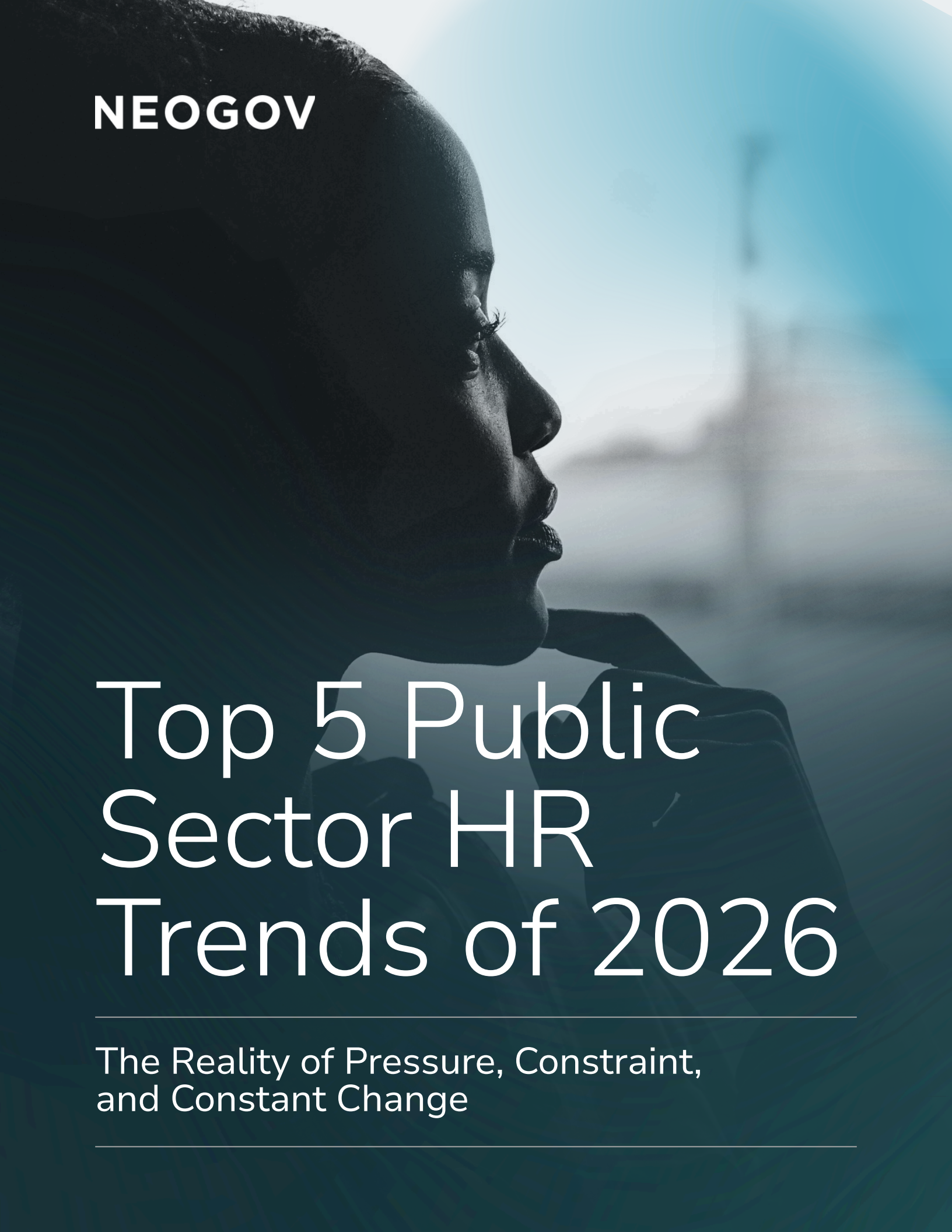
NEOGOV



Top 5 Public Sector HR Trends of 2026

The Reality of Pressure, Constraint, and Constant Change

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Public Sector HR is Entering a New Operating Era

A combination of **conditions, decisions and constraints** is altering the public sector HR landscape in 2026. These factors are contributing to foundational shifts driving gradual, persistent change at every level of operation.

Teams are operating with **staffing shortfalls**, an obstacle compounded by long hiring timelines and low budgets. Managers are juggling **competing demands**, often with higher expectations in the same constrained environment. At the leadership level, long-term priorities are overtaken by more **immediate operational needs**, each adding to the unfading sense of urgency.

For years, these felt like temporary disruptions. But in 2026, they have become a steady state of function for public sector agencies – something many teams now plan around rather than expect to resolve.

This transition reflects the new era of public sector HR **defined by workforce scarcity, limited resources, and uneven preparedness** in a rapidly changing environment. Compared to 2025, when agencies were heavily focused on improving employee experience and exploring emerging technologies, the emphasis in 2026 has shifted.

NEOGOV's survey data suggests a **move toward managing tangible burdens**, like staffing, inefficiency, and workload, often at the expense of longer-term initiatives. Patterns in the data provide important insights to illustrate the depth of this shift. Challenges are not isolated to one function or department, and leadership priorities are not always aligned with operational realities.

These findings show **a system under pressure**. Awareness and effort are not lacking, but the capacity to execute varies – resulting in a **gap between intention and what is realistically achievable within current constraints**.

Who We Heard From

This report draws on survey responses from **4,203 public sector professionals** across local and state government agencies of various sizes (Figures 0.1 and 0.2). The respondent base encompasses a wide range of perspectives, from HR and administrative roles to department leaders and executive positions, providing **insight into both strategic priorities and day-to-day execution challenges** (Figure 0.4).

Figure 0.1
Distribution of Respondents by Agency Type
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

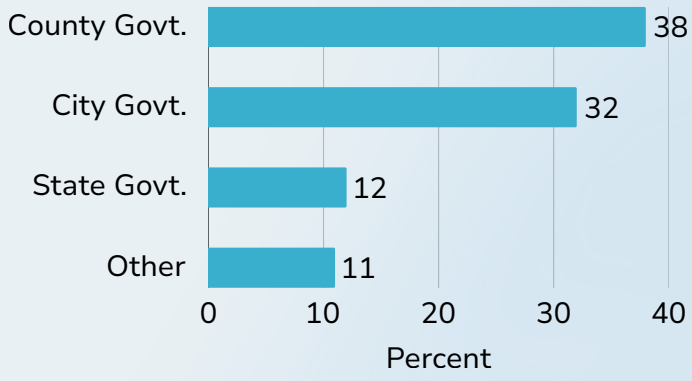


Figure 0.2
Distribution of Respondents by Agency Size
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

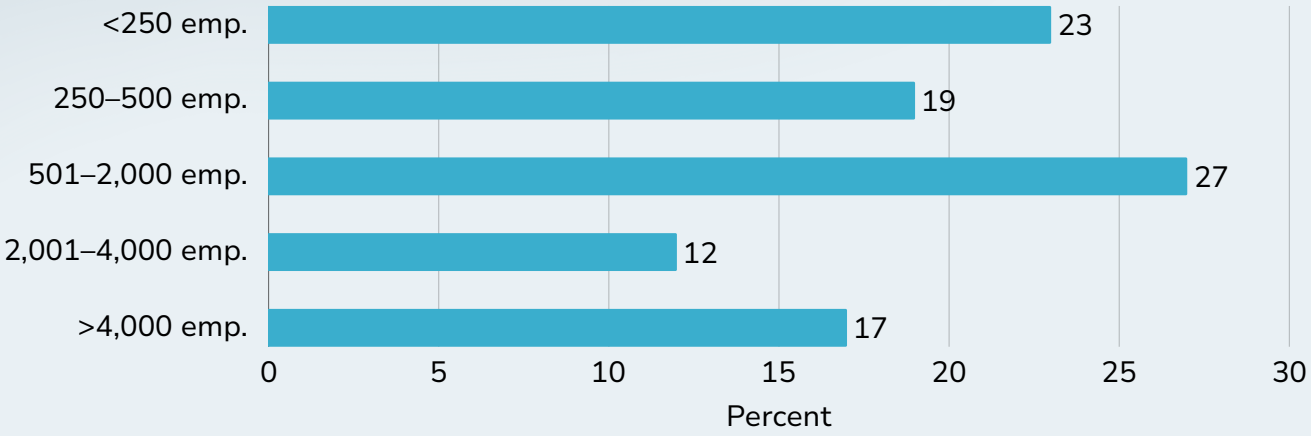


Figure 0.3
Distribution of Respondents by Agency Location
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

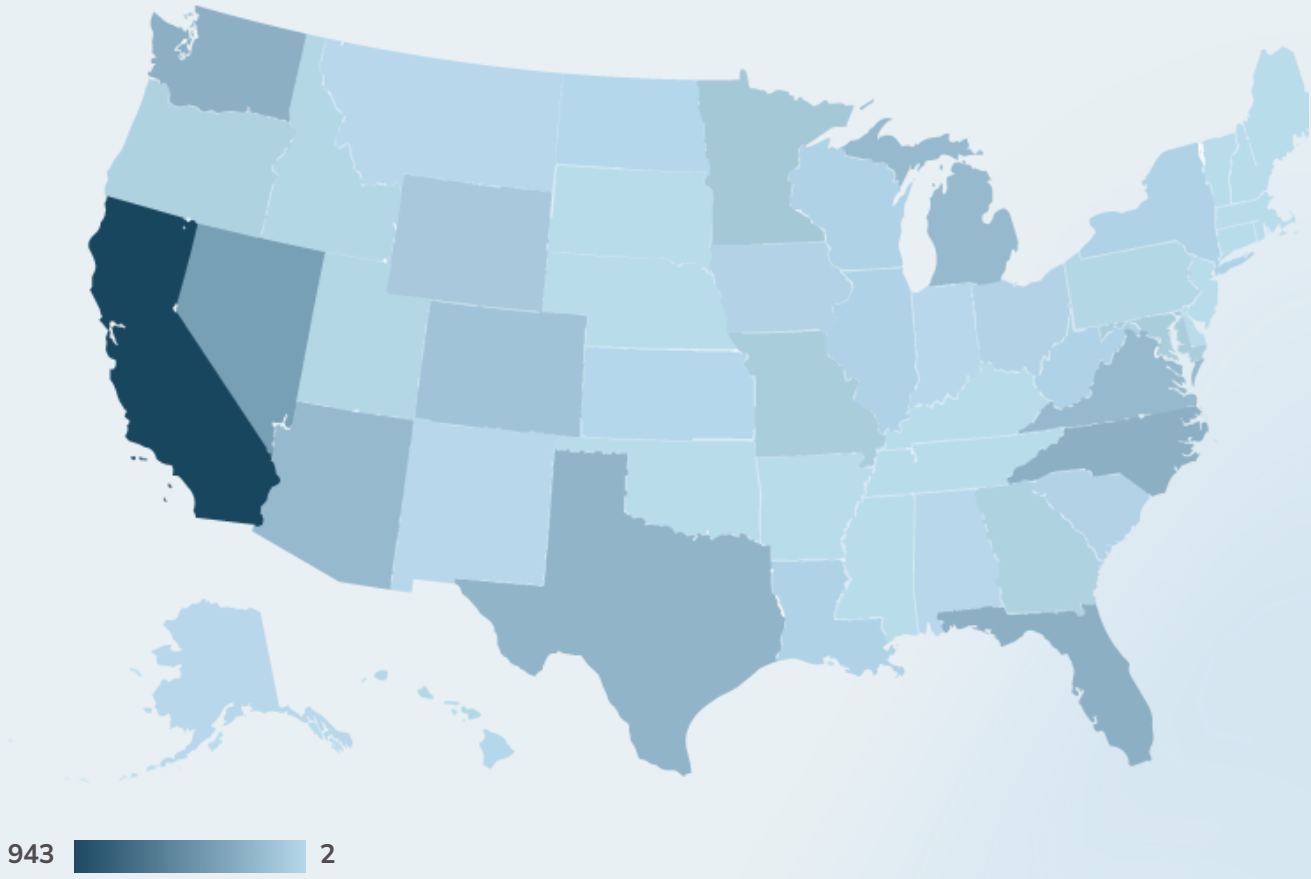


Figure 0.4
Distribution of Respondents by Role Category
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

A significant portion of respondents bring long-term institutional experience, with nearly one-third having more than ten years of service (Figure 0.5). This combination of experience and role diversity offers a **comprehensive view of workforce dynamics** across public sector organizations.

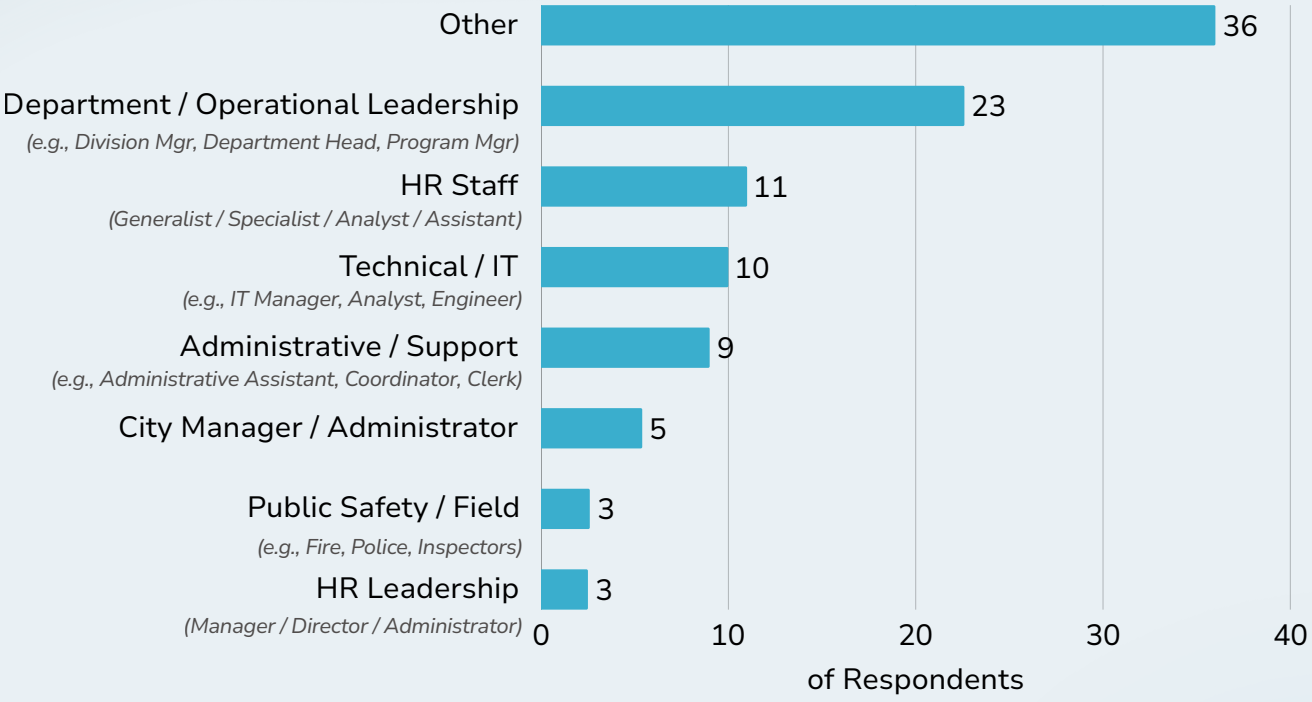
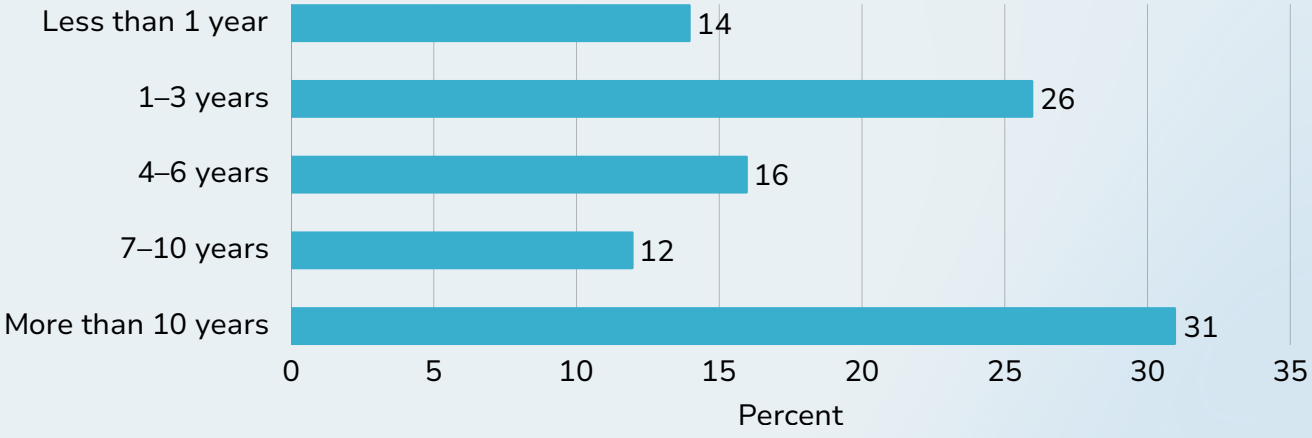


Figure 0.5
Respondent Tenure at Agency
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



All findings are based on valid responses for each question and reflect a combination of quantitative data, cross-question analysis, and qualitative insights from open-text responses.

Cross-Cutting Forces Shaping All Trends

While each trend in this report highlights a distinct challenge, several **underlying influences appear consistently throughout the data**. These forces are interconnected, guiding how agencies respond to workforce challenges and explaining why similar issues manifest differently.



Employee Value Proposition (EVP)

EVP continues to evolve beyond compensation. Culture, flexibility, development opportunities, and mission alignment play an increasingly important role in both attracting and retaining talent.



Management Proficiency

Managers emerge as a central factor influencing employee experience. Communication, coaching, and leadership effectiveness shape how policies and initiatives are put into practice at the team level.



Measurement and Visibility

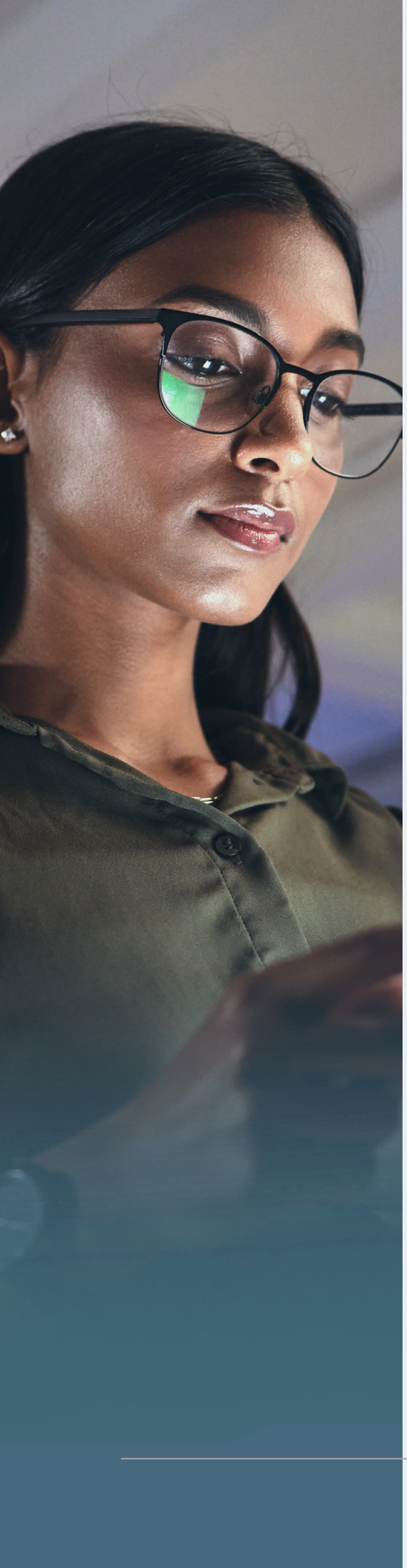
Use of analytics remains uneven. Many agencies recognize the importance of data, but lack consistent access to the insights needed to guide decision-making.



Organizational Preparedness

Readiness varies widely. Some agencies are positioned to respond proactively to change, while others are operating in a more reactive mode, addressing issues as they arise.

As the trends in NEOGOV's survey data unfold, these four forces take shape in many ways. Perhaps their most visible form is how work gets distributed, how teams operate, and how agencies manage their most immediate challenge: staffing.



Trend 1

Workforce Strain is Becoming an Enduring Operational Reality



Trend 1 *Workforce Strain is an Operational Reality*

The effects of public sector workforce strain are visible in the rhythm of day-to-day work.

Positions remain open longer than anticipated, sometimes through multiple hiring cycles. Recruitment efforts push forward, but outcomes are inconsistent. To keep up with services, **responsibilities are redistributed across teams that are already stretched thin**. This was only supposed to be a short-term adjustment, but it gradually solidified until it became "just the way things are".

This motif is mirrored in the survey data: **Staffing shortages persist in 62.5% of agencies**, and more than **one third of agencies report vacancy rates over 10%** (Figures 1.1 and 1.2). Finding qualified candidates remains the top recruiting challenge, as reported by 58% of respondents, followed by compensation limitations and slow hiring processes at 52% and 47%, respectively (Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.1

Agencies Experiencing Staffing Shortages

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

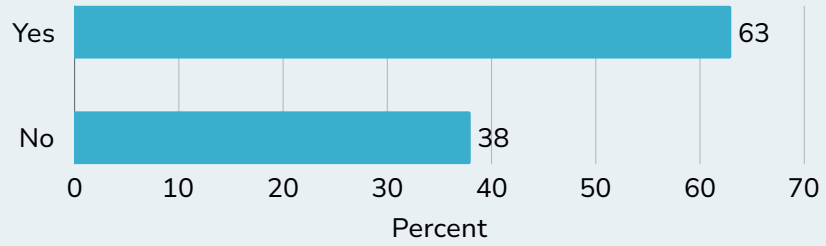


Figure 1.2

Percentage of Budgeted Positions Currently Unfilled

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

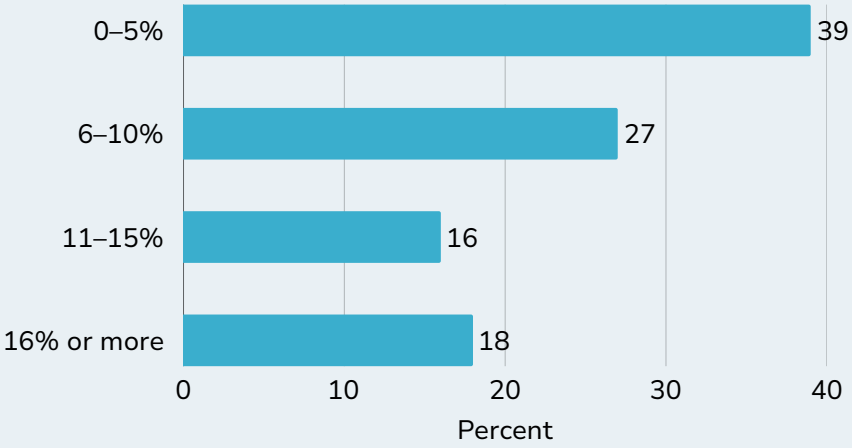
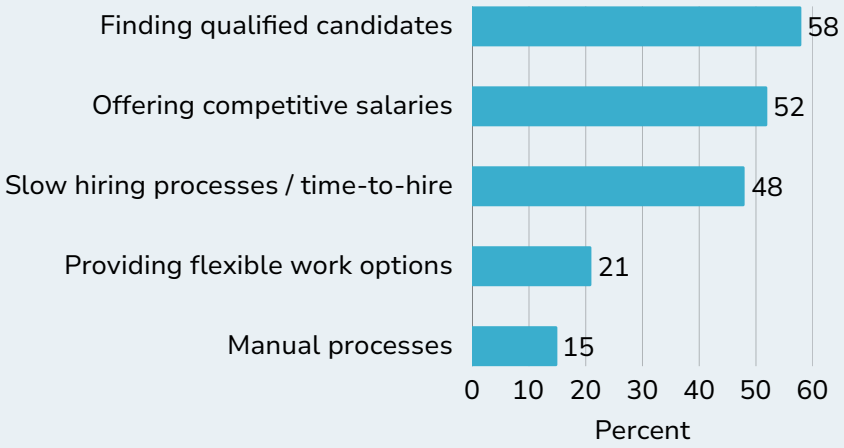




Figure 1.3
Top Recruiting Challenges in 2026
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



Strain on the workforce is not evenly distributed. Respondents who hold operational leadership and public-facing roles report the highest levels of impact, suggesting that **hiring gaps are being felt most directly in service delivery** environments.

While 2025 signaled a potential improvement in the labor market, the reality in 2026 paints a more complex picture. **Increased candidate activity has not necessarily translated into successful hires**; instead, fit, speed, and competitiveness continue to mold results – and many public sector agencies struggle in at least two of these areas.

More Than a Talent Shortage

At first glance, workforce strain may appear to be a simple issue of supply and demand. However, NEOGOV's data indicates a more layered truth.

Recruiting challenges are about more than just candidate availability. Competitive pressures, process complexities, and structural restrictions also affect how agencies engage with job seekers. Some respondents described "**too many rules**" and the "**compliance burden**" as key contributors to inefficiencies, while others said "**red tape slows everything down**" and that it is "**hard to make changes**".



These responses point to constraints that have little to do with the talent market. Even when candidates are available, agencies **may not be positioned to compete effectively or move quickly enough** to secure them. As a result, workforce strain goes beyond a simple hiring problem caused by slow processes and not sourcing enough candidates. It forces agencies to confront nuances that are often overlooked: **a strong value proposition and strategic targeting**.

A Refined Recruitment Strategy Feels Out of Reach

The lack of targeted recruiting strategies offers a key example of how resource limitations play out. While **71% of agencies report not targeting specific candidate groups** (Figure 1.4), this is not because they are unaware. Rather, it reflects impediments that determine what teams can feasibly achieve.

Survey respondents report **budget constraints** (37%), **high turnover** (31%), **and increased service demands** (17%) as three of the top five contributors to staffing challenges in their organizations (Figure 1.5). Recruitment and retention difficulties add to the strain on existing staff. Recruiting itself is often described by HR respondents as a time-intensive function:

> *Recruitment takes up a large percent of our teams' time. We are trying to find ways to* ***make recruiting more efficient****.*
>
> *–* ***HR Staff,*** *Survey Respondent*



Figure 1.4

Targeted Candidate Recruiting in 2026

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

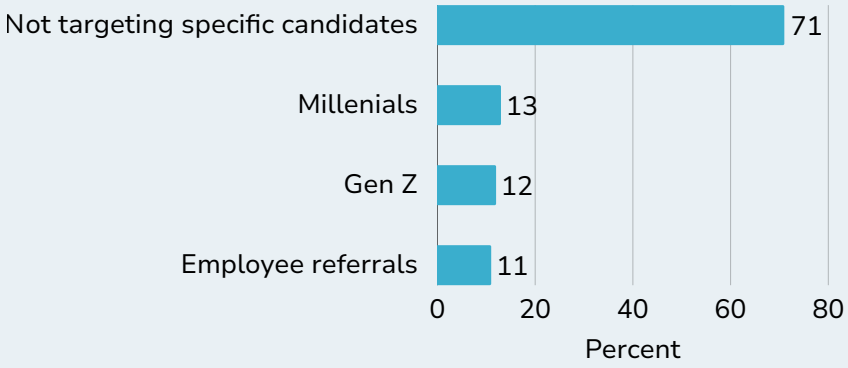
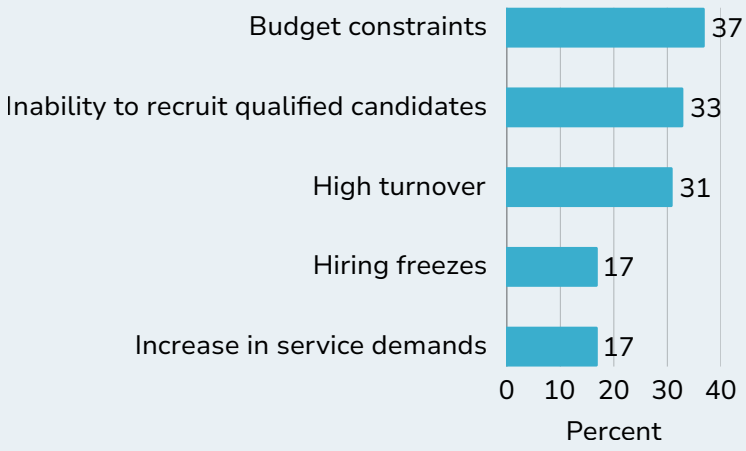


Figure 1.5

Top Factors Contributing to Staffing Shortages

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



Process regulations add another layer. Hiring timelines remain long and manual workflows persist, limiting the flexibility teams need to invest in more tailored approaches. These are, in part, structural restrictions that many agencies cannot change at will.



Local, state, and federal **compliance requirements and procedures restrict how recruitment strategies are designed and implemented**, particularly in the public sector where consistency and fairness are critical. All of these reduce the time and resources available to execute more targeted outreach strategies.

These dynamics suggest that broad recruiting approaches continue not because they are preferred, but because **they are workable – and more easily accessible – under current conditions**. Many agencies are then left wondering: what can they actually change?

Employer Brand Offers an Element of Control

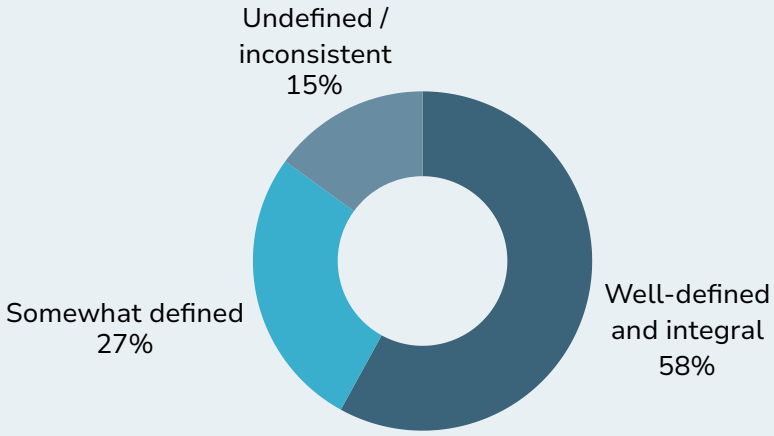
In an industry where compensation is often rigid, employer brand carries more weight. For the public sector, this shift has been gradual over the past six years rather than intentional. Nevertheless, it has become undeniable.

Employer brand is no longer just a supporting element of recruitment – it is part of how agencies compete. This is especially important because **employer branding is one of the few levers agencies can actively control**. Amidst hiring challenges, attention turns to how roles are positioned and how agencies present themselves to candidates. **The message becomes just as important as the job opening itself.**

While slightly less than half (42%) of survey respondents say their agency does not have a well-defined employer brand (Figure 1.6), one third of agencies still do not prioritize improving it in 2026. This means many agencies may be **underestimating the significance of their employer brand as a recruitment tool**.



Figure 1.6
Employer Brand Maturity
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



Inconsistency matters more in a constrained hiring environment. When the public sector cannot compete on salary or move quickly through hiring processes, the **clarity and strength of their brand message can influence whether candidates stay engaged** or move on. The Academy to Innovate HR found organizations that emphasized employer branding messages around purpose and mission **gained three times more quality candidates** than those that focused only on tasks and pay.

At the same time, improving employer brand requires time, coordination, and alignment – resources that are not readily available in the public sector. As a result, this tool becomes **both an opportunity and a limitation**. It is recognized as important, but not always positioned as urgent in the face of more immediate operational demands.

Employee Value Proposition Goes Beyond Face-Value

As workforce strain continues, the employee value proposition (EVP) is evolving in subtle but important ways. Candidates are evaluating opportunities based on a broader set of factors. Culture, flexibility, development opportunities, and mission alignment all contribute to how roles are perceived. In 2026, the value proposition **extends beyond what a role offers on paper to what it feels like in practice**.



Traditionally, public sector roles have relied on stability, benefits, and mission-driven work to attract candidates. While these factors remain important, they are **no longer sufficient on their own** – especially when candidates have more options and clearer expectations around flexibility, growth, and day-to-day experience. This intersection is where workplace culture comes into play.

The data points to a mixed reality among respondents. Many describe their workplace culture as "**supportive**" and "**collaborative**", while a significant portion also characterize it as "**stressful**" or "**burned out**" (Figure 1.7). Flexible work options are available in some agencies, but not consistently applied across roles or departments. Development opportunities exist, but may not always align with long-term growth or advancement.

> *We are working to **break down the silos** and had major changes in leadership and strategic planning, which has promoted collaboration across departments.*
>
> *– **Recruiter,** Survey Respondent*

This variation complicates the equation for candidates and employees alike. **The experience of working within an agency is not uniform**; it is molded by team dynamics, manager capability, and workload conditions. As a result, the **employee value proposition is increasingly defined by execution rather than intent**. Policies and programs matter, but how they are applied – and whether teams have the capacity to sustain them – determines their impact.

In a constrained workplace, this is a critical distinction. Public sector agencies may not be able to change every aspect of their offering to candidates, but **the consistency of the employee experience they provide can influence both attraction and retention outcomes**.



Figure 1.7
How Would You Describe Your Agency's Workplace Culture?
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



Employer brand and the employee value proposition highlight a broader shift. In an industry where hiring conditions are difficult to control, an agency's success is shaped by **how effectively it communicates and delivers the experience of working** within the organization to candidates.

While often considered secondary to the recruiting strategy, these elements are central to navigating workforce challenges. Therefore, **strengthening them is one of the most powerful agents** agencies can leverage to improve recruitment.

> *A positive culture **improves engagement, collaboration, and morale**, which directly impacts productivity and reduces turnover.*
>
> *– **Benefits Specialist,** Survey Respondent*



But the impact of workforce strain is not limited to hiring outcomes – it also **changes how work gets done every day**. Managers shift from leading strategically to putting out fires urgently. Teams focus on checking boxes rather than improving processes. Over time, this affects performance, morale, and long-term sustainability.

As teams adapt to these conditions and try to mitigate their negative impacts, the need to operate more efficiently grows exponentially.

Next Trend ›

Trend 2

Efficiency is Replacing Expansion as the Operating Model

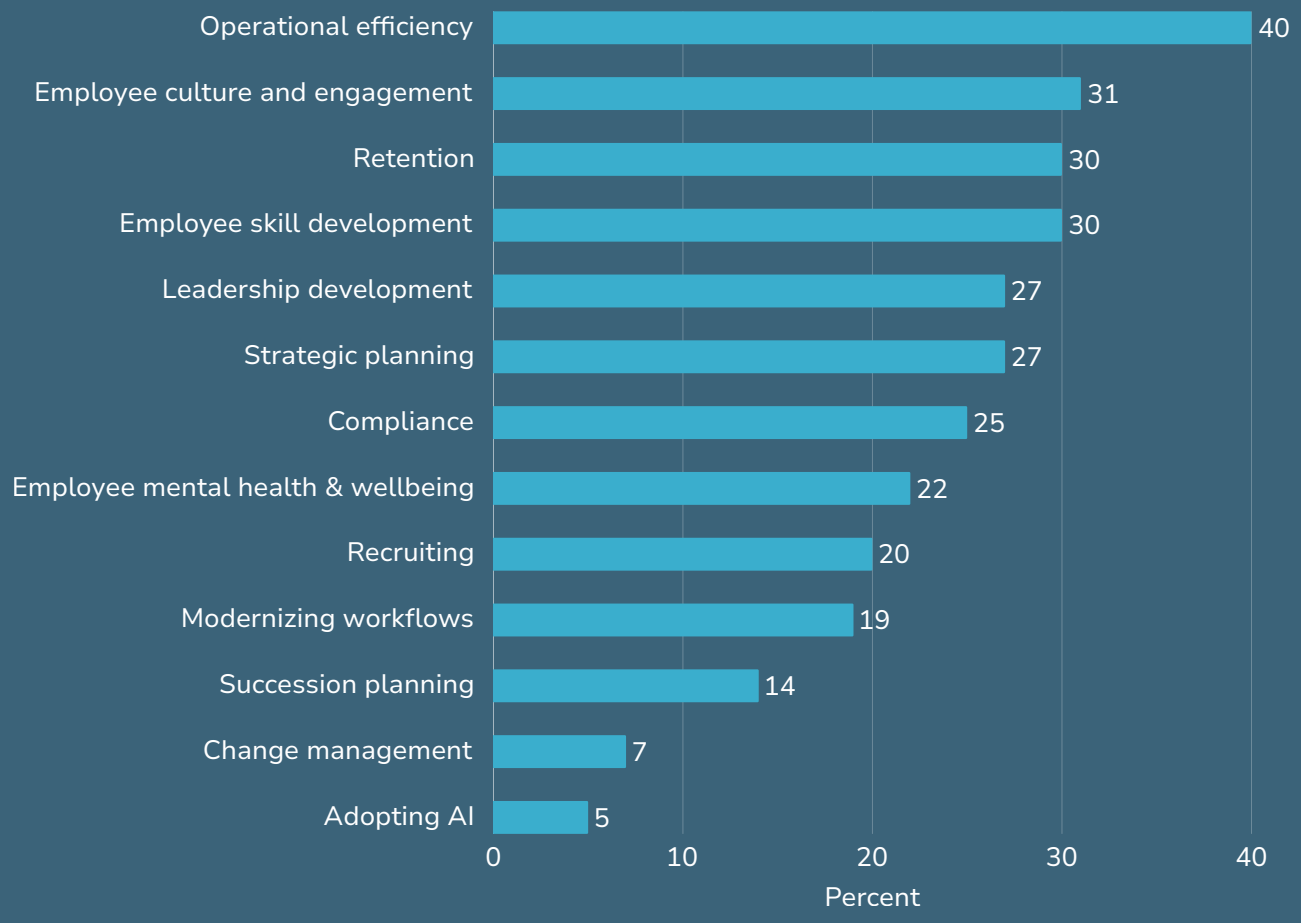


Public sector agencies have always sought to **make the most of the resources they already have in place**. But persistent staffing shortages are forcing organizations to shift their focus from other initiatives and place even more importance on efficiency.

Rethinking how work flows through the organization is a core component of this: Where is time spent? Where do processes slow down? Where can effort be redirected for greater impact?

Survey data mirrors this shift clearly. **Operational efficiency is the top priority for 40% of agencies** in 2026, surpassing recruiting, retention, and other workforce initiatives (Figure 2.1). Similarly, several related priorities – employee skill development (30%), leadership development (27%), and strategic planning (27%) – suggest that **agencies are looking inward for ways to strengthen performance**.

Figure 2.1
Top Agency Priorities for 2026
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

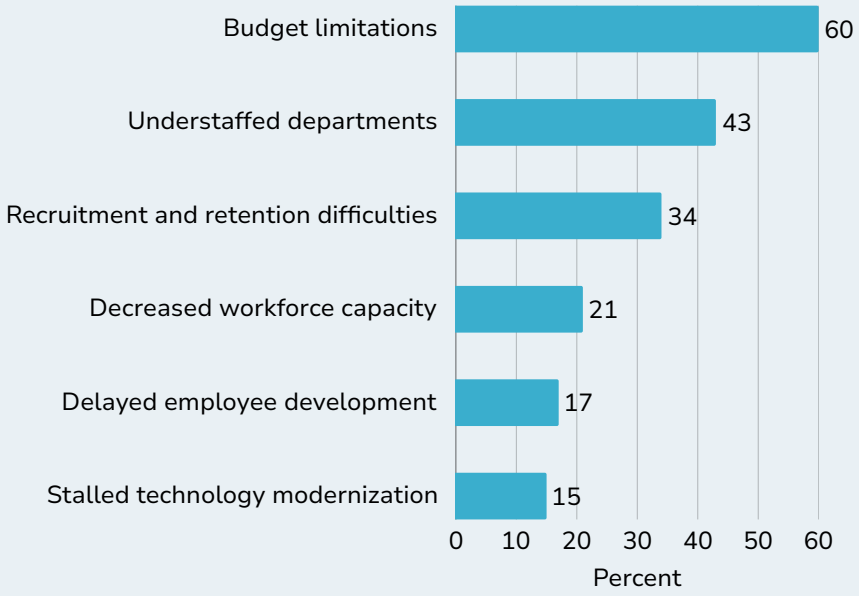


This marks a subtle but important change. Public sector organizations are **moving from a "hire-to-grow" mindset to an "optimize-to-sustain" approach**. Recruiting remains critical, but it is no longer viewed as the primary solution to workforce challenges. Instead, agencies are focusing on how to operate more effectively with what they already have.

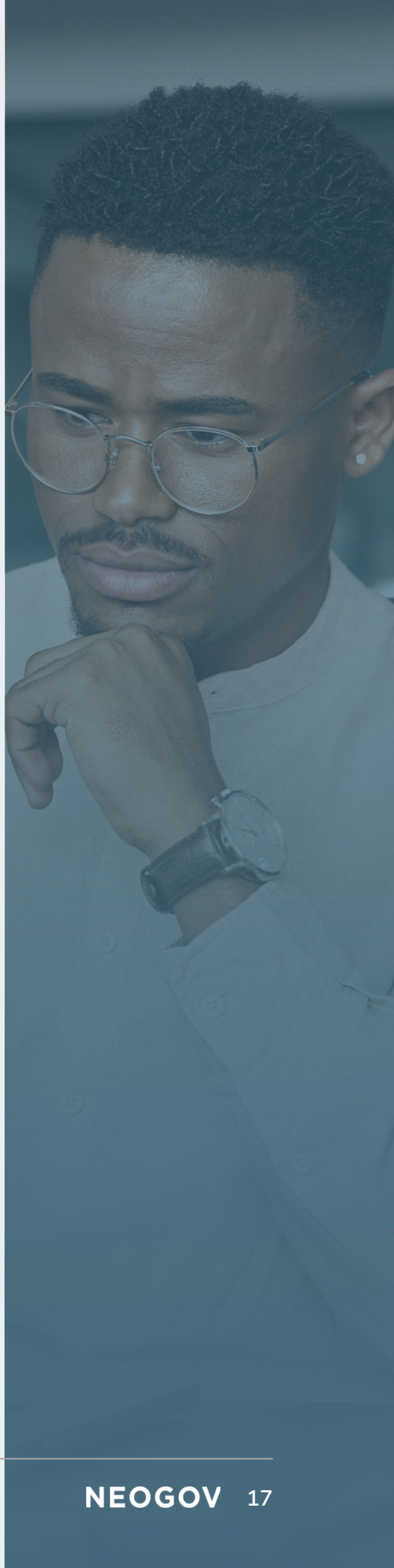
Efficiency is the Quickest Response to Constraint

The same restrictions that define the broader operating environment are driving the "optimize-to-sustain" mindset. **Budget limitations** (60%), **understaffed departments** (43%), and **recruitment and retention difficulties** (34%) are the leading factors reducing available capacity (Figure 2.2). Together, these conditions make it difficult to expand the workforce; therefore, **improving efficiency becomes the most immediate path forward**.

Figure 2.2
Top Resource Constraints Impacting Operations
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



In this context, efficiency is less about optimization in the traditional sense and more about **maintaining continuity**. It is about ensuring that essential services continue to function despite persistent gaps in staffing and resources.



The 2025 "One Big Beautiful Bill Act" (OBBBA) is **projected to reduce federal aid by nearly $1 trillion** over the next decade, forcing many counties to make difficult decisions around service levels and local taxation. Early indicators suggest these impacts are already taking shape. In Michigan, for example, the proportion of local governments reporting that they **may not be able to maintain current service levels** has **risen from 34% in 2010 to 43% today**.

> *If we can be more efficient, we can **help people** in a more streamlined manner.*
>
> – ***Clerk,*** *Survey Respondent*

Faced with these circumstances, teams are looking for **opportunities to simplify workflows, reduce duplicate work, and improve coordination**. Expanding role responsibilities and consolidating tasks based on workload capacity means processes that once operated independently are brought closer together. These adjustments are often incremental, but over time they reshape the processes driving how work is completed at every level.

The Gap Between Priority and Execution

Despite the strong emphasis on efficiency, the data reveals a consistent gap between what agencies aim to improve and what they are able to implement.

Operational effectiveness ratings reflect this tension. While only 15% of respondents describe their operations as "excellent", **40% rate their operational efficiency as "average" or "poor"** (Figure 2.3). Concurrently, the majority of agencies report spending 10% or less of their time on long-term strategic planning (Figure 2.4). This suggests that while the need for efficiency is widely understood, the **capacity to pursue it is limited**.

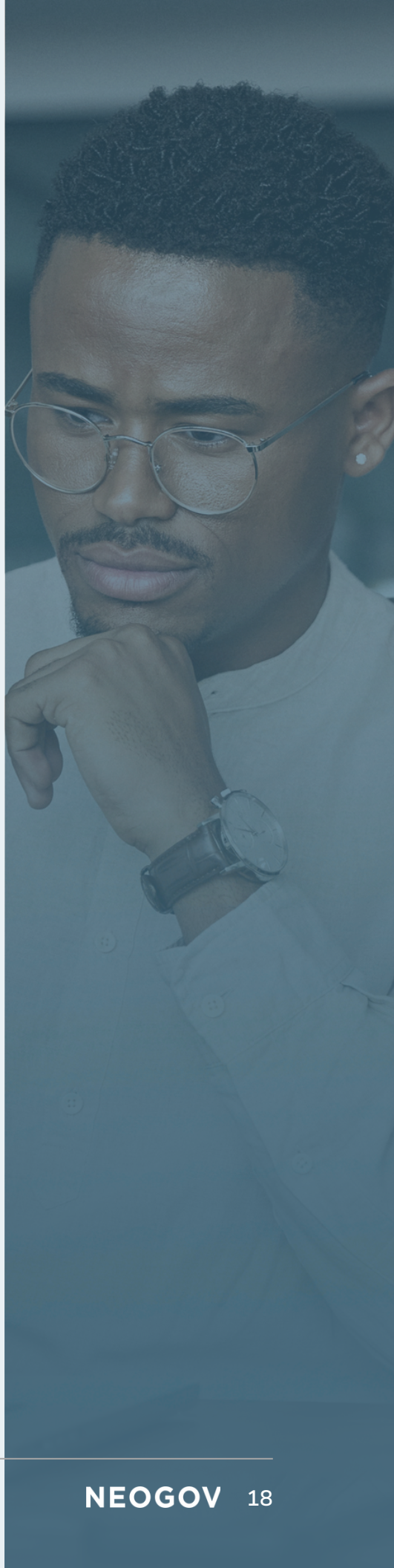


Figure 2.3
Perceived Operational Effectiveness
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

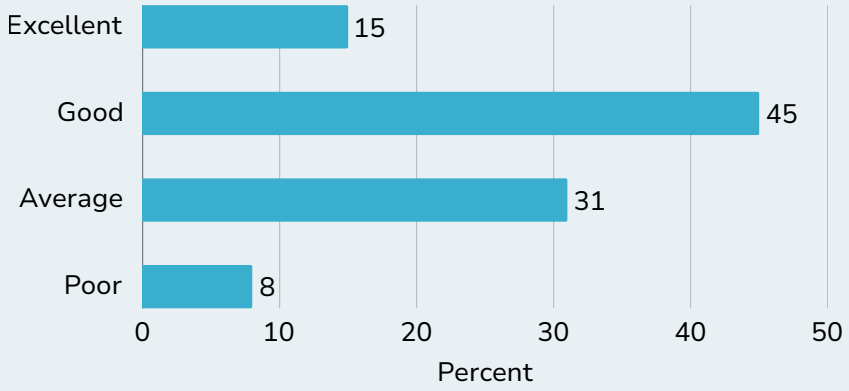


Figure 2.4
Time Spent on Long-Term Strategic Planning
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

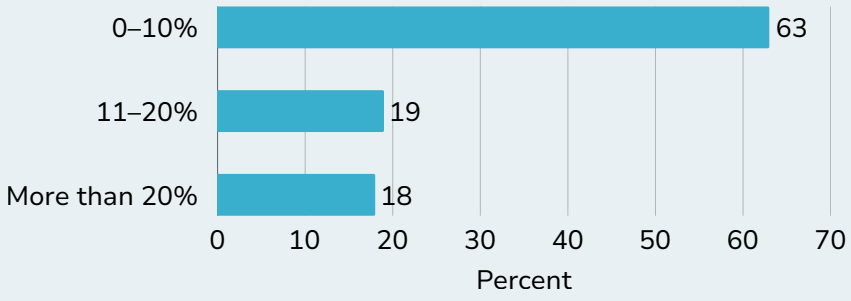
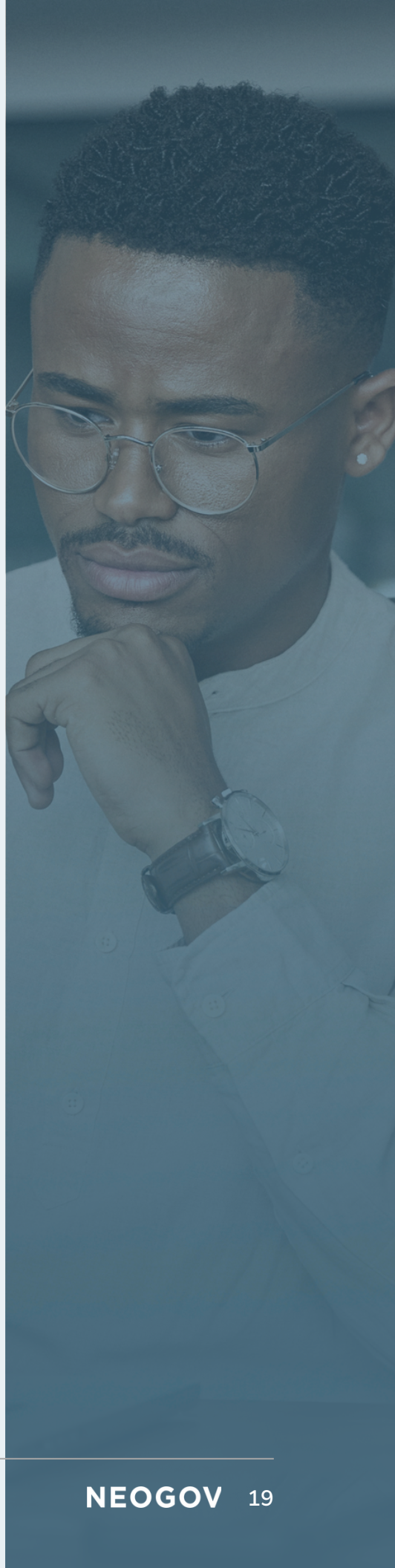


Figure 2.5
Areas of Greatest Opportunity for Efficiency Improvement
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data





The areas most impacted by this hindered capacity emerge consistently across multiple data points. Agencies identify **training and development** (52%), **communication** (51%), and **workflows and approvals** (35%) among the top opportunities for improvement (Figure 2.5). However, these same areas often require sustained attention, coordination, and resources to meaningfully progress – and most agencies are in short supply.

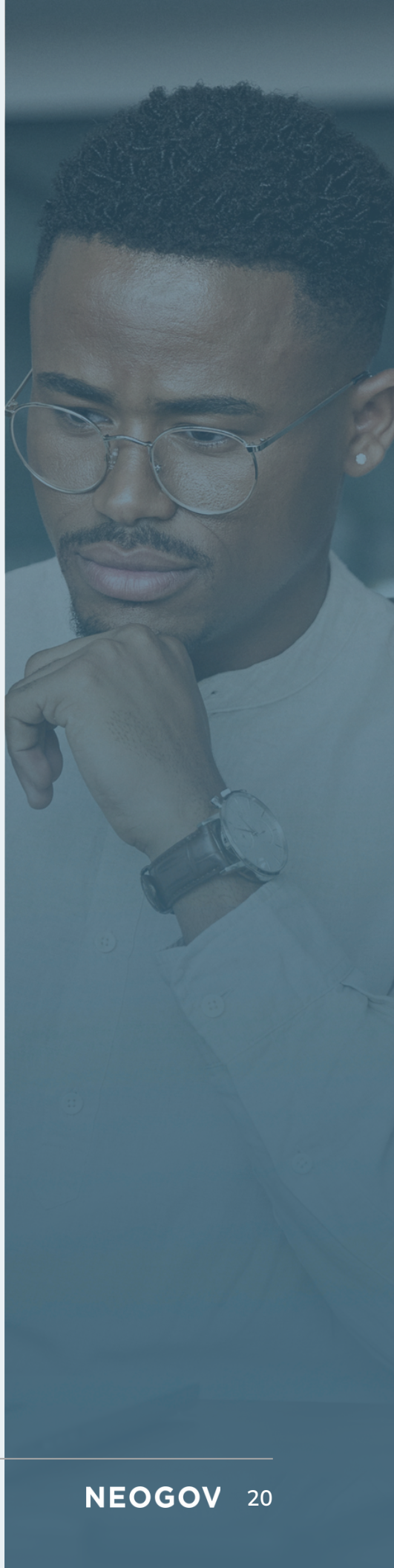
Open-text responses reinforce this dynamic. Many respondents describe environments where priorities compete for attention and initiatives struggle to gain traction, as well as "**lack of alignment across leadership**" and cases where "**we identify issues but don't act**".

These insights signal a deeper challenge when it comes to efficiency. Beyond just identifying what needs to change, **agencies must also have the capacity to follow through**; otherwise, nothing actually gets better, and the workforce continues to bear the brunt of the burden. But limited time for strategic planning and ongoing resource restrictions indicate that many agencies are **not equipped to implement the very improvements they are prioritizing** – and part of that problem is structural.

Standardization is a Stepping Stone to Automation

A key part of the efficiency challenge lies in how work is structured across organizations. Some respondents describe "**no standardized processes**", "**lack of documentation**", and "**too much variation**" from one department to the next as barriers to their ability to work more efficiently.

These observations highlight a common issue. Even when agencies invest in new systems or tools, **underlying process inconsistencies can limit their impact**. Improvements in one area may not translate across the organization if workflows are not aligned. This helps explain why efficiency gains can be difficult to sustain. Without a consistent foundation, changes may improve isolated processes but fail to improve the broader organizational experience.

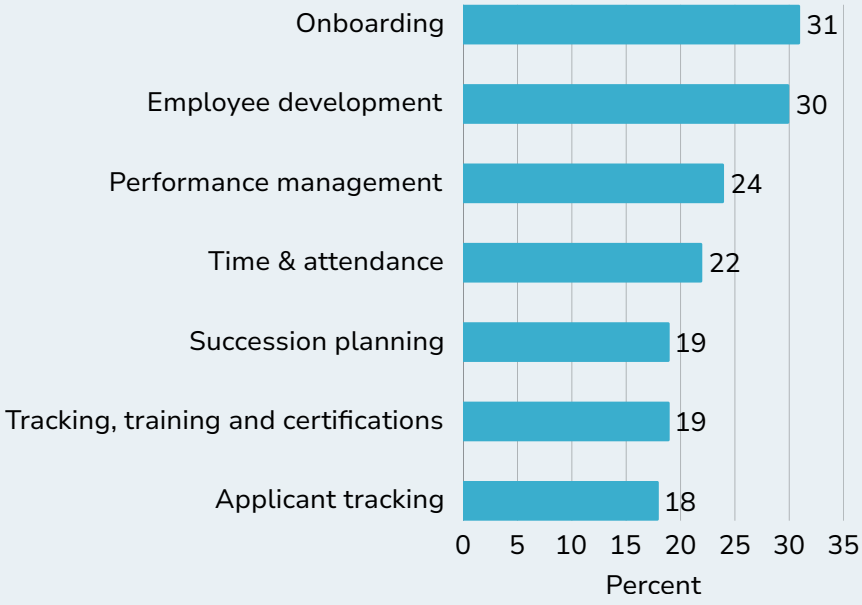


Standardization is the blueprint that agencies need to **streamline processes that can otherwise benefit the most from automation**. Respondent interest in automation provides a lens into where agencies experience the most operational strain (Figure 2.6). Notably, these processes are all essential and time-intensive. The desire to automate them suggests that they are not functioning as efficiently as needed under current conditions of high constraint.

Figure 2.6

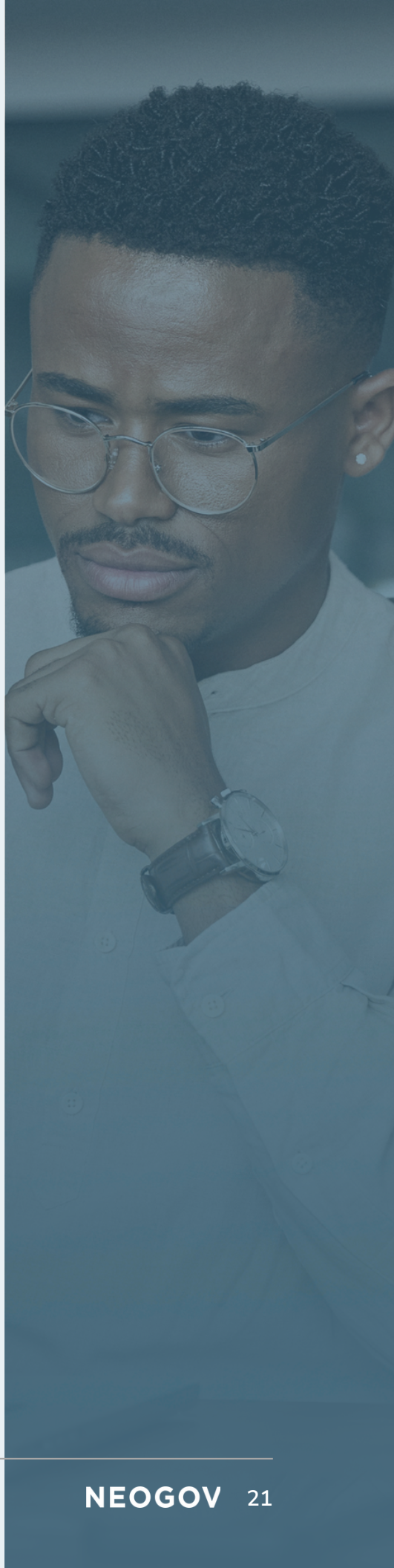
Top HR Processes Agencies Want to Automate in 2026

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



Looking specifically at the top three automation priorities – **onboarding, employee development, and performance management** – further indicates that agencies are focused on improving internal processes that could support their existing workforce in 2026. Each of these areas has a **direct impact on the growth, empowerment, and gratification of public sector employees**.

Nevertheless, automation does not automatically resolve underlying issues. Several respondents note that even with new systems in place, inefficiencies persist due to fragmented processes and lack of integration. This reinforces a broader point: technology can support efficiency, but it **does not replace the need for alignment, standardization, and clarity** across the organization.



Data Visibility is a Foundation for Efficiency

The clarity and alignment needed to improve efficiency can be difficult to achieve without visibility into process performance. Data plays a **central role in evaluating the effectiveness** of public sector processes, yet its use remains uneven across agencies.

While most organizations report using data at least occasionally, **only 23% say they consistently use data and analytics to inform decision-making** (Figure 2.7). Meanwhile, demand for workforce insights is high, particularly around **skills gaps** (49%), **performance tracking** (29%), and **compliance** (30%), contributing to the "optimize-to-sustain" approach (Figure 2.8).

Figure 2.7
Use of Data and Analytics in Decision-Making
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

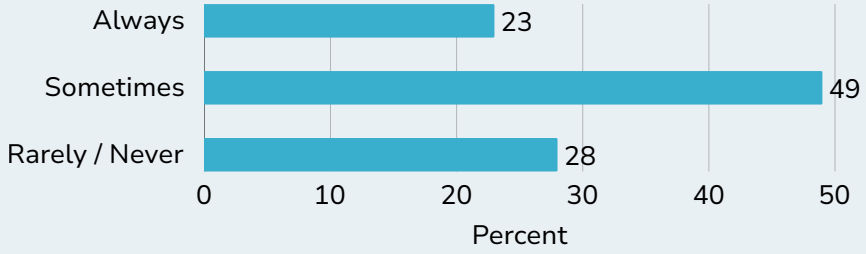
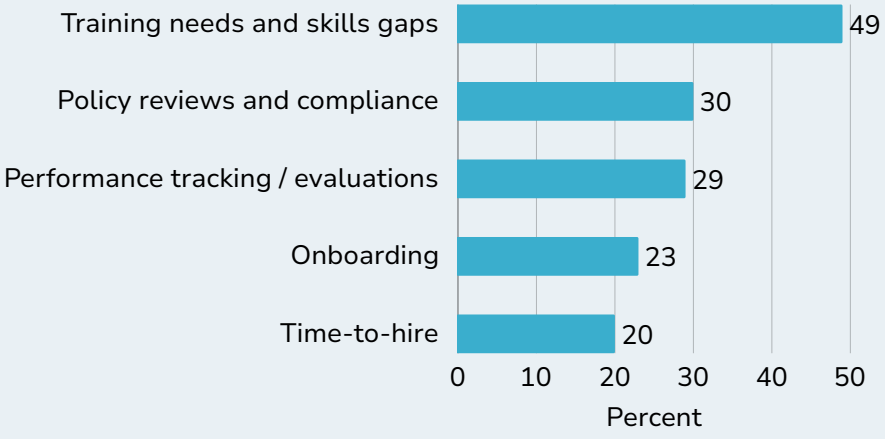


Figure 2.8
Top Areas Where Agencies Want More Data Insight
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



This contrast shows a familiar disconnect between recognition and execution. Agencies understand the value of data, but often lack the systems, integration, or processes needed to fully leverage it.

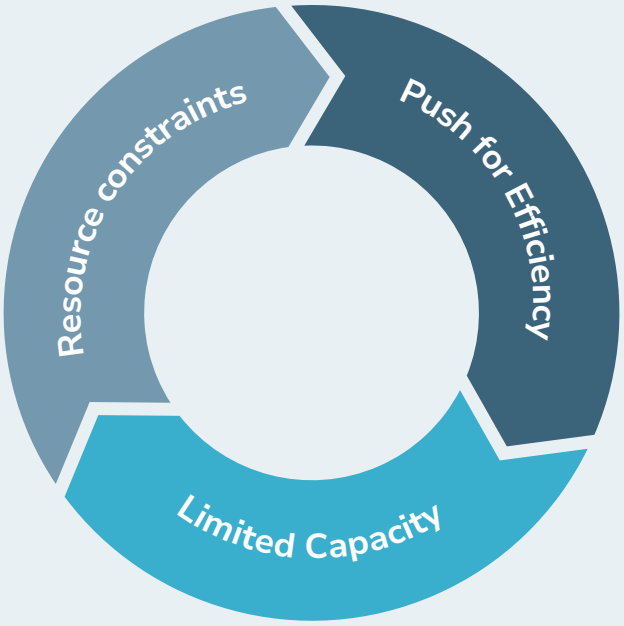
Without consistent visibility, efficiency efforts tend to be reactive – or worse, guesswork. Decisions are made based on immediate needs or one-off scenarios rather than long-term patterns, limiting the ability to identify root causes or measure impact over time.

> ***Accurate, reliable data*** *drives fair talent decisions and workforce planning.*
>
> *– **HR Staff,** Survey Respondent*

Taken together, these findings point to a broader dynamic shaping public sector HR in 2026. The push for efficiency is **shaped by the same limitations it is meant to address**, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. Resource constraints drive the need for improvement, but also restrict the time and capacity that's required to carry out those improvements (Figure 2.9).

The dynamic affects not just operations, but also how agencies approach recruiting, how managers support their teams, and how employees experience daily work. As workloads increase and time becomes more constrained, **the pressure shifts to the workforce itself** – bringing retention challenges into sharper focus.

Figure 2.9
The Constraint Loop
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



Next Trend ›



Trend 3

Inherent Constraints are **Making Retention Harder** to Stabilize



Trend 3 *Constraints are Making Retention Harder*

Retention challenges in the public sector rarely come down to a single factor. They gradually build based on conditions that may be outside an agency's direct control – but not always.

In many organizations, **turnover reflects a steady accumulation of pressures**: workload, limited advancement opportunities, compensation gaps, and day-to-day experiences that vary across teams. Over time, **these pressures influence employees' decisions to stay or leave**.

Higher pay remains the leading reason employees leave for more than 51% of agencies, followed by retirement (46%) and career changes (26%) (Figure 3.1). The data also shows that agencies are **actively investing in initiatives intended to boost retention**. Efforts to improve workplace culture, expand wellness support, and provide recognition programs are most common (Figure 3.2). Yet these do not always align with the underlying drivers of attrition, creating a **gap between cause and response** (Figure 3.3).

Therefore, the issue of retention is not always a result of inaction. The reality is that **many of the strongest drivers of turnover sit outside the levers agencies can easily adjust**.

Figure 3.1
Top Reasons Employees Leave
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

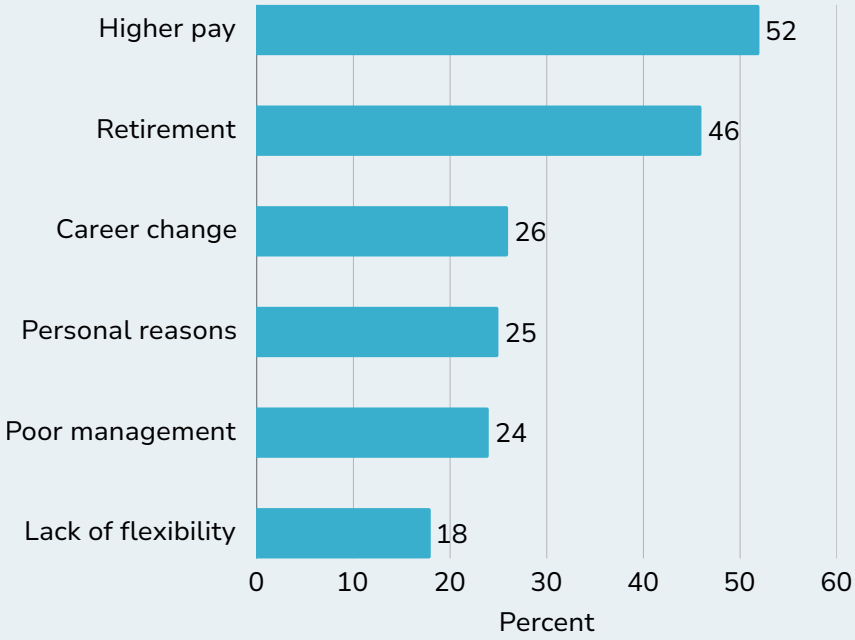




Figure 3.2

Retention Strategies Being Used

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

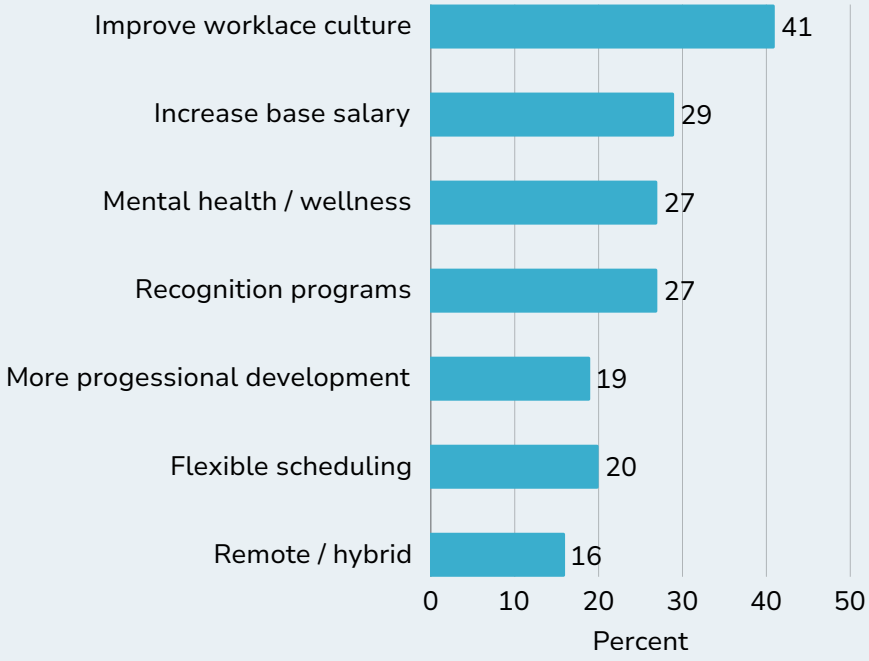


Figure 3.3

Retention Cause vs Response Comparison

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data





Working Conditions are Key Drivers of Retention

In most cases, retention is not easily addressed through policy changes alone, particularly in the public sector where things like compensation are often fixed. Rather, it is shaped as much by operating conditions as it is by policy decisions.

As workforce strain continues and efficiency takes priority, employee workloads increase. Teams take on additional responsibilities and managers spend less time supporting long-term development – and **each shift changes the employee experience at work**.

Several respondents noted how "**people are burned out because we're understaffed**", and even though some agencies try to maintain a unified culture, "**no amount of engagement fixes workload**". The broader pattern highlights that retention challenges are not only about whether programs exist, but whether the environment allows them to be effective.

In this context, improving retention becomes less about introducing new initiatives and more about **addressing the conditions employees navigate each day**. One of the most apparent and impactful ways to start is by evaluating the drivers of the individual departments: management.

Managers are Feeling Pressure from All Sides

The quality and proficiency of public sector managers are some of the most influential factors in retention outcomes.

Nearly **one in four respondents cite poor management as a reason employees leave** (Figure 3.1), and management skills are one of the top five improvement opportunities for agencies (Figure 3.4). When asked what would be the most impactful areas where managers can improve, 52% of respondents selected **communication**, 45% chose **morale building**, and 40% said **coaching and development** (Figure 3.5).



A **Gallup study** found that managers who received training in coaching and people development saw **measurable improvements in key areas**, including up to:

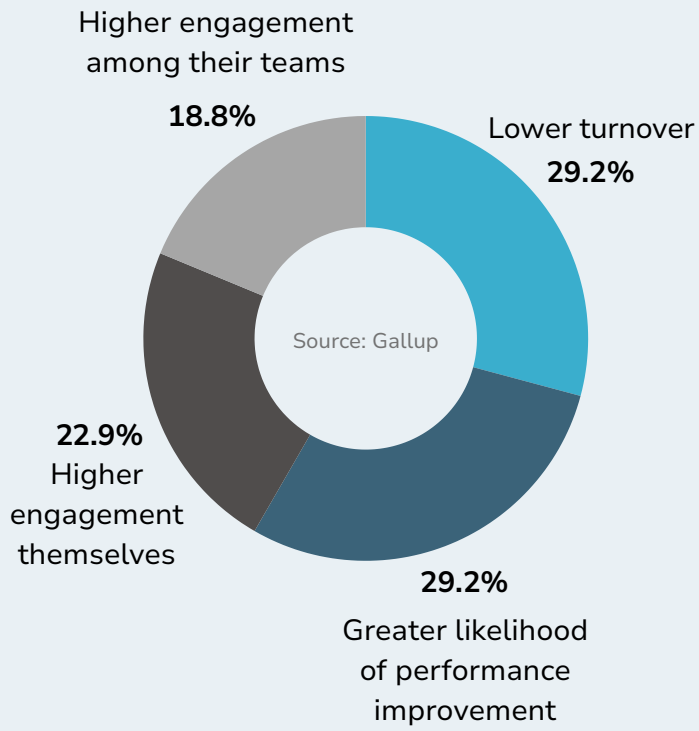


Figure 3.4
Top Reasons Employees Leave
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

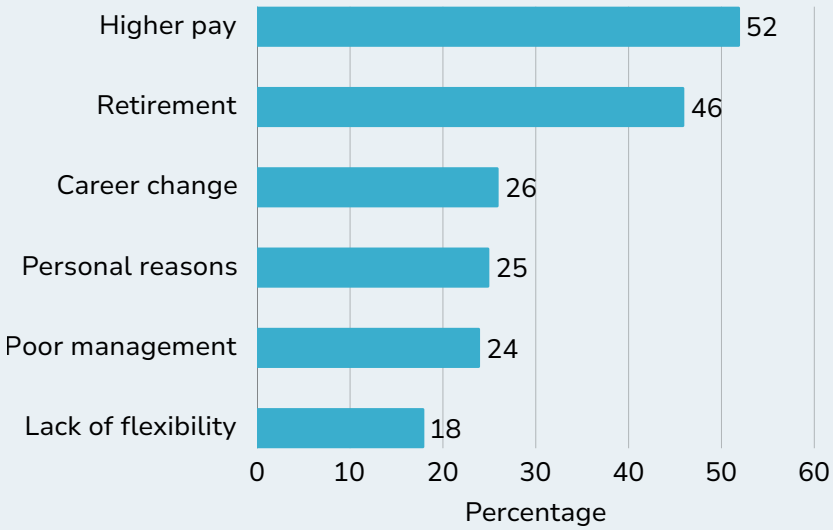
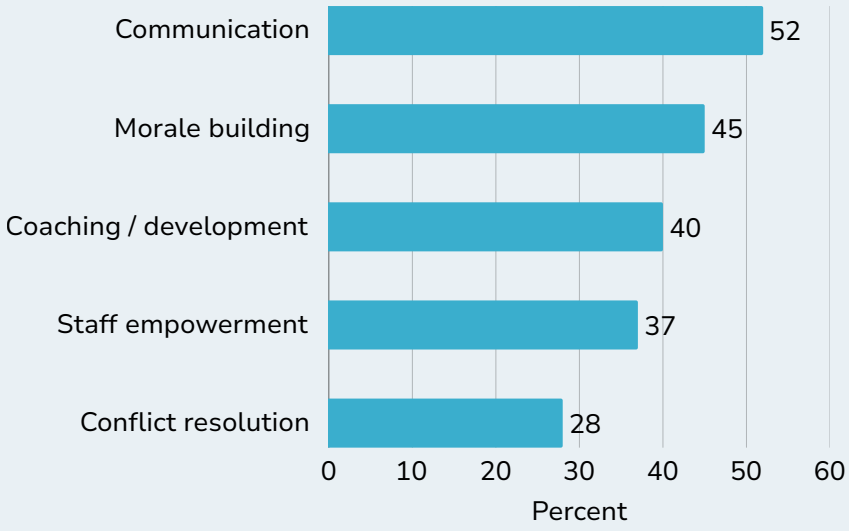




Figure 3.5
Most Impactful Areas of Manager Development
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



On the surface, this suggests a clear path forward: invest in training and development for managers. But upon further inspection, the data tells a more nuanced story.

Many managers describe their role as **increasingly reactive**. Time that might once have been spent on coaching, feedback, and team development is now absorbed by immediate operational demands. One respondent explained that there was "**no time to lead, just react**". Others shared that they are "**caught between leadership and staff**" and are given "**too much responsibility without support**".

These responses are consistent with broader organizational constraints discussed in earlier trends. Understaffed departments and budget limitations **reduce the capacity available for managers to lead effectively.** Even when training is available, the time and space needed to apply it may not be.

This suggests that **manager proficiency is both a skill gap and a capacity problem** – but capacity is often the limiting factor. With that in mind, improving manager effectiveness in the public sector may **require more than additional training**. It may depend on reducing workload, clarifying priorities, and ensuring managers have the support needed to translate knowledge into action.



> *As a low-level manager, I have to advocate for and **serve my team**.*
>
> *– **Department Head,** Survey Respondent*

Engagement is a Second Tier Priority

As managers work to alleviate strain on their employees while facing more strain themselves, employee engagement remains an important focus – but its position within organizational priorities is shifting.

In 2025, engagement was identified as a key priority for 35% of agencies. In 2026, that figure dropped slightly to 31% (Figure 2.1), indicating that engagement is competing with more immediate operational concerns.

This is reinforced by the 24% of survey respondents that say engagement is not a priority for their agency at all (Figure 3.5), along with many open-text responses describing it as something that is **acknowledged but not consistently acted upon** because "**other priorities take precedence**".

> *Employees who **feel supported** and like they are a part of the team are happier.*
>
> *– **City Manager / Administrator,** Survey Respondent*

At the same time, engagement is widely recognized as an area for improvement – particularly among HR professionals – while other roles tend to describe it through related challenges such as morale, burnout, and team dynamics. This **creates tension between what is desired and what is attainable**. Engagement is understood as important, but difficult to prioritize in environments where resources are limited and immediate demands are high.



Figure 3.6
Ways Agencies are Improving Employee Engagement
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



In practice, engagement is often influenced at the team level. Respondents share that "**engagement depends on your supervisor**" and "**some teams are great, others are struggling**". This variability reinforces the role of management in shaping employee experience and spotlights the **uneven scale to which retention challenges can impact different teams within the same agency.**

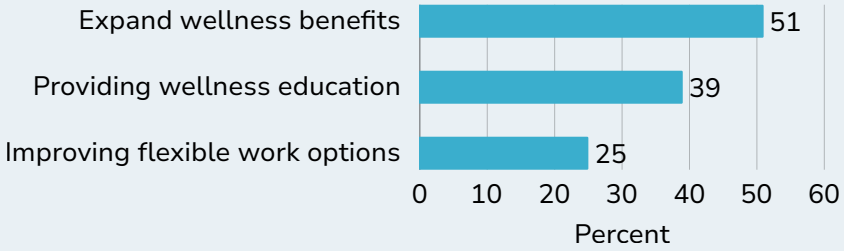
Wellbeing Efforts Do Not Equal Impact

Wellbeing has gained attention in recent years, and many agencies are actively investing in related initiatives.

More than half of respondents report expanding wellness benefits, while others are increasing wellness education and improving flexible work options (Figure 3.7). These efforts reflect a growing awareness of the importance of employee health and balance.



Figure 3.7
Initiatives Agencies are Using to Improve Wellbeing Support
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



However, the data suggests that these initiatives may not fully address underlying challenges. Open-text responses consistently point to workload and staffing as primary drivers of stress, describing "**more awareness than action**" around employee wellness. Where programs exist, respondents say "**workload is still the issue**" that prevents meaningful participation and impact.

Through these insights, a key distinction comes to light. Simply creating wellness programs does not mean wellbeing will improve – **the conditions in which employees work have just as great an influence on their wellbeing**.

Flexible work arrangements offer one example: while 54% of agencies provide flexible hours, respondents note that **access is not always consistent across roles or departments**. This variability limits – or completely negates – the impact of wellbeing initiatives for employees who do not have access to certain perks.

Oftentimes, putting too much focus on wellbeing efforts only adds to existing pressures rather than replacing them. In truth, improving wellbeing – and by extension retention – may depend less on expanding programs and more on **addressing the structural conditions that influence employees' day-to-day experience**.

Each of these findings inform a broader understanding of what drives retention in the public sector in 2026. Rather than seeing it solely as a function of individual programs or policies, agencies should view retention as a combination of factors, like compensation, workload, and management proficiency. Each **contributes to the way employees experience the workplace** and each **influences their decision to stick around**.



> *It takes a lot to be placed into a new hire, from the cost to training... And if they only stay less than a year,* ***you are back to square one****.*
>
> *– **FM Manager II,** Survey Respondent*

This interconnected dynamic helps explain why retention challenges persist even when agencies are actively investing in solutions. Retention is not simply a problem to solve, but **a condition to manage within a constrained system**.

As these pressures continue, they intersect with another significant trend: a **growing wave of retirements** that will further reshape workforce capacity and institutional knowledge.

Next Trend ›

Trend 4

Retirement Risk is Magnifying Succession Gaps



Not only are the workforce challenges facing public sector agencies immediate – they are also cumulative.

As organizations work to manage staffing shortages, improve efficiency, and stabilize retention, another force has accelerated over the past few years: **a growing wave of retirements**. Unlike other workforce challenges, retirement is usually predictable, although the timing may vary.

What doesn't vary is the implications that come with this. Across agencies, experienced employees are stepping away after years – often decades – of service, **taking with them institutional knowledge, relationships, and context** that are difficult to replace. New hires are stepping in, but the transition is rarely seamless. The volume of retirements transcends simple turnover, necessitating a fundamental change in workforce capabilities.

> *"There have been a lot of new hires due to mass retirements and there is a large focus on **trying to restore the amount of experience** that has been lost throughout the department."*
>
> *– **Division Manager,** Survey Respondent*

A Growing Gap Between Risk and Response

Survey data shows a clear awareness of retirement risk, with **69% of agencies expecting more than 5% of their employees to retire over the next five years** (Figure 4.1). At the same time, retirement remains one of the top reasons employees leave (Figure 3.1).

Furthermore, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data shows that nearly **one in four public administration employees is age 55 or older**, putting a significant portion of employees within typical retirement eligibility in the coming years.



Trend 4 *Retirement Is Magnifying Succession Gaps*

Despite growing awareness of the issue, the **actions being taken to mitigate the negative impacts remain limited**. Only 14% of agencies identify succession planning as a top priority (Figure 4.2), marking a notable decline from 2025, when succession planning ranked significantly higher. This highlights a disconnect between what agencies know is coming and how they are preparing for it.

Figure 4.1
Expected Retirement Rates in Next 5 Years
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

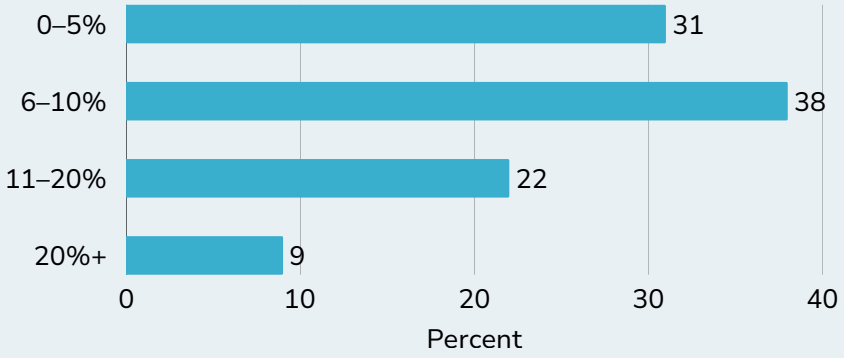
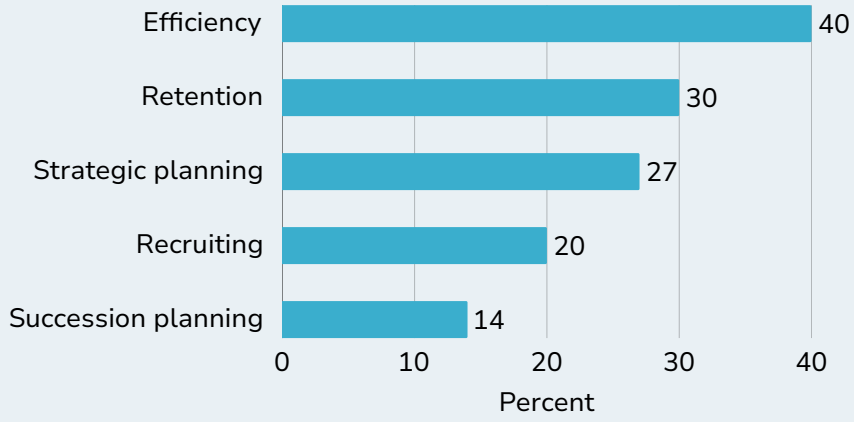


Figure 4.2
Succession Planning Priority Gap
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



In many organizations, succession planning is deferred, not absent. Amidst more urgent, immediate operational needs, long-term workforce planning becomes more difficult to prioritize. As a result, public sector agencies are often **responding to departures as they occur, rather than preparing for them in advance**.



Unfortunately, this only compounds the workforce challenges they are seeking to resolve. When viewed alongside other trends, the implications become more significant. As recruiting and retention challenges increase strain and reduce capacity, **succession planning becomes harder to execute – even as its importance simultaneously increases**.

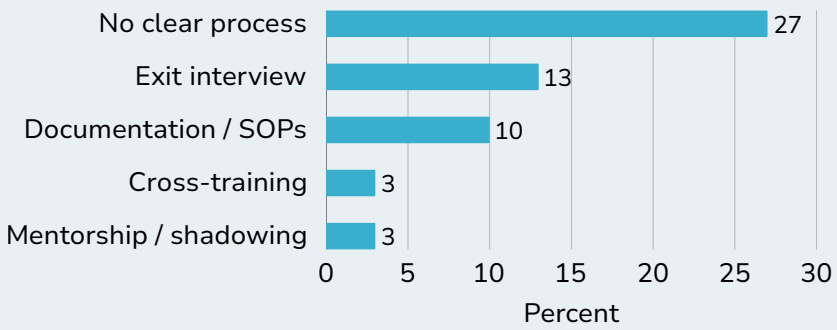
When experienced employees leave, remaining staff take on additional responsibilities, further increasing workload and reducing the capacity to prepare for future transitions. Over time, this cycle traps agencies in a self-reinforcing loop.

Knowledge Needs to Shift From Individual to System

At the center of the retirement challenge is knowledge. Public sector organizations often **rely on experienced employees who hold critical institutional knowledge** around how processes work, how decisions are made, and how to navigate complex systems. When these individuals leave, that knowledge is not always captured in a way that can be easily transferred.

Over a **quarter of survey respondents report that their agencies have no clear process for knowledge transfer** when an employee leaves (Figure 4.3). Among those that do, many rely on informal approaches such as exit interviews or documentation, with limited use of structured methods like cross-training or mentorship. Respondents reinforced this, sharing that their agencies "**rely too much on individuals**" and are "**reactive when someone leaves**".

Figure 4.3
Knowledge Transfer Methods Used
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data





These insights point to a key issue: **knowledge transfer is often dependent on individuals rather than systems**.

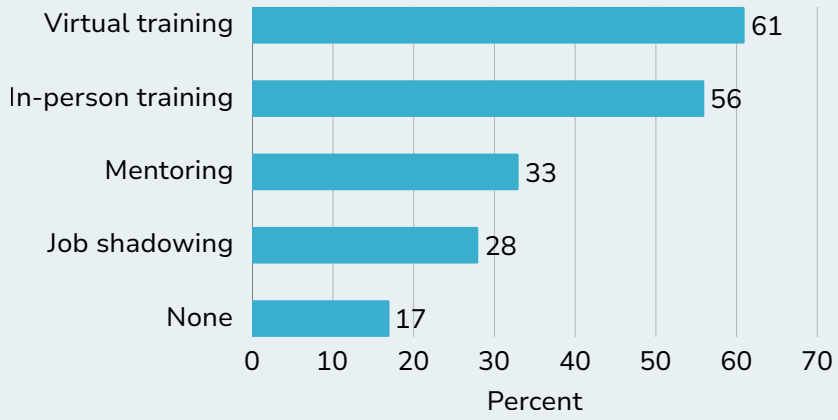
In practice, this means that outcomes can vary widely from team to team. Some departments may have effective processes in place, while others leave it up to informal handoffs or last-minute transitions. Inconsistency makes it difficult to scale knowledge transfer across the organization, and puts even more pressure on an already-strained workforce.

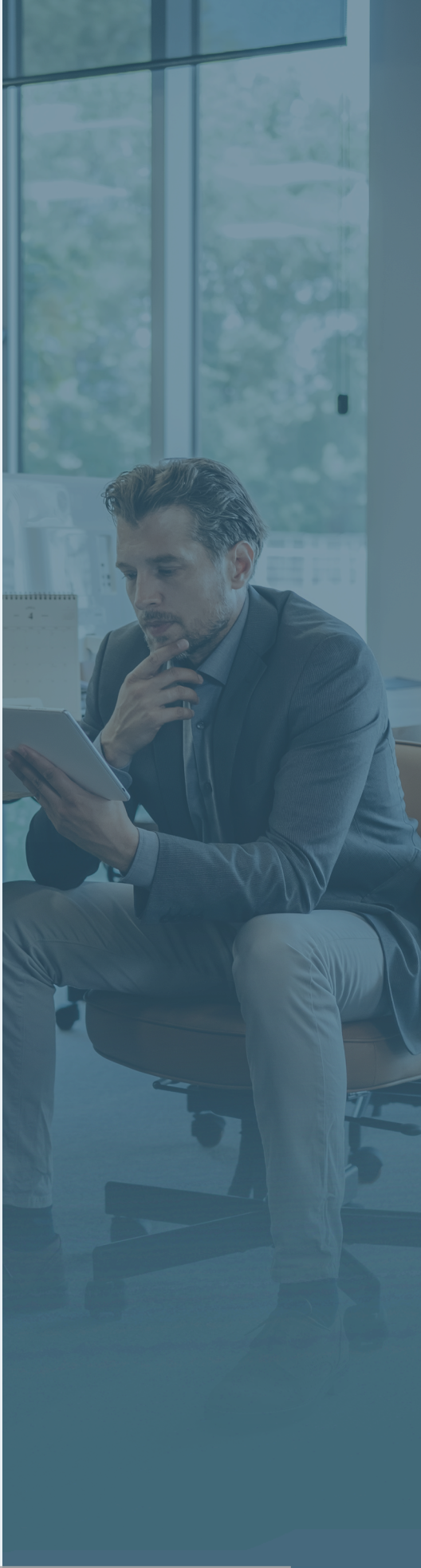
Employee Development Lacks Strategic Alignment

As with other trends in this report, the primary barrier to succession planning is execution capacity. Employee development is a key enabler for employees to take on a wider variety of responsibilities. Although it is widely recognized as important and many agencies invest in training programs and professional growth opportunities, **development efforts are not always aligned with succession planning**.

Figure 4.4 shows that while most agencies offer some form of training, like virtual, in-person, or mentoring, **16% still report offering no development opportunities** at all. Even where programs exist, they may not be structured to support long-term workforce needs.

Figure 4.4
Employee Development Opportunities Offered
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data





There is a disconnect between the fact that development is happening, but it is **not always tied to preparing employees for future roles**. Instead, it may focus on immediate skill needs or compliance requirements. This distinction matters. Development can support retention and performance, but without alignment to succession planning, it may not address the underlying challenge of workforce continuity.

> *Clear growth paths **support both** retention and adaptability.*
>
> ***– IT Manager / Tech,** Survey Respondent*

Public sector agencies have a unique advantage with retirements that other trends do not allow: they know it is coming. The only question left to ask is, **how prepared will organizations be when the day arrives?**

Structured knowledge transfer, aligned development pathways, and proactive planning are critical to sustaining highly effective operations and an efficient workforce when employees retire. At the same time, these efforts require time, coordination, and resources that are already in high demand. Thus, **the ability to prepare for retirements is shaped by present conditions** and retirement risk **influences decisions in the present** – and the implications extend beyond individual roles or departments.

Succession planning is much more than leadership transitions. It affects frontline confidence, compliance knowledge, and the ability to maintain consistent service delivery over time. In this context, **development becomes a bridge between current workforce needs and future organizational resilience**.

But each trend has shown that intention is not the key to strengthening that bridge. Agencies need to align priorities, build systems that **support knowledge transfer**, and **create the capacity to act** before gaps become detrimental.

Many organizations are exploring new tools to support workforce planning and knowledge management – however, adopting these solutions introduces its own set of obstacles.

Next Trend >





Trend 5

AI Experimentation is Outpacing Governance and Readiness



Trend 5 *AI Experimentation is Outpacing Readiness*

Public sector employees are increasingly turning attention toward technology as a potential source of relief in the face of their persistent workforce challenges in 2026.

Among these technologies, artificial intelligence (AI) stands out, not because it is fully integrated into daily operations, but because it is already **beginning to change how work gets done** at the margins. Unlike previous shifts explored in this report, AI adoption is not being driven solely by long-term planning or formal strategy. It is emerging more organically, often in response to immediate needs.

In environments where time is limited and workloads are high, even **small gains in efficiency can have meaningful impact** – and that is where AI shines. It remains in its early stages, but it is no longer theoretical. In 2025, most agencies had not yet begun integrating AI into HR processes, and few had established policies or training programs.

In 2026, adoption has increased modestly, with **21% of respondents reporting active use of AI** (Figure 5.1). But many respondents describe a lack of guidance and clarity, stating that they are "**not sure what's allowed**" and "**still figuring out how to use it appropriately**".

> *We want to have the **best AI tool for HR** to understand how we should be using it and how much or little we should rely on it.*
>
> *– **HR Manager,** Survey Respondent*

These responses demonstrate that AI is being experimented with and introduced into environments that are not yet fully prepared to support it. The data illustrates the same foundational gaps. Only **28% of agencies have documented policies** governing AI use, and just **24% have provided training to employees** (Figure 5.1).



Larger concerns emerge from these insights around compliance, data security, accuracy, and more, which respondents themselves expressed (Figure 5.2) – issues that agencies cannot ignore. **Smart Cities Dive** highlighted multiple cities across the U.S. that are formalizing AI usage through **policies that establish guardrails around transparency, accountability, and data protection** – aimed at reducing liability while maintaining public trust in how emerging technologies are applied.

Figure 5.1
AI Usage in Public Sector Agencies
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

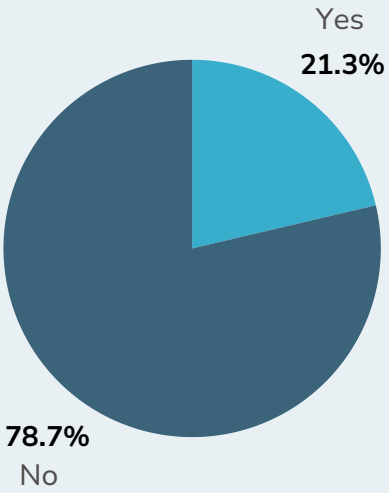
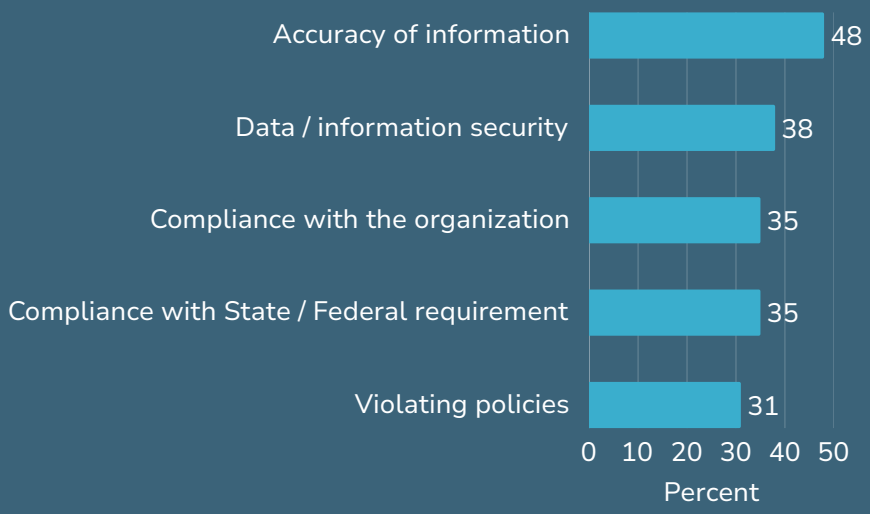


Figure 5.2
Top Concerns with Using AI
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data





How Public Sector Employees are Using AI Today

Among respondents who have already started using AI in their daily work, they apply it most often to practical, task-level activities. The most common use cases include **data analysis** (46%), **internal communications** (42%), **external communications** (33%), and **workflow automation** (33%), as seen in Figure 5.3. These applications identify the immediate needs of agencies:

- Summarizing large volumes of information
- Drafting communications more efficiently
- Reducing manual administrative tasks
- Identifying patterns in workforce data

> *"It takes the **admin load off** by filling in the gaps for repetitive tasks."*
>
> – ***Program Specialist,*** *Survey Respondent*

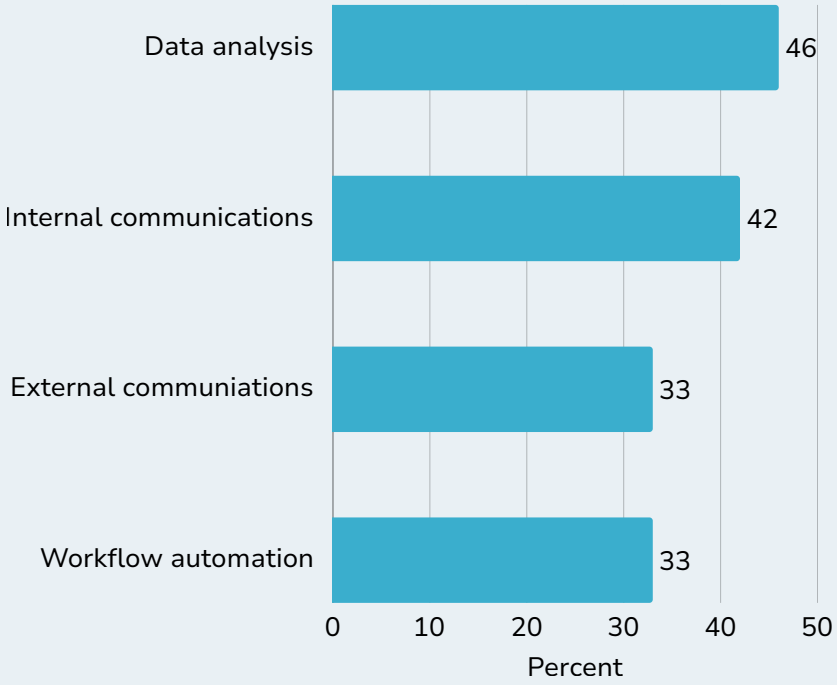
> *"AI **saves an extraordinary amount of time** with certain workflows, allowing staff to focus on more prioritized matters."*
>
> – ***Division Manager,*** *Survey Respondent*

> *"It helps **sort our data** and write internal communications."*
>
> – ***Program Manager,*** *Survey Respondent*



These examples illustrate how AI is currently functioning; not as a transformative system, but **as a productivity tool that supports existing workflows.** In many cases, it is helping teams manage the same constraints described throughout this report: limited time, high workload, and increasing operational demands.

Figure 5.3
How Agencies are Using AI
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

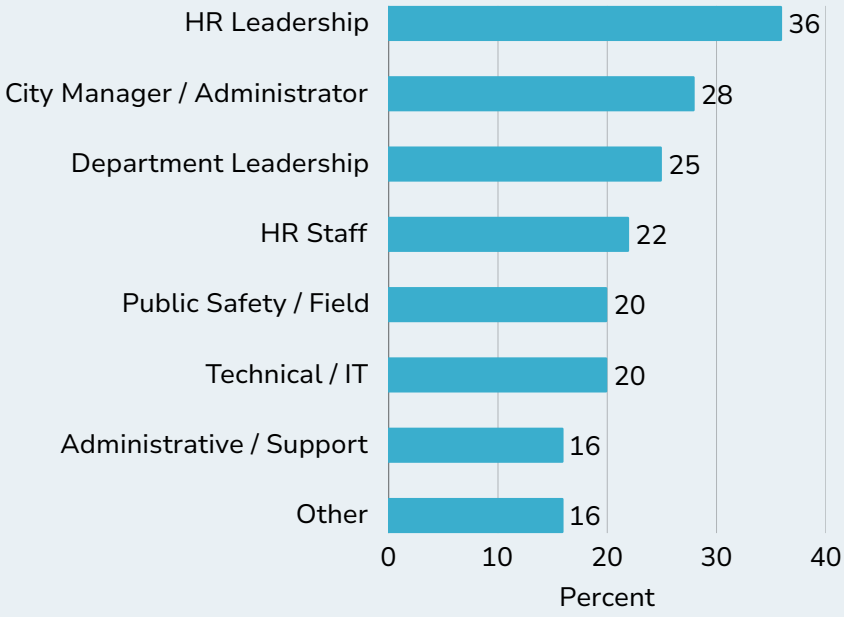


One of the more notable patterns in the data is how **AI adoption varies by role**. Usage rates are highest among HR leadership and executive roles such as City Managers and Administrators, followed by department leadership (Figure 5.4). Technical and administrative roles report lower levels of use, suggesting AI experimentation is often being driven by leaders.

This gap could stem from a **lack of clarity around AI** from public sector organizations. Leaders may be exploring potential use cases and setting direction, while broader teams are still unsure whether they are allowed to incorporate AI into their day-to-day work.



Figure 5.4
AI Adoption by Role Category
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



AI Readiness Reflects Organizational Readiness

AI adoption mirrors the broader environment in which it is introduced. Agencies that do not have processes set in place to prepare their workforce for change, adoption and impact show **uneven readiness**. Several indicators point to uneven organizational preparedness in the public sector in 2026:

- Only **24%** of agencies feel very prepared to manage change (Figure 5.5)
- Only **23%** consistently use data to inform decision-making (Figure 2.7)
- Only **18%** spend more than 20% of their time on long-term planning (Figure 2.4)

Many agencies are still operating in reactive environments. In such conditions, introducing new technology, particularly one as complex as AI, can be challenging. The issue is not only how to implement AI, but **how to absorb and sustain it over time**.



Trend 5 *AI Experimentation is Outpacing Readiness*

Respondents frequently describe environments characterized by constant change that causes fatigue and frustration, citing "**too many initiatives at once**" and "**no time to implement properly**". Paired with the top challenges agencies have with change management – communication, resource gaps, and burnout – these insights show that the challenge of AI adoption is both technical and organizational.

> *We have seen **so much change** in the last 5 years, and we have not been able to take a holistic approach to the changes that have been thrown at us.*
>
> *– **City Manager / Administrator,** Survey Respondent*

Figure 5.5
Change Management Readiness
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

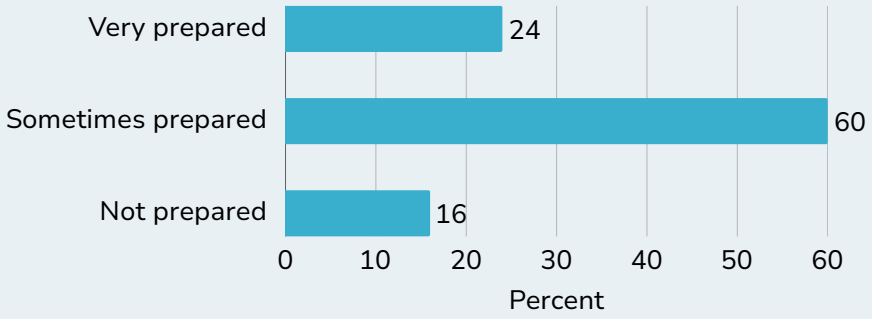
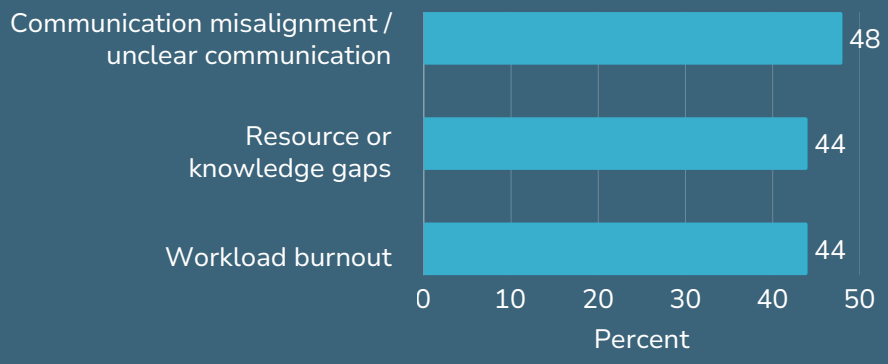


Figure 5.6
Top Challenges with Change Management
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data





Data Maturity is the Foundation of Readiness

The most common AI use cases – data analysis, summarization, and communication – signal to another underlying factor: **data maturity**.

Trend 2 revealed that many agencies recognize the importance of data but **struggle to use it consistently**. While about 72% of respondents report using data at least occasionally, only a small portion use it regularly to guide decision-making (Figure 2.8). Still, demand for insights is high.

AI is often used to bridge the **discrepancy between what agencies need and what they can access**. By helping agencies analyze, summarize, and interpret information, **AI can make existing data more accessible**, even when systems remain fragmented.

However, this also introduces risk. When AI is used to compensate for gaps in data infrastructure, its effectiveness may be limited by the quality and consistency of the data itself – reinforces a broader point: AI readiness is closely tied to data maturity.

> *Leveraging data ensures that* ***decisions are evidence-based,*** *allowing leaders to identify trends, measure impact, and continuously improve initiatives.*
>
> – ***Well-Being Coordinator,*** *Survey Respondent*

Overall, the pattern that AI adoption is increasing, but readiness is not keeping pace, consistently emerges through the survey findings. Agencies are exploring new tools and identifying opportunities to improve efficiency, but many **lack the policies, training, and organizational alignment needed to scale these efforts** effectively.



Trend 5 *AI Experimentation is Outpacing Readiness*

AI has the potential to play a meaningful role in addressing many of the challenges outlined in this report, from reducing administrative burden to improving data visibility and supporting workforce planning. However, its impact will depend on more than the technology itself. **Successful adoption requires:**

- Clear governance
- Defined use cases
- Employee training
- Alignment with existing processes
- Capacity to manage change

Without these elements, AI may remain a useful but limited tool, applied in isolated ways rather than integrated into broader organizational systems – reflecting a larger theme throughout the trends. The challenge is more than just identifying the right solutions. It is **creating the conditions that allow those solutions to take hold.**

Key Takeaways >

Conclusion & Key Takeaways

Across the public sector, most of the challenges outlined in this report are not new. What has changed is how consistently they are being felt and how deeply they are beginning to guide the way work is carried out.

Workforce strain, demands for efficiency, retention difficulties, retirement risk, and emerging technologies are often discussed as separate topics. But in actuality, **each one influences the others**, and together they create a set of conditions that define the current operating environment.

All in all, these five trends point to something more than a collection of individual issues. They show a system under sustained pressure – one where agencies are not lacking awareness or intent, but are **navigating competing priorities and resource constraints that limit what can be executed** at any given time.



A Framework of Interconnected Pressures

Each trend in this report highlights a specific challenge, but **none exist in isolation**. Workforce strain increases workload, which affects manager capacity and employee experience. Increased pressure on teams contributes to retention challenges, which further reduce capacity. All the while, retirement risk introduces additional uncertainty, and limited succession planning makes transitions harder to manage.

In response, agencies shift toward efficiency, seeking to stabilize operations with the resources available. Yet the same constraints that drive this shift can also restrict the ability to fully realize it. This **reinforcing cycle continues as challenges compound rather than resolve**, and improvements in one area are often dependent on progress in another.

Breaking the cycle requires a shift in mindset. The patterns in this report suggest that some of the most pressing challenges may be rooted in how problems are framed:

- A **retention** problem may also be a **management capacity problem**, where expectations exceed the support available to meet them.
- A **succession** problem may also be a **development alignment problem,** where training exists but is not connected to long-term workforce needs.
- An **efficiency** problem may also be a **visibility problem**, where limited access to consistent data affects decision-making.
- An **AI** problem may also be a **preparedness problem**, where adoption outpaces the systems needed to support it.

In each case, the surface issue is real – but the underlying dynamics are more complex. Recognizing these connections can help **reframe these issues from singular problems with one-off solutions to system-level conditions** that call for integrated responses.

What Forward-Thinking Agencies Do Differently

While the challenges outlined in this report are widespread, they are not experienced or addressed the same way from one public sector agency to the next. Some organizations are beginning to approach these conditions differently, and it's part of the reason for their success.

Forward-thinking agencies are making meaningful progress by being strategic about where they focus first and building momentum through quick wins. Moving from insight to action requires a clear, practical roadmap – and understanding where to start is the first step.

Where to Start: *The Prioritization Framework*

This simple framework will help agencies determine which trend should be the starting point based on their specific circumstances.

1

Start with *Trend 1: Workforce Strain* if...

You are experiencing critical staffing shortages.

Indicators: Open positions sitting unfilled for 90+ days, departments operating significantly understaffed, mission-critical services at risk

2

Start with *Trend 2: Efficiency* if...

You have adequate staff but low productivity.

Indicators: HR team spending most time on manual data entry, frequent errors in payroll/benefits, leadership has no time for strategic work

3

Start with *Trend 3: Retention* if...

You are hiring but losing people quickly.

Indicators: Turnover above 15% annually, exit interviews citing preventable issues, high performers leaving within first 2 years

4

Start with *Trend 4: Retirement Risk* if...

You have 15%+ retirement risk in the next 2 years.

Indicators: Significant portion of workforce eligible to retire soon, critical knowledge concentrated in senior employees, no succession plans

5

Start with *Trend 5: AI Readiness* if...

You are exploring technology but lack governance.

Indicators: Employees already using AI tools without guidance, leadership asking about AI but no policy exists, data quality issues

Actionable Strategies: *Quick Wins and Foundation Builders*

Different agencies can execute operational improvements at different intervals. **Quick wins are low-effort actions** delivering fast results within 30-60 days with minimal resources, intended to build momentum and create immediate relief. In contrast, **foundation builders are strategic investments** requiring more time and coordination which create sustainable, long-term capacity and systemic improvement. This section offers one quick win and one foundation builder for all five trends to give every public sector agency an actionable starting point.

Trend 1

Quick Win

Conduct an employer brand audit using existing employee feedback.

- **Resource Level:** Low
- **Timeline:** 30 days
- **What to Do:** Review your last 12 months of exit interviews, employee surveys, and Glassdoor reviews. Identify the top 3 themes about what employees value and the top 3 pain points.
- **Expected Outcome:** Clear understanding of your actual employee value proposition vs. what you're communicating in job postings
- **Cost:** None (uses existing data)

Foundation Builder

Implement a 90-day hiring process improvement pilot.

- **Resource Level: Medium**
- **Timeline: 90 days**
- **What to Do:** Map your current hiring process for one department. Identify bottlenecks (approval delays, manual screening, interview scheduling). Automate one key step; applicant tracking systems like **NEOGOV Insight** can reduce manual screening time by up to 60%.
- **Expected Outcome:** Reduce time-to-hire by 20-40 days for pilot department
- **Cost:** Investment required if implementing new technology; low-cost if optimizing existing process

Trend 2

Quick Win

Map and standardize your top three most time-consuming processes.

- **Resource Level:** Low
- **Timeline:** 30–45 days
- **What to Do:** Ask your team: "What takes the most time each week?" Common answers: new hire paperwork, payroll corrections, benefits enrollment. Document the current process step-by-step. Identify redundant steps.
- **Expected Outcome:** Clear visibility into where time is being wasted; 10-20% time savings from eliminating redundant steps
- **Cost:** None

Foundation Builder

Create a simple efficiency scorecard with 5–7 key metrics.

- **Resource Level**: Low to Medium
- **Timeline**: 60 days
- **What to Do**: Track metrics like: time-to-hire, payroll error rate, benefits enrollment completion rate, employee self-service adoption rate, HR ticket resolution time. Review monthly.
- **Expected Outcome**: Data-driven decisions; ability to demonstrate HR's impact to leadership
- **Cost**: None if using existing data; low-cost for dashboard tools

Trend 3

Quick Win

Conduct stay interviews with high performers.

- **Resource Level:** Low
- **Timeline:** 30–60 days
- **What to do:** Identify your top 20% of performers. Have their managers (or HR) ask: "What keeps you here? What would make you consider leaving? What can we do better?" Document themes.
- **Expected Outcome:** Actionable insights into what drives retention; ability to address issues before people leave
- **Cost:** None

Foundation Builder

Implement a manager effectiveness assessment.

- **Resource Level:** Medium
- **Timeline:** 90 days
- **What to Do:** Survey employees about their manager's effectiveness (communication, support, development opportunities). Provide confidential feedback to managers with coaching resources. Tools like **NEOGOV Perform** provide structured 360-degree feedback that gives managers actionable insights into their leadership effectiveness while maintaining confidentiality and psychological safety.
- **Expected Outcome:** Improved manager-employee relationships (the #1 driver of retention); 15-20% reduction in turnover in teams with strong managers
- **Cost:** Low-cost if using simple surveys; medium-cost for comprehensive assessment tools

Trend 4

Quick Win

Identify critical roles with retirement risk in next 24 months.

- **Resource Level:** Low
- **Timeline:** 30 days
- **What to Do:** Pull a report of employees eligible to retire in the next 2 years. Cross-reference with critical positions (those where vacancy would significantly impact operations). Create a priority list.
- **Expected Outcome:** Clear visibility into succession risk; ability to prioritize planning efforts
- **Cost:** None

Foundation Builder

Implement structured knowledge transfer protocols.

- **Resource Level:** Medium
- **Timeline:** 90 days
- **What to Do:** For high-risk positions, require: documented procedures, cross-training of at least one other employee, recorded training sessions, shadowing opportunities in the final 6 months before retirement. Platforms like NEOGOV Learn enable agencies to build comprehensive training libraries where retiring employees can document processes, create video tutorials, and structure knowledge in ways that remain accessible long after they have left.
- **Expected Outcome:** Reduced knowledge loss; smoother transitions when retirements occur
- **Cost:** Low cost (primarily staff time)

Trend 5

Quick Win

Establish clear AI use guidelines (even a simple 1-page policy).

- **Resource Level:** Low
- **Timeline:** 30 days
- **What to Do:** Create a basic policy covering: approved AI tools, prohibited uses (e.g., entering confidential employee data), data privacy requirements, and who to contact with questions.
- **Expected Outcome:** Reduced compliance risk; clear expectations for employees
- **Cost:** None

Foundation Builder

Create an AI governance committee.

- **Resource Level:** Medium
- **Timeline:** 90 days
- **What to Do:** Form a cross-functional team (HR, IT, Legal, Department representatives) that meets quarterly to review AI use cases, update policies, and address concerns.
- **Expected Outcome:** Coordinated AI strategy; reduced risk; better adoption
- **Cost:** Low cost (staff time)

Public sector agencies don't need a massive budget, a huge team, or perfect conditions to make progress. The bare necessities to get off the ground are:

1. **Clarity** on where to start (use the prioritization framework)
2. **Quick wins** to build confidence and demonstrate value
3. **Consistency** in executing the plan
4. **Patience** to let small improvements compound over time

The approaches above **do not eliminate constraints; they work within them** and acknowledge limitations while simultaneously identifying areas where incremental improvement is possible – and acting on them. Forward-thinking agencies **are not doing everything at once**. They are making strategic choices about where to focus, celebrating small wins, and building momentum that carries them forward.

Looking Ahead to a Balanced Reality

The public sector workforce will never remain static. Over time, it will continue to evolve in response to shifting expectations, technological advancements, and general labor market dynamics.

Nevertheless, the conditions described in this report are **likely to persist in the near term**. Workforce shortages may stabilize but not disappear. Efficiency will remain a priority for better service delivery and return on investment. Retirement will continue to reshape organizational knowledge (or lack thereof). Technology adoption will expand exponentially, bringing both opportunity and complexity.

The agencies that thrive will be those that **approach these conditions strategically**, starting with small, sustainable changes that compound over time. In this landscape, progress does not always come from large, immediate changes. It may come from **sustained adjustments** – clarifying priorities, improving alignment, strengthening systems, and creating space for execution where possible.

Ultimately, the challenges facing public sector HR in 2026 are the result of **operating within conditions that require constant balance** between immediate demands and long-term goals, between available resources and expected outcomes. Agencies that understand and actively manage that balance are better positioned to navigate these conditions and **build a more resilient workforce** to serve their community.

> *Clear strategic direction ensures every team and initiative is **aligned, purposeful, and working toward outcomes that create real value**. This focus turns strategy into measurable results and drives long-term organizational success.*
>
> ***– Deputy Director,** Survey Respondent*

NEOGOV is the **leading public sector HR software provider**, serving over 13,000 organizations across government, public safety, and education. As a portfolio company of EQT and CPP Investments, NEOGOV offers an integrated solution for HR, payroll, talent management, and compliance policy management—purpose-built for the unique needs of the public sector.

Celebrating over 25 years of innovation, NEOGOV empowers organizations to streamline and automate critical HR processes—so they can focus on what matters most: serving their communities in meaningful ways. By eliminating inefficiencies and simplifying compliance, NEOGOV helps improve productivity and engagement, drive time and cost savings, enhance regulatory compliance, and reduce paper-based processes.

13,000+	800,000+	25+
Public Sector Agencies	Government Employees	Years Serving You