The Workforce Evolution: Recruiting and Retaining State IT Employees

The changing nature of the workforce seems to be at the forefront of every employer’s mind today. Research studies and articles abound proclaiming a looming “crisis shortage” of workers and decrying the obstacles of today’s multi-generational workforce. Questions regarding these workforce challenges are plentiful: Will there be enough incoming workers to fill outgoing retiree vacancies? Will these workers be skilled enough to take over responsibilities from seasoned employees, some of whom have been in their jobs for decades? With IT employment, the available talent pool can often be even smaller due to ever-evolving skill requirements that employers demand.

For state CIOs and other state IT employers, a deeper question remains: Is there a compelling reason for new workers to even consider a public service IT career? Will applicants be willing and able to navigate the red tape and the testing process that often accompanies a civil service application—or will they simply not consider state employment? Will they be equipped with the necessary technical skills for a career in state IT? In recent years, many state human resources departments have begun to take a hard look at their hiring processes in hopes to potentially streamline the application process and overhaul pay scales in order to entice and retain skilled talent. Some states have allowed certain exemptions from traditional merit systems in order to hire IT employees in a more expedient manner than other state employees. Certain states have also revised pay scale structures for IT employees so that they may receive compensation comparable to the private sector. Other states are just beginning to explore these options as potential solutions.

For many, the decision to enter public service comes from a desire within. Civil servants often feel satisfaction in knowing they are helping deliver vital citizen services and contributing to the advancement of their state. For others, the primary incentive lies in the generous benefits package and relative job security that state employment often offers. Both of these are crucial drivers in state employment and states continue to tout these incentives as a way to attract new workers.

In a 2007 NASCIO survey, State IT Workforce: Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?,...
State CIOs were asked to gauge the current workforce situation in their respective states. This survey pointed to the conclusion that state CIOs are experiencing difficulty in recruiting new employees to fill vacant IT positions—over 80 percent of respondents indicated they were having difficulty recruiting these new employees.1 When asked if their state was confident that it will be able to promote qualified staff to replace those retiring, over half of state respondents indicated that they were not.2 Addressing these recruitment—as well as retention—issues that states and state IT departments are clearly facing is a key factor in tackling workforce turnover challenges at the outset.

RECRUITMENT

State CIOs who explore innovative recruitment strategies and modernize traditional recruitment methods will have an advantage if their state happens to be hit with a disproportionate amount of outgoing to incoming employees. State CIOs can work to reverse this trend by continuously reviewing best practices and success rates of traditional recruitment strategies, and by seeking out alternative and innovative recruitment methods.

TRADITIONAL RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Print Advertising: Newspaper publicity has long been the advertising lifeline for both employers and job seekers. While this still remains a common source for job searching, moving from print to online advertising is an easy way to reach a wider audience who may not regularly read print newspapers. Some newspapers offer their verbatim print advertisements online, while others enlist specialized online employment sites, such as CareerBuilder. Posting on other job advertisement websites, such as Monster.com or other specialized venues, can help bring traditional advertisements into the digital age.

Student Outreach: High schools, universities and technical schools are fertile grounds for potential civil servants, and states must pursue different avenues in courting this untapped talent pool. This can be done indirectly through developing relationships with high school guidance offices and university career centers, and also by posting job advertisements on university career websites and job lists.

Directly reaching out to students can be done by appearing at career fairs to meet with prospective employees. State CIOs can work to incorporate innovative ways to stand out at these high school or college career fairs—these can include handing out a DVD about state IT employment, making print materials enticing and making sure your best resources are on hand to talk to students and their families. Also, evaluating success rates at certain schools can be an easy way to determine where more effort is needed and where more resources should be placed.

Internship and Cooperative Education Programs: Internship and cooperative education programs continue to drive students, primarily at the college or technical school level, to government employment. By allowing students to get a foot in the door early, they gain a greater understanding of civil service, and obtain the experience that is often necessary for even entry-level positions. Additionally, their supervisors or colleagues can assist them in navigating through the civil service application process, should they become interested in full-time state employment following graduation.

- Internship programs are generally more flexible than co-op programs in terms of length and compensation. Co-op programs generally compensate students with a set rate that is previously determined; whereas internship programs vary in terms of compensation offered—often, interns are not paid in anything but experience gained. Interns can serve for a semester, a summer, or over a longer span of time if desired. These programs
continue to be an effective way to recruit young employees by allowing them an inside look at civil service before making a career decision.

Oklahoma’s CAPIP Internship Program Proves Successful

The State of Oklahoma’s Carl Albert Public Internship Program (CAPIP) has assisted students at institutions of higher education in gaining experience and knowledge in state government and to encourage recruitment of such students to pursue careers in state government service since 1988. The program has two components: the Undergraduate Internship, and the Executive Fellows. At the conclusion of FY 06, a total of twenty-five graduate students and eight undergraduate students participated in internships.

The Undergraduate Internship program consists of temporary positions for students who are currently enrolled in institutions of higher education and are working toward an undergraduate degree. Executive Fellows interns may be employed for up to two years; those who successfully complete a two-year internship are eligible for appointment to a position in the classified or unclassified state service. State agencies utilized CAPIP’s from a number of Oklahoma schools. For more information, please visit: www.ok.gov/opm/State_Jobs/Carl_Albert_Public_Internship_Program.html

- Cooperative Education (Co-op) Programs allow students to hold positions within state government while earning school credit. These programs are typically compensated and last for at least one year while the student holds a position title and has specific responsibilities. These programs are often a formal agreement between a university or technical school and the state agency in which the student is placed.

Tennessee IT Community Sees Success with College Co-Op Program

Tennessee’s IT departments and agencies typically utilize thirty-five co-op students at any given time. Of the last thirty co-ops to leave the program, thirteen have become state IT employees over an approximate one-year period. The students enter employment with proven desktop, helpdesk, security, and wide area network (WAN) skills.

The students are placed in an entry-level position, termed “Information Systems Associate.” After one year, these Associate positions can transition to Programmer Analyst, Systems Programmer, Data Designer, and others. This position is not rated; therefore everyone is equal on the state register. This allows agencies to hire graduating co-ops.

These methods and programs are examples of traditional recruitment methods that remain successful. Other recruitment incentives may include signing bonuses or relocation assistance. Consistently reviewing best practice components of each program can help to enhance employee achievement rates. State CIOs must seek out alternative ways to recruit new employees in order to remain competitive with the private sector—utilizing unique recruitment strategies will help states stay ahead of the curve.

INNOVATIVE RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Generation “Why?” Enticing the Next Generation to State IT Employment

Enticing young people to enter government IT work—and making sure those young people can cut through the necessary red tape to navigate the application process—remains a key component to counteracting a potential decline in IT talent. State CIOs
must seek ways to answer that one key question from young workers—why should I consider working in state IT? It is essential that State CIOs seek innovative ways to communicate the benefits for working in state IT to this next generation of ambitious, inquisitive and socially-networked workers.

To do this, state CIOs must answer a critical question of their own—where can I find these young potential employees? Bright, talented and educated young workers are out there; you just have to know where to look. **Web 2.0 has ushered in an age in which constant interaction is necessary and expected. It has changed the way people socialize with peers and network with colleagues—job recruitment is no exception.**

Employers at all levels are beginning to explore unique ways to reach out to members of Generation Y (typically those individuals 28 or younger) who are vastly plugged into various forms of social networking by moving beyond conventional online advertising to utilizing social networks such as Facebook, Myspace, LinkedIn and Second Life. These innovative efforts are not limited to the private sector—after discussions with Human Resources departments, state CIOs are finding that they can implement some of these unique recruiting efforts as well.

**Missouri Takes Recruitment to the Next Level of Reality**

In December of 2007, the State of Missouri became the first state in the nation to establish a presence in “Second Life,” an online community in which individuals and organizations can create “avatars” which serve as virtual adaptations of themselves or their companies. These avatars can shop using Second Life (SL) currency (which translates into real dollars), socialize with others, attend classes at real universities—and job search.

The Missouri Information Technology Services Department (ITSD), led by state CIO Dan Ross, has worked in response to this growing trend of virtual reality and created an online presence in Second Life. Led by the ITSD, in consultation with Human Resources, this online resource holds virtual job fairs and seeks to educate those IT-savvy individuals that are plugged into this virtual world about working in state IT in Missouri.

Although the program was recently launched, it is already considered a success by Ross. The national media attention that the state garnered as a result of the launch of their SL presence has provided a unique marketing aspect that casts Missouri as utilizing leading-edge tools (virtual worlds or social networks) in the hiring of technical talent and in promoting the State of Missouri overall.

Additionally, the SL project has enabled Missouri to recruit outside state boundaries for relatively no cost. In February of 2008, the state held a virtual job fair in SL in which they were able to communicate with people from several states in addition to their own. To date, there have been over 300 visitors to their SL site.

However, innovative student recruitment for IT careers and state IT employment is not limited to the virtual world. In Arkansas, the EAST initiative (which includes the state Department of Education as a partner) allows high school student participants to obtain training in a number of technical areas including GIS, website design and PC upgrade and repair. Students engage in numerous technical projects that prepare them for potential careers in IT.

In South Carolina, the Vocational Rehabilitation Department has a program in place that enables physically disabled citizens to gain extensive IT training in preparation for a job in IT. Both of these programs—and many others nationwide—lay the groundwork for young people to enter into IT careers. State IT departments can work to identify programs like these, as
Beyond Retirement: Recruiting Seasoned IT Workers

State IT departments should concentrate on attracting the younger generation of employees, to be sure. However, this young talent pool is largely inexperienced and will require years of training before they can be adequately able to replace the large number of anticipated retirees. Even the most sound knowledge management plan can’t substitute for the years of work experience of seasoned professionals that are well-versed in navigating office politics and heavy workloads. In this regard, states are reaching out to older workers in three demographics:

- Retired civil servants
- Retired military personnel
- Private sector workers who are retired or who desire a career change.

Retired Civil Servants

Career civil servants who have dedicated themselves to public service are typically eligible to retire at a fairly young age. Young retirees may feel as though they are not done with the workforce and may wish to return, even on a part-time basis, to either their previous positions or to other departments.

While some states are beginning to incorporate prohibitions against retirees being able to return to previous positions in order to prevent individuals from being eligible to draw two pensions, many states do allow retired civil servants to return to work in some capacity albeit without additional benefits. Re-hiring and utilizing prior staff resources to help implement knowledge management plans, train new staff members on aspects of their former jobs, or as contractors to perform certain job functions, can be a good way for states to stave off potential problems that can arise when there is a shortage of staff members.
Whether states are reaching out to students, recent graduates, current or retired private sector employees, retired public servants or military personnel — states nationwide can agree that taking steps to ensure a steady flow of state IT job applicants will augment state IT services.

California Allows Former State Employees to “Boomerang” Back to Public Service

California’s “Boomerang” program, launched in September of 2006, is a centralized database of retired state employees that have an interest in accepting temporary employment within a state agency as a retired state employee. The database allows retirees to detail their skills and areas of expertise and to determine how long they would like to be a part-time employee. State retirees can work for any state department and state departments can use the Boomerang program to identify potential applicants for retired civil servant employment opportunities.5

For more information on this program, California Public Employees Retirement System (CalPERS) has released a booklet about working after retirement which will help determine eligibility for the Boomerang program.6

Retired Military Personnel

Retired military service personnel are also eligible to retire from duty at a young age. Desire to serve the public is often very high among this demographic and state employment can be viewed as another avenue in which to serve. Also, in certain states, working for the state provides an additional pension beyond their military pension. Work ethic among these former service men and women is typically very high — additionally, military personnel often hold security clearance status and can be potentially placed into critical high-level or security-focused positions.

Current and Retired Private Sector Workers

Retired private sector employees who wish to “give back” through public service and are looking to make a transition after retirement can bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the public sector. These retirees, similar to public and military retirees, may feel they are not done working and wish to shift to an employment environment that may offer fewer hours and better benefits than they had previously received. This prospect can be attractive for both retired and current private sector employees who wish to make a career change.

“Converting” Contract Employees: Contractual employees for state IT departments often work alongside their state employee counterparts every day and state CIOs have reported success in bringing over contract employees to state employment. In converting these contract employees, state CIOs are not only bringing in skilled professionals — they are gaining employees that already have hands-on knowledge of their specific work process and environment. In some instances, the lines are so blurred between contract and state employees; some may not be able to distinguish which employees are under which employment system. However, the job stability that state employees have can be attractive to private contractors, especially if the threat of downsizing reaches their company.

In the oft-volatile job market, private sector employees are more vulnerable to abrupt lay-offs than state employees, who are generally protected by merit system laws. By following industry trends, public employers can target private sector employees who are anticipating a lay-off by a downsizing company. In some states, companies of a certain size are required to meet with the state Department of Labor (DOL) prior to downsizing in order to discuss employee rights, instructing those downsized on how to sign up for unemployment benefits, how to receive job training, etc. State CIOs can contact their DOL in order to be advised of potential layoffs, particularly those which may include IT employees.

Whether states are reaching out to students, recent graduates, current or retired private sector employees, retired public servants or military personnel — states nationwide can agree that taking steps to
ensure a steady flow of state IT job applicants will augment state IT services. However, another challenge facing State CIOs is not only the recruitment of new employees, but holding on to those they already have.

**RETENTION**

Often, recruitment and retention benefits can go hand in hand. *The same benefits and incentives that are used to attract employees can be used to preserve them.* Along with monetary incentives such as employee referral bonuses and one-time award bonuses, these retention incentives can include:

- Establishing a sound Work-Life Balance
- Emphasizing the civil service benefits package
- Offering educational and learning opportunities

**Work-Life Balance**

Placing emphasis on work-life balance is not only about giving employees the ability to manage their time spent on the job, but also about giving employees the opportunity to engage in activities with co-workers outside of the office. For example, Missouri’s IT Services Department arranges an organization-wide outing to a baseball game, other state IT departments may organize teams for area fundraising efforts, or for other activities outside the office. Not only do these activities enhance a sense of unity among colleagues, but they allow others to see that working for your department or division is enjoyable. A major component of this work-life balance is workplace flexibility.

**Workplace Flexibility**

**Flexible Hours:** A flexible workplace can encompass a number of components. A popular element of this can be flexible hours in which an employee can work. Allowing employees to set individual working hours as long as they are working during core business hours, i.e., 7:00-4:00 vs. 9:00-6:00, can allow employees to feel a sense of control over the way they spend their day. Similarly, giving employees the option of working condensed work weeks, with longer hours on the days they work in order to have more time off, also allows employees to feel a greater sense of jurisdiction over their personal time management.

**Flexible Work Location:** A growing phenomenon in workplace flexibility is that of teleworking, sometimes referred to as telecommuting. Whether an employee works from home primarily, or is allowed to do so when the need arises, productivity is able to continue even during emergency or other external situations. *Often employers find that productivity levels will increase when employees do not have to embark on a daily commute, and do not have to deal with office distractions and internal stressors.*

NASCIO’s State IT Workforce survey respondents placed Workplace Flexibility at the top of the list—second only to the benefits package—of what attracts new workers to their state. This suggests that states have already begun to recognize and implement workplace flexibility plans.

**Telework!VA Program Helps Virginia Business Establish Telework Programs**

Telework!VA, launched by the state Department of Rail and Public Transportation in 2001, seeks to provide resources to allow more Virginians to telework. In order to help reduce the number of commuters on Virginia’s roadways, Telework!VA provides financial assistance and training for Virginia businesses to start or expand a formal telework program.

The Telework!VA program promotes the following benefits to telework:
Teleworking still remains a subject of debate among employers. To incorporate a telework process, state policy issues must first be resolved, some of which may pose significant obstacles. Employers must work to overcome doubts regarding remote worker productivity levels and other internal issues that surround telework agreements. Tensions can arise if there is friction among team members as to which employees are eligible to telework and which must remain in the office on a daily basis. While certain jobs require an in-office presence, state IT job functions can frequently be performed off-site. However, there must be a certain number of people in the office during business hours, which may create conflict among colleagues.

One common concern around teleworking is that it detracts from a culture of teamwork, as developing a strong interoffice rapport is often seen as an integral part of team-building. However, studies have increasingly shown that teleworking is a growing movement that is rising in popularity. **Teleworking appears to be a trend that will only accelerate as both long-time and incoming employees advocate for this benefit, emergency and pandemic-preparedness plans continue to develop and as organizations become increasingly committed to incorporating “green” practices such as keeping more vehicles off the roadways. Therefore, these reasons can compel state IT departments to establish telework policies and procedures and explore alternative methods of team-building.**

**Benefits Package**

In NASCIO’s recent survey, state CIOs were asked to gauge the current workforce situation in their respective states. When states were asked what attracts new workers to their state, the benefits package was at the top of the list. These benefits include comprehensive medical benefits, flexible benefits, deferred compensation, comp leave, substantial sick leave, disability, life insurance, dependent care, generous vacation policies and personal time off, paid holidays, and other forms of flexible benefits. **While many of these benefits are not necessarily unique to state government, they often serve as a driver for incoming workers and a retainer for current workers.**

These comprehensive medical benefits, and the flexibility to choose “cafeteria benefits” that allow employees to pick and choose those benefits most applicable to their personal needs, continue to be an attractive incentive to both incoming and existing civil servants. In addition, many states are moving to adopt additional “wellness” programs for their employees to improve their quality of life and to help potentially reduce medical costs for the state.

- Allows employees to be more effective
- Increases management results
- Assures uninterrupted work
- Reduces real estate costs
- Decreases employee recruitment and training costs
- Allows for Business Continuity
- Lowers relocation costs
- Increases quality of life
- Lowers personal costs
- Expands your human resource pool
- Benefits the environment

To incorporate a telework process, state policy issues must first be resolved, some of which may pose significant obstacles.
Kansas Is On a “Quest” to Improve Healthcare of State Employees

HealthQuest, a program that is jointly administered by the Kansas Health Policy Authority and the Kansas State Employees Health Care Commission, offers unique health services to employees and their dependents. Health screenings, health coaching, the Personal Health Assessment (PHA) online tool, programs for Tobacco Control and Weight Management are all part of HealthQuest and are available for all state employees.

Monthly newsletters offering nutritional and exercise tips, information regarding health and wellness issues, a wellness blog, and a wealth of other resources on HealthQuest’s website are free for users.10

Retirement and pension plans are also a major driver and incentive for state employment. Public servants can work a set amount of years in order to become eligible for a full retirement package, and in some states, this includes full medical benefits and coverage after retirement. In states that do not offer the medical component, many workers may choose to delay retirement in order to maintain medical health insurance coverage. These states may face a different dilemma—an aging workforce that simply can’t afford to leave due to rising healthcare costs.

But will young employees, both potential and existing, think of these benefits in a similar way? Recent trends indicate a reversal of the once-common employment cycle in which an employee may stay in the same job for decades. Young workers today are known to be highly driven to find that “next best thing” and can often jump from job to job in short periods of time, and may not place high value in certain benefits such as pension plans. **Will these benefits, along with other benefits such as job stability, be attractive to the next generation of workers?**

And perhaps more importantly, if so, will these benefits even be available to these incoming workers? Due to substantial unfunded liability of pension plans, recent state trends of cutting back on benefit packages may mean that the same benefits that current state employees enjoy may not be able to be utilized for recruitment purposes. Each state, according to their own needs and situations, will handle these issues individually. Civil service benefits packages must remain comparable and competitive to that of private sector benefits packages in order to attract and retain top IT talent.

Civil service benefits packages must remain comparable and competitive to that of private sector benefits packages in order to attract and retain top IT talent.

Education and Learning Opportunities

One significant advantage that often accompanies state employment is the educational benefits that employees are eligible to receive in the form of tuition reimbursement and other opportunities to further education and training. Many states offer tuition reimbursement to individuals receiving both bachelors and master’s degrees, or offer training in certain areas that are related to their job functions. States also offer reimbursement for employees seeking certain IT certifications. Other states partner with local universities to offer courses in public management for their employees.

Oregon’s Certificate of Public Management (CMP) Program

Oregon’s CMP program is a joint effort between the State of Oregon and Willamette University and Portland State University and allows state employees to take courses on state time. They attend courses one morning per week for two hours for two years. The CPM is designed to meet the professional needs of managers in the public service. Upon completion of the Certificate, employees can put these hours toward a Masters of Public Administration degree if they choose.11
Moving beyond traditional tuition reimbursement, many states are offering innovative ways to keep their employees trained on the latest technologies and allow them to further their own professional development. These can include:

- Bringing educational opportunities to employees by having area universities hold undergraduate and graduate-level courses in state facilities
- Allowing employees to participate in online learning courses or attend virtual universities
- Providing monetary assistance in receiving IT certifications
- Sending employees to professional development seminars or conferences

**TAKING THE FIRST STEPS: WHAT STATE CIOS NEED TO DO**

The ideas presented in this brief will not and can not happen overnight. *All civil servants, at any level, understand the complex state processes and extensive rules that can encumber recruitment strategies and hinder certain retention methods.*

- **Utilize Human Resources Departments:** In order to help navigate pre-existing red tape, state CIOs should first consult their personnel departments at the outset of a project to determine if certain recruitment or retention methods are possible, and what steps need to be taken to implement a new process. Find out if they perceive an upcoming worker shortage and gauge the current applicant pool for state IT positions. Collaborating with HR to integrate these new projects or processes will help facilitate cross-boundary collaboration and may expedite processes. Additionally, collaborating with HR will help to identify collective bargaining agreements that may be in place in your state.

- **Think Outside the Box:** Human resources departments can not only help CIOs navigate through restraints, but can also help to show what policies and initiatives are possible, and what is within the boundaries. Get creative—some ideas that may seem farfetched at the beginning can develop into innovative initiatives that can have a major impact on recruitment efforts and employee morale.

- **Do Your Homework:** Working with HR departments to become familiar with your state’s regulations, procedures and protocols will help state CIOs determine what they can do before they move forward with a project. Also, reach out to other states that have done innovative things in recruitment and retention. Gather best practices and lessons learned, gage success stories and assess project failures before deciding to embark on a similar initiative.

- **Start at the Top:** In some cases, policy may need to be changed before certain strategies can be implemented. For example, to have your state IT department implement a bonus system or to alter pay scales for both recruitment and retention purposes—or to streamline hiring processes—will often require approval by state personnel boards, or may even necessitate legislative approval.

- **Look Within:** Take a close look at your existing staff and work to assess the severity of the workforce shortage you may be facing—and determine if you are likely to face a shortage at all. Establishing a baseline of what your particular situation is, or may be in the near future, will help state CIOs determine the level of rigor that may be required to overhaul your current recruitment and retention tactics.

Work to implement knowledge management training programs and incorporate succession management plans. Survey your own employees for ideas that they may have for retaining workers and keeping morale high. Conducting a skills gap...
assessment can also be a way to determine what knowledge disparities may exist. Additionally, consider updating and modernizing legacy systems in order to retain existing knowledge—all of these internal processes may help make a potentially drastic situation into a more manageable one. Working to augment a potential state IT worker shortage will help state CIOs be ready to face these challenges as they arise and as the IT workforce evolves to reflect the modern, multi-generational, and socially-networked IT workforce of the future.
Appendix I: Resources


The Impact of the Aging Workforce on Public Sector Organizations and Mission, February 2007. This study, conducted by EquaTerra for the International Public Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-HR), can be found at: http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/IPMA-HR/UNPAN025894.pdf

The National Association of State Personnel Executives (NASPE) has several publications and research available on this and other topics. These can be found at www.naspe.net
Appendix II: Endnotes


2 Ibid. Pages 14-15.

3 [http://it-careers.mo.gov](http://it-careers.mo.gov)

4 EAST Initiative, [www.eastinitiative.org](http://www.eastinitiative.org)


8 Telework!VA, Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, 2008. [www.teleworkva.org](http://www.teleworkva.org)


10 HealthQuest—State of Kansas Health & Wellness Program. [www.khpa.ks.gov/healthquest](http://www.khpa.ks.gov/healthquest)

11 Oregon Certificate of Public Management Programs – for more information, please visit [www.willamette.edu/agsm/cpm](http://www.willamette.edu/agsm/cpm) or [www.eli.pdx.edu/cpm](http://www.eli.pdx.edu/cpm).

NASCIO makes no express or implied endorsement of any specific products, services or organizations listed in this brief.