Government Workforce of the Future:
Four Key Trends

by Marnie E. Green

Hundreds of reports are published annually documenting shifts in workforce trends. Each year, the list of trends seems to include the same themes: diversity, globalization, the aging workforce, and economic impacts. These trends are predictable and often not clearly actionable for most public agencies.

Trend #1: Threaded Environments

In the coming decade, success in all sectors—and more so in the public sector—will depend on relationships. In public life, it is no longer taboo to say, “It’s not what you know, but who you know.” Relationships with key players will be the currency that drives accomplishment. And these critical relationships will no longer be purely face-to-face, shoulder-to-shoulder affiliations. A threaded environment is one in which the ability to reach intended goals is based upon internal and external alliances.

While we will always rely on the relationships we establish in person, virtual relationships will continue to increase in prevalence. These virtual associations may be established through email or other electronic networks, including LinkedIn, blogs, and other social networking tools. They will require new skills and a renewed approach to connecting with others.

As professional networks expand through the use of technology, so does the ability to affect others. In fact, one scenario is to consider the public agency as a small, core organization that manages relationships with major outsourcing providers on behalf of the agency’s constituents. California now has more than 65 official “contract cities” that operate primarily through contracts with other...
agencies or private organizations to provide basic governmental services, such as police, fire, libraries, and parks.

The added stimulus provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 has also fueled this approach and will push the state and local outsourcing market from more than $12 billion in 2009 to well over $20 billion by the end of 2010. Complicated by constituent and environmental pressures, much of this new outsourcing is expected to be with domestic rather than offshore providers, according to the Government Technology article, “Top Five Outsourcing Trends for 2009.” Functions including technology, staffing, supply chain management, finance, accounting, and even green initiatives are currently being outsourced by public agencies of all kinds.

In 2010 and into the future, public organizations will continue to develop a network of partnerships and alliances with talented people—small niche players who provide nimbleness—and access to new tools and services on an as-needed basis. The government workforce of the future will be more dependent on nimbleness and immediate rewards. Loyalty is now to one’s own career ambitions rather than to the organization.

In a new employment paradigm, workers look to the organization less for lifetime employment and security and more for skill-building and immediate rewards. Loyalty is now to one’s own career ambitions rather than to the organization. Workers have learned that even in the public sector, it may not be wise to depend on a pension plan that may or may not be available 30 years from now.

This emphasis on self-reliance is likely to carry over to worker’s expectations toward retirement planning, healthcare, and skills development. As such, the role of the public sector employer must shift. In response to this trend toward self-reliance, workers will look to the employer for new and different services, including increased educational opportunities to help them navigate the financial world and investing. Employers will take on a greater role in the area of financial education, while not necessarily providing the traditional investment vehicles for the workforce.

Additionally, organizations are forcing self-reliance on employees through shared medical and drug costs. Buck Consultant’s Prescription Drug Benefit Survey, completed in July 2009, reveals that 76 percent of respondents use employee cost-sharing as a management tool, up substantially from 51 percent in 2008. As a result, employees will have to learn quickly to take a greater responsibility for their own healthcare, rather than relying on an all-inclusive health plan to do the work for them.

In another nod to self-reliance, public agencies will continue to be challenged by a workforce that is moving from jobs to roles. Employees will be more focused on personal aspirations and goals rather than primarily on the organization’s goals. It is expected that workers in the aftermath of the most current round of budget cuts, layoffs, and restructuring in state and local agencies will continue to embrace the concept of free agency.

Barriers of how, where, and when to work have been removed and employees will be seeking ways to exploit the opportunities offered by the technology and potential flexibility now available. In fact, Ryan Healy of Employee Evolution predicts that the employees who are most attractive to employers in the future are not looking for a job; they are looking for a lifestyle. Creating a workplace that shifts from employee control to employee choice is becoming more and more essential if public agencies expect to attract and retain top talent.

Likewise, entrepreneurism is on the rise. Workers want to be their own boss because the traditional bureaucratic life has become increasingly unattractive. According to U.S. Census, 10 million Americans are self-employed, up from 8 million in 1980, and the number of non-employer firms (firms with no payroll) recently topped 20 million, up from 15 million

Trend #2: Self-Reliance

The second trend that the government workforce of the future will embody is increased self-reliance. Since the early 1990s, scholars have been describing younger generations as more independent. With the lightning-fast shift of the external environment, workers have learned to depend on themselves rather than on the organization.

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Trend #3: Knowledge Sharing

In the past, power and success was gained through information hoarding. The more someone knew, the more valuable he or she was to the organization. Today’s workers understand that hoarding information is a sign of weakness—not only because it shows a lack of willingness to contribute, but also because most of the information that was worth hoarding is now available through a quick Internet search.

There is not much information that has not been chronicled somewhere, by someone. As a result, workers in 2010 and the future will leverage the value of knowledge sharing and will look for more and more ways to get the message out.

Public agencies must be prepared to leverage the opportunities that are created by this culture of sharing. Of course, this trend applies to how the public workforce is managed as well as how the agency relates to its constituents. Increased transparency in decision making has continued to morph how public records are managed.

In addition, the explosion of social media and interactive technologies—such as Twitter, Ning, and blogs—present enormous opportunities for agencies to engage public sector employees in a new kind of dialogue about public service. Using these tools will require public leaders to come to a new understanding about who gets to be heard and how they express themselves. Reaching this new level of comfort quickly will allow government leaders to more rapidly engage and implement new ideas and innovations.

The discipline of knowledge management has been around for some time. Global corporations such as Northrop Grumman, Capital One, and The World Bank have been using technology backed by incentives to encourage employees to catalog and share what they know, all in the name of increased efficiencies and innovation. Government agencies must embrace the practice of knowledge management if it is to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

Trend #4: Portability

Another trend that will define the government workforce of the future is the capability of the individual or organization to change and move as needed. In 2010, the concept of portability applies to a variety of life segments. Cell phones and the shrinking size of computer memory have made data ultra-portable.

Today, there is not much that is not portable. We take our phone numbers with us from cell phone to cell phone and from location to location. The shift of defined benefit pension plans to defined contribution plans is now making retirement planning more portable. Even healthcare is moving toward portability.

As such, jobs are also becoming portable. Because job tenure is increasingly short, work has become a series of time-defined projects or deliverables. The Society for Human Resource Management, in its 2015 Scenarios for the Future of Human Resource Management publication, suggests that managerial jobs will become project management-based, with one manager juggling dozens of projects that are being completed by talented, external providers.

Only 25 percent of workers feel a strong attachment to their employers, and four in 10 feel trapped in their jobs, according to Walker Information, an Indianapolis-based research firm. Employers who ignore workplace discontent run the risk of periodic productivity slumps as skilled staffers depart for higher-paying positions whenever the labor market surges. Smart public organizations that make employees feel valued will gain a crucial competitive edge.

Bottom line: Workers are now more portable than ever. The promise of a 30-year government career with a pension at the end is no longer relevant. Agencies must redefine their relationship with the workforce to adapt to this shifting reality.

Preparing for the Future

As the dates of the calendar pass, the public workforce and workplace will continue to evolve and adapt. Work will increasingly become more threaded, requiring public leaders to develop strong relationships with

REFERENCES


Employee Evolution, www.employeeevolution.com


internal and external service providers in order to provide work in new ways. Workers at all levels will becomes more self-reliant, some by choice and others by necessity. Public employers can support this trend by restructuring jobs and rethinking how to support the workforce. Along the way, government agencies must implement new tools for sharing best practices and critical knowledge. Finally, agencies will thrive when they embrace the trend of portability and find ways to maximize this new way of work.

While numerous other trends will continue to influence how public agencies will look in the future, these four trends will have a direct impact on the government workplace. Superseding demographics, economics, and politics, these four social trends cannot be ignored.

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