

Questions for Ms. Michelle

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Questions from Chairman

Gerald E. Connolly

Subcommittee on Government
Operations

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1. What do agencies need to do to address mission-critical skills gaps both in the short and longterm?

Response

To close mission-critical skills gaps, federal agencies need to improve recruitment processes to attract more highly qualified candidates, invest in reskilling and upskilling their existing workforce and promote retention of current high-performing employees.

Improving recruitment can involve both general policy changes to strengthen the federal hiring process overall as well as strategies to target specific federal employee groups or professions in high demand. As I discussed in my testimony, one important broad-based approach is to bring more young people into government. We can do so by reinvigorating the Pathways programs, providing early-career talent with exposure to and positive experiences working in government; making it easier to offer jobs to high-performing interns; creating a centralized internship and fellowship database; ensuring internships are paid; lifting the caps on expedited hiring authorities for students and recent graduates; and creating an ROTC-like program for federal service.

In addition to moving legislation to address these goals, Congress should also remain engaged in oversight as the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) implements its recent “Hiring Authority for Post-Secondary Students” and “Hiring Authority for College Graduates” rules. Another approach is to encourage recruitment of those who may want to serve the government for shorter durations instead of committing their entire career to government. Just 35% of millennials expect to stay with their current employer for five or more years.¹ We can encourage diverse, mission-critical talent to join public service through fellowships, talent exchanges and service corps. The Partnership’s Cybersecurity Talent Initiative, which creates cross-sector opportunities for cyber graduates, is one example of such an innovative approach to attracting cyber specialists into government.

¹ Deloitte, “The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2020,” June 2020. Retrieved from <https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/millennialsurvey.html>.

Other federal programs like the U.S. Digital Service, 18F, and Presidential Innovation Fellows allow “technical tours of duty” with the federal government and are unique in helping promote and respond to an increasing desire for the next generation to be more mobile in their careers. Congress and the administration can look to these models for filling other hard-to-fill positions in government. In addition, agencies need to ensure they are fully taking advantage of hiring flexibilities that can reduce the length and complexity of the federal hiring process.

With other sectors competing with the government for high-skill candidates, hiring alone is not the answer. In addition to recruitment, the government will need to look towards its experienced roster of civil servants to provide the critical skills needed for new work. Retraining current employees is a valuable way to retain talent with the institutional knowledge of how government works and dedication to their agency’s mission. It also provides employees with the opportunity to focus on meaningful work and helps agencies fill positions in highly competitive fields, such as IT and cybersecurity, with qualified candidates. One example of this approach was the Federal Cyber Reskilling Academy launched by the Federal Chief Information Officers (CIO) Council. It demonstrated substantial interest in learning new skills within the federal workforce, but also showed that such programs must be designed with the transition of newly-trained employees in mind, as Academy participants often found that job opportunities for their new skills did not match their non-cyber-related levels of experience and responsibility.²

Lastly, the federal government must focus on retaining its high-performing employees, particularly those who demonstrate their potential to be advanced to fill roles of greater responsibility over time. Of the full-time employees under 30 who voluntarily quit federal service FY 2019, over 73% did so with less than 2 years of federal tenure, suggesting that many young people may not have a positive work experience in the federal government. There are notable correlations between those who plan to stay and those who believe their employers perform well on issues related to financial performance, community impact, talent development and diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA). Agencies need to focus on employee retention by adopting strategies like robust onboarding programs, mentorship programs, professional development opportunities and cross-agency or government collaboration initiatives. One way to promote retention through professional development is to conduct regular skills assessments. An example of this approach is the Internal Revenue Service’s (IRS) automated skills database for its IT technical skills, in which nearly 7,000 employees rated their proficiency in targeted skills such as computer and software languages, IT certifications and project and program management. Employees are required to complete a first-time skill assessment within 120 days of being hired, then update their skill proficiencies and technical certifications every two years. The agency maps these self-assessments with data based on job grades and series, so leadership can assign high priority work to employees with the specific expertise or competency levels that the

² Natalie Alms, “Lessons of the Cyber Reskilling Academy,” FCW, Sep. 23, 2021. Retrieved from: <https://fcw.com/security/2021/09/lessons-of-the-cyber-reskilling-academy/259196>.

agency needs. They can also use the data as a tool for talent management efforts, such as hiring, training or succession planning.³

Another retention approach is to draw on the lessons of the pandemic and update the framework for telework and remote work. The experience of last year has shattered old expectations about the workplace. While some jobs cannot be performed by telework, agencies should embrace the new reality that a large number of jobs can be performed partially or wholly outside the traditional office setting. This flexibility is expected by more and more employees and job seekers across sectors, and the provision of this benefit can help the government recruit and retain workers seeking it as part of their compensation packages. Furthermore, agencies should have clear performance metrics related to employee development and do more to capture data on why people leave government so that steps can be taken to address retention issues.

All of these goals would be supported by strengthening and reaffirming of OPM as the strategic leader for human resource functions across the entire government and by strengthening agency human resource capabilities. OPM could have an immediate and positive impact by prioritizing the modernization of recruiting and hiring and should provide the vision to help Congress create a modernized personnel system for government. In the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, Congress tasked the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) with conducting a review of OPM, which was delivered to Congress in March of this year. The NAPA report reaffirms the importance of OPM's leadership and independence and makes many smart recommendations for Congress to consider on how best to position OPM to lead the workforce into the future, including shifting OPM from a compliance-based to a strategic and risk-based approach. The Partnership welcomes the introduction of Chairman Connolly's Strengthening the OPM Act, H.R. 6066, as a first step in implementing the NAPA recommendations. Congress will also need to continue to closely monitor and support OPM's budget needs, particularly for IT modernization and moving OPM away from a fee-based model. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 provided an additional \$32 million to OPM to compensate for lost revenues due to the transfer of the background investigation function to the Pentagon and increased IT modernization needs, but the agency continues to face funding challenges at present.

In addition to strengthening OPM, Congress needs to ensure that we have human resource offices across government with the requisite skills, capacity and tools. There are outstanding and innovative HR professionals across the government, but there are also skills gaps in their offices. Congress should jumpstart efforts to increase the skills and professionalism of the federal HR community by requiring OPM to provide technical training to HR specialists, conducting a review of overall training needs and how those

³ Partnership for Public Service and General Assembly, "Looking Inward for Talent: Retraining Employees for Tomorrow's Jobs," September 2019. Available at <https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Reskilling.pdf>.

needs can be met, and funding IT needs of the HR community. Congress should also ensure that agencies undertake strategic workforce planning and make sure that Chief Human Capital Officers have a voice in the strategic and budget planning processes so that agency leaders will be informed of the HR needs necessary to carry out their policies and programs.

2. What can agencies do to recruit college students and recent graduates into mission-critical positions?

Response

As mentioned in the first response, bringing more entry-level talent into the government now is a key priority. In other sectors, college graduates in high-demand fields can easily go from job application to offer in days, instead of weeks or months as frequently occurs with the federal government. To compete, the federal government must offer a smoother, faster application experience that is more reflective of private sector hiring processes. In addition to the recommendations made in the first question, it's particularly important that federal agencies move away from a "post and pray" approach to job openings, where opportunities are simply placed on the USAJobs.gov website without substantial active outreach and recruitment of targeted candidates. One example of an agency successfully doing so is the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), which uses both Pathways Programs and targeted hiring events to recruit college students and recent graduates. As of July 2021, about 40% of entry-level FDIC bank examiners for the prior six years were former FDIC interns.⁴

Moreover, federal hiring managers should proactively reach out to students who may have two-year degrees or other non-bachelor's credentials. When job seekers who do not have four-year degrees find and apply for federal positions, they are often at a disadvantage in the competitive hiring process—even if they possess the knowledge and competencies to succeed in a new role. Instead, agencies should be encouraged to use skills-based assessments to expand the talent pool for federal jobs.

3. How will anticipated employee retirements affect the ability of federal agencies to achieve their missions and serve the public?

Response

The older average age of federal employees and the high levels of retirement eligibility pose a sustained long-term risk to federal agencies. While this issue has at times been discussed in terms of a potential "retirement wave," it is perhaps better described as a

⁴ Partnership for Public Service, "How One Federal Agency Has Developed a New Pipeline for Entry-Level Talent," Dec. 2020, updated July 2021. Available at <https://ourpublicservice.org/blog/how-one-federal-agency-has-developed-a-new-pipeline-for-entry-level-talent>.

vulnerability that chronically undermines mission success. Attrition due to retirement in the absence of countervailing robust recruitment of new workers and well-executed strategic succession plans will continually erode institutional knowledge and capacity to achieve mission outcomes.

Moreover, specific agencies, occupational groups and senior ranks of federal service are more vulnerable than the government as a whole. For example, just 6.9% of full-time federal workers are under the age of 30; but in the federal IT workforce, the situation is even worse with 16 times more employees over the age of 50 than under age 30.⁵ As another example, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) noted in its FY2021 Agency Financial Report⁶ that half of its science and engineering workforce was more than 50 years old. Over 52% of the Senior Executive Service (SES) – a specialized group of federal executives selected for their leadership qualifications – is over the age of 55.

Federal agencies must put processes into place now to prepare for this. One key component of their work must be the documentation and transfer of older workers' institutional knowledge. Agencies should also track separation trends and conduct exit interviews, project future hiring needs and develop succession plans so they can begin preparing for vacancies before key employees depart, whether for retirement or other reasons.

4. The General Services Administration (GSA) is looking at significant ways to save the American taxpayer money and invest in the Lease Cost Avoidance Plan (LCAP). LCAP is GSA's plan to avoid approximately \$4 billion in lease costs through fiscal year 2023. What are some factors that federal agencies should consider when determining their future real estate footprint? What lessons can federal agencies learn from the private sector, which is facing the very same challenges?

Response

Successful planning for federal real estate needs requires integration with strategic workforce planning and consideration of the diverse customer service requirements of various agencies.

Through rapid expansion of adaptations like telework and flexible scheduling during the COVID-19 pandemic, many agencies have resoundingly demonstrated that they can maintain operations, serving their customers and achieving their mission in the face of a historic emergency. These adaptations hold great potential to reduce the federal government's real estate footprint. With increased telework for example, a greater variety

⁵ Statistics on federal employees are drawn from Office of Personnel Management FedScope data on the federal workforce unless indicated otherwise.

⁶ National Aeronautics and Space Administration, "FY2021 Agency Financial Report," Nov. 2021, 118. Retrieved from https://www.nasa.gov/sites/default/files/atoms/files/111521_fy21-afr_final.pdf.

of people can take advantage of the same space by staggering in-office presence over time. Moreover, these adaptations are here to stay – not only because they succeeded during the pandemic, but because they are now widely expected and sought out by skilled professionals whether in the public or private sector.

The public and private sectors experimented with adaptations in parallel, with the private sector sometimes turning seemingly temporary initial policies into permanent shifts in workplace arrangements and organization. One example of evidence on these changes comes from the monthly Survey of Business Uncertainty conducted in partnership by the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, the University of Chicago Booth School of Business and Stanford University. The Survey tracks the views and expectations of a diverse sample of business executives, representing firms across geography, business size and industry type. Survey respondents reported that their employees worked from home for approximately 5.5% of their working time in 2019. By contrast, respondents not only noted that work from home increased during the pandemic (for example, work from home comprised 25.3% of working time in January of 2021), but that they expect work from home to remain elevated relative to the pre-COVID-19 status quo even after the pandemic ends at 14.6% of working hours.⁷ Apart from the work with the Atlanta Fed, researchers are also fielding the Survey of Working Arrangements and Attitudes to track economy-wide employee perspectives on these issues. As of October 2021, the surveyed workers reported that their employers plan to increase the average amount of days of work from home after the pandemic to slightly over 1.3 days per week, compared to approximately 1.05 days in July of 2020.⁸

However, even as federal leased office space might be reduced, attention must be given to its design and organization. Agencies need to consider technology needs and space design to support collaboration between colleagues and ensure that remote employees can fully contribute to their team's work. Agencies handling sensitive information must prepare for the cybersecurity challenges presented by remote work and all agencies seeking to promote telework need to consider broadband access of their employees in developing workforce and space plans. Most importantly, agency office space use must reflect the needs of the constituents the agency serves. Some agency missions will always require some level of in-person customer service; given this reality, office space considerations should take into account the functions of each location and its teams and how both fit into an overall strategic workforce plan.

5. Is the USAJobs.gov website sufficient for potential interns to find available internships across the federal government? What improvements to the website would you

⁷ Blog post by David E. Altig *et. al.*, Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, "WFH Is Onstage and Here to Stay," Feb. 24, 2021. Retrieved from www.atlantafed.org/blogs/macroblog/2021/02/24/wfh-onstage-and-here-to-stay.aspx.

⁸ Working From Home Research Project, "Survey of Working Arrangements and Attitudes November 2021 Updates." Retrieved from https://wfhresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/WFHResearch_updates_November2021.pdf.

recommend?

Response

While we have seen continued improvements to the USAJobs.gov website, there is still more work to be done to make it easier for internship seekers to use. The Partnership supports creating a federal internship and fellowship database so that applicants can easily understand the full scope of opportunities the government makes possible, easily filter opportunities by their interests and background and plan the timing of their applications before specific positions open. To increase the use of internships as a recruitment tool for federal employment, the Partnership also supports creating a centralized resource where federal agencies can find information on interns and fellows eligible for conversion to competitive employment. Moreover, USAJobs.gov should be improved for accessibility through varied devices, including mobile phones.

6. Why has the federal government struggled to place people of color and women in leadership positions, and how can the federal government overcome these barriers?

Response

As mentioned in the hearing, diversity challenges in the federal workforce increase at higher echelons of service. Only 36.1% of career members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) are female, and only 23% of the career SES are people of color. Whether in government or in society overall, the legacies of past decisions are not simply gone; dismantling them takes sustained leadership and active choices to promote the voices of those previously shut out from educational, work and cultural opportunities.

People who have reached the highest levels of government have done so with robust support networks and dedicated mentors. For people in communities that have lacked these resources, it may be difficult to even imagine a career as a leader in the private sector or government, never mind getting the sustained support needed to accomplish such a vision. For this reason, the Partnership strongly advocates for a long-term focus on workforce diversity through targeted recruiting, hiring, training and development opportunities for groups with lower-than-expected participation rates in federal occupations.

The Partnership also urges continued investment in leadership development. Leaders who recognize and respond to the unique challenges and obstacles diverse communities face are better able to ensure that our government reflects and draws upon the best available talent and ideas from across the nation and equip their teams with needed tools to root out and eliminate bias that may exist in performance management and professional development systems.

7. The Partnership has published several reports on the federal hiring process. Why does it take the federal government twice as long as the private sector to hire employees? Please describe the impact this timeline has on government operations and any recommendations you have for shortening the federal government's time-to-hire.

Response

In some instances, the hiring process is slowed down by background checks, mandatory medical exams and security clearances. In other cases, bottlenecks and poor communication between hiring managers and HR lead to delays. Regardless of the cause, an extended hiring process harms the federal government's reputation as an employer, discouraging future applicants. It also means that federal agencies lose out on their investment in the hiring process when promising candidates take other positions after getting discouraged by the federal government's hiring delays.

While a number of suggestions listed in previous answers would reduce the time-to-hire for the federal government, several key ideas must be emphasized. Federal agencies will best succeed when they identify talent needs ahead of time; conduct proactive, targeted recruiting; and draw on the population of candidates already vetted through internships and fellowships, or through job consideration processes carried out by other agencies. One example the Partnership highlights in its "A Time for Talent" report is the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) sophisticated attrition model that helps the agency understand when it should begin to recruit new talent for specific occupations, significantly reducing the amount of time between when a position opens and when it is filled. The Partnership also encourages agencies to develop and implement talent pipeline dashboards that provide close to real-time data on hiring trends and enable users to make informed decisions, such as the dashboard created by the Air Force. As a final example, the Partnership recommends maintaining some of the innovations pioneered during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a remote onboarding environment, some employees have been permitted to start work in a limited capacity before background procedures were completed, such as taking a drug test or providing fingerprints. This approach by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) allowed the agency to drop its average time-to-hire from 94 days to just 10 to 12 days in the midst of the pandemic.⁹

⁹ Partnership for Public Service, "A Time for Talent: Improving Federal Recruiting and Hiring," Aug. 2020. Available at <https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/A-Time-for-Talent.pdf>.