



IN CASE OF **EMERGENCY,** BREAK GLASS

10 EMERGENCY WAYS TO COMBAT THE HIRING CRISIS

It's time for local government agencies
to take urgent measures with their
talent recruitment and retention.

BY PATRICK IBARRA

"It's almost impossible to solve today's problems with yesterday's solutions."

—Patrick Ibarra

Tired of posting another in a series of job announcements only to find practically no one applies and those who do aren't qualified? Have you raised employee compensation only to realize all your neighbors have as well, so higher starting pay isn't the competitive advantage you once thought? Wondering if remote work is a fad or here to stay? Hired people only to watch them wash out and leave your organization? Struggling to not lower your hiring standards but recognize it's becoming a real challenge not to? Any of these statements ring true? I'm speculating that you replied yes to most if not all these questions. Consider yourself in good company as attracting talent has reached a crisis, in particular for local government.

What year is it in your organization? In other words, from what era is the prevailing mindset? Raise your hand if you know someone who lives in a world that no longer exists. Yep, that's what I thought. My recommendation is that now is the time to do things differently and do different things because if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got—and that's not good enough.

The biggest issue is often the lack of applications and an increasingly smaller size of qualified candidates. Obviously, the pandemic has fundamentally changed the labor market, creating a high demand/supply gap for talent, and today's job seekers have higher expectations. Most job seekers are searching for an employment arrangement that generally checks three boxes: flexibility, well-being, and purpose-driven work.

Flexibility. A recent CareerBuilder survey found that more than 61 percent of employed American adults agree that they work better remotely than they do in the office. Additionally, 77 percent of job seekers who are already employed believe the option to work remotely is important in a job posting. "Employers who include a remote work option are currently attracting seven times more job applicants," according to Susan Arthur, CEO of CareerBuilder.

Flexibility is no longer a perk; it's expected by all your employees. The demand undeniably grew out of the pandemic experience. Job seekers from all sectors and levels are making it clear that flexibility is their top priority—including for jobs that can't be

done remotely. It's also a critical factor in managing employee retention. People are not willing to give up how they integrate their work with the rest of their life. Job seekers have so many options right now that they don't have to make the trade-offs and sacrifices that they used to make and are unwilling to do so.

Well-being. Well-being is all about viewing your employees through a holistic lens. Work-life balance is no longer the norm; instead, it's life-work balance.

The trend is to create a quiet room for workers to recharge mentally, nutritional foods in the cafeteria and vending machines, fitness club membership and work-free weekends are all examples of ways to contribute to a positive mood, less fatigue, and a decrease in employee burnout.

Purpose. The public sector is all about purpose—every day each and every employee is building a stronger, more vibrant community. You and your employees are community builders. Now, more than ever, job seekers are craving positions that mean something to them and in some respects, impact society at large.

Competition for talent will continue to intensify and the belief that attracting top talent is simply about pay and pension needs to be reexamined.

Increasingly job seekers are exploring organizational purpose and workplace principles as they relate to their new job.

I have authored a number of articles for ICMA about talent management, sharing proven ways that local governments can effectively address emerging challenges to attracting and retaining a modern workforce. In 2022, I penned the article, "Help Wanted: Turning Your Workplace into a Talent Magnet," along with a companion webinar that you'll find immediately beneficial.

In this article, I offer 10 emergency ways that you can implement instantly to successfully combat the hiring crisis in your organization and convert the headwinds of change into a tailwind. Oh, and these changes are not the sole responsibility of your HR department since hiring qualified people isn't entirely up to them; it's everyone's responsibility, especially department directors.

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1. Recruitment Strategy

How can you find the people with the right skills to do the right work at the right time? The power balance between employers and employees has shifted. There are more jobs than people. The pandemic has prompted employers to rethink traditional ways of operating and to rethink talent acquisition. As candidates at all levels weigh opportunities differently and the competition for talent continues to intensify, organizations will need to offer an employment experience that candidates prize.

The intent is to bring in new employees who are as good as your current top performers. The marketplace for talent is competitive, so the best recruiting efforts are proactive, dynamic, and capable of engaging candidates. The challenge for public-sector organizations is to manage what comes to mind when prospective candidates think of government as an employer. Job candidates have a certain experience when they research the organization and apply for jobs—good, bad, or indifferent. This experience influences their decisions about whether to apply, accept a job offer, or look somewhere else. What exactly do candidates experience when they interact with your agency as an employer? Do candidates get a sense of what sets the organization apart from other potential employers?

Hire faster. Question every step in the current process and determine what you can either delete or compress but hire faster. It stinks when your top candidates turn down your offer for employment because they already accepted a position elsewhere.

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Have a plan. When a vacancy occurs, a specific recruitment plan that consists of sourcing strategies, schedules, etc., should be co-created by the human resources business professional and the hiring manager. Agreement about these variables is fundamental to a smooth and effective process.

Establish a time-to-hire metric. This will establish expected deadlines for each segment of the hiring process. These should be co-created by HR and the hiring manager of the department. This metric should be reported regularly to all interested parties.

Begin establishing your own farm system, in particular for public safety and public works and utilities. Sponsor candidates to earn their certifications with the contingent they’ll be offered a job once its completed. Revisit your partnership with unions that represent these employees and adopt a more aggressive apprenticeship and journeyman program for new hires along with a solid and reputable internship program.

Host your own career fair for all positions. Invite members of the executive team, along with front-line employees, to present and

describe the benefits of working for your agency. Obtain a background profile for each person attending and follow up with these potential full-time employees.

Focus on college students. Tailoring your organization’s appeal to a new breed of college graduates requires a marketing approach to devising a campus recruiting campaign that addresses two of the highest priorities among young people: career mobility and social responsibility. Check out such websites as Handshake (joinhandshake.com).

Gather information from current seasonal employees. Many of these employees are attending college and may be interested in employment with your workforce once earning their degree. Obtain email addresses and stay in regular contact throughout the academic year as a means of strengthening the relationship between your agency and prospective full-time job seeking candidates. Additionally, because of their seasonal employment, this group benefits from learning about the purpose of local government and their potential contributions in that pursuit.

In summary, if you want better qualified candidates, then go get them! Hope and faith aren’t a strategy and the days of posting a vacancy and receiving scores of applications are over.

2. Job Announcement

Promise me that you’ll never again make a job description a job announcement. Let me repeat that (say it with me): “I shall never again use a job description as a job announcement.” Job descriptions are essential but often task-centric—and quite

honestly, a bit boring. Instead, how about the following:

*“Adventurers wanted.
We’re a unique
and exemplary
organization
comprised of mission-
oriented people who
choose everyday
to build a stronger
community. Join us and
realize your potential.”*

Organizational values should be included and shown in announcements and used in the hiring process. Focus as much on mindset as you do on skill set; I argue that a person’s mindset or their intangibles are as influential to their success as their skill set.

If your organization doesn’t have a list of values, now is the time to create one. These values (and please, get past the platitudes) should outline how the organization wants to treat its employees, how the organization wants to be perceived as a brand, how employees are expected to represent themselves, and how employees should feel working for your organization.

Beyond posting the values on the wall in the employee break room, you should operationalize the behaviors associated with those values into the hiring, promotional, and performance review processes.

Make open positions easy to find. Your agency should have a job opportunities or careers section on its website’s home page. Each department should list openings, describe the hiring process, provide an FAQ listing, and outline the challenges and satisfaction that employees can expect from working in

that particular department. This type of message makes a powerful impression on potential candidates. Make sure you're tracking traffic to your website and evaluate its effectiveness periodically.

Use social media.

You must have a coherent recruitment strategy that includes an active presence on social media sites. In marketing there's a term referred to as "spray and pray" which comes from a strategy of "let's blast it out everywhere with hopes someone reads it." Instead of this ineffective method, adopt a more targeted approach where you're being selective and zeroing in on a prospective applicant population.

Social media channels—notably Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok—are the most powerful medium for communicating an employer's brand. Your agency should use LinkedIn to promote its employer brand (i.e., reputation) as part of the recruitment strategy, especially when targeting candidates with college degrees. Avoid using a screenshot of a job announcement that lacks sizzle as your post on LinkedIn. Finally, have a presence on social media about careers and job opportunities in your agency and not just when a vacancy is open. Promoting your agency as a destination employer is a process, not an event.

3. Sign-on Bonuses

Sign-on bonuses have gained widespread popularity as employers struggle to attract talent, especially in law enforcement. But hiring experts warn that one-time bonuses have a range of drawbacks

that employers must consider, including the following:

- Sign-on bonuses should be offered consistently to all new hires regardless of position; otherwise, engagement may be low for those not cashing in.
- Current employees will wonder where their bonuses are and may jump ship to collect them somewhere else absent a monetary reward for staying (i.e., retention bonus).
- Some new hires will take the money and run; even if payments are spaced out over time, many workers will still leave if they don't find value in the work.
- Attempting to reclaim bonuses from employees who leave early can be a legal nightmare that's rarely worth the expense.
- Keeping employees on board for a year or more without offering additional bonuses may prove difficult, since those workers have already shown a preference for such payments.

4. Remote Work Policy

I suggest you stop referring to it as "employees working from home" as though they're sitting at home in their pajamas. The

fact is that everyone reading this article has worked while attending one of their kids' soccer games, sitting at an airport, during vacation, and yes, at home in their pjs. In some respects, geography has disappeared. Here's the thing: job seekers won't even apply for a job with your agency if a modern remote work policy isn't offered on their first day of work. At a minimum, you should adopt a hybrid arrangement, which has become the norm for many public-sector workplaces wherein employees can choose a flexible schedule; and on certain days, everyone is in the office.

One of the most delicate issues concerning remote work is internal equity. In short, if some employees are eligible, what do those employees who aren't receive instead. Don't allow that issue to prevent you from adopting a modern remote work policy. First up, employees who work remotely a few times a week earn no extra compensation while working remotely so there's no additional budget dollars directed toward it. Second, if you want to have a serious discussion in your workplace about internal equity, then it's essential you focus on economic benefits that employees receive in certain occupations. For instance, there are a large number of government employees in occupations where overtime, uniform allowance, holiday pay, special duty pays, call-in pay, etc., are part of the package. I realize bringing up this topic can be sensitive but avoiding it places your organization at a severe disadvantage in attracting and retaining top talent. The intent here isn't to remove

the economic benefits from employees who receive them, but that it's not permitting the sensitivity to the entire topic, preventing you from moving forward with a contemporary approach to remote work. Ladies and gentlemen, let me be crystal clear: remote work is here to stay!

5. Candidate Experience

Candidates are savvier than generations past thanks to access to consumer-friendly technologies and the massive amounts of employer information available online. This, coupled with labor market shifts and related talent shortages, has seen employers either able to adapt to the new hiring landscape or risk falling swiftly behind the competition.

Candidates do not want to expend an extraordinary amount of time to simply apply for a job. In fact, many job seekers want to complete the online application while they're sitting at a traffic light.

Offering job seekers a clean, well-branded mobile presence is now a basic requirement of an effective hiring strategy. Research shows that more than half of all candidates are job hunting exclusively via their mobile devices. Consequently, if you don't have an advanced mobile recruiting platform, those candidates won't find you. Finally, tools should be provided to indicate the real-time status of the candidate's application.

After applying, candidates need to hear from your agency frequently in order to have a positive experience during the application process. Better and more timely communication with candidates throughout the applicant process should

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**The Three Rs for
today's workplace:
reimagine, refresh,
and reshuffle.**





be undertaken. It costs nothing monetarily but definitely improves the candidate experience. While not everyone who applies for a position is hired and is disappointed, the candidate experience and the way your agency handles the entire process may affect whether the candidate re-applies for a future opening.

6. Selection

It's difficult to build a modern workforce with remnants of the past, like employees being forbidden to have piercings or show body art. I ask you, what year is it in your workplace? I ask because adopting contemporary approaches to dress code is expected by your employees.

Increase your use of *behavioral interviewing*. In the behavior-based interview, the interviewer uses examples from the candidate's past to predict future job performance. The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Therefore, you need to obtain detailed behavior-based descriptions of past events in order to determine the extent to which the candidate's competencies match the requirements of the job. Questions that are developed should incorporate aspects of your agency's mission, vision, and values to increase the likelihood of the appropriate fit. Behavioral interviewing should also be utilized for promotional interviews. Suggested interview questions might include:

- In past positions you've held, how have you handled continually shifting priorities?
- Tell us about a decision you made when you were under pressure.
- What steps have you taken when you had to make an immediate decision?
- What were the biggest challenges facing your

current employer and what solutions did you recommend and implement?

- Describe the most important attributes in people you've hired.
- What did you learn last year?

7. Onboarding

A systematic and effective onboarding process is especially critical in order to reduce turnover among new employees and accelerate the performance of your new employees. Let me be clear, HR can have a fabulous onboarding process for new members joining your organization, but once that employee shows up to their respective department on their first day, how robust is the departmental onboarding process? Organizational leaders should be asking each of their department directors to report out on their onboarding process for their new employees. You may discover serious opportunities for improvement.

Nothing turns off new employees more than showing up for their first day of work and finding that no one is expecting them. It can send a disheartening message that they're not valued, and they may regret their decision of choosing to work for you. This kind of low morale right off the bat can quickly derail performance. Your organization's brand relies on that first day for the new employee to create the necessary traction for high performance and to ensure all the terrific comments expressed by the organization's hiring team about their employer are actually true.

The challenge for public sector organizations is to manage what comes to mind when prospective candidates think of government as an employer.



Beyond the basics of having the workspace prepared, business cards printed, email accounts set up, uniforms available, and so on, your organization should assign buddies or mentors to show new employees the ropes, introduce them around, take them to lunch, and acquaint them with the workplace and their co-workers. The buddy or mentor doesn't have to be their immediate supervisor, but someone who will have the time, enthusiasm, approachability, and credibility to help the new employee become more familiar with their workplace, including articulating expectations about performance.

Equally vital for the new employee to contribute their talent quickly is crafting a customized work plan that outlines goals and objectives to be met within the first 30 days, 90 days, and six months. Creating a clear and compelling work plan will give new employees vision, which will lead them down the road to success.

8. Learning and Development

A relic of the past is "let's not go to great expense to train people; they might leave." I turn that around and ask, what if you don't and they stay? Which is the bigger risk to your organization's level of performance? Successful organizations realize that in today's workplace, candidates and employees alike are seeking (and usually expecting) an employer that chooses to invest in developing their skills and capabilities as a strategy for elevating employee performance and improving organizational effectiveness. Again, the employer's reputation of being an organization that makes strategic decisions to invest in its own workforce, even through tough economic times, is important because it helps attract, retain, and develop talented people. Gone are the days when training was first on the chopping block when budgets tightened. Your organization should begin linking precious training dollars with the desires of those employees who are seriously interested and committed to improving their performance trajectory. It's time to discard the idea of training as a budget expense and lean toward viewing it as an investment in the future of both employees and the organization.

9. Workplace Culture

Culture is the workplace experiences that both shape beliefs and drive actions and results. In short, employees both affect workplace culture and are affected by the workplace culture. Most people want to be part of something bigger than themselves—this

is why culture is the most important dimension of an organization's identity. It's the context—or should be—for every other dimension. Think of your workplace culture as the set of principles and mores that defines the organization, lived with conviction and consistency by every employee from top to bottom. Collectively, the culture is something bigger that unifies all the individual elements of what you are and what your employees do. Everything from outward-facing activities to internal business processes are reflections of those shared principles. In brief, culture is the predominant attitudes, language, and behavior of the organization:

- *Attitudes* are the way people think and feel that affect behavior.
- *Language* is the words people use to describe their thoughts and feelings.
- *Behavior* is the way people act.

Workplace culture should be factored into your organization's recruiting and hiring decision. While organizational objectives outline what you want to get done, culture defines how you get it done. Workplace culture is essentially how you operate, interact, and collaborate to accomplish these objectives.

For their part, employees say the top three areas where they experience their organization's culture are the mission or values statement, employer recognition or celebrations, and the approach to employee performance, according to Quantum Workplace's 2022 Organizational Culture Research Report.¹

Constructed properly, a healthy workplace culture will

reinforce the articulated values and the specific behaviors that leaders expect from all employees.

10. Performance Appraisal/Evaluation/Management

You've invested a tremendous amount of time, effort, and energy in hiring new employees and now it's time for them to perform. Let me go out on a twig and offer that your agency, in the past few years, has probably modified the performance appraisal instrument to make it shorter, maybe even put it online for easier access, yet performance management remains a sore point. You might be asking, Patrick, why are you identifying this as a subject for attracting talent? Well, it's been my experience and observation that effective organizations actively promote in their outreach to prospective job candidates how high performance is the norm, and that the necessary mechanisms and advocacy are in place to ensure success.

At its core, performance management is about creating a work environment that helps an organization meet its goals. It's more than just a collection of tools and processes, although there are many that can help organizations meet their goals.

Employees who are clear on what's expected of them and who know they are being evaluated on a consistent set of criteria have been proven to be more productive and committed to the organization. Naturally, it provides them with some assurance that the organization is making decisions that affect them in a fair and ethical manner.

Failing to assess and coach employees can lower individual

performance and organizational effectiveness. Good performance management can engage employees and invigorate your agency's overall performance. It can:

- Improve individual employee performance and enhance organizational effectiveness.
- Inspire greater employee commitment and help reduce unwanted turnover.
- Enhance your agency's reputation as an employer of choice and strengthen your brand.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities and hold employees accountable.

Performance management must be structured and consistently applied, but also flexible and responsive to the needs and styles of employees. Designing performance systems is never easy; changing them can be even harder, if for no other reason than employees are used to the ones they have, like them or not. The goals of this performance management initiative should be to:

- Educate both management and employees on the rationale and value of implementing performance management within the agency.
- Provide managers and supervisors with the tools they need, and the training on those tools, to implement performance management within their departments.
- Focus people on doing the right things that drive value for the organization and deliver results that support key strategic priorities.

- Increase accountability for performance at all levels of the organization.
- Train both managers and employees to ensure everyone adopts, understands, and embraces the principles and intent behind the performance management system.
- Communicate and coach constantly at all levels (including the executive level) to keep the intended process on track.

Conclusion

In closing, change introduces uncertainty into our worlds, and clinging to what we know is an entirely human response. Feeling paralyzed by the sheer scope of implications, real or imagined, is normal. Breaking down our strongly held positions to understand the underlying interests allows us to solve them in different ways. Exploring the range of options to meet the seemingly insurmountable challenges present with respect to the workforce offers a concrete path toward addressing what matters while continuing to evolve. **PM**

ENDNOTE

¹ <https://marketing.quantumworkplace.com/hubfs/Marketing/Research/2022%20Organizational%20Culture%20Research%20Report.pdf>

PATRICK IBARRA and his consulting firm, the Mejorando Group, are passionate about unleashing human potential (patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com).



Most people want to be part of something bigger than themselves—this is why culture is the most important dimension of an organization's identity.

