Public Service Workforce Disrupted

Evidence for improving public service as a career of choice around the world
Answering Tomorrow’s Questions Today

The World Government Summit is a global platform dedicated to shaping the future of governments worldwide. Each year, the Summit sets the agenda for the next generation of governments with a focus on how they can harness innovation and technology to solve universal challenges facing humanity.

The World Government Summit is a knowledge exchange center at the intersection of government, futurism, technology, and innovation. It functions as a thought leadership platform and networking hub for policymakers, experts and pioneers in human development.

The Summit is a gateway to the future as it functions as the stage for analysis of future trends, concerns, and opportunities facing humanity. It is also an arena to showcase innovations, best practice, and smart solutions to inspire creativity to tackle these future challenges.
Three Critical Areas for Interventions Emerged to Improve Government as a Career of Choice:

1. Employer Brand
2. Employee Experience
3. Future Skills
Executive Summary

Global public services are at a pivotal moment. The same agencies and departments that are delivering on the public mission of preventing, eradicating, and recovering from the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, have also been under long-term talent stress. Incremental approaches to improving government as an employer cannot withhold the immediate pressures of the pandemic. What comes after the pandemic will be a crucial opportunity for fast-tracking innovations in human capital. That includes building on the innovations arising from working during a crisis, capitalizing on a renewed interest in public service, and anticipating austerity following the economic downturn. These all make every human resource decision that much more important.

Accenture’s research comes at a very timely moment to understand the current experience of the public sector workforce. Our interview and research program covered all levels of seniority, across six countries, three levels of government, and multiple sub-industries. We have also compared public service with for-profit industries. At a high level, we found that public service was under stress: public service was recommended the least to peers of all sixteen industries evaluated. Many executives pointed to a lack of investment in people development and technologies.

Three critical areas for interventions emerged to improve government as a career of choice, including: employer brand, employee experience, and future skills.

Focusing on the theme of employer brand, our surveys found that working in a ‘Purpose’ industry (the prospect of doing meaningful work that makes a positive difference to individuals/the community) differentiates public sector employment for job seekers. And yet, public service workers today are not feeling connected to the sense of mission which attracted them to the work in the first place. Without an understanding of their unique employer brand, public sector agencies will find it even harder to attract talent in high-demand critical skill areas.

There are some clear areas for improvement of the employee experience in public service. These include more flexible work arrangements, including remote work, and personalized career paths. The pandemic lockdowns dislodged many of the traditional barriers to flexible working, with remote work enabled by digital technologies becoming the default. The next step in improving employee experiences is to actively listen to workers’ feedback, formalize coaching experiences, and co-create an individualized worker experience in alignment with workers’ goals.

Finally, governments sense that a major skills disruption is underway. In our survey, Chief Human Resources Officers (CHROs) identified “Reskilling the Workforce” as the number one priority for the next three years. Intelligent technologies are already beginning to automate and augment public sector employees’ tasks to make meeting the public mission more effective and efficient. Not all jobs will be affected evenly though, so public sector leaders need to start planning now for investments in digitization, automation, and most importantly, training.

Now is the moment for bold transformation of public sector employment. In addition to long-standing labor force pressures, the very dynamic of employee-employer relations has also changed. In sharing this report, we hope that government employers around the world can set their priorities based upon this evidence and emulate the approaches of more mature organizations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMPROVEMENT AREA</th>
<th>PRIORITY INITIATIVES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employer Brand</td>
<td>• Collect and/or review organizational data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Review organizations’ values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Gap analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Messaging and communication plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Experience</td>
<td>• Enhance work flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Listen to workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mentorship and coaching arrangements and programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Co-create and design the experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Skills</td>
<td>• Start with data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Chart an investment path</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Emphasize training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Public Sector Workforce of Today</td>
<td>07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVID-19 Response – Employer Adaptations, Challenges, and Opportunities</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings and Recommendations</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Employer Brand</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings: Brand Centered on Purpose</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies for Change</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Employee Experience</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings: Flexibility and Personalization</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies for Change</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. Future Skills</strong></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings: Preparing for High-impact Work</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies for Change</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Sector Workforce of the Future</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1: Summary of Recommendations</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 2: About the Research</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Authors</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About Accenture Research</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citations</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

The need to reform public sector employment has never been more important. As a pandemic rages around the world, public servants are trying to meet their mission with limited tools and low job satisfaction for this most critical work. Accenture conducted research during the pandemic to measure an industry under stress – and to find out where it can make the most impactful changes.

This paper begins with describing the complexity of the global public service workforce today and the long-standing pressures on employers. Section Two explores “who” is being discussed when we refer to public sector employment. Next, Section Three lays out the unique circumstances likely to follow from the pandemic, drawing upon trends from previous national emergencies. Section Four introduces our research agenda findings from two large cross-country surveys conducted in September 2020, highlights findings, and ends with strategies needed for change. The format repeats across the three focal areas that emerged: Employer Brand, Employee Experience, and Future Skills. Section Five concludes with our insights on what a government workforce of the future will look like, and the predicted fundamental changes in the roles of public sector employees in the medium-term future.

1. Public Sector is broadly defined, and includes all government and quasi-government entities, those that are chartered by public decree, and those delivering service in the public interest.
The global public sector workforce is varied across functions and roles, across countries, and between levels of government. There is little research literature about the totality of public sector employment owing to the difficulty of standardized data collection across the industry. Key factors such as the levels and segments, size of a country and even mode of government centralization affects the public sector workforce. One common thread is serving the public good as funded by the state, including missions related to health, defense, safety, and education. Many of these government employers also share common pressures related to hiring and retaining talent: increasing citizen demands, declining trust in government, the limitations of CHROs, and key gaps in mission-critical skills. While the COVID-19 pandemic has shocked public sector agencies in novel ways, the pandemic revealed many longer-term sources of stress on public sector employers.

Wide range of roles and responsibilities

The role of a public servant can vary greatly depending on the sector of government they work for, as well as the country and the type of bureaucratic system in place. While some are elected or appointed by political parties, the vast majority of government workers are hired on a merit basis independent of political transitions or parties. Roles include informing policymaking for the incumbent government, providing government services to citizens, and developing internal digital capabilities to meet evolving trends at the intersection of government and technology.

In countries with decentralized/multi-government systems, public servants may be employed by either the federal, regional, or local (city) government. For example, government employees in the United States of America range from an active-duty service member with the Department of Defense to an unemployment claims specialist for the State of Michigan, to a firefighter in the City of Portland. In countries such as Germany, Canada, and India, public servants employed by federal governments often focus on issues such as diplomacy and national defense, while those in state or local governments frequently administer education, policing, and employment policies.

Size of government workforce

When evaluating public sector employment as a percentage of total employment, several clear trends stand out. General government employment across OECD countries has remained relatively stable at approximately 18%, with no significant change between 2007 and 2018. Nordic countries such as Denmark, Norway and Sweden have reported the highest public sector employment levels at nearly 30%, while the two Asian countries with consistent OECD data (Japan and South Korea) pale in contrast at 6% and 7.6% respectively (OECD, 2019). Non-OECD countries in Asia demonstrate similarly low levels of public sector employment. Singapore’s public sector workforce comprises only 3.9% of total employment, or 6.3% of total resident employment (Singapore Statistics, 2021).

Furthermore, the growing trend of a blended contractor workforce has seen its popularity increasing within the public sector, resulting in a range of public sector employment types. Analysis of the true size of the US government has shown that while total federal employment stood at nearly 11 million in 2020, outsourced federal contracts and grants accounted for over 6.8 million jobs (Brookings, 2020). In contrast, there were only 2.2 million full-time federal employees. More than 70% of the federal workforce currently serves in defense and security agencies like the Department of Defense, the intelligence community agencies, and NASA (Brookings, 2020).

Persistent challenges and pressures on public service employers

As governments scale in size and complexity, the growth of the public sector has faced its fair share of challenges. The ongoing pandemic has only further intensified several of these, resulting in pain points for public service employers to examine and tackle in-depth.
Increasing citizen demands

Governments will reach more citizens with higher levels of expectations for quality services. Accenture’s “Living Government” global report found that “85% of citizens expect the same or higher standard of quality from government services as they do from commercial organizations” (Accenture, 2019). Termed “liquid expectations,” this increase in expected quality of service from governments has created a need for them to upgrade what they offer citizens. These demands can range from welfare assistance enrollment to healthcare portals for the aged, and from job search assistance to pension benefits.

To ensure proper functioning, governments must be prepared to meet or even predict citizens’ expectations. An aging global workforce also means that the number of citizens requiring government services related to healthcare and retirement benefits will greatly increase, imposing a heavier strain on governments already racing to meet existing citizen demand (Meister, 2005). As a corollary, governments must invest in hiring public servants with customer service skill sets, and in training current public servants to ensure they are ready to meet rising expectations from their citizens of every generation.

Longer-term declining trust in government

Alongside increasing demand for services is a long-term decline of trust in government overall. An OECD survey in 2019 found that among member countries, only 45% of citizens stated that they trusted their elected government. In comparison, a majority of citizens trusted public services in their country (healthcare – 69%, local police – 77%, education system – 67%) (OECD, 2019). Similarly, the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer measured before the pandemic found that 80% of citizens in democracies distrust their government (Edelman, 2018). The latest edition of the annual British Social Attitudes Survey found that in 2019 only 15% of respondents said they trust the government either “most of the time” or “just about always,” which the pollsters described as the lowest level recorded in more than 40 years (Politico, 2020).

The growing distrust in elected government has several implications for public service employers. As the public service conducts research, implements, and maintains the government of the day’s policies, high distrust within the citizenry can result in a weaker appeal for potential employees deciding on a public service career. OECD research
has also shown that high trust in government results in a higher level of compliance with government policies, and vice versa (OECD, 2019). High-caliber workers may not view public service as an attractive career option, if they do not believe in the elected government’s ability to craft and propose policies.

**Restricted CHROs**

The public sector workforce is also expected to be increasingly dynamic and agile, requiring government CHROs to be equipped with sufficient resources to meet those challenges. Past understandings of a CHRO’s roles and responsibilities within the public sector were often limited to employee recruitment, benefits, compensation, and employee satisfaction. A recent Harvard Business Review report highlights the need for CEOs and fellow C-suite executives to include the CHRO in organizational decision-making at the highest levels (HBR, 2015). This could be expanded to cover missed opportunities in predicting outcomes, diagnosing problems, and prescribing actions to add value. In the public sector, the enactment of policies by a sitting government requires employees with the right skillsets to ensure smooth implementation and rollout. A Gartner report also calls for CHROs to have a breadth of experience that goes beyond HR (Gartner, n.d.). Increasingly, CHROs are expected to play a vital role in their company’s enterprise development and business results. Governments must ensure that their CHROs are equipped with the appropriate financial resources and industry-relevant knowledge to be ready to tackle any further challenges.

**Mission-critical skill gaps**

There is intense competition for technical talent across all industries and geographies. A shortage of cybersecurity talent is one area of particular concern owing to the need to defend against increasingly sophisticated threats. According to research by the Information Systems Security Association (ISSA), 70% of its members believe their organization has been impacted by the global cybersecurity skills shortage. Distressingly, 45% of those surveyed believe the cybersecurity skills shortage (and its impact) have become worse over the past few years (only 7% believe things have improved) (ESG, 2020). A global shortage of cybersecurity talent means that every organization must compete to attract and retain talent at a higher caliber than other roles (with potentially dire consequences for failing to do so).

Public sector employers face challenges in recruiting employees with in-demand skillsets, resulting in mission-critical skill gaps in the workforce. An OECD report has highlighted the two main challenges associated with mission-critical skill gaps: the need to identify and predict the skillsets required for the future of government, and the means by which governments can fill the gaps through talent attraction, recruitment and development (OECD, n.d.). Due to organizational and legislative restrictions, government employers do not have all the tools at the disposal of for-profit organizations to attract and retain the best talent.

A 2019 US Government Accountability Office (GAO) report underscored the impact of the talent gap on the US federal government. The report identified skills gaps within the government in the fields of science, technology, engineering, mathematics, cybersecurity, and acquisitions. A lack of employees with these skillsets may result in the delay or even inability on the part of governments to introduce public services relating to, among others, healthcare, social welfare, and defense. According to the GAO report, the delayed or failed introduction of public services may be exacerbated by an aging workforce and the rapidly changing demand for government services, resulting in the loss of experienced employees with specialized skillsets (GAO, 2019).

**Conclusion**

As long-standing pressures mount on the public sector, public sector employers must respond to simultaneous competing pressures to adapt. The public sector workforce is extremely diversified and varied across and even within countries, requiring employers to stay abreast of the latest technology and demographic trends while working with limited resources. As the coronavirus pandemic rages on, the workforce faces an immediate need for organizational reform to ensure its ability to recruit and retain the necessary talent to complete its mission.
COVID-19 Response – Employer Adaptations, Challenges, and Opportunities

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an immediately disruptive force for governments around the world as they respond to protect their workers, complete their increasingly important public mission, and adjust to new ways of working. Some of the changes from the pandemic have accelerated workforce trends that had been progressing slowly for years, including moves towards remote work and a focus on the individual employee. We may also see other historical pressures return soon after the worst of the pandemic subsides, including increased interest in public service and potential for government austerity measures. In response to all these challenges and adaptations, government employers must refocus their attention on their employees, where hiring and job realignment decisions become even more important.

Innovative workforce adaptations

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the public sector workforce has been operating in modern ways—embracing remote work, adopting emergency policies with agility, and contending with unprecedented demand for citizen-facing services. An OECD report details how various countries have normalized new working arrangements. In Italy, for example, teleworking is now the default and employees no longer require formal authorization to work from home. Additionally, the reskilling of Public Service Labor has taken on a new urgency. Australia is providing reskilling opportunities for public servants to help them carry out crisis-related work. In Morocco, government services were digitalized to limit COVID-19 transmissions via physical documents. It’s also become normal for public sector employers to check in on employee experiences and welfare. An OECD report notes that employee surveys are being conducted in Latvia to assess the wellbeing of public servants, including causes of anxiety and their expectations of the government and their management. The surveys aim to offer targeted psychological help to public servants and have garnered more than 3,000 responses from more than 90 institutions (OECD, 2020). Overall, the pandemic has challenged common assumptions for rigid and dated workforce policies.

Example: UK child services

How do social workers help children and families during a lockdown? In the UK, they’ve undertaken a major shift in service delivery in order to do just that. Smaller changes include check-in visits now occurring over the phone. Larger shifts include giving practitioners credit cards in order to purchase essential items for the families they serve. Social workers have championed these changes as enabling them to better serve families. As one practitioner states, these shifts have “helped relationships – the backbone of children’s social care – develop. During the first lockdown, social workers revealed that existing strong relationships flourished, aided by the sudden use of new technologies to communicate and a more flexible approach to working together.” UK social workers have been empowered through innovative ways of working to champion relationships and boost collaboration to better serve their constituents.
Global trust in government is at an all-time high: Edelman reported that between January 2020 and May 2020, “government trust surged 11 points to an all-time high of 65%, making it the most trusted institution for the first time in the study’s 20-year history” (Edelman, 2020)
Surging interest in government employment

The pandemic is a global disaster, with public service agencies at the forefront of fighting the deadly virus. As a result, global trust in government is at an all-time high: Edelman reported that between January 2020 and May 2020, "government trust surged 11 points to an all-time high of 65%, making it the most trusted institution for the first time in the study's 20-year history" (Edelman, 2020). While there is some variation across the eleven countries where the sentiment was measured, in six of the eleven markets measured, there was a double-digit rise in government trust. Even where national government lacked trust, there was a rise in trust in the local government.

After national disasters, such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11, interest in public service employment surged. We are already seeing evidence of this trend in public health. In what is being dubbed “the Dr. Anthony Fauci Effect,” the American Medical Association has found that applications to medical professions in the US were up 18% in 2020 (American Medical Association, 2020). Additionally, many of the world’s most serious and imminent challenges – such as climate change and the fourth industrial revolution – spark enormous excitement from young people. Government employers have an opportunity to capitalize on this renewed interest to capture talent that would not have originally been interested in public sector employment. Preparing for this likely surge in applications should be on every government’s radar.

Anticipating austerity

Government agencies around the world should prepare for an austerity scenario, with budget cuts impacting existing and future labor force recruitment. We can learn some lessons by looking at how governments responded as employers to the last recession in 2008. From March 2008 to March 2018, the number of US government jobs declined by 93,000 to 19.6 million, a 0.5% decline, according to US Census Bureau statistics from the Annual Survey of Public Employment & Payroll (US Census Bureau, 2019). Although there was a smaller fall in employment in the public sector compared with private industry, the rebound of the public sector is taking longer than it did for the private sector. The decline in government employment fell sharply in the 2011–12 period, when some countries were at the height of austerity reductions. For instance, Greece and the UK saw 7% and 4.7% reductions in general government employment respectively (OECD, 2017). In some countries following that same pattern, general government employment growth recovered by 2014–15.

There’s already evidence of public sector labor cuts related to COVID–19. For example, an IMF report highlighted several countries considering wage cuts for public service employees in bids to reduce expenditures during the pandemic. Paraguay and Uruguay have announced cuts to public service employees with higher wages, while San Marino announced a reduction in public sector pay to help finance extra spending in the health sector (IMF, 2020). The South African government won a court-case in December over its refusal to adhere to promised wage increases for its civil servants, citing its inability to pay due to the pandemic (Reuters, 2020). Furthermore, unemployment among US public sector workers rose from 1.8% in September 2019 to 4.1% in September 2020 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics).

These measures have extended to state and local governments. For instance, India’s Karnataka state government has instituted a hiring freeze since July 2020 as it seeks to financially recover from the pandemic (India Times, 2021). Similarly, the provincial government of Alberta, Canada announced an extended wage freeze for all non–union public service employees until April 2021 (CBC, 2021). A survey from the National League of Cities shows 32% of US cities will have to furlough or lay off state employees, while 41% have planned or enacted hiring freezes due to the pandemic (NLC, 2020). With the coronavirus pandemic yet to be contained globally, continued budget cuts for the public sector look to be a significant problem facing public service employers in the near future.

Conclusion

The COVID–19 pandemic has stress–tested the current thinking about talent within government and presented opportunities for reforms to attract the next generation, capitalizing on trends seen in previous national emergencies. Taken together, these reforms and pressures will change the way citizens serve in government, whether government employers are ready or not. Our research was conducted during this pivotal time of change and seeks to answer how government employers can respond to this combination of pressures.
Findings and Recommendations

Accenture developed a research agenda to test our hypotheses on what attracts people to work for a government organization. It’s a critical time to ask this question, as we need the very best talent working on public missions. The two new global surveys, “Public Service as a Career of Choice” and “Care to do Better,” were both fielded in September 2020 at a time of heightened institutional stress and public fatigue due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Together, the surveys covered six countries (Australia, Germany, Japan, Singapore, the UK, and the US) and included respondents at multiple levels of seniority, different age groups, three levels of government centralization, and various government sub-industries.

Previous studies on talent in public services have often focused inwardly within the government space, including perspectives only from government leaders or current employees. Our “Public Service as a Career of Choice” study paints a fuller picture, because it includes individuals who have worked in public services and left, those considering it, and those who have never considered a career in public services. In parallel, we ran a “Care to do Better” survey focused on employee welfare during the pandemic. This allows us to compare the public sector respondents with results from fourteen other industries, to help us to examine which attributes are unique to public service and which are broader.
At a high level, a common thread was that the pandemic is an opportunity to rewrite expectations for public sector employee–employer relationships. Government employees are not satisfied with the current dynamic, and there’s a risk that they will not complete their important missions. Only 51% of public sector employees described their employer as a great place to work, compared to a global cross-industry average of 68%. Government is the lowest recommended industry by employees: only 59% of employees would recommend their employer to a friend (compared to a 69% global average across all industries).

Public sector employment ranks low in most dimensions of quality of life we studied. We measured six dimensions (emotional, relational, physical, financial, purposeful, employable) across fourteen global industries. Compared to all fourteen global industries that participated in the survey, public service employees rank their employers in the bottom quarter for every dimension. This low ranking means that government is or will soon be losing the war for talent in key critical skill areas.

Government is the lowest recommended industry by employees: only 59% of employees would recommend their employer to a friend (the cross-industry average is 69%).
Accenture measured 14 industries of what motivates people in the workplace along six dimensions. Public Service ranked low in every dimension across industry peers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional &amp; Mental</td>
<td>Feeling positive emotions and maintaining mental wellness</td>
<td>Public Service</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Oil &amp; Gas</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Feeling a strong sense of belonging and inclusion; having many strong personal relationships</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Being in good physical health with a lack of stress</td>
<td>Logistics</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>High Tech</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Being financially secure without undue economic stress or worry and having equitable opportunity for future stability and advancement</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Banking</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposeful</td>
<td>Feeling that one makes a positive difference to the world and that life has meaning and a greater sense of purpose beyond oneself</td>
<td>Consumer Goods</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employable</td>
<td>Having marketable in-demand capabilities and skills to obtain good jobs and advance in career</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Aerospace</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“How would you rate how well your employer has contributed to your overall quality of life as a human being on the following dimensions?” SUMMARY OF MEANS (7=Significantly better off, 1= Significantly worse off)
One underlying shift is the growing desire for employers to holistically address a worker’s needs, leaving them “net better off” than before they started the job. 57% of non-senior public sector employees say their employer is responsible for helping them meet fundamental human needs through work. In contrast, only 28% of public sector leadership feel the same way. This reflects a disconnect, with leadership not tuned into the needs of employees in lower ranks. It’s a foundational change in the ways of working that may leave more public sector employees dissatisfied. Just 43% of non-manager public sector employees believe that their potential is being fully realized at work.

Traditional ways of working have been dislodged by the pandemic. The disruption of COVID-19 has resulted in employee growth: 75% of public sector employees have taken on new tasks, 75% have learned new skills, 84% agree that work has become more digital, and 59% have increased their productivity. But the pandemic has also increased day-to-day pressures on public sector workers. Public sector employees report increased stress (52%), worse work–life balance (42%), limited collaboration (55%), and decreased motivation (35%). These negative effects are particularly pronounced in the public health, and borders and customs segments.

One reason for mismatched expectations may be a short-sightedness when employers make investments in the organization. 72% of government CHROs agree that their organization’s agility is constrained by lack of investment in people, technology, and processes. This large number may be indicative of a larger lag in public sector agencies.

The remainder of this section focuses on which strategic initiatives merit greater investment, based upon the trends and data revealed. Taken together, our research indicates that, in order to anticipate the likely swell of interest in public service careers following COVID-19, government employers must soon: deepen their mission and purpose with impact, reinvent the employee value proposition, and enable the workforce with future skills.
At a high level, public sector organizations should consider the following government-wide policies to increase the attractiveness of working in government after the pandemic is over:

- Developing a differentiated employer brand at all levels of government and agencies, so employees can decide which level of government they wish to serve.
- Measuring and publishing employee experience indicators, to increase transparency for both leadership and those looking to join.
- Soliciting input and support for future workforce projections, given current trends in disruptive technology and an aging workforce.

At an organizational level, securing top talent in government is essential to fulfilling the public mission and delivering services critical to citizens’ livelihoods. To successfully fill critical skills gaps, and retain top performers, employers must approach the employee lifecycle holistically. This starts with recruitment marketing and advertising before the candidate even enters the organization, and extends throughout the employee’s experience with the organization, right through to the exit or retirement interview. As demonstrated by our research, employers must invest in the whole employee experience, by extending the flexible/remote working options that the pandemic opened up, and taking career personalization seriously. Equipping employees with skills, by implementing learning programs and planning for technology disruptions, is important for government employers to maintain a high-performing workforce.

Employer brand

In every industry, an organization’s reputation is important for attracting and retaining talent. There are clear consequences for having a poor reputation. Research by Harvard Business Review found that having a bad reputation increases an organization’s hiring costs by at least 10%. The study found that the top three factors that contribute most to a bad employer reputation are concerns about job security, dysfunctional teams, and poor leadership. The top three factors associated with a good reputation as an employer are stability, opportunities for career growth, and the ability to work with a top-notch team (HBR, 2016). Organizations with poor reputations are paying a premium to overcome them and attract talent.

To understand government work dissatisfaction, we must evaluate the unique brand proposition that working in government has to offer. Employer branding is how organizations market themselves to desired job seekers and defines how they communicate to employees. Just like how a corporate brand differentiates a product or service to customers to build loyalty, an employer brand defines an organization’s reputation or market perception as an employer. An organization’s employer brand affects the recruitment of new talent, as well as the retention and engagement of current employees.

The central component of an employer brand is the employee value proposition (EVP), which is essentially the employer’s promise to both current and potential employees. The EVP reflects what an organization uniquely offers employees in exchange for their experience, talents, contacts, and skills. An EVP embodies the essence of the organization, including how it’s unique and what it stands for.

Research has measured EVP drivers for specific geographies and industries over many years. For all industries and geographies, the hierarchy of EVP drivers has remained relatively stable over the past five years, according to Ranstead’s annual employer brand research report. In 2020, the top three reasons that a worker would choose an employer consist of attractive salary and benefits, work-life balance, and job security. The secondary drivers differ by region. For North America and APAC, the second most sought-after driver is career progression, while in Eastern European countries, the employer’s financial health is considered important. A pleasant work atmosphere is the second most important driver in Western Europe, whereas in Latin America, it’s career progression opportunities. Interestingly, public service industry ranks as the most attractive sector in North America (53%), yet does not appear in the top five elsewhere. There are clear generational differences in EVP drivers as well. Gen Z finds a pleasant atmosphere more important than security, while millennials and Gen X would rather get a good work-life balance and security from their employer. Baby boomers are more likely to choose an employer based on the salary and benefits, but a convenient location could also impact their decision (Ranstead, 2020).
Findings: Brand centered on purpose

The clear key differentiator for government employers’ EVPs is the promise of mission and purpose. Overall, the top reasons for joining a career in the public sector are consistent with other industries, with stability leading the charge. (38% cite the prospect of having good job security as the top reason for joining a career in the public sector, and 34% cite the prospect of earning a good and stable salary). However, it is purpose that differentiates employment in government from other industries (29% cite the prospect of doing meaningful work that makes a positive difference to individuals/the community as the top reason for joining a career in the public sector). The ranking of these choices holds true across countries and education levels. It is also consistent across current government employees, those who have left government service, those who are interested in joining government, and those who have never considered joining government.

‘Purpose’ differentiates government employment to other industries.
“Our ministry attracts many female workers – 80% of current employees are female – because they feel supported to raise children with flexible schedules, and also we support them to grow into leadership positions.”

-CHRO in a large civilian ministry, United Arab Emirates

The top reasons for joining or considering joining the public sector vary slightly by sub-industry and age group. For example, purpose ranks higher than job security for those in the field of borders and customs, and public health. Differences by age group also emerged: younger workers are looking for more work-life balance, 35-44 age group is more interested in making a positive difference, and older workers ranked a pension as a top reason.

Age 18-34: Top three reasons are good job security (49%); earning a good stable salary (49%); and having good work-life balance (41%). Age 35-44: Top three reasons are good job security (48%); earning a good stable salary (44%); and the prospect of doing meaningful work that makes a positive difference to individuals/the community (38%). Age 45-70: Top three reasons are good job security (49%); earning a good stable salary (44%); and earning a good pension upon retirement (38%).

Top reasons for joining or considering joining the public sector by age group

Q: What aspects of a career in the Public Sector drew you/made you consider entering the Public Sector?

- Earning good pension
- Prospect of doing meaningful work
- Work-life balance
- Good stable salary
- Job security
Agencies today are not highlighting the impact, mission, and purpose of employees that attracted talent in the first place. It’s difficult to measure and attribute each worker’s personal impact on the mission. About 40% of public sector workers are not aware of their agency’s purpose and how their work aligns to it. Government employers must highlight their employees’ direct contribution to purpose and the public good. Moreover, only 47% of public sector employees agree that their organization gives them opportunities to engage in work they love. This low connection to the purpose and impact which attracted government workers to their jobs in the first place may be a factor in low satisfaction rates or attrition.

The COVID-19 pandemic has, in the immediate term, shifted public service employees’ perception of their work, delivering on the EVP. 62% of government workers report that work has become more meaningful as a result of the pandemic. In many countries, public sector workers were recognized as essential workers and applauded for keeping countries going during the strenuous lockdowns.

The resurgence of interest in public service is not isolated to current government employees. The pandemic has reawakened interest for those not currently in government but considering joining or re-joining the public sector. In fact, 66% of those who left the public sector are considering re-joining. Workers who have left public service previously are more likely to consider re-joining than those who have never worked in the sector. The motivations for joining or re-joining the public sector primarily revolve around seeking a job with greater job security; only respondents in the US rank the desire to make a difference to citizens’ lives higher than job security.

Governments must sharpen and communicate their unique EVPs, demonstrating citizen impact and potential, to attract and retain public-minded talent in the civil service. Once employees arrive, employers must maintain that promise to meet recruits’ expectations and improve employee satisfaction.

“I don't think the public ever recognized that without public servants, the country would fall on its knees. During the lockdown, we got many letters from children saying “thank you” to our waste collectors. Having that recognition made us feel so proud to serve.”

- CHRO in a local government district, United Kingdom
An employer brand precedes any recruiting interaction with a prospective candidate. Developing an EVP for public service is important to understand and communicate how candidates perceive an organization’s employer brand, why candidates are interested in working for an agency, and what makes employees stay. A well-articulated EVP can help to bring recruitment marketing to life and is a key thread woven through both the candidate and employee experience.

Some strong examples of positive employer branding come from Silicon Valley where, for instance, one search engine giant is known for its extensive in-office benefits, collegial atmosphere, and opportunities to work on cutting-edge projects. While not as widely recognized, the US Census Bureau offers a similar culture of data science excellence, with an open campus fostering intellectual collaboration. When done correctly, employer branding can be a positive and differentiating force for attracting and retaining talent.

LinkedIn also found that, unsurprisingly, interest in employee advocacy grew nearly 200% between 2014–2017. In addition, organizations that are socially engaged are 40% more likely to be seen as competitive. So, while employee advocacy is still somewhat nascent, the trend is clear and the upside is authenticity: messages coming directly from employees are inherently more trusted than those communicated through traditional marketing and advertising.

Most government organizations are not yet considering employee advocacy, but will likely be doing so soon to compete more effectively in the war for talent. The trend also highlights the basic importance of creating a positive employee experience – and nurturing it over the long-term – to in turn recruit more top talent. It’s all about creating a virtuous lifecycle that results in a high-performing workforce to strengthen the organization and its mission.

A commitment to improving an organization’s EVP includes using both potential recruits and current employees as brand ambassadors. A brand ambassador is an individual who embodies and promotes the brand externally. The employee experience matters – a lot – and shapes whether employees want to become brand ambassadors, or “influencers” in today’s lexicon, as well as how they portray that employer to the outside world. A LinkedIn analysis found that an employer advocacy program or brand ambassador effort can extend an organization’s reach dramatically, as only 8% of most employees’ social networks overlap with their employer’s social networks. What’s more, when employees share information on social media, their posts reach 561% more people compared to corporate posts. Brand messages distributed by employees are re-shared 24 times more often than if they come straight from the brand (LinkedIn, 2017).

LinkedIn also found that, unsurprisingly, interest in employee advocacy grew nearly 200% between 2014–2017. In addition, organizations that are socially engaged are 40% more likely to be seen as competitive. So, while employee advocacy is still somewhat nascent, the trend is clear and the upside is authenticity: messages coming directly from employees are inherently more trusted than those communicated through traditional marketing and advertising.

Most government organizations are not yet considering employee advocacy, but will likely be doing so soon to compete more effectively in the war for talent. The trend also highlights the basic importance of creating a positive employee experience – and nurturing it over the long-term – to in turn recruit more top talent. It’s all about creating a virtuous lifecycle that results in a high-performing workforce to strengthen the organization and its mission.

A commitment to improving an organization’s EVP includes using both potential recruits and current employees as brand ambassadors. A brand ambassador is an individual who embodies and promotes the brand externally. The employee experience matters – a lot – and shapes whether employees want to become brand ambassadors, or “influencers” in today’s lexicon, as well as how they portray that employer to the outside world. A LinkedIn analysis found that an employer advocacy program or brand ambassador effort can extend an organization’s reach dramatically, as only 8% of most employees’ social networks overlap with their employer’s social networks. What’s more, when employees share information on social media, their posts reach 561% more people compared to corporate posts. Brand messages distributed by employees are re-shared 24 times more often than if they come straight from the brand (LinkedIn, 2017).

LinkedIn also found that, unsurprisingly, interest in employee advocacy grew nearly 200% between 2014–2017. In addition, organizations that are socially engaged are 40% more likely to be seen as competitive. So, while employee advocacy is still somewhat nascent, the trend is clear and the upside is authenticity: messages coming directly from employees are inherently more trusted than those communicated through traditional marketing and advertising.

Most government organizations are not yet considering employee advocacy, but will likely be doing so soon to compete more effectively in the war for talent. The trend also highlights the basic importance of creating a positive employee experience – and nurturing it over the long-term – to in turn recruit more top talent. It’s all about creating a virtuous lifecycle that results in a high-performing workforce to strengthen the organization and its mission.

A commitment to improving an organization’s EVP includes using both potential recruits and current employees as brand ambassadors. A brand ambassador is an individual who embodies and promotes the brand externally. The employee experience matters – a lot – and shapes whether employees want to become brand ambassadors, or “influencers” in today’s lexicon, as well as how they portray that employer to the outside world. A LinkedIn analysis found that an employer advocacy program or brand ambassador effort can extend an organization’s reach dramatically, as only 8% of most employees’ social networks overlap with their employer’s social networks. What’s more, when employees share information on social media, their posts reach 561% more people compared to corporate posts. Brand messages distributed by employees are re-shared 24 times more often than if they come straight from the brand (LinkedIn, 2017).

LinkedIn also found that, unsurprisingly, interest in employee advocacy grew nearly 200% between 2014–2017. In addition, organizations that are socially engaged are 40% more likely to be seen as competitive. So, while employee advocacy is still somewhat nascent, the trend is clear and the upside is authenticity: messages coming directly from employees are inherently more trusted than those communicated through traditional marketing and advertising.

Most government organizations are not yet considering employee advocacy, but will likely be doing so soon to compete more effectively in the war for talent. The trend also highlights the basic importance of creating a positive employee experience – and nurturing it over the long-term – to in turn recruit more top talent. It’s all about creating a virtuous lifecycle that results in a high-performing workforce to strengthen the organization and its mission.

LinkedIn also found that, unsurprisingly, interest in employee advocacy grew nearly 200% between 2014–2017. In addition, organizations that are socially engaged are 40% more likely to be seen as competitive. So, while employee advocacy is still somewhat nascent, the trend is clear and the upside is authenticity: messages coming directly from employees are inherently more trusted than those communicated through traditional marketing and advertising.

Most government organizations are not yet considering employee advocacy, but will likely be doing so soon to compete more effectively in the war for talent. The trend also highlights the basic importance of creating a positive employee experience – and nurturing it over the long-term – to in turn recruit more top talent. It’s all about creating a virtuous lifecycle that results in a high-performing workforce to strengthen the organization and its mission.

LinkedIn also found that, unsurprisingly, interest in employee advocacy grew nearly 200% between 2014–2017. In addition, organizations that are socially engaged are 40% more likely to be seen as competitive. So, while employee advocacy is still somewhat nascent, the trend is clear and the upside is authenticity: messages coming directly from employees are inherently more trusted than those communicated through traditional marketing and advertising.

Most government organizations are not yet considering employee advocacy, but will likely be doing so soon to compete more effectively in the war for talent. The trend also highlights the basic importance of creating a positive employee experience – and nurturing it over the long-term – to in turn recruit more top talent. It’s all about creating a virtuous lifecycle that results in a high-performing workforce to strengthen the organization and its mission.
A strategy that incorporates each of these dimensions is critical for strong employee branding and a positive employee experience. Organizations should consider what they are doing in each of these areas; where there are key dependencies; relative strengths and weaknesses; priorities for improvement and measures for success.

Government employers must strengthen their brands and keep the promise of mission-centric work. While taking a holistic approach to branding and experience is the most important first step, it’s also essential for public sector employers to understand and leverage the special role of mission and purpose. While always important, the focus on mission and purpose is even more amplified in today’s crisis environment, where individuals feel called to serve and help support the recovery.

As discussed, the role of mission and purpose is exceedingly important to public sector job seekers and employees, yet employers may not be doing enough to impart a strong sense of it – both during recruitment efforts and in the day-to-day experience of employees. Here are a few steps that employers can take to lean into mission/purpose in order to differentiate their organizations in the market and attract top-performing talent dedicated to the mission.
Questions to ask:

- Is our brand making us a more competitive employer?
- Do employees embrace and understand the mission?
- Do we have a compelling employee value proposition?
- Do we know how to best communicate our values to different audiences (including those new or returning to public service)?
- Do we have a creative strategy to help us infuse our mission and purpose into the brand?

Initiatives:

- **Collect and/or review organizational data:** Gain insights into how the organization’s mission and purpose is understood and brought to life by employees. Common sources of such data might include quantitative surveys (employee and candidate) or qualitative research (internal and external focus groups).
- **Review the organization's values:** Review the organization’s vision statements, employee value proposition, and any other materials with high-level strategic content to identify key messages around the organization’s mission and purpose. Specifically, review the mission, values, culture statements, and benefits.
- **Gap analysis:** Identify where mission and purpose could be strengthened within the organization’s approach and materials; analyze publicly available materials from key hiring competitors to explore areas for differentiation.
- **Messaging and communication plan:** Communicate the brand, strengthened by a renewed sense of mission and purpose. This can be done through user personas and journey maps. This should culminate in a targeted brand marketing strategy highlighting the organization’s mission and purpose.
Employee experience

Employee experience describes the formal and informal touchpoints related to performance, career milestones, training, and ways of working. What was traditionally thought of as the domain exclusive to the HR function, centered around discrete employee events, has now expanded to include the general welfare of workers. It now encompasses all events that affect employees, including promotion celebrations, receiving personalized messages, experiencing discrimination at work, and requesting maternity or paternity leave. The goals of building superior employee experiences are to drive employee engagement, retention, and productivity.

Investing in employee experience is a much needed area for most organizations, with clear returns. According to research by Gartner, only 13% of employees are largely satisfied with their work experiences. Although many organizations cite improving the employee experience as a priority, only a quarter of organizations are undertaking the work: 24% of organizations today are reshaping their overall approach to employee experience. Those that effectively reshape the employee experience yield notable returns on their investments: they are 38% more likely to report high intent to stay, 33% more likely to report high discretionary effort, and 44% more likely to be high-performers (Gartner, 2019).

A key employee experience trend that the pandemic accelerated is the move towards flexible, remote work. The idea of work that includes commuting for hours to work nine-to-five in a confined office has rapidly been challenged and proved expensive to maintain. Research by the International Workplace Group found that more than half of employees globally are working outside their main office headquarters for at least 2.5 days a week. 85% of those surveyed confirm that productivity has increased in their business as a result of greater flexibility. Additionally, 65% of businesses say a flexible workspace helps them reduce operating costs and manage risk better (IWG, 2019). Flexible work policies respond to employee demands for greater autonomy, while lowering costs and emissions, and increasing resilience.
The adoption of teleworking arrangements has been fast-tracked due to COVID-19, with the Brookings Institute predicting that the trend of telecommuting will continue even after the pandemic has subsided. Citing experimental research, the authors found pros and cons to more telework: “On the plus side, workers tend to prefer working from home, it reduces emissions and office costs, and it helps people (especially women) balance work and family roles. It may even make us more productive. The downsides: managing a telecommuting workforce can be difficult, professional isolation can have negative effects on wellbeing and career development, and the effects on productivity over the long run and in a scaled-up system are uncertain” (Brookings, 2020). Another pro for public service employers is that remote work expands the geographical hiring pool to include under-tapped rural areas.

The findings from our research emphasize two areas for improving the employee experience of public service workers: increased flexibility and career personalization.

Findings: Flexibility and personalization

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced opened new opportunities for improving the employee experience for government employees. As we return to an eventual new normal, government employers would do well to make permanent many of the innovative and modern workplace policies introduced during the pandemic. In fact, a majority of government agencies plan to do just that: 56% of government CHROs expect to significantly increase their focus on employee experience in the next three years.

Government workers report an appetite for modern talent management policies that improve the employee experience, including offering a more visible path for career progression, as well as non-financial benefits such as flexible/remote working, cross-sector collaboration, and an innovative and inclusive work culture. Strategic initiatives for modernizing the government employee experience center around creating more flexibility in the roles, and greater personalization in career paths and evaluation.
Increased flexibility is prized not only among current government employees, but also a key improvement for attracting outside talent. Offering flexible/part-time working arrangements is the top-rated workforce improvement for creating an attractive public service career, according to those who left public service, those considering joining public service, and those who have never considered public service. The perception and reality of rigid workforce policies is therefore a pain point for current employees and also a deterrent for new government recruits.

Career flexibility also includes options for cross-training and learning from different departments within an agency. This is an area where government employers have room to improve compared to their private sector peers. Only 22% of government employees agree that their organization has flexible career experiences with a chance to try new roles across different parts of the organization (compared to a cross-industry average of 37%). Creating mobility within the workforce is a lower-cost option for increasing flexibility for government employers that have strict rules or budgets for making investments in the organization.

“People really adjusted well to working remotely and we saw increased efficiency. We got feedback that employees were less exhausted from commuting back and forth from far away so could focus more. There has been a big culture shift to be more generous with allowing remote work.”

- CHRO at large civilian ministry, United Arab Emirates
As part of a flexible workforce, staff desire the option to work remotely with asynchronous hours. For current public sector employees, the top workplace changes to their agency to create an attractive career are to enable remote working/teleworking (42%) and adopt new methods and processes for creativity and innovation (41%). These two goals can go hand-in-hand, as evidenced by the sudden push for remote, innovative work of entire organizations and governments during the pandemic.

The option for remote work, either partial or total, is one tested adaptation from the pandemic that government leaders should strongly consider. 68% of public sector employees expect their role to revert back to office-based after the pandemic ends, even though 63% of respondents agree that their job can be done remotely just as effectively as face-to-face. In fact, many governments are preparing to continue with remote working: 69% of public sector employees report that their organization is making investments for remote working to become the norm. The top segments making investments for remote working to become the norm is Customs/Border (81%); the lowest is public safety (55%).

Investing in remote working can not only improve the employee experience, but also hiring. With fully remote positions, agencies can expand their talent pools outside of cities and government capitals. Remote work across a larger geography can help government agencies meet other goals, including reducing their carbon footprints.

63% of public sector workers agree that their job can be done just as effectively remotely as face-to-face.

Another key aspect of a modern employee experience that emerged is the personalization of career journey, feedback, and rewards. For current public sector employees, the top career changes to their agency to create an attractive career are an individualized program (rewards, benefits, etc.) (46%); access to personalized training and education programs (46%); and clear, merit-based career progression and opportunities (45%). Additionally, government workers are not getting the individualized feedback they need to improve their performance. Only 40% of public sector workers receive transparent communication of expectations and clear performance metrics. Together, this ranking shows that public sector employees want to shift towards a model of self-paced, individualized HR policies.

Top career changes to create attractive career in Public Service

- An individualized program (rewards, benefits, etc.) 46%
- Access to personalized training and education programs 46%
- Clear, merit-based career profession and opportunities 45%

“How could Public Sector agencies create an attractive career option where individuals could thrive?”
The COVID-19 pandemic has made employees more aware of the physical spaces in which they work, as well as their work-life balance. This reality is clearly articulated in our workforce surveys, which show a significant increase in the desire for flexibility. In understanding how to move forward, organizations should consider policies and arrangements prior to the pandemic; during the pandemic; and what is planned for after the pandemic, to understand what has worked, what hasn’t, and how to improve. Specifically, they should consider flexible or part-time work arrangements; options for telework or remote work; flexible HR policies; inclusive workspaces; and leadership and culture initiatives focused on work-life balance.

Flexible, remote work

While flexibility is the name of the game, its importance is not only limited to work structures and arrangements, but also to flexibility in the work itself. The public sector lags behind other industries in creating flexible career experiences – an area that is vital to employee satisfaction and retention, especially for essential roles. Flexibility not only makes workers happier and healthier, but can also make the workforce more productive, provide cost-savings and increase resilience. Policies to expand flexible work must be modeled from the top down to change an unnecessarily rigid culture.

Example: Netflix

The entertainment streaming giant Netflix has a very “Silicon Valley” approach to time off – the “No Vacation Policy,” which means it does not track vacation days. Each employee is encouraged to develop their own work-life balance and “not have a prescribed 9-to-5 workday” (Netflix, n.d.).

John, a Netflix engineer, highlights the cultural effects of this: “I bike, I’m a musician, and my kids need me. I often think, I’m making all this money...shouldn’t I be working more? But I’m getting a ton done, so I tell myself that this incredible work-life balance I have...it’s OK” (INC, 2020). This 2003 change came with a steep learning curve. Some employees, like John, were able to adapt their lives and working patterns; yet some employees never took vacation and the policy was seen as a negative, endorsing workaholic tendencies. Over time and through gathered learnings on the program, Netflix determined that “the amount of vacation people take largely reflects what they see their boss and colleagues taking.” Netflix’s leadership started taking vacation publicly, and more employees began taking time off. Netflix’s flexible working arrangements also extend to new parents, who generally take 4-8 months on maternity or paternity leave. Being able to take this time to truly focus on a new family structure enables parents to come back re-energized and sets them up for long-term work/life success. These policies have helped contribute to Netflix’s exceptionally low voluntary staff turnover rate of 3-4%.
Personalize career paths

Flexible work opportunities fit into a broader goal to create enriched and personalized career experiences. Today’s workforces are more complex than ever. They are made up of multiple types of workers—from traditional full-time and part-time employees to contractors and freelancers. The extended workforce also comprises multiple generations and workers in different locations or regions around the world. While employee experience must address these distinctions, it is a mistake for companies to assume that every type of worker or every generation of employee wants the same experiences.

Public sector employees are drawn to individualized programs, personalized training and education programs, and merit-based career progression. All of these are opportunities and initiatives that most public sector employers are not fully delivering on today. To remain competitive with a highly productive workforce, agencies must create a personalized employee experience that truly engages workers. Organizations should make a dedicated effort to review and modernize talent management practices and HR policies to make this happen.

Questions to ask:

- Are we doing everything we can to help all employees be successful?
- How does our organization listen to and understand the voices of our employees?
- What can we do better to “live our values?”
- Do our employees feel that their work–life balance is valued?
- What tools are available for planning personalized employee experiences over their lifecycle with the agency?

Initiatives:

- **Enhance work flexibility:** Organizations can offer multiple hiring options, including part-time, contractor, workshare, and freelance roles. Jobs should include predictable hybrid telework schedules, modeled by leadership who also participate. It starts with cultivating a work culture that encourages vacation, holiday, sick leave, and telework.
- **Listen to workers:** Accept that workers know the type of experiences that will boost their engagement and productivity. Don’t make assumptions about the types of experiences your target workforce wants. Evaluate the employee experience with a fresh lens. Use analytics, internal and external survey data, and social listening to understand the professional and personal moments that matter most to each segment. Review talent management policies, understand typical career progression within the organization and drop-off points, and refocus the CHRO role on the employee experience.
- **Mentorship and coaching arrangements and programs:** Formalized regular feedback sessions with supervisors and mentors can help understand the employee experience and uncover problems early.
- **Co-create and design the experience:** Use choice as a key design principle and engage with individual employees to co-create the most relevant and valuable experiences. Pilot new experiences with a small number of workers, and assess the impact on employee productivity and business value.
Across all industries, traditional job routines are being disrupted by technology and changing expectations of work. Today, many tasks for workers are routine and repetitive. New forms of skills development and lifelong learning are therefore urgently required to reorient the workforce towards more human, complex tasks. When it comes to workforce skills, public sector organizations face two primary forces: the upcoming generational shift as baby boomers retire, and the disruption of new technologies to automate and support existing work. The solutions to these two phenomena are related; intelligent technologies can take over some tasks from old job positions as new jobs are created. This shift will require agencies to invest in new technologies and reskilling employees to support the new technologies.

The public service workforce has a higher average age than other industries. Governments must therefore prepare many talented and experienced older workers to retire, leaving large knowledge gaps to be filled. In OECD countries, central public administrations tend to have more workers aged 55 and over (24%) than under 34 (18%). The difference in age is starker for those in leadership positions. More than 60% of senior managers are 55 or older in Greece (67%), Italy (66%), the Netherlands (66%), Finland (65%) and Belgium (60%) (OECD, 2017). One-third of US federal employees will be eligible to retire between now and 2025; only 6% of federal employees are under 30 years old (Brookings, 2020). Without a plan to transfer knowledge from the retiring generation, the upcoming exodus from the public sector could cause massive knowledge loss, just when citizens expect even more from their government services.
The benefits of intelligent technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) will shape the public sector workforce by promising huge productivity gains. AI can empower government workers in two ways. The first is by automating repetitive tasks, freeing up time for higher value-added activities. The second is that AI can make public-sector workers more productive by enhancing their capabilities. Accenture quantified AI’s potential to boost workers’ productivity, through a cross-industry econometric model that synthesized labor force data from 14 countries in the G20. We found that AI job augmentation and automation will affect up to 90% of the time workers spend on daily tasks in the coming decades.40

For several reasons, public sector employers have been slower to adopt new intelligent technologies to augment the workforce. The World Economic Forum identified five barriers to AI adoption in government and public entities: effectively using data; data and AI skills shortages; evolving AI vendors; legacy culture opposed to risk-taking; and lagging procurement mechanisms (WEF, 2019).41 Governments will need to address these issues and prepare for the coming disruption. Accenture’s “The Coming AI Productivity Boom” report highlighted that while 85% of US federal executives believed in AI’s importance and applications, only 18% were preparing their workforce to implement AI systems and processes (Accenture, 2020).42 The preparation to harness this new technology, and the planning required to curb the effects of a smaller workforce, is not a given for public sector organizations.

Findings: Preparing for high-impact work

This urgency for upskilling the current workforce is understood at the highest levels of talent operations. Government CHROs identified reskilling the workforce (75%), automating HR transactional services (69%), and growing the next generation of leaders (59%) as their top priorities for the next three years. The dual pressures of transferring knowledge from a retiring generation and adopting new technology tools provide a critical juncture to automate processes where possible, and to focus jobs on inherently human skills closer to the organization’s mission.

Priorities of Public Sector HR Executives for the next three years

1. Reskilling the workforce (75%)
2. Automating HR transactional services (69%)
3. Growing the next generation of leaders (59%)

“Which of the following are among the top 5 of your primary initiatives for your HR function in the next three years?”
“We are refocusing HR to be more self-service. Trainings will be online and self-paced; recruitment screening will be conducted using AI; we’re introducing automatic file archiving; and we’re using digital apps to replace benefits cards.”

- CHRO in a large civilian ministry, United Arab Emirates

The current and future generation of government employees will benefit from sharing lessons learned from retiring employees, but employees and executives don’t agree on how agencies are addressing the shift. Many government employees today identify that knowledge-sharing is happening, primarily through digital means. 78% of government employees report that leadership encourages knowledge-sharing between teams; 77% report that knowledge-sharing is supported through internal digital platforms.

Upskilling is happening today in a variety of virtual and in-person ways. Public sector employees report building their future skills through access to online platforms (56%), experiential learning on the job (46%), and immersive learning with virtual reality (19%). Expanding upon, and adding new avenues for learning, will allow for employees to customize their learning and go at their own pace. The two findings that emerged were the need to prepare for knowledge from a generation getting ready to retire, and disruption and opportunities from incoming technologies.

There’s concern over who will replace the outgoing generation. Only 31% of non-management government employees are confident that their organization is actively developing the next generation of skills and capabilities needed to be successful in the future. Government executives are somewhat more optimistic about their preparedness: 47% say they have a formal leadership development and succession program that includes all levels and roles within the organization. Preparing the incoming set of leaders with a formal knowledge transfer process can minimize disruption to the mission and make the agency a more attractive place to build a career.
Only 31% of government employees are confident that their organization is actively developing the next generation of skills and capabilities needed to be successful in the future.
“Our aging workforce concerns are primarily around our manual workers – how do we protect 50- to 60-year-old employees doing strenuous physical labor on behalf of city services?”

- CHRO in a local government district, United Kingdom

The public sector workforce of tomorrow will have to learn to work with machines: to automate repeatable tasks and collaborate with intelligent technologies. Creating new value by equipping people with the skills they need will not only make jobs more interesting, but also more purposeful. Using insights from new technology tools can also boost productivity. With this in mind, 55% of public sector executives plan to increase their investment in training and reskilling in the next three years.

For many, this trend of reskilling alongside new technology adoption is already underway. Nearly half of government workers (47%) are helping their people reinvent their work and jobs alongside technology. The pandemic already accelerated this trend. 69% of public sector employees report an increase in the use of automation during the pandemic. The segments of the public sector industry with the highest increases in automation during the pandemic are Customs/Border (80%) and Tax/Revenue (75%).

For the most part, public sector employees do not think their jobs are at risk of automation. Only one in five (20%) public sector employees are concerned that technology will take over their job, the lowest of any industry (and half the cross-industry average of 40%). Workers at the federal level perceive the risk to be slightly higher than at state level (24% versus 18%). This disconnect could be related to state-level employees working in inherently human roles, such as police officers, teachers, or nurses.

Public sector organizations must prepare for these seismic changes in the way that work is done to complete the mission.
Only one in five (20%) public sector employees are concerned that technology will take over their jobs, the lowest of any industry (the cross-industry average is 40%).
AT&T faced a common problem: a talent gap in the industry. With skills like cloud architecture, coding, cybersecurity, and data science in high demand, AT&T decided to avoid the high costs associated with hiring new talent by implementing a global reskilling program called Future Ready. Backed by an investment of $1 billion, the program includes online courses in collaboration with Coursera, Udacity, and universities, as well as an online careers portal where employees can easily search available jobs, see which jobs will have increased/decreased demand in the coming years, and the potential salary increases for each role. As of 2018, more than half of AT&T’s employees have engaged in the program. Employees have completed 2.7 million courses, and 475 employees have enrolled in Georgia Tech’s Master of Computer Science program. AT&T reports that employees in the program are twice as likely to be hired into mission-critical roles and four times as likely to make career advancements (CNBC, 2018).
Across industries, organizations face huge challenges ahead in contending with technology disruption and upskilling needs to move toward a more machine-supported workforce. Within this disruption lies a great opportunity to shift employees away from automated, repetitive tasks, to higher value-added activities, thereby enriching their everyday work experience.

But creating more meaningful work, upskilling, and boosting organizational resilience is only effective if it fosters broader organizational achievements. How can these workforce initiatives and programs safely help improve productivity, decrease backlogs, and deliver better services for citizens?

Questions to ask:

- How could our teams, processes, and technologies be restructured to facilitate scaling of intelligent technologies?
- How strong are the knowledge-sharing mechanisms within our organization?
- What can we do to better prioritize and invest in the development and recruitment of critical-need skills?
- Which workers are most exposed to automation, and therefore the best opportunities for upskilling?
- How will we prepare our workforce for risks related to cybersecurity and privacy breaches?

Initiatives:

- **Start with data:** For workers to get the most out of working alongside technology, agencies will need to refocus how they collect, manage, and use their data. Begin by strengthening governance procedures and protocols, to better source and store the vast amounts of data that are required to train AI. Critical skillsets such as data scientists and analysts are needed to advise and develop any data strategy.

- **Chart an investment path:** Plan for a sequenced multi-year investment in intelligent technologies. To create a strategy, seek input from workers on where they see potential opportunities to harness AI. Focus on ways that AI might strengthen an agency’s mission. Think about how to connect AI with existing systems, to avoid duplication.

- **Emphasize training:** Narrow job descriptions will become less prevalent, and workers will be asked to do a wider range of tasks. To prepare, organizations can encourage better communication and collaboration between business and IT teams, motivating workers to develop a more flexible set of skills. Public sector organizations should offer individualized and immersive training for working with AI, focusing on high-value-add skills such as complex reasoning, creativity, and emotional intelligence.
Conclusion

Today, many public sector organizations are struggling to attract and retain the skills they need to fulfill the mission. Our research highlights specific ways that government executives can improve their employer brands and employee satisfaction. Developing a compelling Employee Value Proposition (EVP) and highlighting factors that drive talent acquisition and retention (purpose and impact) are important for improving the brand promise of working in government. Organizations must also modernize the employee experience. Building on the adaptations many agencies made during the pandemic, executives can implement more flexible work policies, remote work policies, and a focus on career personalization. Lastly, enabling future skills emerged as a focal area for government employers; both to address the impending changing of the guard and also disruption and opportunities from new technologies that will both automate and support government workers. The next section of this paper describes initiatives and examples of how to implement these changes.
Public Sector
Workforce of the Future

The public sector workforce of the future may look almost unrecognizable compared to what we know today. New technologies in the form of intelligent systems and machines will undoubtedly play a huge part in the public sector, reshaping governmental structures and processes.

As we know from our research, a major component of why workers are attracted to work in the public sector is purpose. We believe the government workforce will reorient and shift skills towards mission-centered work. The workforce of the future will also be multigenerational, with workers living and staying in the workforce for longer. It will also be better prepared for cyberattacks, likely having gone through incidents in the past. Lastly, the workplace will likely be a remote-first, hybrid one, which enables agencies to expand their geographical hiring pools and offer flexible compensation packages.

High-impact, human work

The government workforce of the future will focus on high-value, uniquely human work, attracting and retaining employees for the very reason they are interested in public sector work. First, intelligent technologies will perform routine tasks for public sector workers across a range of government agencies and departments, freeing up time and space for innovation and creativity. No longer will public servants spend considerable time expensing trip reports, logging data entry, or conducting routine analysis. Automation, self-service portals, and machine learning will eliminate repetitive tasks that are unrelated to purposeful work.

The tools available to public sector workers to achieve their mission will be powerful and predictive. Across many functions including healthcare, defense, municipal administration, infrastructure, education, and enforcement, workers will be comfortable querying software to support and model decision outcomes. The technology helps deliver services faster, with more efficiency, increasing trust in government to provide public services.

Workers will perform interactive and collaborative tasks directly related to the organization’s mission. Every day, employees will address public sector challenges, using the skills for which they were screened, including complex reasoning, creativity, socio-emotional intelligence, and sensory perception. Each of these skills is sector-, industry- and function-agnostic. With minimal time allocated to administrative tasks, employees can thrive in doing the purposeful work that attracted them to the public sector in the first place.

A future government workforce will also see the advent of cross-functional employees not confined to a single desk, department or even division, but assembled to address a specific issue area. As governments face increasingly complex issues, the solutions required to tackle them will be multi-faceted and coherent across different agencies in government. As intelligent technologies provide commoditized access to specialized forms of knowledge, the current siloed approach of having a single team or department address a public sector issue will be phased out.

The resulting workforce will be extremely agile and cross-functional, as employees are no longer defined by their work roles but their skillsets. They will be empowered to work across various government teams and agencies to tackle complex issues. For example, a relationship manager could assist with predictive modelling on energy forecasting scenarios with the government’s energy agency in one month, then lend expertise to an urban planning project on public infrastructure planning the next month. As rates of higher education continue to rise, the future government workforce will be better placed to make the best use of each individual’s expertise.
Multi-generational teams

As life expectancy increases and employees retire later, the public sector workforce will include more generations of employees working together. Executives will have a dedicated strategy for addressing the needs of workers from different generations, including different employee experiences and trainings. The highest performing organizations will focus on training and re-training workers as a core competency. A worker who enters the public sector at age 22 may undergo many different roles and functions throughout a 50-year career. Lifelong learning will become a must-have, rather than a nice-to-have.

Cybersecurity and verified authenticity

Public sector organizations of the future will have significant experience responding to cyber-attacks. As more tasks move online, geopolitical and non-state actors will have greater opportunities to interrupt the valuable and sensitive work that governments conduct. Additionally, malicious actors will become more sophisticated in posing as authoritative sources on a wide range of topics, and public sector organizations must respond to this trend. Navigating an evolving threat to citizen services, privacy, and data will require a dedicated and persistent culture of cyber-hygiene. To minimize risks by employees, public sector organizations will implement cyber-hygiene practices, regularly monitor adherence and recommend immersive training for delinquency. Lastly, governments will place a premium on sources that can verify authenticity for analysis and information.

Remote, connected workforce

The government workplace of the future will lean heavily on digital technologies to become a remote-first workforce. Long gone will be the days of the commute and strict work hours only to arrive in a dull cubicle. For everyday collaboration, virtual-reality facilitation of meetings and group work will become the norm. Even team-building activities, training workshops, and other organizational culture-enhancing events will be remote and made possible through experiential reality technologies. Imagine a company townhall starting off with a virtual tour of Machu Picchu or other wonders of the world.

However, public sector entities need physical spaces for events and oversight. These spaces will be dramatically smaller, rotational, and primarily serve communal meeting and public gathering spaces. This combination of a remote-first workforce with an appealing physical location for public events will create the flexibility employees desire, without sacrificing the organizational culture and oversight by constituents.

Remote-first working will grant the public sector access to a larger pool of expertise and capabilities, enhancing government’s ability to address a wider variety of issues. Rather than concentrating in the country capital, state capital, or city center, those working on the public mission can be spread across the region to include under-represented demographics including rural communities. Lastly, compensation packages for public service workers will be different with a remote-first workforce. Without a commute, there will be no need for perks such as drivers and cars. Organizations may instead offer to upgrade the home internet of workers, or provide expanded budgets for the latest technology or ergonomic furniture.

While the skills, composition, and tasks of the public sector workforce will shift, we believe that organizations’ fundamental missions will remain steady. These organizations exist to protect and serve, administer the tax law, secure borders, regulate energy sources, create inclusive communities. This is both continual work and multiple lifetimes of work for the public sector employees who make it happen.
Conclusion

The global pandemic has only served to further emphasize the importance of the public sector, as countries around the world race to tackle the health crisis with varying degrees of success. The spotlight has been shone on the public sector amidst growing pressures for governments to prepare their workforces for future crises. The post-pandemic workforce will also be shaped by prevailing technological trends and a growing call for shared social responsibility.

In the context of a generational health crisis and beyond, we hope that this research will contribute to a broader understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities of talent management in the public sector, and provide evidence for improvements.
## Appendix 1: Summary of Recommendations

### Employer Brand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to consider</th>
<th>Initiatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Is our brand making us a more competitive employer?</td>
<td>• Collect and/or review organizational data: Gain insights into how the organization’s mission and purpose is understood and brought to life by employees. Common sources of such data might include quantitative surveys (employee and candidate) or qualitative research (internal and external focus groups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do employees embrace and understand the mission?</td>
<td>• Review the organization’s values: Review the organization’s vision statements, employee value proposition, and any other materials with high-level strategic content to identify key messages around the organization’s mission and purpose. Specifically, review the mission, values, culture statements, and benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do we have a compelling employee value proposition?</td>
<td>• Gap analysis: Identify where mission/purpose could be strengthened within the organization’s approach and materials; analyze publicly available materials from key hiring competitors to explore areas for differentiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do we know how to best communicate our values to different audiences (including those new or returning to public service)?</td>
<td>• Messaging and communication plan: Communicate the brand, strengthened by a renewed sense of mission and purpose. This can be done through user personas and journey maps. It should culminate in a targeted brand marketing strategy highlighting mission and purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do we have a creative strategy to help us infuse our mission and purpose into the brand?</td>
<td>• Enhance work flexibility: Organizations can offer multiple hiring options, including part-time, contractor, workshare, and freelance roles. Jobs should include predictable hybrid telework schedules, modeled by leadership who also participate. It starts with cultivating a work culture that encourages vacation, holiday, sick leave, and telework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Collect and/or review organizational data: Gain insights into how the organization’s mission and purpose is understood and brought to life by employees. Common sources of such data might include quantitative surveys (employee and candidate) or qualitative research (internal and external focus groups)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Employee Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to consider</th>
<th>Initiatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Are we doing everything we can to help all employees be successful?</td>
<td>• Listen to workers: Accept that workers know the type of experiences that will boost their engagement and productivity. Don’t make assumptions about the types of experiences your target workforce wants. Evaluate the employee experience with a fresh lens: Use analytics, internal and external survey data, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How does our organization listen to and understand the voices of our employees?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What can we do better to “live our values?”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do our employees feel that their work–life balance is valued?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What tools are available for planning personalized employee experiences over their lifecycle with the agency?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• How could our teams, processes, and technologies be restructured to facilitate scaling of intelligent technologies?

• How strong are the knowledge-sharing mechanisms within our organization?

• What can we do to better prioritize and invest in the development and recruitment of critical-need skills?

• Which workers are most exposed to automation and therefore represent the top opportunities for upskilling?

• How will we prepare our workforce for risks related to cybersecurity and privacy breaches?

• Start with data: For workers to get the most out of working alongside technology, agencies will need to refocus how they collect, manage, and use their data. Begin by strengthening governance procedures and protocols, to better source and store the vast amounts of data that are required to train AI. Critical skillsets such as data scientists and analysts are needed to advise and develop any data strategy.

• Chart an investment path: Plan for a sequenced multi-year investment in intelligent technologies. To create a strategy, seek input from workers on where they see potential opportunities to apply AI. Focus on ways that AI might strengthen an agency’s mission. Think about how to connect AI with existing systems, to avoid duplication.

• Emphasize training: Narrow job descriptions will become less prevalent, and workers will be asked to do a wider range of tasks. To prepare, organizations can encourage better communication and collaboration between business and IT teams, encouraging workers to develop a more flexible set of skills. Public sector organizations should offer individualized and immersive training for working with AI, focusing on high-value-add skills like complex reasoning, creativity, and emotional intelligence.

• Mentorship and coaching arrangements and programs: Formalized regular feedback sessions with supervisors and mentors can help understand the employee experience and uncover problems early.

• Co-create and design the experience: Use choice as a key design principle and engage with individual employees to co-create the most relevant and valuable experiences. Pilot new experiences with a small number of employees and assess the impact on employee productivity and business value.

Future Skills

Social listening to understand the professional and personal moments that will matter most to each segment. Review talent management policies, understand typical career progression within the organization and drop-off points; refocus the CHRO role on the employee experience.
Appendix 2: About the Research

The Accenture Research program was built on two proprietary research initiatives: the “Care to do Better” survey and “Public Service as a Career of Choice” research, both fielded in September 2020.

1. “Care to do Better” research, September 2020
The research included two parallel surveys across a variety of industries.

Narrow, public service survey:
- 180 public service executives respondents:
  - Five countries: Australia, Germany, Japan, the UK, and the US
  - 80% at federal/central government level, 20% at state/regional level
  - 80% in HR roles (CHRO, HR VP, Chief Talent Officer), 20% other (CEO, CTO, COO, CFO, CIO, CMO, other C-suite).

- 1,000 public service employee respondents:
  - Five countries: Australia, Germany, Japan, the UK, and the US
  - 43% at federal/central government level, 57% at state/regional level
  - 20% at manager level, 80% below manager level.

Larger, cross-industry survey:
- A survey of 15,665 workers across skill levels and generations from a range of large and small companies: 30% were management workers
- A survey of 3,200+ C-level executives: 50% were HR decision-makers and 50% other CXOs
- Covering 10 countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Singapore, Spain, the UK, and the US
- Covering 15 industries: aerospace & defense, banking, communications, consumer goods & services, energy (oil and gas), freight and logistics, health, insurance, media, public sector, retail, technology (high tech), travel, US federal government, utilities
- The original survey was fielded between October and November 2019
- A follow-up survey was conducted in April to July 2020, involving 5,400 global workers and 700 C-suite executives.

2. “Public Service as a Career of Choice” research, September 2020
- This Accenture study is based on a survey of 5,030 workers, of whom 2,530 were currently working in public services across central/federal, state and local government. The others include those who worked in public services previously, those who have considered public services but never joined, and those who have never considered a career in public service.
- The aim was to understand perspectives on work and careers in public services, specifically around improving the employee experience as the world of work shifts to a new dynamic following the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The respondents were primarily those at the Executive Vice President/Director level or below.
- The survey covered five countries: Australia, Germany, Singapore, the UK and the US.
- It spanned five public service segments: Tax/Revenue, Public Employment Services/Social Services, Defense, Borders/Customs/Immigration and Public Safety.
Authors

Gianmario Pisanu
Accenture Capability Network Growth Markets Lead
gianmario.pisanu@accenture.com

Phillip Pollman
Accenture Research Specialist
phillip.g.pollman@accenture.com

Masa Al Chalabi
Senior Manager, Accenture Middle East
masa.al.chalabi@accenture.com

Meghan Yurchisin
Accenture Research Public Sector Lead
meghan.yurchisin@accenture.com
About Accenture Research

Accenture Research shapes trends and creates data driven insights about the most pressing issues global organizations face. Combining the power of innovative research techniques with a deep understanding of our clients’ industries, our team of 300 researchers and analysts spans 20 countries and publishes hundreds of reports, articles and points of view every year. Our thought-provoking research—supported by proprietary data and partnerships with leading organizations, such as MIT and Harvard—guides our innovations and allows us to transform theories and fresh ideas into real-world solutions for our clients.
Citations

5. Citizen Experience in the Digital Age | Accenture
11. https://hbr.org/2015/07/people-before-strategy-a-new-role-for-the-chro#:~:text=CEOs%20know%20that%20they%20depend,human%20resources%20to%0A%0Aachieve%20success.&text=Research%20by%20McKinsey%20and%20the,important%20function%20in%20a%20company.