

Plugging the federal brain drain

By David T. Ellwood
and Max Stier

AS PRESIDENT OBAMA takes charge, expectations are high. The economic crisis, global warming, healthcare, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict all need to be addressed. But as the nation's challenges are growing, the federal government faces a serious people problem, one that must be tackled if Obama wants to achieve his ambitious policy goals.

The federal government — comprised of 1.9 million men and women — is expected to lose nearly one-third of its most talented and experienced workers, largely as a result of the baby boomer retirement wave. This brain drain will have serious consequences if left unaddressed. It is time for serious civil service reforms that will allow Washington to recruit the “best and the brightest” into government service. But it won't be easy.

A lack of skilled talent is only one of many factors inhibiting government's ability to build the workforce that the times demand. Salaries for high fliers in government pale in comparison to those in the private sector, and must be made more equitable to attract the most talented into public service.

But salary is only part of the problem. Antiquated hiring procedures must also be changed. While private sector firms can hire a qualified candidate quickly, the wheels turn much slower in the federal government. In one case, the application process of a single applicant to a government agency involved 114 steps and 45 people, and lasted months.

Recruitment practices also play a part. Private firms visit university campuses to interview soon-to-be graduates no later than the fall of their final year, often making decisions within a few weeks and typically offering much higher salaries. In contrast, government agencies rarely conduct on-campus interviews and can often take six-to-nine months before making hiring decisions.

Even when outstanding candidates

are recruited into the public sector, they often depart out of career frustration. Upward mobility is frequently constrained in government. Lateral moves between agencies are rare. With the exception of political appointees, movements in and out of government are all too infrequent.

This is a critical time in the nation's history that will require exceptional talent and innovative ideas. Obama's “Renew America Together” initiative is a good first step in calling on Americans to engage in public service and give back to their communities. But more must be done to draw the brightest minds into government.

Here are some steps that the new administration and Congress can take to confront the federal brain drain, and to make the federal government a more attractive place to work:

- Provide creative financial incentives, expand loan-repayment programs, create “fellowships” for certain jobs, and develop an ROTC-like program in which students receive educational benefits in return for a commitment to serve in government after graduation.

- Expand the Presidential Management Fellows program to bring the most talented graduates directly into all federal agencies.

- Improve recruiting and hiring systems to reduce red tape to bring qualified candidates on board more quickly.

- Recruit mid-career professionals including engineers, IT experts and financial wizards interested in public service after spending time in the private sector.

- Create new measurement tools to allow citizens to see how their government is doing in recruiting dedicated and talented people. The new administration should encourage all government agencies to adopt a “Federal Job Applicant's Bill of Rights,” which ensures all candidates will be treated fairly, openly and promptly.

- Improve management from the top down. Obama will need to signal clearly and often to his political appointees that making long-term improvements to

basic government operations is a central part of their jobs.

These are extraordinary times, times in which government is not the problem, but must be part of the solution. With some basic reforms in how the government recruits, hires and retains its people, it can channel that enthusiasm to help rebuild the federal workforce. We must act now.

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