

The Young and the Restless

There are proven ways to recruit and retain the emerging generation. Most states and localities don't seem to know about them.

By ZACH PATTON

Two years ago, the American workforce passed a major milestone. A majority of the nation's workers now come from Generation X, born between 1965 and 1977, or Generation Y, born between 1978 and 1990. This shouldn't come as a shock to many people — baby boomers can't stay on the job forever — but for many, it takes some getting used to. Nevertheless, it's reality.

Except in state and local government. There, it's a very different scene. The average age of local managers has actually risen dramatically over the past several years. In 1971, 45 percent of local government managers were in their thirties, according to the International City/County Management Association. By 2000, only 16 percent were. Thirty-five years ago, 26 percent of managers were under 30, but by the turn of this century, only 2 percent were. The story at the state level is similar.

It's not that older government employees are refusing to leave their desks. Quite the opposite. States and localities are starting to lose experienced workers by the droves. But they aren't finding young people to fill the jobs the way private companies are. Most governments are concerned about this to one extent or another; many are scrambling to draft succession plans to determine their needs a decade or two down the road. But even the best succession planning efforts face one major dilemma: Boomer retirements leave an enormous gap to be filled, but will younger people, especially those in Generation Y, even want to fill it? How do governments recruit them, and then how do they keep them? This is the problem that the most sophisticated workforce specialists are currently focused on. And it's a very frustrating problem: A series of talks I recently conducted with a sampling of younger workers in both state and local agencies made clear just how complex the problem is.

For example, I had a long conversation with a young man I will call Mike Taylor. He works as a mid-level manager for the state of Tennessee. In his early thirties, Mike already has held a number of different positions at the state and local level, focusing on fiscal analysis. He has liked them all, more or less. But he's thinking of leaving. "I'd get into a job, learn it and get bored," he says. "When you're working for the government, it's easy to start thinking, 'I know this stuff. It isn't going to change. I need a new challenge.'"

In many ways, Mike Taylor sounds like a match for the Gen X-Y stereotype. Both cohorts are widely viewed by their management elders as being impatient, demanding, tech-addicted, narcissistic and needy. Some of that may be true of Taylor. But he's not selfish, or lazy or flippant. He's not a slacker. It's not even that he doesn't like government work. "I feel like I need something new and exciting potentially happening every couple months," he says.

All the academic experts who study these issues say Taylor is typical of his contemporaries. "I've definitely seen a shift in my students in recent years," says Paul Light, a professor at New York University's Wagner School of Public Service. "They're more interested in jobs that have significant opportunities for impact as well as skill development and personal growth. In the 1970s, people were looking for a 30-year career that would lead to stable retirement. Today, there's very little stated interest in spending 30 years in any one organization. Gen Y workers expect to shift jobs often, and they look forward to it."

TIME AND FEEDBACK

Jen Parks, a 31-year-old social worker who does substance abuse training for the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, is a little different from Mike Taylor. She feels fulfilled by her job in state government. But she worries that it will somehow come to define her, and she doesn't want that. She says she needs time for hiking, bicycling, making pottery and volunteering. "I see some other people working crazy hours," Parks says, "but I've just very purposefully decided to avoid that. I'm not going to let myself get consumed by my job."

Younger workers are looking foremost for flexibility, says Sally Selden, who teaches management at Lynchburg College in Virginia and is a nationally respected workforce planning scholar. Selden says agencies that offer flexible schedules, where an employee can work longer hours most of the week in exchange for Fridays off, are much more attractive to younger workers. "They enjoy their time. Having the option of flexibility — even if they don't use it — is a very, very attractive tool for young people." Once managers begin to understand just how vital time is to Generation Y, they have a much better chance to compete for talent.

If that were the only problem, the public workforce shortage, as serious as it is, might be amenable to some relatively painless solutions. But it's not that simple. The newest generation of workers wants more than time to explore personal interests. In many cases, they want immediate influence and access to decision making. "You need to get them on board, up to speed and owning some valuable task quickly," says Bruce Tulgan, the author of several books on managing younger workers and an expert on the Gen X and Gen Y

workforce. "They think short-term and transactional. 'What do you have for me today? Tomorrow? Next week?' "

Tulgan attributes some of that need for constant feedback to the child-rearing methods of 20 years ago. Anybody who raised a child in the mid-1980s — or was one — knows how fashionable the concept of self-esteem was both in parenting and elementary education. Today's entry-level workers grew up with T-ball games where nobody was allowed to strike out. In Tulgan's view, this has helped many of today's young people feel good about themselves. But it has also led them to want praise from others — and reassurance that they're having an impact.

One way to offer that reassurance is to adopt a merit-based system for salaries and promotions. But this is something state and local governments have been extremely slow to do, and it is costing them. Selden, in fact, declares flatly that this is the most important thing governments need to change if they want to attract young people. "The biggest mistake they can make," she says, "is not providing performance-based pay. Younger people have come up through very competitive output-based programs. They have grown accustomed to rewards and pats on the back."

"I'm not interested in being an Analyst 1, and then an Analyst 2, and then the special assistant to the deputy director," says Tanisha Briley, who is 28 and is a management analyst for the city of Davenport, Iowa. "I just want to know that I'm valued and recognized. My generation is excited and committed, but we want to get started now. If you can't do that for us, then that's what's going to continue to turn young people away from government."

At the moment, private consulting groups and even nonprofits seem to have a better handle on the desire for feedback than government agencies do. Public-sector recruiters say this comes up when they compete with the private sector for young talent. Private firms, of course, can usually pay salaries much higher than government wages. Nonprofits can't do that, but frequently they offer focused work with a specific, well-defined mission — and benchmarks that make it possible for a new recruit to see what he or she is actually accomplishing. State and local governments haven't done very well at offering similar enticements.

But there may be more to it than that. Cuong Nguyen, a 28-year-old scheduling director for the borough president of Manhattan, thinks governments don't even do very well at promoting the advantages they possess. Born in Vietnam but raised mostly in California, Nguyen became interested in government work after a Peace Corps assignment in Honduras, then came back to the states and got a master's degree in public administration at NYU. He was an easy sell for the city — he knew he wanted to work there. But if he hadn't actively sought a job in local government, Nguyen says he might never have even heard about jobs that were available

in the field. "I think that's really the area where governments could improve," he says. "They're really lacking in areas like HR and recruiting. A lot of folks don't know how to get connected. And if you're in school, just weighing your options, you would never even think about government."

Some of the steps that would improve public-sector recruiting are actually rather simple. Market research shows that Generation Y spends an average of 12.2 hours per week online — 28 percent more even than Gen X. And the first place Gen Y goes to in seeking out employment is the Web. But many of the Web sites run by governments are simply lists of available jobs with links to applications. There's no effort to discuss why someone might wish to work for the government — or why the government needs them. "If you want people to come work for you, you need to let them know you want them," says Selden. "If you're only being reactive and not proactive, you're not going to get the workers you want. They need to feel like they're being pursued."

There are some striking examples of governments that seem to be doing it right. Visitors to the Vermont state hiring site first see a banner reading, "Great jobs — an even greater purpose... When you work for the State of Vermont, you and your work matter... You are contributing to the betterment of the people, places and traditions of Vermont." But the site also emphasizes how a public job will help in professional development, with language expressly geared toward Gen Y. The jobs site talks about challenges and personal growth, and promises help "finding your path." It touts government as a "stepping stone" where you can gain significant experience early in your career before moving on.

There's another recruitment example for states and localities that's blunter, more aggressive and extremely effective: the military. Their entire marketing strategy is built on the idea that if you join as a young person, the armed forces will shape you into the person you want to be. As Bruce Tulgan puts it, "They say, 'Come work for us, and we will be the best managers in the world for you. We'll coach you and train you and make you into someone great.' " It's simplistic, but it seems to be the kind of message that resonates with Gen Y in civilian as well as military life.

IMAGE PROBLEM

Beyond recruiting strategies, of course, there's the much larger question of image. "Local government isn't really seen as sexy among people of my generation," says Briley, the Davenport management analyst. "I can't imagine a 20-year-old in college right now saying, 'I can't wait to be a sanitation engineer.' "

Briley didn't grow up dreaming of sanitation work, but somehow she did end up choosing local government for a career. She attributes that in part to her

childhood in a housing project in Cleveland. "We were very much dependent on public services of all sorts," she says. "That's probably the thing that led me to where I am now."

Initially, Briley wanted something different: a business career where she could make a lot of money. "I fell in love with the women I saw walking around downtown, in their power suits and tennis shoes, carrying their briefcases. They seemed to have a purpose. They seemed so important." A year of study in Africa changed her mind. "I realized those were all the same issues people were struggling with in the neighborhood where I grew up," she says. Even so, she makes essentially the same criticism of public service recruiting that Cuong Nguyen does: If she hadn't been looking for a job in government already, it's unlikely she would have been attracted.

Fairly or not, Gen X and Gen Y continue to perceive government as a bureaucracy mired in paperwork, where new employees won't be able to make a difference until they've put in their time and moved up through the ranks. In many cases, the fact is that states and localities offer a better shot at instant impact than the private sector. But they don't communicate that. As Briley says, "local government has not done a good job of explaining what it does."

Part of the perception that governments aren't a place for social impact is rooted in the notion that governments are by their very nature inefficient, ineffectual and wasteful — an idea that has been drilled into Gen Y members for their entire lives. "The respect for the institution of government is so low," says Selden. "You've heard all the negative rhetoric, so why would you ever work there? There has to be a general shift in perspective, to see that government's not bad. You need for government to be perceived as worth your intellectual energy."

If any public employee would seem a likely counterpoint to the restlessness of the younger generation, it's Klint Johnson, in Maricopa County, Arizona. With a father in the military, Johnson attended 13 schools before he went to college. He doesn't need any convincing that stability is valuable. And as a 32-year-old fiscal policy analyst for the county, with a wife and a seven-month-old daughter, Johnson is quite a bit more career-oriented than many people his age. He even thinks seriously about his retirement package — something few workers in his cohort seem to do, either in the private or public sector.

Perhaps ironically, though, it's the retirement issue that is giving Johnson concerns about being locked into a government job for the rest of his career. In particular, Johnson worries about the defined-benefit programs that Maricopa, like most public entities, still offers its employees. With its written guarantees of fixed retirement income, one might expect a defined-benefit system to provide a form of reassurance. But after watching problems nationwide with underfunded pensions, and with the boomer retirement all

but certain to exacerbate those problems, Johnson says he would happily opt out of his retirement system if he were allowed. He says he's beginning to view his pension the same way he views Social Security — that is, with fear that he'll never see it.

So, as much as Johnson values stability, he also wonders if betting too much of the future on one public employer might be a mistake. "Defined-benefit programs are designed to reward only those with lengthy stays within a particular political geography," Johnson says. "These programs discourage mobility within the workforce. My peers in the private sector have a lot more flexibility to move around."

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