BEST PLACES TO WORK
IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT®

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT
DEMANDS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK

Accelerated by the global events of the last several years, the future of work has arrived at a dynamic, critical turning point for the federal government. Some agencies have found success in harnessing the innovation gained during the COVID-19 pandemic, while others are wrestling to adapt to increasingly complex and changing realities driven by cultural, social and technological shifts.

There are also internal workplace dynamics that require long-term planning and preparation. For instance, employees under 30 comprise just 6.9% of the federal workforce while representing 23.4% of the U.S. labor force (see Performance Dashboard for more insights). Also, a recent Partnership for Public Service report found that Generation X and Generation Z federal employees have both expressed a growing demand for more flexibility, technology and opportunities for growth.

These and other issues present leadership with both challenges and opportunities to develop innovative employee engagement strategies to succeed in the future of work.

The Partnership, in collaboration with Boston Consulting Group, annually produces the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® rankings. These rankings assess how federal public servants view their jobs and workplaces to give leaders a way to measure employee engagement and satisfaction across the federal workforce. Building off this work, we collectively hosted a Best Places to Work workshop series in early 2023 where federal leaders strategized about the demands and opportunities for increased employee engagement as our government adapts to changing workplace needs. This brief summarizes the concerns and recommendations shared in these workshops. We have sorted these findings into categories of importance addressed by the participants.

To implement changes, clear and consistent communication on initiatives is critical. As such, we have created the Employee Engagement Reporting Tool to facilitate the development and implementation of improved reporting and internal communication plans. This tool is intended to increase accountability for agency leaders who are in charge of implementing initiatives as well as improving internal transparency.

THE HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENT

CHALLENGES

With multiple organizations weighing in on the current state of flexible work schedules in recent months such as the Office of Management and Budget memo on agency return-to-office policies, the future of a hybrid work environment and what that might look like are of top concern for federal leaders.

While positions considered eligible for teleworking have increased in recent years, leaders are struggling to maintain equity in determining participation in flexible work programs. When asked if they are considering leaving their organization because of their work unit's current telework or remote work options, 25.9% of the 2022 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey respondents answered they are. Employees in the age groups of 26-29 and 30-39 indicated this reason for departure at a higher rate than older employees.

While this finding shows that flexible work arrangements are important to the younger generation, another finding from the 2022 FEVS suggests younger employees were more likely to be required to work in person than their older colleagues as agencies have adjusted work schedules. When asked how much time they are required to be physically present at their worksite, those under 30 who answered they were required to be present 100% of the time increased 11.5 points from 30.9% in 2021 to 42.5% in 2022. In comparison, all other age groups only saw a 6-to-7-point increase.

Maintaining a widely distributed remote workforce may place additional stress on human resource personnel if agencies are not prepared. Participants noted that dispersed workforces present unique challenges for agencies around organizational cohesion, unity and employee engagement.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Though challenges exist, the expanded use of telework has enabled agencies to recruit talent outside of their normal geographic areas. This has provided the opportunity to improve representation in the workforce from traditionally underserved regions and be more competitive with the private sector.

To effectively implement telework policies, participants encouraged capitalizing on lessons learned during the pandemic. This includes ensuring required in-person events have clear objectives that could not be achieved in hybrid or remote settings as well as continuing the use of collaboration technologies.

Suggestions to address the equity issue included giving teams more freedom to set internal work policies and organizing support groups for remote workers. These groups would be useful for agencies to streamline onboarding and organize localized versions of previously agency-wide in-person events.

The Demographic Directorate at the Census Bureau created systems to regularly engage its staff and increase information-sharing as telework increased during the pandemic. One of these is a voluntary culture council that serves as a leadership advisory body on workforce issues and a networking and support forum. Pulse surveys and culture council discussions led to the discovery that the staff was more interested in smaller in-person or virtual gatherings to socialize and share interests outside of work rather than larger in-person events.
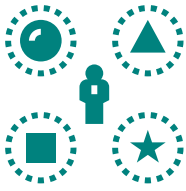
DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY

CHALLENGES

The 2022 Best Places to Work rankings analysis revealed a diverse employee experience. Younger employees and those with less job experience had lower employee satisfaction and engagement scores than those in older age groups and with more work experience. Younger employees also registered lower scores on workplace issues such as leadership, recognition and work-life balance compared to other age groups. In addition, employees in traditionally marginalized groups evaluated their agencies' diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility practices worse than their peers.

The workshop participants expressed concerns that the implementation of DEIA practices is sometimes a box-checking exercise rather than a way to change the workplace culture. Moreover, some employees from traditionally marginalized groups reported to our participants that they had a sense of isolation which prevented them from feeling comfortable enough to disclose important information.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants suggested using telework options and creating additional networking opportunities to open opportunities for more diverse workforces as both a recruiting and retention strategy. This can be the start of a wider strategy making the idea of accommodation more universally accessible, embracing the ability for work to be more flexible and allow employees meet their personal, family, and identity needs in a safe and enabling environment. This can be the start of a wider strategy making the idea of accommodation more universally accessible, embracing the ability for work to be more flexible and allow employees to meet their personal, family and identity needs in a safe and enabling environment. For example, flexible work arrangements have reportedly had a positive effect on inclusion and work-life balance for employees, including for those with disabilities.

For additional information, see our blog post for DEIA strategies, including the need to clearly define expectations and hold leaders accountable for results, and our LinkedIn live event page to learn more about inclusion and accommodation for employees with disabilities. More on a new approach to DEIA can be found in this BCG article.

The National Institutes of Health has been addressing DEIA issues through its UNITE program, which acts as a forum for innovative ideas related to combating disparities in research and health outcomes, improving equity data and promoting equity among both NIH staff and the medical research community. One of its activities is The Power of an Inclusive Workplace Recognition Project. This project attempts to increase the visibility and recognition of those with traditionally marginalized identities in the NIH workforce through the agency's portraiture. Like many other institutions, the NIH had portraiture that reflected the structural racism that limited opportunities in government leadership and research. The visual representation of people from diverse backgrounds highlights that all contributions are valued.

HIRING AND RETENTION OF EMPLOYEES

CHALLENGES

Workshop Participants pointed out that the length of the hiring process and the lack of transparency cause frustration for both applicants and human relations staff. For the applicants, the average time-to-fill rate of federal jobs is almost 100 days, whereas it is under 50 days for private companies across industries. In addition, the 2022 FEVS data reveals that only 57.7% of federal employees agree that new hires in their work unit have the right skills to do their jobs.

The 2022 FEVS found that 91.3% of the survey participants responded that they strive to contribute to the common good through their work, but many become dissatisfied as they find bureaucratic barriers and few opportunities to improve their skills. Of the 2022 FEVS respondents, 68% reported that they are given a real opportunity to improve their skills, and 64.7% responded they are receiving the training to do their job well. These results highlight the need for federal agencies to provide more individualized career considerations and upskilling opportunities.

For human resources staff, a lack of investment in HR staffing, training and innovation has escalated the recruitment and hiring burdens as remote options increase application interest and employee needs diversify.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve transparency, workshop participants recommended making the hiring journey and career paths more visible and accessible for applicants and new hires. One suggested way to do this is creating a dedicated team to inform applicants and keep them on track throughout the hiring and onboarding experience. It was also recommended that agencies develop relationships with educational institutions to increase awareness for recruits. Another option is to provide employees with the opportunity to gain alternative experiences, such as rotations in other offices or agencies to encourage professional development opportunities. Further investment in training will help with retention among those frustrated by limited opportunities for professional development and exploring non-traditional career paths.

The Office of Budget, Finance and Management at the Social Security Administration enhances professional development through its Branch Out program that allows employees to do a rotation of multi-month assignments in different parts of the agency. Employees experience the breadth of the work at the SSA, learn more about the missions of its different subcomponents and gain a new perspective on their career options.
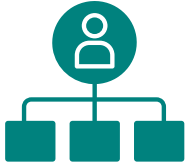
LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

CHALLENGES

The 2022 Best Place to Work rankings suggest that employees' sense of trust and respect for leadership is declining from levels that were already low. Compared to the 2021 Best Places to Work rankings, the 2022 scores decreased in all leadership categories. . The senior leadership score, which measures employee option on the heads of departments and agencies and their immediate leadership team went down by 0.8 points, while scores for supervisors dropped 0.1 points and employee empowerment decreased by 5.7 points.

Those who attended the workshops mentioned that leaders have a critical role in breaking down the siloed nature of work across and within agencies, which results in inconsistent sharing of knowledge, talent and technologies. Some participants noted that leaders often lack sufficient employee input in part because a significant portion of staff does not or cannot participate in feedback mechanisms. Attendees pointed out that improving access to accurate information about employee engagement and needs in easy to interpret formats would be a prerequisite to increasing accountability and data-driven decision-making.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants emphasized there is a need for leadership is communication, especially as agencies continue to adapt to new work realities. Increased leadership communication on employee engagement and an openness to innovative ideas could help build trust, break down silos and make the reasons behind decisions clearer for the whole workforce as we outlined in our BPTW Communications Toolkit. BCG has also discussed this and decision-making strategies in this article on decision rights.

The Department of Transportation has significant tools to improve leadership, innovation and the cultivation of ideas. One of these is the DOT IDEA program, an innovation forum where individual employees can create ideas for organizational improvement. These ideas are vetted by an Innovation Community of Practice, which also connects the suggestions with similar past successes and staff who may be interested in further collaboration. This places ownership of the innovation process with groups of staff using feedback from subject matter experts.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

CHALLENGES

While there are government-wide initiatives to responsibly promote the use of advanced technologies like artificial intelligence to maximize efficiency, workshop participants said their agencies are struggling with aging, less secure infrastructure. With little support and long-term funding, agencies are adopting technologies on an ad-hoc basis. This creates a general lack of standardization across agencies that makes it difficult to share best practices, data, and talent.

Moreover, the participants agreed that recruiting and providing upskilling opportunities for top talent is difficult. As a result, the federal IT workforce is aging, with those under 30 years old consisting of only 4% of all federal IT workforce. Some also expressed concern that automation could create a disconnect between employees and customers due to the loss of personal interactions, and lead to a loss of trust when malfunctions occur.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants recognized that there is a need for strong and consistent investments in IT to compete with the private sector for top talent and training employees in the use of new technologies to improve customer service. These investments would provide the opportunity to introduce more standardization in the use of collaboration tools. In addition, participants said using IT resources to distribute and interpret employee surveys will be critical in understanding policy impacts on the workforce.

The Health Resources and Services Administration at the Department of Health and Human Services has created a pair of digital dashboards to share Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey results and actions taken based on the findings. They also have used this data to improve programming related to diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility, which has been organized by HRSA's Office of Civil Rights, Diversity and Inclusion. The demographic data has shaped discussions in the HRSA's various employee resource groups and informed the feedback.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Partnership would like to thank participants from the Winter 2023 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® workshops for their contributions to this toolkit, including:

Alia Newhall	Eddie Ribas	Laura Sepulveda
Analisa Archer	Eric Popiel	Lisa Griffin
Barbara Sanford	Gary Farley	Mary Sprague
Ben Goldhaber	Holly Donnelly	Maureen Marks
Corynne Gerow	Jack Schreibman	Monae Nickerson
Craig Bedard	Jacqueline Wynn-Bryant	Natalia Sorgente
Dalyn Allen	James Egbert	Nigel Simon
Daniel Callahan	Janis Coughlin-Piester	Steven Owens
Dave Waddington	Jeneen Iwugo	Traci DiMartini
David Padrino	Julie Brill	Yadira Guerrero
Deborah Eichhorn	Kathleen Stephan	
Dennis Alvord	Kimberly Steide	

The Partnership would also like to thank teams from the following agencies for their contributions to this toolkit:

Demographic Directorate at the Census Bureau

Department of Transportation

Health Resources and Services Administration at the Department of Health and Human Services

National Institutes of Health

Office of Budget, Finance and Management at the Social Security Administration