

Federal HR chiefs say they need more resources

By Alyssa Rosenberg arosenberg@govexec.com December 3, 2008

A new survey of chief human capital officers and other human resources managers suggests that President-elect Barack Obama needs to pay more attention to federal workforce issues.

"The 2 million people in the federal government will be one of the most important constituencies [Obama] has to deal with for the next four years," said Scott Cameron, director of enterprise management solutions for the global public sector practice at management consulting firm Grant Thornton LLP, which co-sponsored the survey with the nonprofit Partnership for Public Service. "I think one could argue without exaggeration that the success of his presidency will depend on his ability to inspire, lead, and in a thousand mundane ways each year, to manage, those 2 million employees."

But getting those people in place has been a challenge. Of the 54 officials interviewed between May and September for the survey, 62 percent said they had the necessary resources to be an effective CHCO to a "moderate" or "limited" extent. Seventy-two percent of participants said their human resources staffers possessed, to a limited or moderate extent, the skills necessary for the agency's future success. Fourteen percent reported that their agency leadership viewed them to a limited extent as a trusted business adviser, while 34 percent of those interviewed said they were trusted to a moderate degree.

The survey asked participants to answer questions with one of the following five responses: "not at all," "limited extent," "moderate extent," "great extent" and "very great extent."

John Palguta, vice president for policy at the Partnership, said the survey first asked participants what they would tell President-elect Obama if they shared an elevator with him.

"Most people assumed it was a very tall building with a very slow elevator," Palguta said, noting that many of the respondents had long wish lists, ranging from more HR flexibilities to a greater advisory role for the Office of Personnel Management. "Many of our interviewees said, 'Look, Mr. President, please, vision, policy, the infrastructure of government is important, but nothing happens in government without the people.' "

Ron Sanders, chief human capital officer at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, said the bailout of the financial system illustrated the government's human resources weaknesses.

"It saddens me that the response to the credit market crises has been largely outsourced," he said. "We're not fast enough."

Former OPM Director Linda Springer urged CHCOs to concentrate on devising an agenda that they could advocate for together. CHCO Council Executive Director John Salamone said he hoped the council's upcoming report to Congress would be a "rallying point" for the next administration and a useful guidance document for incoming CHCOs.