

UKG

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Attracting and retaining government talent in a post-pandemic world of work





TABLE OF CONTENTS

1

The exodus challenge: attracting and retaining passionate public sector employees in a post-COVID world

2

Key roadblocks to success

3

Using data to gain a clearer understanding of employee needs and morale

4

Critical considerations moving forward

5

Leveraging technology to better serve the public

CHAPTER 1

The exodus challenge: attracting and retaining passionate public sector employees in a post-COVID world





THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC dramatically reshaped workplaces worldwide. Here in the United States, this shift presented state and local governments with unique challenges in attracting and retaining skilled employees. Initially, governments enforced work-from-home policies as a temporary measure for social distancing and health safety.

Yet teleworking and video conferencing quickly emerged as the new standard. These changes led many employees to seek the flexibility and option to work from home — permanently or in a hybrid arrangement.

However, the public sector, particularly with respect to state and local government jobs, often struggles to match the remote work options available in the private sector.

“A large percentage of public sector employees, especially in local government, work on-site in fields such as public works, law enforcement and firefighting,” says Bob Lavigna, a senior fellow for the public sector at UKG and an industry expert. “There’s a limited amount of flexibility that public sector employers can provide to these employees, even though people across the country want flexibility.”

Even for positions that can be performed remotely, some lawmakers are pushing for employees to return to the office to support economic recovery, Lavigna notes. While the private sector has recovered most pandemic job losses, the public sector has not. Factors include not only salary disparities but also considerations such as retirements, budgetary constraints and organizational culture preferences.

These limitations significantly affect the government’s capacity to attract and keep skilled workers. It’s also harder for the government to offer raises and bonuses. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows a large gap between state and local government job openings and hires. Estimates suggest there are more than 600,000 fewer government employees now compared with pre-pandemic numbers.

Furthermore, 2022 [data](#) indicates that up to 59% of state and local government employees are contemplating leaving their current jobs, while 69% of state and local HR leaders say they are already experiencing a retirement surge, or expect a surge in the next few years.

“Americans expect the government to protect our nation and our communities, maintain a strong economy, preserve our quality of life, reduce poverty and homelessness, recover from disasters, safeguard the environment, educate our children, etc.,” Lavigna says. “These are hard jobs, and they become even harder when the government is unable to attract and retain talent.”

To address these challenges, governments must adapt their strategies to attract, hire and retain highly qualified employees passionate about working in the public sector. In addition to offering competitive pay, government agencies should evaluate how they communicate fulfilling careers and opportunities to potential employees. ■



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CHAPTER 2

Key roadblocks to success





FOR GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS to deliver efficient and accessible services to the public, it's imperative to have dedicated and competent staff. This means employing skilled professionals adept in public administration, policymaking and many other specialized domains.

However, the government is struggling with many different challenges in trying to attract and retain such talent. These include a decline in public trust, cumbersome hiring processes, inability to match private sector salaries, limited remote work opportunities, poor perception as a technology leader, and restricted avenues for employee skill development.

Public trust is a linchpin for government recruitment. Unlike many private organizations, the public sector grapples with shifting political leadership and policies, introducing potential instability. The

intertwining of conflicting agendas and a larger presence of unions further complicates the landscape.

Cumbersome hiring processes often discourage potential candidates from considering government roles. With the private sector providing more efficient recruitment experiences, government agencies need to update their practices to meet these expectations.

Often, public sector salaries can't compete with those offered by businesses. However, while matching private sector salaries may be challenging because of budgetary and political constraints, government agencies should offer flexibility and wellness initiatives to compensate for lower pay.

“There’s a demand for employees to be heard,” Lavigna says. “Employees also want organizations to focus on wellness. They want more of a balance and integration between their work and personal lives. They’ve taken the last three years as an opportunity to rethink what they want out of their lives.”

In the post-COVID job market, many candidates value remote work and flexibility. Yet political pressure pushes some public service roles back to in-person settings. Furthermore, state and local governments struggle with an image of lagging in technology. To attract and retain top talent, it’s crucial to highlight tech progress and digital transformations.

Lavigna highlights research from employee experience platform [Great Place To Work®](#), now part of UKG, that finding purpose in their work is the No. 1 reason employees, particularly younger generations, stay in a job. A career in the government can provide that sense of purpose.

Many also overlook the positive influences of government in their lives, often viewing it as bureaucratic and unexciting. They might not realize how their unique experiences and backgrounds can enrich public service.

“There are a lot of ways that government agencies need to change the way they attract talent,” Lavigna says. “It really goes beyond just pay. A lot of it has to do with marketing and branding public service. The government doesn’t do a very good job communicating to prospective employees the many ways in which public service can provide rewarding and fulfilling careers.” ■



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CHAPTER 3

Using data to gain a clearer understanding of employee needs and morale



TO ADDRESS ISSUES and strengthen employee experiences, government agencies must first grasp the strengths and challenges within their organizations. It's important to gain insights into how employees feel about their work, what they appreciate and what they struggle with. This understanding helps organizations identify areas for improvement and prioritize their efforts.

"You can guess and say, 'Well, we need more training and development,' or 'We need a better onboarding program,' or 'We need to train our supervisors,' and those things may work, but you really need data," Lavigna says.

One valuable data point is employee turnover and retention. Agencies should analyze who is leaving their positions and who is staying, along with the reasons behind these trends.

"Are the people you want to keep — like new employees, best performers, people who contribute to the diversity of an organization — staying or are they leaving?" Lavigna asks. "You really need to drill down and look at that turnover data to understand whether you have some gaps or issues you need to address."

It's also important to examine other data points such as pay equity, the extent of overtime, employee engagement levels, the impact of training and professional development, and absenteeism rates.

"We believe it's important for organizations to understand what's going on in their workforce before they take action to improve the employee experience," Lavigna says. "Otherwise, you're just guessing, and the stakes are too high in the government to guess."

As a global leader in human capital management, UKG provides tools that help employers tackle employee issues promptly. Its solutions help public sector employers in drawing talent, simplifying onboarding and



elevating employee experiences. Furthermore, UKG® human capital and workforce management solutions automate HR processes, boosting operational efficiency.

“UKG’s motto is ‘Our purpose is our people,’” Lavigna says. “We provide technology tools to help the organization create that positive experience.”

Recognizing the value of HR professionals’ expertise and insights, government agencies should involve them in technology decisions. Moreover, equipping HR departments with dedicated personnel trained on tools for data collection and analysis allows them to streamline operations, elevate employee experiences and leverage data effectively. Empowering HR professionals with knowledge and tools promotes innovation, strengthens recruitment and retention strategies, and supports organizational growth.

Understanding the sentiments and experiences of employees is not merely an optional exercise, but a critical endeavor that shapes the core of an organization’s culture and success. By actively reaching out to employees and asking them about their feelings and experiences, employers can gain valuable insights that drive meaningful change. Becoming a Great Place To Work Certified™ organization helps do just that and is one way to attract employees.

Great Place To Work conducts employee surveys to assess the workplace. Employees can share their thoughts and experiences confidentially. Earning a Great Place To Work designation sets organizations apart, provides insights for improving employee engagement and retention, and ups the agency’s reputation as a people-centric organization, Lavigna says.

“Fundamentally, the Great Place To Work model is about trust,” he adds. “It’s really based on whether the employee trusts their boss, the leadership of the organization and their colleagues. When there is a high degree of trust, that creates a great place to work.” ■



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CHAPTER 4

Critical considerations moving forward





THE EFFICIENCY, READINESS AND COMPETENCE of government agencies in providing essential services are key considerations that directly impact the well-being of the population. When the government falls short, the consequences are dire. For instance, the response and recovery efforts during Hurricane Katrina were delayed, negatively impacting citizens along the Gulf Coast. A clean water crisis in Jackson, Mississippi, arose because of a shortage of city water operators.

Providing critical services at the federal, state and local levels is a paramount responsibility of government. If it doesn't have skilled employees to deliver these services, the 330 million Americans who depend on them will face difficulties not only during crises and emergencies but also in their day-to-day lives, Lavigna says.

"I believe the 22 million people who work in federal, state and local organizations across the country comprise the most important sector of the American economy," he adds.

Employees serve as the backbone of government agencies, ensuring the efficient and effective delivery of services. By recognizing the value of their employees and investing in their well-being, development and engagement, public sector employers can cultivate a motivated and committed workforce. The government directly impacts people's lives and provides employees with meaningful jobs where they can make a difference.

There are around 90,000 public sector jurisdictions across the country, each with its own goals, political environment, culture, and economic situation. Organizations that provide a positive work experience will attract and retain motivated individuals. When employees feel valued and supported in their growth, they will give their best to help the organization succeed.

"You can have a very satisfying and fulfilling career in the public sector," Lavigna says. "Engaged employees in the public sector are twice as

likely to say they believe their organization achieves its mission. They're twice as likely to say they feel good about their mental health."

Unlike previous generations who sought long-term stability with a single organization, younger generations lean toward more mobility.

"We all see the research about how people who are entering the workforce today are not going to stay in the same job, the same organization, for 40 years, like many Baby Boomers did," Lavigna says.

Mobility is also possible in government as public sector organizations are occupationally diverse, so it is possible to have a series of experiences but stay in the same organization.

"Employees don't have to leave to do something different," Lavigna says.

However, government agencies need to adapt to the post-pandemic work environment to be seen as employers of choice. The shift toward remote and hybrid work arrangements, the growing importance of technology and digital solutions, and evolving employee expectations all require agencies to embrace change. Doing so is imperative for the long-term success and resilience of government organizations.

"What many refer to as the Great Resignation, we refer to as the Great Reassessment," Lavigna says. "People are rethinking where they want to work and its impact on their personal lives. Approximately 4 million people who are quitting their jobs every month — and this has happened for the last year and a half — aren't leaving the workforce. They're moving to what they believe are better jobs."

In many cases, people leave for higher pay, but more often, it's about finding organizations that meet their needs and have a culture aligned with their values. Without making changes to enhance flexibility and

the work environment, the government will continue to struggle to fill vacant positions.



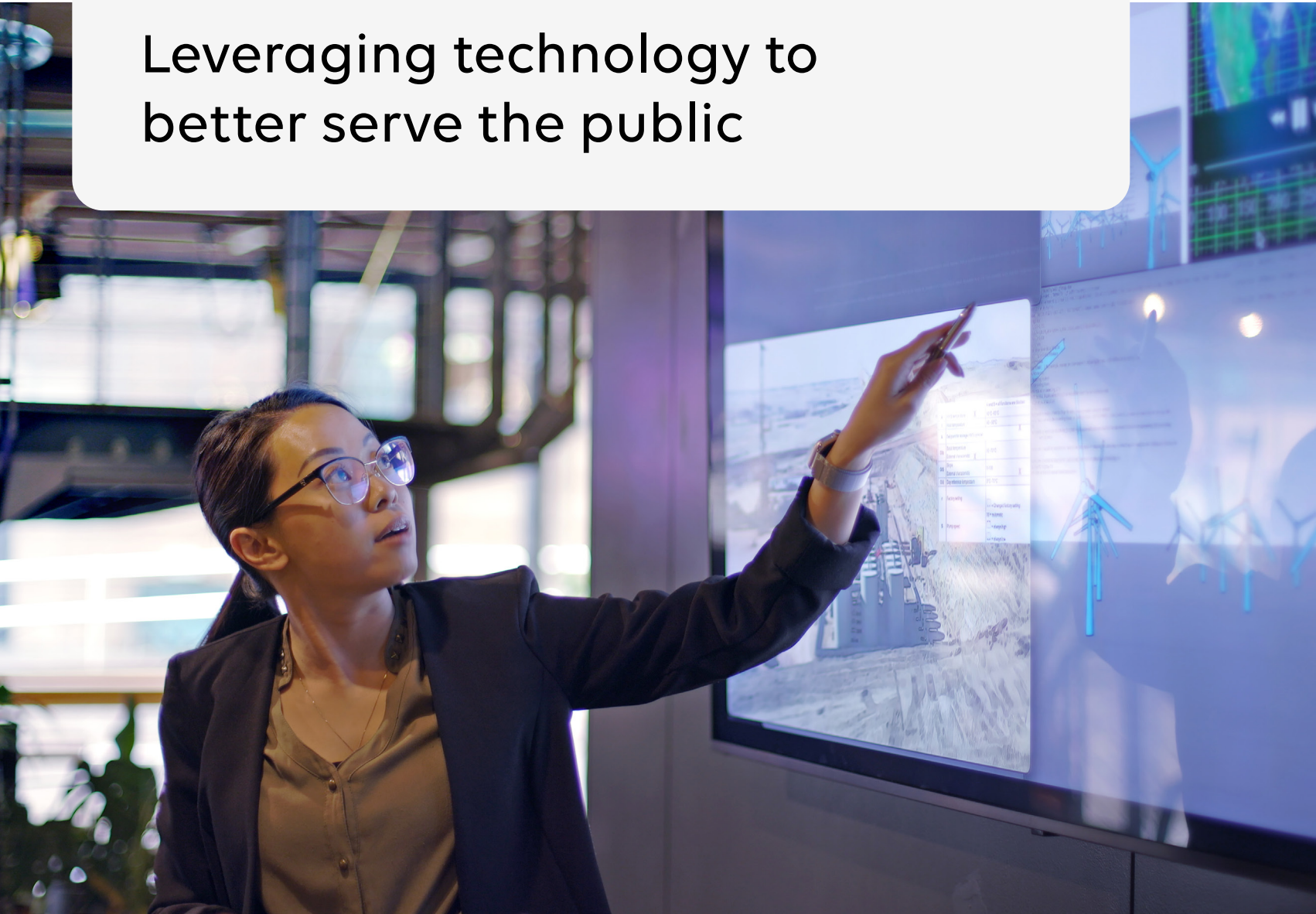
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To become top employers, agencies must strive to create a positive workplace culture. This involves building trust, valuing employee well-being, promoting diversity and inclusion, and providing opportunities for growth and development. By fostering a supportive and inclusive culture, government agencies can attract and retain quality talent. A great workplace culture not only enhances employee engagement but also augments services and increases productivity. ■

CHAPTER 5

Leveraging technology to better serve the public





THE POST-COVID JOBS LANDSCAPE has made it harder for government agencies to attract and keep skilled professionals. Challenges like public distrust, lengthy hiring procedures, pay gaps with the private sector, and limited remote work options must be tackled for continuous delivery of essential services.

Implementing a workforce technology solution such as those offered by UKG, government HR teams can streamline communication, simplify recruitment, and secure and retain top talent. This technology also guides agencies in pinpointing improvement areas and implementing beneficial changes.

In today's world, the emphasis on the employee experience is critical for governments to serve the public effectively. This means adapting to newer work norms like remote or hybrid models, harnessing technological growth, and fostering an employee-centric environment.

Investing in tools that prioritize employee well-being and growth can empower agencies with a dedicated team, ensuring top-tier public service delivery. The focus should be on valuing and supporting staff to meet the dynamic needs of the public.

In this evolving landscape, HR leaders stand at the forefront of shaping the future of public service. Now is the time to proactively adapt, innovate and lead by example. Embrace the challenges, harness the power of technology and invest in employees — the heart of public service. These actions, powered by data and technology, today will pave the way for a more resilient, effective and dedicated government workforce tomorrow. ■

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Our purpose is people