Another option is consolidating services with another jurisdiction. Procurement, information technology and human resources services are likely candidates in this area. Consolidating emergency dispatching services among jurisdictions is one of the fastest growing national trends.

2. Recruitment and selection. First off, this should not be just an HR-department function. Successful government leaders realize this and bring organizational horsepower to bear so that a shared and unified vision among all executives, managers and supervisors guides the development of their workforce.

It's time to recognize that you're competing for talent. The best people today aren't simply looking for a job. They want meaning and impact, and government is all about having an impact on the quality of life for citizens. This should give the public sector an edge over the private sector. However, the traditional methods of building the government workforce--post an advertisement, administer an exam, create a hiring list, make an offer--aren't the best ways to recruit that kind of talent.

While you may have a hiring freeze in place and think recruitment of employees is something off in the distance, take this opportunity to refresh your repertoire of recruitment and selection practices. Redesign your agency's website so it features more curb appeal and includes a web-based application process. Feature testimonials from current employees about what a wonderful organization yours is and how the work is challenging. Modify promotion practices to factor in performance as much as seniority, because it's a myth that seniority translates to competence, just as it is a myth that technical proficiency translates to supervisory effectiveness. Wise leaders pivot from these tired old notions and adopt a more practical approach that reflects what they're really seeking from their workforce. Remember, hiring is like dating--you get what you look for.

Wellington, Fla., is one place that is [utilizing leading-edge tools](#) to recruit candidates who are highly compatible for its fast-paced, progressive workplace culture.

3. Social media. If your agency doesn't have an active Facebook page, you're not even in the game for top talent. Active and relevant social media must be used to attract the caliber of talent you're seeking. And don't ask your IT department to create a Facebook page for your agency. Instead, invest in a marketing firm to assist your staff in crafting a social-media plan, one that includes Twitter and emerging digital tools and that reflects tomorrow's trends, not today's. Another approach is the one taken by Patrick Banger, town manager of Gilbert, Ariz., who [recently hired the town's first chief digital officer](#) to help design and implement a digital strategy with a special emphasis on the use of social media to strengthen Gilbert's brand as an employer.

While we're on the subject of social media, it's past time to retire the practice of not allowing your workers access to social-media sites at work. (It may be hard to believe, but there are some government agencies that don't allow employees to access their agency's own social-media sites. That is both astonishing and ridiculous.) Blocking access, supposedly as a deterrent to employees wasting work time, equates to thinking that the paperless office we used to hear so much about will actually occur.

4. Developing and training the workforce. Isn't it counterproductive that when government budgets are reduced, one of the first areas to be cut is training? Some government leaders have fought successfully to sustain their budgets for workforce development, persuading policymakers that now is when it is most needed.

The latest trend has smaller government organizations pooling resources to bring in top-flight trainers, while webinars have become a staple of the professional-development diet. Bismarck, N.D., has for the last several years utilized its "Bismarck University" to enlist "climbers"--employees on the way up--in a highly successful leadership-development program. Participants complete a comprehensive feedback assessment to establish a baseline for individual development and then attend a series of competency-based training workshops.

What all these "next practices" approaches have in common is a focus not on simply adding bodies to the government workforce but on transitioning to one that is right for the times as they are now and as they will be. The old models just won't get you there.



Patrick Ibarra is an "entrepreneur of ideas" and architect of innovation who takes the headwinds governments are facing about the current climate of unprecedented changes and translates them into a tailwind with practical, tactical and impactful solutions that can be used immediately. A former city manager, Patrick owns and operates The Mejorando Group consulting practice (www.gettingbetterallthetime.com). Mejorando is Spanish for "getting better all the time" and Patrick's firm partners with governments helping them increase employee performance and organizational effectiveness by providing consultation, facilitation, and training. Ibarra is an author, speaker, blogger and educator who brings fresh thinking, innovation, and new ideas to help public sector organizations succeed in the 21st century.

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