

Finding and Recruiting New Public Servants

By: Jonathan Fisk



In September 1776, General Washington needed a spy to collect information on the size, strength, and location of British forces. Nathan Hale volunteered. When questioned by his fellow soldiers, he declared: “I am not influenced by the expectation of promotion or pecuniary reward. I wish to be useful, and every kind of service necessary for the public good becomes honorable by being necessary.”¹ Hale’s statement encapsulates the public service ethic, the desire to support and maintain a community, state, or nation.

The public service ethic and its role in recruitment is an abstract concept. In order to better understand its role in recruiting younger workers, I used a combination of professional, academic, and interviews. The following article is an attempt to summarize the information I collected from all sources. Contemporary public administration scholars suggest that an ethos of public service drives many into the public sector.² Emily Watson, Budget Analyst, City of Olathe, for example, believed that her upbringing engendered a commitment to public service. “I credit my parents with inspiring me to become involved in the public sector. I was raised by two people who were always involved in their community. When I was in grade school, my dad was the Mayor of my hometown. Throughout my childhood and even still today, my mom and dad have participated in civic organizations and served on community boards. They taught me the importance of being an active member in one’s community.”

Most scholars acknowledge that the service “ethic” is not the sole motivator for public sector employees. Rather, they explain that public sector employees are generally motivated by a desire for job security and stability, financial reward, and the satisfaction of public service.³ Job security and financial reward are relatively straightforward. The public service ethic, as a motivator, however, can vary according to the individual. Dr. Gene Brewer, University of Georgia, identifies four different archetypes: samaritans, communitarians, patriots, and humanitarians. Samaritans are individuals who are motivated to help other people, while communitarians have a strong sense of civic duty and desire to serve others. Patriots seek jobs that serve a large cause, and humanitarians look for opportunities to work toward their sense of social justice.⁴ Unfortunately, these motivations are not currently strong enough to achieve industry needs.

Aging of the Public Sector Workforce and Need for Renewed Recruitment

The public sector is facing a human capital crisis. Despite indications that younger generations are interested in politics and government, current recruitment strategies have failed to attract them into public service.⁵ A study by the Brookings Institution confirmed the ineffectiveness of current recruitment efforts: “the percentage of students from the top graduate schools of public policy and public administration that go on to work for federal, state, and local governments has fallen from 76% in 1974 to 55% in 1988 to 49% today.” Finally, the results suggest a public relations failure by government recruiters. 60% of young graduates, for example, did not even know how to get a job in the federal government, and 90% believed the process would be too long.⁶

The demands on government are growing; yet, its workforce is not. As a result, all levels of government may become unable to perform vital functions in the future. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM), for example, calculated that by 2017 nearly 60% of employees in federal agencies will be eligible for retirement.⁷ Moreover, the OPM estimated that it will need to fill approximately 193,000 “mission-critical” jobs within the next decade. Mission critical jobs often include positions at the Department of Defense and Homeland Security.⁸

State and local governments are graying as well. According to the International Association of City and County Management, five out of eight public sector employees work in local government. In 1971, nearly 71% of professional city, town, and county managers were age 40 or younger. By 2006, that percentage had fallen to only 13%.⁹ According to the Kansas Department of Administration’s 2007 Workforce Report, which tracks workplace changes since 1998, workers ages 50–59, as a percentage of the state’s workforce, have significantly risen. Conversely, workers ages 30–39 and 40–49, as part of the state’s total workforce, have significantly lessened. The following table shows the graying of the Kansas workforce.¹⁰

2007 Kansas Workforce Report

State Agency	% of Employees that are Retirement Eligible by 2012
Adjutant General	51%
Dept. of Administration	49%
Dept. on Aging	61%
Dept. of Commerce	49%
Corporation Commission	48%
Dept. of Education	53%
Dept. of Health & Environment	48%
Kansas Health Policy Authority	46%
State Historical Society	51%
Insurance Dept.	45%
Judicial Branch	40%
Dept. of Labor	54%
Dept. of Revenue	40%
Dept. of Social & Rehabilitation Services	42%

Source: <http://www.da.ks.gov/ps/documents/workforce07.pdf>

Additionally, workers with 20–29 years of experience have increased, while employees with 5–9 years have decreased. Alarming, by 2012, the State projects that one-third of its workforce will be eligible for retirement. It should be noted that the State did report a 3% increase in workers younger than 30.¹¹ Finally, in FY 2007, the state reported an increase of 6.8% in job requisitions while also reporting a 12% decrease in job applicants per opening.

Understanding this trend and its consequences will be critical for the public sector. The scope of this article, however, does not include a full discussion on workforce planning and succession. It is designed to introduce organizations to new recruitment technologies and approaches so that they attract the best young talent. Nonetheless, before a new job announcement is placed, the organization should analyze its current and future needs, strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats. They should forecast personnel needs in a manner similar to the budget process and then estimate an amount of human capital necessary to achieve stated goals and objectives. A city, for instance, may expect an increase in building construction, regulation, or population within the next five years. These types of growth require new and different types of personnel. As such, if a city hopes to attract young talent, city leaders should begin planning and taking proactive recruiting steps now.¹²

Unique Characteristics of Incoming Workforce (GenX & GenY)

In order to compete with the private sector, the public sector needs new and progressive recruiting strategies and incentive packages that specifically target younger generations. Nikki Spencer, Management Analyst II, Sedgwick County, commented that “[local] governments should be open to other benefits that are being offered in the private sector such as flexible schedules, wellness benefits, student loan re-payment as a sign-on bonus, paid time off vs. sick, and vacation leave accrual, etc. A major hurdle that local government must overcome to continue to attract people to the profession is being stuck in the way things have always been done when it comes to recruitment and retention. The private sector is always looking for new ways to attract and retain a skilled, trained workforce. I think local government should be prepared to offer their version of the same types of benefits.” New strategies should capitalize on the different attitudes toward work, public service ethics, family, loyalty, and authority.¹³ Better recruiting strategies will shorten the time needed to fill the position, attract better candidates, and reduce overall costs.

In order to attract younger workers, it is critical that government recruiters understand what these young workers are looking for in a job and their values. Jobs must appeal to an applicant’s professional and personal interests. Consider applicants for a city administrator position and the applicants for a social worker in the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services. Both positions are professional and vital to sound government but will likely attract people with different backgrounds and interests. As a result, applicants should be targeted with those specific backgrounds and interests in mind.

Some generalizations about younger generations are appropriate. Applicants from Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), for example, look for opportunities that reward innovation, support personal and professional growth, recognize success, value teamwork, and encourage personal responsibility. In response, an organization may stress in its promotional literature its support of professional growth, by agreeing to fund travel to conferences. GenXers also prefer an office that values work/life balance, flexibility, creativity, and fun. A manager described his



feelings relative to work/life balance. “It becomes a personal decision [leaving an organization] that is based on professional development and family needs/responsibilities.” Finally, members of Generation X tend to search for opportunities that are interesting and empowering to a degree that allows them to set their own professional and personal goals.

Recruiters are wise to be cognizant of the values held by Generation Y (1976–1995 or 1982–2001), depending on the specific source and appeal to their values and attitudes. Although they are only beginning to enter the workforce, members of Generation Y tend to seek out positions that are creative, value innovation, and offer responsibility. GenYers thrive in offices that are mission driven, have a positive and supportive culture, and offer meaningful work that aligns their interests with the public good. Finally, they value learning and education and have a work/life balance.¹⁴ Nathan Eberline, Intergovernmental Associate at the League of Kansas Municipalities, reflected that, “I have observed firsthand the dissatisfaction that often arises in a life spent pursuing the highest salary. Individuals typically spend more time daily in the workplace than they do sleeping, which may explain why so many people dislike their jobs. I believe the knowledge that I am helping others with my work combats the distaste that people tend to develop for their work.”

New Recruitment Technologies and Refurbished Old Ones

Therefore, the question becomes how an organization may translate generational dispositions and attitudes into recruiting success. Successful human resource offices incorporate those dispositions and attitudes into their job recruitment programs. They might, for example, adopt new Internet technologies and continue traditional recruiting methods. Recent college graduates and young professionals are digital beings. They interact with the Internet. They post and retrieve information, download and upload multi-media, and communicate. Yet, most, but not all, firms use the Internet in a passive way. They host a website or use a third-party site that posts recruitment information and available positions.¹⁵ This dichotomy between active and passive Internet presents new challenges for the public sector. In order to attract younger generations, public employers should anticipate using a more interactive format. An effective recruiting website should interact

with its audience and include links to pertinent information and related multi-media.

Public sector managers should explore new outlets and strategies to market their employment opportunities. Agencies might consider advertising on networking sites frequented by young professionals (LinkedIn, Facebook, Jobvite, and Jobster).¹⁶ Additionally, they might look for ways to improve the overall quality of their websites, or include newer and different multi-media options. Multi-media may include videogames (<http://peacecorps.gov/kids/>), videos (<http://www.kckpd.com/CareerOpportunities>), or even just links to [Youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) videos and photos. Agencies might also detail local entertainment options such as social clubs, carnivals, parks, and other information relative to quality of life.

In 1997, approximately one-third of federal employees learned about their current job from a friend or relative.¹⁷ The proliferation of interactive websites (Web 2.0) has enhanced the ability to connect and communicate with peers and colleagues. Web 2.0 software, such as LinkedIn, Jobvite, and Facebook, gives employers the ability to locate and communicate with active and passive applicants. These applications also enable employers to target candidates with specific interests, skills, licenses, or talents as well as enlarge the applicant pool.¹⁸ A community searching for a city administrator or manager, for instance, might search Facebook for individuals who are members of ICMA or students in Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs. Additionally, current employees might be encouraged to transmit job announcements, referrals, and other pertinent information to their networks. They may also share firsthand accounts of workplace culture, the type of work, and if mentoring or job coaching is available.¹⁹

Some of the top Web 2.0 sites include: Jobvite, LinkedIn, Facebook, PublicServiceCareers, and Jobster. These sites collectively have millions of relatively young users (average age: 41). The private sector, perhaps, has best exploited the potential of services such as LinkedIn, (www.linkedin.com), which has more than 600,000 small business owners trafficking the site. Moreover, they report that nearly all Fortune 500 companies have used LinkedIn as one strategy of their recruitment practices.²⁰ In addition, LinkedIn allows interested parties to build their own networking pages. Users add contacts and search via the LinkedIn job network for employment opportunities.²¹

Facebook (www.facebook.com) boasts more than 100 million

active users. Its technology empowers its users to network and communicate with other users. Facebook also allows advertisers to selectively recruit by targeting specific age, location, and interests. Additionally, Facebook features *Trusted Referrals* that attach to “friend-to-friend interactions about your business to your ads.”²²

Jobvite (www.jobvite.com) also incorporates Web 2.0 technology and enables online recruitment. The site is an on-demand recruitment application that fosters company-wide collaboration during the hiring process. The software integrates employees’ social networks into the hiring process by encouraging online referrals. In effect, the company states that it brings the “rolodex” online.²³

Jobster (<http://www.jobster.com/at/mvt/mv1.html>) also integrates online networking with a search function. It accommodates targeted recruitment and advertising, and employers only pay a fee for each applicant. In many cases, similar services are not free, and specific questions should be directed to their host company.²⁴

PublicServiceCareers.org (<http://www.publicservicecareers.org/>) is another resource for recruitment. It focuses on career opportunities in government, non-profits, non-governmental organization, contracting, consulting, and academia. The site offers a one set price for each job advertisement, regardless of length or word count. Potential employers may also use the site to view resumes, at no cost, and post a profile. The filter allows for targeted applicant searches and postings.

The Internet is not the only way the public sector may improve its recruiting. Public sector employers might become pro-active in targeting potential applicants, for example, students before they who have made career choices.²⁵ Philip A. Kiraly, Assistant Village Manager of Deerfield, Illinois, said that, “I believe that informing the younger generations about this field and its positive, long-lasting impact on a community is critical in maintaining a steady flow of good talent. I’ve started doing that by reaching out to, and presenting to classrooms with kids of all ages, beginning in elementary school, which makes them aware of the important role city managers play in improving quality of life. It’s important to reach out to high schools and colleges too...making it clear that city management or any aspect of public administration is an honorable, rewarding career choice.” The need to engage younger students is critical. Similarly, the National League of Cities declared that, “Nothing is more important to the health of our democracy than the

active engagement of young people in representative government at the local level. For this reason, city leaders across the nation have sought creative and effective ways to ensure that youth from diverse backgrounds have a ‘seat at the table’ in their cities and towns.”²⁶

Government and other public employers work in complex legal environments. Although the law is designed to meet specific legislative goals (veteran’s preference, fair and non-discriminatory hiring), it also slows the hiring process. Bill Trahan, in Recruiting the Generations to Federal Service, argues that speed is the most important factor in hiring the best college graduates. Recent graduates often cannot wait months for an offer from a public agency, especially when they will likely receive offers from private sector firms. In fact, he suggests that speed may be more important than “large salaries, stock options, and signing bonuses.”²⁷ In this regard, municipalities and other public firms should streamline their hiring process so that it is more efficient and effective at attracting talent.

Employers might also target specific majors and degree fields or even specific clubs or groups and pre-qualify those individuals as candidates. This can be especially valuable at job fairs with on-site interviewing/hiring.²⁸ If a city is interested in hiring an aspiring city manager from the University of Kansas or Wichita State University, its recruiters might learn about the student and customize a recruiting package and talking points that reflect the interests of that student. For example, if a potential applicant expresses an interest in hunting and fishing, a city may include “perks” related to those activities.²⁹ They may also discuss municipal projects/developments related to those interests. In practice, the cities ought to work with public administration and planning departments, career services (at colleges and universities), and clubs throughout the state and pre-qualify student applicants.

Career paths and internships are additional non-internet options. Matt McQuillen, Assistant to the City Manager, City of Ankeny, Iowa, while reflecting on the value of his internship, observed that “the experience at the Iowa League of Cities and Iowa Statehouse is what solidified my decision to enter public service. During my time as an intern at the League, I was involved with many research projects in which I had to converse with various city managers throughout the state to collect information. As I talked with those managers, I heard stories of progressive initiatives and projects they



were undertaking to advance their communities. The endeavors of these managers were making a difference in their communities, and those stories convinced me that I wanted to be involved with making a difference in a community, for the greater good.”

Career “paths” will likely reflect the career tracks of specific agencies and foster a sense of career progression. In a city setting, paths might include administrative, financial, and planning. Consider the following scenario: a new professional employee begins working in city government. Through a mentoring process, he or she spends his or her first year making decisions regarding his or her future with the city. At the end of the year, the employee may decide which path to take and be allowed to act upon his or her interests in the chosen field. One interviewee commented that “Making a plan for what you want to accomplish in your career is the most important step in this process. That can really help to guide you in what you do and where you go, when all this happens.”

If, for example, a new employee chooses administration, that individual should be given responsibilities in that field and encouraged to enroll in a MPA program. Additionally, mentoring and interning give the new employee new insights into the organization, the profession, and the opportunity to better understand its culture, values, and mission.

In addition to conventional advertising (television, newspapers, billboards), employers should consider marketing employment opportunities in non-traditional locations. These areas might include: daycares, cafes, campuses, or coffee houses and other GenX and Y hotspots. Government agencies looking for new hires might also consider advertising at conferences, trade shows, and seminars.³⁰ Additional advertising, however, may produce only limited success in reaching potential employees. In other words, it should be used in conjunction with other strategies specifically designed to reach younger generations.³¹

Ten Practical Steps for Innovative Recruiting

1. Positions should include a diverse set of responsibilities and continuing education with opportunities for recognition and advancement, i.e., a career path and mentoring;
2. Become familiar and take advantage of Web 2.0 technology, even if it means just posting a job announcement and using multimedia to showcase your community or organization’s mission. Consider using Jobvite, Facebook, Youtube, etc. to target younger workers;
3. Sell quality of life by learning about your candidates’ interests and hobbies;

4. Streamline the hiring process. Young people won’t wait two months for a job offer;

5. Cultivate relationships with colleges and universities across the region, and be more visible in your region and in academic communities—use internships, fellowships, or create other forms to engage young people;

6. Include flexible working schedules and compensation schemes (pay for performance and student-loan reimbursement, childcare, and eldercare) if they are possible, during the recruiting process;

7. Make information available on available housing stock and other pertinent information, including professional associations, career coaching, and mentoring;

8. Be pro-active in recruiting and advertising at unconventional locations (cafes, coffee houses, and campuses)—in other words, any “hotspots” that young people gravitate to;

9. Encourage and utilize your existing employees’ social networks—electronic and non-electronic (state associations, local jobsites, municipal leagues); and

10. Assess and forecast organizational needs.

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