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Career Compass No. 104: Workforce Trends You Can't Ignore

Six workforce trends are too big to ignore or resist. Local governments need to embrace these new realities and help their organizations adapt.

By Dr. Frank Benest | Nov 01, 2023 | ARTICLE

I am the assistant city manager of a large Midwestern city. In the post-pandemic, we are struggling to maintain services to the public much less respond to city council priorities.

There is a lot of staff churn; many older, seasoned employees have retired; we have significant vacancies that are hard to fill; and our employees seem exhausted and less engaged. Due to these workforce challenges, we are dealing with customer service and productivity problems across all departments. Our police and paramedic response times have worsened; we don't have the staff to reopen our libraries full-time; and the processing of key development projects lag.

To attract new employees, we have raised salaries, begun to offer hiring bonuses for certain hard-to-fill positions (police and engineers), and provide employee referral incentives. The better compensation, bonuses, and referral incentives haven't made much of a dent in our vacancy rates.

We in top management seem to be at a loss. How do we turn this workforce situation around?



Local governments are facing a number of workforce trends and challenges that imperil our mission of providing effective services to the public. It used to be that addressing

workforce and talent issues was a nice, discretionary activity for top management. Now, addressing workforce challenges is a key business imperative.

These workforce trends do not just affect the public sector. In a survey of CEOs, the top three issues that “kept CEOs up at night” were:

1. Attracting and retaining top talent.
2. Developing the next generation of leaders.
3. Maintaining an engaged workforce.

(See “Stephanie Neal, “The Human Factor: The Top Three Concerns Keeping CEOs Up at Night,” CEO World Magazine, March 21, 2023.)

The Talent Crisis

Like many sectors in the economy, local government is facing a talent crisis. We are in a war for talent . . . and we are losing the war.

The talent challenge has many dimensions:

First, given the anti-government sentiment in much of the country, as well attacks on government from our own elected officials, we are not attracting high-potential young people into the talent pipeline. In addition, hyper-critical comments from the public and elected officials drive talent away.

Second, local governments can no longer rely on poaching talent from other agencies. We have to prioritize growing our own talent at all levels of the organization.

Third, talent is mobile. It can go anywhere, anytime. “A” players are “free exiters.” They can freely exit. Our organizations are not sufficiently “sticky” to retain high-performing staff.

Finally, many local government employees feel exhausted, undervalued, and disconnected. “Quiet quitting” (feeling unengaged and just doing the minimum) is a growing phenomenon.

(See Cal-ICMA Talent [2.0 Report](#).)

Recognizing this multifaceted talent dilemma, I believe that local government leaders must acknowledge and act upon certain workforce trends.

Six Workforce Trends and What to Do

Given my work with local government agencies and much research investigating current workforce realities, I suggest that we local government leaders confront six workforce trends.

1. Byzantine recruiting and hiring processes put local government at a competitive disadvantage.

In many cities and counties, it takes six months to recruit and hire someone. As one example, the recruitment and hiring process in San Francisco takes an average of 255 days. (See [Mallory Moench, "Reforms Intended to Accelerate City's Hiring Tied Up in Red Tape," San Francisco Chronicle, June 25, 2023.](#)) No professional or talented young person is going to wait six months for us to make up our minds.

Exacerbating bureaucratic hiring processes, our job announcements are unappealing and jargon-laden, and focus on job duties, not the difference that people can make in the position. In addition, our insistence on "minimal qualifications" and formal education attainment eliminates many applicants and limits our ability to diversify the workforce. (See Cal-ICMA Talent [2.0 Report.](#))

Some things to do:

- Reengineer recruitment and hiring processes. In most of our agencies, we need to reengineer and eliminate the many steps in the processes to recruit and hire talent.
- Eliminate "minimal qualifications." In many cases, minimal qualifications (including educational attainment) are not critical to actually doing the job. Given the ever-changing nature of local government jobs, we need to move from "pedigree" to "potential" and learning agility.
- Enhance job announcements. Job announcements issued by local governments are typically boring and unexciting. They need to trumpet the "why" of the job and the opportunity to make a difference ("help save the planet," "care for our children").

(See [Robert Lavigna, "A Roadmap for Dealing with Government's Workforce Crisis," ICMA blog, March 20, 2023.](#))

2. Remote/hybrid work is not going away.

Prior to the pandemic, local government agencies, like many public and private organizations, resisted telework. Of course, our experience during the COVID pandemic radically changed what was acceptable. Much research demonstrates that remote work is as productive if not more productive, than in-office work. (See [Julian Birkinshaw et al, "Research: Knowledge Workers Are More Productive from Home," hbr.org, Aug 31, 2020.](#)) Moreover, now that employees have experienced the ample benefits of remote or hybrid work (less costly and time-consuming commutes, more flexibility to care for

children and elders, more work autonomy and flexibility, better work-life balance), employees will strongly resist any “one-size-fits-all” edicts from top management to fully return to the office.

Onsites are the new offsites.

Some things to do:

- Provide autonomy and flexibility. For those employees who can do their work fully or partially at home, allow managers and their team members to figure out how many days and/or which days team members work in the office. The team knows best what is required of them. Autonomy and flexibility are key to maintaining engaged employees and retaining talent. (See [Career Compass #95 “Use Return-to-Office as Your Opportunity to Reset Culture.”](#))
- Treat onsite work as the new offsite. Leaders should not insist that employees commute to the office to do work that can easily be done at home. Just like our previous offsite retreats, onsite work should focus on consensus decision-making, collaboration, and relationship-building. (See [Erica Keswin, “In the Hybrid Era, “On-sites Are the New Off-sites,” hbr.org, Jan 6, 2022.](#))
- Redefine productivity. Pre-COVID, managers could directly supervise employees in-person. Productivity was often defined by “bottoms in the seat” with an emphasis on completing certain tasks. With remote or hybrid work, productivity must be redefined to focus on outcomes and results, allowing employees the autonomy within certain guide rails to “figure it out” and produce the desired results. (See [Lazlo Bock, “5 New Rules for Leading a Hybrid Team,” hbr.org, Nov 17, 2021.](#))

3. Learning and career development have become key drivers for employee engagement and retention.

In the past, providing learning and career development opportunities were not typically high leadership priorities. Now learning and career development are key to retaining talent as well as increasing adaptability amid all the uncertainty facing local government. In fact, learning is the new “social glue” that helps us retain talent. As long as employees are learning and growing, they tend to stay with us. (See [Frank Benest, PM, “Retaining and Growing Talent: Strategies to Create Organizational “Stickiness,” Oct 2002.](#))

Recognizing that it is increasingly difficult to “steal” professionals or those with critical technical skills from other organizations, local government agencies must make it clear that there are opportunities to grow and develop within the organization and/or the organization will get you ready for career advancement with another agency.

Some things to do:

- Commit to learning and career development as key organizational values. Just as “providing excellent customer service” or “promoting community partnerships” may be organizational values, ongoing learning and development must be an organizational imperative and leaders must then demonstrate a commitment to it.
- Teach all managers how to conduct development conversations. All managers can be trained to conduct and guide a simple development conversation with their direct reports, inquiring about their career hopes and dreams, options to achieve those hopes, obstacles to overcome, and support needed. Not only will these conversations support career development but they also demonstrate that the manager and organization care about them.
- Engage the executive team in talent discussions. To promote learning and career development, the chief executive and department heads must have scheduled and structured discussions about the development of emerging leaders in each department and suggested learning activities to accelerate their development. (See the fillable [Cal-ICMA template for “Conducting a Talent Discussion with the Executive Team”](#), and a pre-filled [sample of the template](#).)
- Provide a menu of development activities for all. Employees want choices in how and when they engage in learning and development. Therefore, top management must ensure that the organization provides a menu of development activities, such as stretch assignments, team leadership opportunities, interim assignments, lunch and learns, book clubs, career development classes, job shadowing or rotations, internal or multi-agency talent exchanges, in-house or regional leadership academies, and one-to-one coaching match-ups. In comparison with other investments (for example, capital projects, IT improvements), learning and talent development are some of the cheapest investments by local government. (See [Cal-ICMA “Menu of Development Opportunities for High-Potential Employees.”](#))
- Further develop career ladders. If employees see structured opportunities to grow and advance with their organizations, they are more likely to stay.

4. Employees desire an enhanced “employee experience.”

In the face of growing demands on their agencies yet with constrained resources, top management is being called upon to counter the lack of employee engagement and the “quiet quitting” phenomenon in order to increase productivity. The problem is that many front-line employees who can’t work from home, as well as remote/hybrid workers, feel overwhelmed, frustrated, distressed, and unappreciated. According to MissionSquare Institute research, 69% of local and state employees felt negative about their jobs, 49% said they were stressed, and 47% said they were actually burned out. ([Kery Murakami, “High Turnover Is Disrupting Efforts to Fix Workforce Crisis, A Survey Finds,” Route Fifty e-newsletter, June 30, 2023.](#))

Stay interviews are a powerful way to ‘recruit’ talent.

In dealing with employee morale, leaders have often taken a “transactional” approach (more compensation, better benefits). While employees value salary increases in times of high inflation and better family benefits, they most desire a “relational” approach. Employees want an enhanced employee experience featuring:

- A sense of purpose and meaning.
- Autonomy.
- Learning and growth.
- Belonging and community (“someone cares for me,” “my opinion counts,” “I feel connected to others”).
- Culture of gratitude.

If employees experience an organizational culture exhibiting some if not all of these traits, they will tend to be actively engaged and, therefore, more productive and certainly more likely to stay. In fact, local governments that create a positive employee experience are five times more likely to engage and retain talent. (See [Robert Lavigna, “A Roadmap for Dealing with Government’s Workforce Crisis,” ICMA blog, March 20, 2023.](#))

Some things to do:

- Constantly talk about the “why” of our work. We tend to immediately talk about “what” we need to do and “how” we need to do it. Purpose and meaning are about the “why” of our work. To help employees perceive meaning, leaders may ask in one-to-one conversations and team meetings “why is this project important to you?” (See [Simon Sinek’s TED Talk “How Great Leaders Inspire Action.”](#))
- Resist reinstating controls. By necessity during the pandemic, organizations streamlined approval processes to get things done, and managers gave employees more autonomy in how to do their work. Let’s not now reinstitute deadly controls.
- Autonomy is a great self-motivator. Instead of “telling” employees what to do and then “testing” them to see if they did it according to your instructions, ask employees:
 - What are your key priorities or projects?
 - Why are your efforts important to you?
 - What does “success” look like?
 - In the next week or two, what are one or two important steps forward in accordance with those priorities?
 - How can I support you?
- Promote learning and development. See discussion above.
- Focus on creating connection. People are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness that is only exacerbated by the isolation of remote work. For in-person as well in virtual teams, leaders must help people build social bonds. Research by The Gallup Organization indicated that a key to actively engaged employees is that “At work, someone cares about me.” In one-to-one conversations or team meetings, leaders can foster connection and caring by asking team members about their families, hobbies, sports or other non-work activities. Some organizations promote social

bonding by using the ritual of “taking 5” minutes at the beginning of meetings to talk about non-work interests, having potluck opportunities, or conducting group walking meetings. Research indicates that high-performing teams spend 25% more time on non-work topics than lesser-performing teams. (See [Ron Friedman, “5 Things High-Performing Teams Do Differently,” hbr.org, Oct 21, 2021.](#))

- Demonstrate appreciation. Gallup identifies recognition as another key driver of employee engagement (“In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work”). Even in the face of budget cuts, there are many simple and inexpensive ways to recognize people. For example, start each staff meeting with a “team accomplishment” segment when anyone can give a shout out, recognizing a team member’s contribution. While attending a city council or commission meeting, write personal thank you notes to the team members. It is also important to encourage governing board members to express appreciation of staff’s efforts.
- Conduct “stay interviews.” Instead of conducting an exit interview after a talented employee has already decided to leave, conduct a stay interview. A stay interview is a one-on-one interview between a manager and a valued employee. The purpose of the interview is to learn what will keep the employee working with you and elicit what would entice the employee to leave you. These conversations are a powerful way to connect with employees and “re-recruit” talent. (For stay interview guidelines and sample questions, go to [Career Compass #80 “To Retain Your Talent, Conduct Stay Interviews.”](#))

5. DEI is not a fad that will disappear.

In response to demands from employees, governing boards and community groups, local governments have begun to address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues inside and outside the organization. Some of us may believe that DEI initiatives are a fad that will disappear as more important challenges emerge; however, I believe that this is a workforce challenge that is here to stay.

While DEI initiatives may be based on social justice values, DEI has in fact a compelling business rationale. Local government faces many adaptive (not technical) challenges, such as homelessness, affordable housing, traffic congestion, climate change, and police reform. These adaptive challenges do not have any right or wrong solutions and require the diverse perspectives and ideas of many employees and stakeholders. DEI efforts help create this diversity of thinking and problem-solving.

In addition, employees want to work for an organization that prioritizes diversity and desire to serve on diverse teams. In a study by Citrix, 86% of employees and 66% of HR directors believe that a diverse workforce will continue to be important as roles, skills, and organizational requirements change over time. (See [Tim Minahan, “What Future Employees Want Most, hbr.org, May 31, 2021.](#))

As we face talent shortages, DEI efforts will also help agencies attract nontraditional candidates and expand talent pipelines. (See [Emily Rose McRae et al, “9 Trends That Will Shape Work in 2023 and Beyond,” hbr.org, Jan 18, 2023.](#))

Inclusion is a key element of a positive employee experience.

Finally, DEI efforts in our local government organizations will help us create a greater sense of community and belonging. Employees at all levels and all backgrounds need to feel that their voice is heard, their opinion counts, people care about them, and they have opportunities to develop themselves and advance. Inclusion is a key element of a positive employee experience.

Some things to do:

- Articulate a compelling business rationale for DEI efforts. While DEI for many may be a moral imperative, leaders must articulate and promote the business reasons for DEI.
- Conduct a series of in-person and online conversations with employees and community members. Focus groups, coffee sessions with the city manager, and surveys can help assess the experiences of employees and community members and generate their thoughts, concerns, and ideas about a more diverse and inclusive environment.
- Engage top management leaders in DEI initiatives. Like most organizational change efforts, DEI requires active (not just passive) support from the top.
- Find and engage some DEI champions and form a multi-department team with members from all levels of the organization. The team can identify initial action steps, priorities, training required, and resources.
- Don't go it alone. This is a tough issue and you need help. Get resources and identify best practices from other local government agencies and national organizations. Two national groups providing support are the [Government Alliance on Race and Equity](#) (GARE) and [ICMA](#).

6. The new world of work requires upskilling/reskilling middle managers.

As indicated by all the Gallup research on employee engagement and retention, the key relationship is the relationship between the employee and one's direct supervisor or manager. Employees join an organization for greater responsibility and expanded roles, as well as better compensation. They tend to leave an organization because of a poor relationship with their direct supervisor. (See [Marcus Buckingham et al, First Break All the Rules, 1999.](#))

The roles of mid-managers are shifting. Mid-managers have typically seen their role as “pushing out the work” of team members and demanding accountability. That traditional role is changing as we recognize the need for managers to create relationship and

connection with team members, promote learning and development, and generally support their efforts. As the world of work is transformed, bosses are becoming coaches.

As automation and AI begin to reconfigure work, mid-managers are on the ground and can help team members sort it out. (See [Emily Field et al, "Don't Eliminate Your Middle Managers," Harvard Business Review, July-August 2023.](#))

As Gallup has documented, 70% of the variance in team engagement and performance is due to the manager. (See [Austin Suellentrop and E. Beth Bauman, "How Influential Is a Good Manager?," gallup.com, June 2, 2021.](#))

The problem is we have not trained managers for these new roles and have not eliminated their individual work assignments or all their administrative work. Mid-managers are simply overwhelmed. In fact, they are the most stressed and depressed category of worker in most organizations. (See [Emily Field et al, "Don't Eliminate Your Middle Managers," Harvard Business Review, July-August 2023.](#))

Some things to do:

- Articulate the importance of the new roles for managers. Given the needs of the organization and employees, publicly discuss the compelling rationale in the role shift of managers and the support that the organization will provide.
- Provide training, coaching and other resources. Invest in the training and development of managers that emphasizes enhancing their human interaction skills, promoting employee engagement, and building a positive team culture. San Mateo County, California, developed an upskilling development program that included coaching for its managers. Each new manager is provided with the opportunity to select an internal coach to work with them for six months. Additionally, all supervisors and managers can access an SOS ([supervisors online support](#)) intranet site offering videos, development opportunities, and other resources to support their success.
- Evaluate, reward, and celebrate mid-managers based on their new role definition. Instead of solely evaluating and rewarding managers on the amount of work they and their team push out, evaluation and reward metrics must be aligned with the people skills and behaviors that are now needed by employees and the organization. As a best practice, organizations should celebrate those managers who are exemplars. (See [Career Compass #96 "Why We Need Great Mid-Managers More Than Ever."](#))

Shape the Change

These workforce challenges represent waves of change. These waves of change are too big to ignore or resist. They can easily overwhelm you and your organization.

The best approach is to recognize the waves of change and navigate them for the benefit of your organization. In other words, embrace the change and shape it as it occurs.



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