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# How to build a future-ready public sector workforce

To shape a future-fit workforce, governments will need to rethink how they attract and keep candidates with the right skills, while developing and empowering their existing talent.



Rapid technological advances, and growing citizen expectations for services that incorporate them, are driving the need for public sector workforces to transform. Tomorrow's public servants must not only have the technical skills to work better and faster while innovating to offer citizens a personalized experience. They will also need soft skills for more collaborative and agile ways of working, such as communication and complex problem-solving.

In many countries, highly skilled workers are in short supply, and competition for them is fierce. In the EY Digital Workforce study, 30% of public sector leaders said their inability to compete with private sector salaries and incentives was one of the top barriers in sourcing the talent they need for digital transformation. We also know that low morale, a lack of focus on staff wellbeing, and onerous outdated recruitment processes can stand in their way.

To overcome these challenges, governments must define the roles and competencies they will need in the future, at all levels. The next step is to identify the skills gaps in their current workforce, then plan how to fill them. This will entail attracting and retaining must-have talent, building skills in house and empowering everyone to innovate.

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**56% of the core skills of public sector workers will need to change in the next five years to meet citizen expectations.**

The World Economic Forum (WEF) Future of Jobs Report 2023

## Here are some ideas to consider:

### 1. Attracting must-have talent

With a "job for life" or a generous pension holding less appeal than it used to, government employers need to rethink the value proposition to reflect what employees value today. For example, it's well established that purpose and the chance to make a meaningful impact are even more important to Gen Z employees than to millennials. Government technologists and policymakers get to work on tackling some of society's biggest challenges and make a real difference to people's lives, a point that public sector recruiters need to communicate clearly in their campaigns. But with private sector companies increasingly competing on purpose, they will also need to answer the question: "What's in it for me?"

That means highlighting the interesting, complex work; early responsibility; opportunities for learning and development; and clear, long-term career progression that a public sector career offers. It also means providing more support for mental health and wellbeing, along with more hybrid and flexible working, both of which younger candidates value. Effective marketing, especially on social media, will help recruiters to reach those groups, as well as working with universities to build appealing pathways for the best students in relevant disciplines.

### 2. Improving the hiring process and redefining "talent"

To avoid deterring good candidates, hiring bodies need to streamline their application processes, join up their systems, and automate their basic checking and onboarding processes where possible. This will improve the candidates' experience by requiring them to provide information only once and speeding up the process. Recruiters should also use candidate touchpoints to "sell" the employer and the role as much as to assess if the candidate is suitable.

Rethinking what to recruit for can be another valuable exercise. Candidates have traditionally been recruited based on proven knowledge and competence. But as it gets harder to hire people with in-demand digital and data skills, recruiting and training people with the potential to learn will help to fill skills gaps. And by making sure their assessments don't exclude candidates with potential, hiring bodies can widen the pool of prospects. The outcome will be a more diverse workforce, which can boost innovation.

## 3. Walking the talk to keep good people

When candidates become employees, their experiences need to live up to the job description and any promises made during hiring. They need to feel valued, recognized and rewarded for their contributions, and that their physical and emotional wellbeing matter. They need to see how they could progress in the organization. And, since people join organizations but leave bosses, they need managers who support and motivate them. Government organizations should put policies in place that meet those needs – for example, around internal mobility and flexible working. They should also offer programs to support employees' physical and mental wellbeing, along with leadership training that delivers lasting change.

## 4. Upskilling the existing workforce

As long as the supply of technical talent in the market falls short of the demand, competition will remain intense. Upskilling existing employees will fill the gap more cost-effectively than making redundancies and then hiring new people. It will also help retain and motivate current staff by enabling them to grow, progress and stay relevant.

To equip an entire workforce with digital skills, and continuously update those skills, government organizations will need to adopt a more dynamic approach to learning and development. Emerging technologies can help to assess competencies as well as identify skills gaps and learning preferences. Employers can then blend quality online learning content with experiential learning and on-the-job coaching to suit each person's needs.

Our workforce upskilling and re-skilling platform, EY Skills Foundry™, is a great example of this kind of tech-enabled approach. It combines skills mapping with best-in-class learning content, workforce knowledge and artificial intelligence (AI) to help organizations build an adaptive workforce.

## 5. Changing the culture around risk

Finally, to truly innovate and transform, public sector leaders will need to create a culture in which their people feel safe trying new things, without the fear of negative repercussions. A culture that empowers employees to make decisions and supports them if decisions don't work out. And a culture in which they're free to challenge ideas constructively at all levels to arrive at a better solution.

Creating such a culture will require many leaders to change their own style. In addition to acquiring digital fluency, they will need to be more self-aware, more attuned to the feelings and expectations of their teams, able to admit that they're learning too, and prepared to stand up for their teams when needed.

We call this approach to innovation and transformation Humans@Center. To find out more, read our latest Humans@Center study or [go to our website](#).

### Upskilling veterans and under-represented Canadians to solve IT skill shortages

The Government of Canada didn't have the qualified cybersecurity and IT experts to meet the growing demand to protect and manage its IT environment. Meanwhile, thousands of armed forces veterans, their spouses and underrepresented groups needed civilian career opportunities that matched their aptitudes. A novel solution from EY, the Cyber Workforce Enablement Program, trains these people free of charge and places successful candidates on project teams in government departments.

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The fundamental thing that differentiates governments and the public sector is a sense of purpose and the ability for the role holder to come into the job and make an impact. But it has to be articulated.

**Shalinder Bakshi**, Partner, People Consulting,  
Ernst & Young LLP

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EYG no. 008333-24Gbl.

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