WHITE PAPER



How To Solve

GOVERNMENT RECRUITING NEEDS

Addressing Public Sector Retirement, Image, and Selection Process Challenges

NEOGOV

PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYERS FACE serious challenges in effectively recruiting the quantity and quality of talent they will need. Addressing these challenges is difficult given the constraints under which HR operates. Fortunately, there are recruiting tools and tactics that can make a visible impact. But before we get to solutions, we first need to explore the main challenges facing public sector recruitment.

Issues

While recruiters must, of course, manage the day-to-day work, they must also be aware of three overarching issues that will shape the hiring agenda in the next few years. These issues are the upcoming wave of retirements, a lackluster public image, and a complex public sector recruitment process that creates delays. If HR professionals understand and address these issues, they will be well positioned to meet the talent needs of the public sector in the years ahead.

The Retirement Challenge

The first issue is the coming wave of retirements and the need to fill the resulting vacancies. The scope of the issue is shown in Bureau of Labor Statistics data for 2012 which revealed that of 20 industry classifications with the oldest employees, seven were in the public sector.[1] The large number of older workers is mirrored by the small number of younger workers. Reports find that "the percentage of employees under the age of 30 hit an eight-year low of 7% in 2013."[2] Employees may defer retirement for a few years, but the demographics make increased hiring inevitable.

In fact, the public sector has already seen an uptick in hiring. The April 2016 Current Employment Statistics report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that government has added 270,000 jobs since an employment trough in January 2014.[3] In 2014 as a whole nearly three-quarters of state and local government HR managers reported hiring full-time employees.[4] This rebound shouldn't be a surprise given how hard public payrolls were hit after the 2008 recession when many state and local governments implemented hiring freezes and layoffs.

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Many organizations are concerned that a wave of retirements will cause is a loss of expertise. The National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association has even launched a website drawing attention to the experience lost from retiring federal workers.[5] However, the bigger issue is effectively hiring the next generation of public servants. Organizations can be surprisingly resilient in the face of retirement as employees step up their game to take on larger roles. Organizations really suffer when, over an extended period of time, they cannot bring in good new talent. It's hard to bring in talent if the employment brand is weak, and that brings us to the next issue, the public image of the public sector.

The Public Image of Public Service

There is no question that having a good employment brand makes recruiting easier, but right now the public sector does not have a stellar brand. A study by the OECD concluded: "With few exceptions, young people tend not to rate public employment highly. There is a belief that the public sector is bureaucratic, old fashioned and the prestige of the civil service is low in many countries."[6] Furthermore, according to recent reports, the reputation problem is particularly acute among some of the most desirable undergraduates. "Of roughly 46,000 undergraduates polled in late 2013 and early 2014, just 2.4% of engineering students and 0.9% of business

students listed only government employers as their ideal places to work."[7] It's no surprise that the reputation of the public sector is seen "as a concern of strategic importance."[8]

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Understanding the weakness of the current employment brand is a necessary step, but there is reason for hope. The public sector has one big weapon in the war for talent, which is that it is public service. People want meaning in their jobs, and working in the public sector comes with purpose built in. HR needs to lead with this strength. Recruitment advertising should describe not just what the work is, but why the work is important to the community they serve. It's a great pitch that most of the private sector can't compete with.

However, capitalizing on this asset requires improving the recruiting process, and that takes us to the third big issue facing public sector recruiting—the time-consuming recruitment process.

The Lengthy Selection Process

Public sector HR professionals report a couple of issues that on their own might not be such a problem, but together can create a real headache. One is the large number of applications, which is fundamentally a good thing but it does mean a high workload. The other issue is the complexity of the process. Recruiting in the public sector is more complex than in the private sector because it needs to achieve higher levels of fairness and transparency. A high volume of applications, together with the need for a thorough and uniform selection process, can lead to a drawn out hiring process. Senator James Lankford (R-Okla.) noted "the incredible challenge it is to just get through the hiring process." He went on to describe applying for government jobs as "typing your information into a black hole."[9]

Let's put this issue into perspective. First, transparency and fairness are positive attributes. Studies show that the "single strongest factor in a company's candidate experience rating is the extent to which a candidate leaves the recruiting process perceiving, feeling and knowing they were given a fair chance."[10] If HR can deploy recruiting technology to remove unnecessary delays, and if candidates are well informed about why the process works the way it does, then the public sector can turn a perceived negative into a positive.

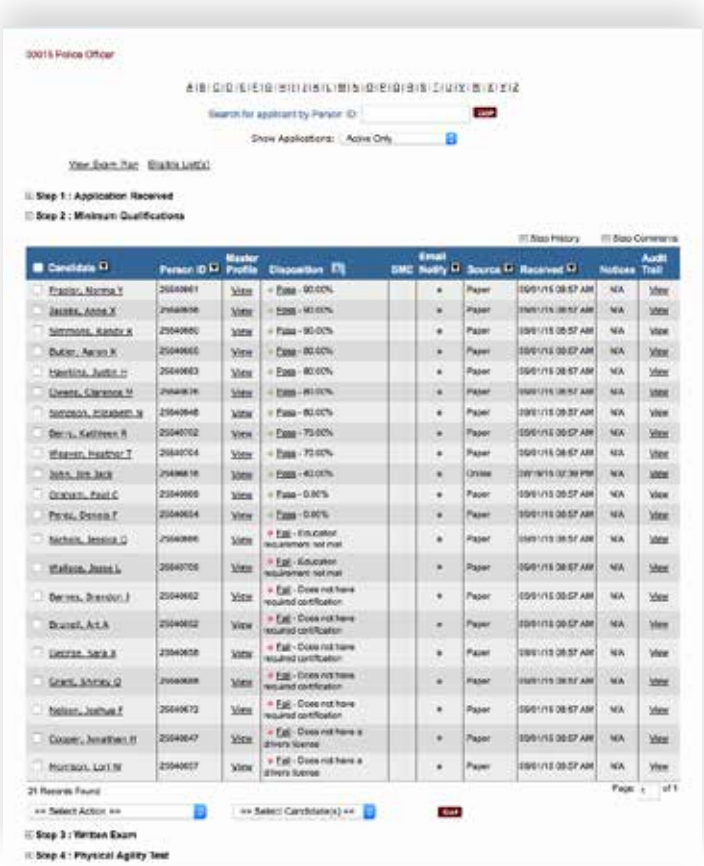
The second point to keep in mind is that the effective use of modern recruiting technology can have a significant impact on the efficiency of the processes. And this sets the stage for outlining solutions to the public sector's recruiting challenges.

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SOLUTIONS

To summarize the challenges facing public sector HR:

- It will have to do a lot more recruitment due to the upcoming wave of retirements,
- It will have to improve its image to attract strong applicants, and
- It will have to move faster while retaining a fair and transparent process.



Autoscoring can improve throughput as well as reduce the time it takes for a candidate to get through the hiring process.

These are big challenges, but properly applied technology brings recruiters three powerful points of leverage.

Embracing the advantage of automation

Given that, due to a wave of retirements, the public sector will need to do a lot of recruitment and deal with a lot of applications, HR has to embrace the power of automation. Recruiting is labor intensive. A study by IPMA showed that the median time spent per hire was 16 to 20 hours.[11] Without automation, too much effort will be spent on simply administering the process, and quality of hire will suffer.

One of the most useful ways to deploy automation involves preparing a small number of questions in the online application that can distinguish between people who are likely to be a good fit and those who are not. Recruitment software has autoscoring features that can filter out a list of the promising candidates based on these questions. This saves times and speeds up the process.

Some hiring managers are reluctant to trust the automation; however, as Wharton professor Peter Cappelli explains, "The alternative to standardized, data-driven practices is unfortunately not a wise, experienced recruiter with an open mind. It is more likely to be a hiring manager who has no training in selection who 'goes with their gut'... it is hard to argue with approaches that rely on data and standard practices to bring rigor to the hiring process."[12]

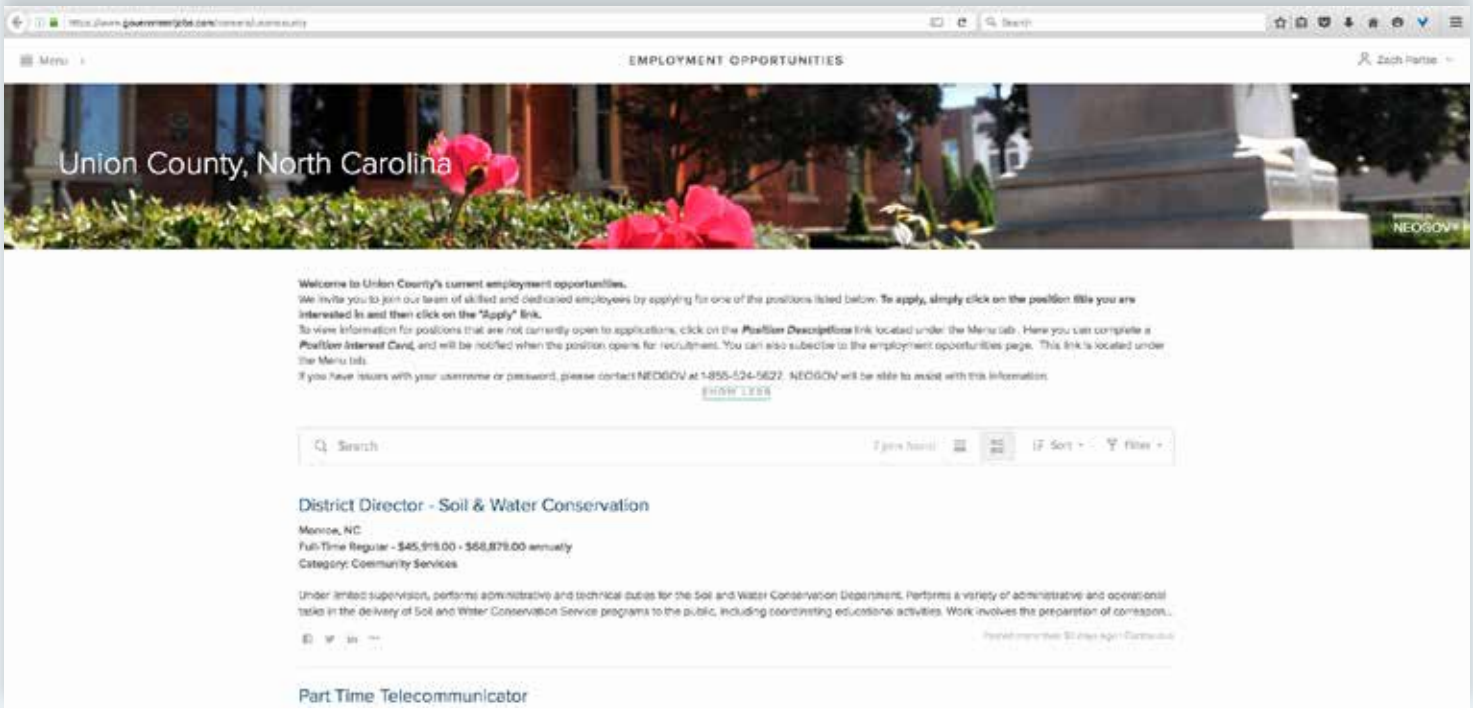
The bottom line is that automation, such as autoscoring, can hugely improve throughput as well as reduce the time it takes for a candidate to get through the process. These efficiencies lead to a better candidate experience and give recruiters more time to select the best candidate from the short list.

A Candidate Experience that People Talk About

Recruiters have to confront the burden of the public sector's poor image. They cannot control broad public perception, but they can control the candidate experience. The candidate experience cannot be underestimated. Research by recruitment expert Gerry Crispin shows that of the candidates "who had a great experience, 60% will go out of their way to encourage others to apply."[13]

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and counter the notion that public service is behind the times. It also provides an opportunity to highlight the fairness of the process and how public sector work contributes to the public good.

Finally, just as HR should analyze the effectiveness of each step in the recruitment process, it needs to examine the candidate experience. Think about what the online recruitment portal looks like to a candidate. What impression does it make? Do they find it easy to use? Does it give them the information they want? Think of your investment in new technology and streamlined process as more than something that eases the administrative burden; think of these changes as a way to provide a winning candidate experience.

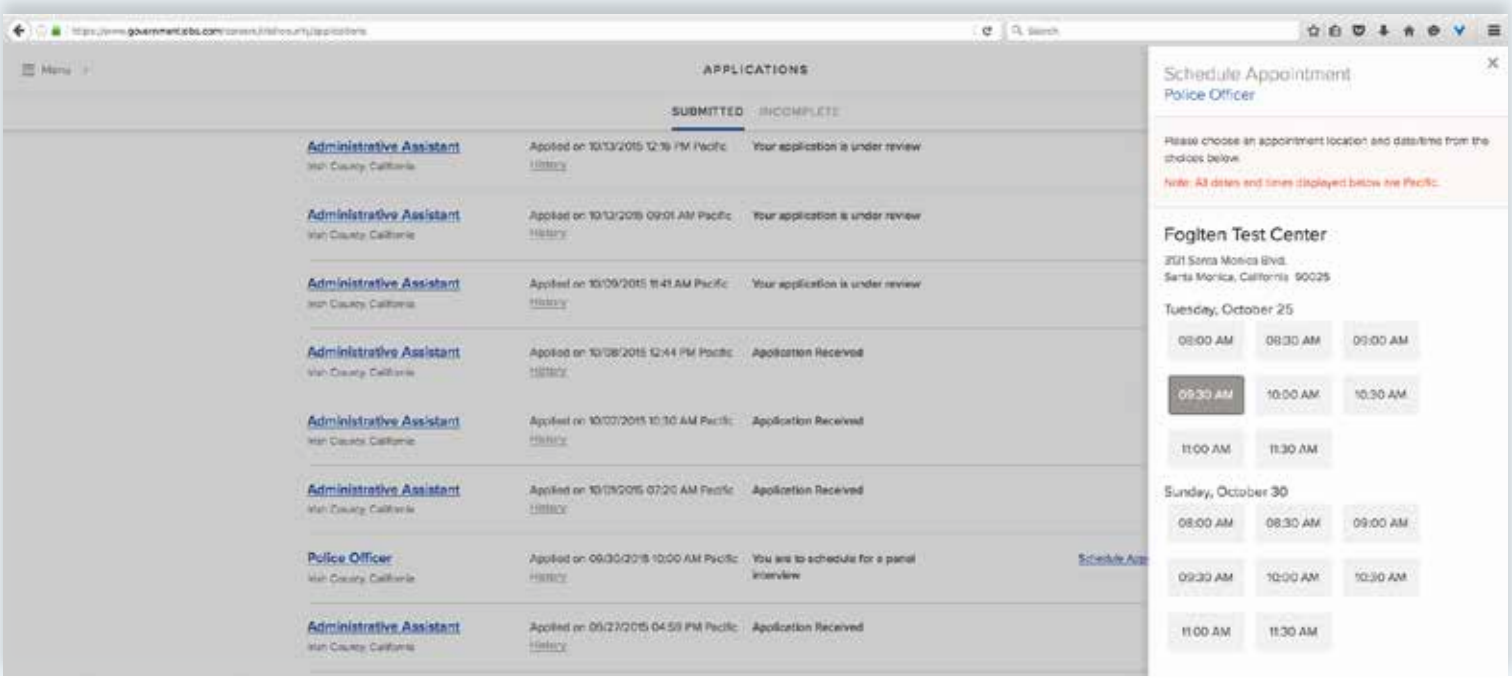
Speeding up the process

Organizations can speed up recruitment with improved processes. For example, many public sector organizations have been known to have dozens of different tests that candidates take to prove they meet qualifications.[14] However, after a careful review, these organizations found that they could reduce such tests significantly. Now when candidates take a test, their results remain in the system and when these organizations need to fill a job quickly, they already have a pool of candidates who have taken the appropriate test.

Another way to streamline processes is to use technology that allows candidates to self-schedule tests and interviews. This saves staff time in calling people to schedule interviews, results in fewer 'no-shows' because people sign up for times that work for them, and candidates like it because it gives them control over their schedule.

An even simpler step is to avoid sending notices to applicants by US mail and instead use email or an online portal. Displaying scores and application status in an online portal eliminates the need to send notices while providing greater visibility into the process.

More generally, HR can use technology to analyze where the recruitment process is working well and where it is



Allowing candidates to self-schedule interviews streamlines HR processes.

not. Where is it slow? How much effort does each step take? What does it cost? Any parts of the process that are not working well can be improved with technology that expedites processes.

Takeaways

The public sector faces some tough recruiting challenges. However, by improving the candidate experience and expediting the hiring process, HR can create a recruitment experience they will be proud of. The key element is to focus on the candidate experience and to proudly sell both the purpose of public service and the merit of a fair and transparent process. In terms of technology, cloud-based platforms have leapt forward in capability. HR professionals will be impressed by the difference they make. When it comes to making changes that reduce the length of the process, well, that takes some courage because there are always tradeoffs to be made. However, changes that reduce workload, improve the candidate experience or speed up the hiring process should be embraced even if they are different from "how we've always done things."

Often, when people talk about the challenges that the public sector faces, the conversation sounds rather negative. But having talked through some of the issues and solutions, it's hard not to be positive. There is a clear path to some noticeable improvements in recruiting that will both impress candidates and effectively bring in the talent the public service needs.

The technical side of the solution lies in new software and sped up processes, but that's only half of it. The other half is in a willingness to embrace new ideas and a new spirit. There is no part of HR that has undergone faster evolution than recruitment. Given that the public sector faces such stiff recruiting challenges, it's time to enthusiastically embrace new solutions.

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