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Time to sink or swim in the public sector

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Mr Bean, is the image many private sector workers associate with the public sector, 'inflexible', 'slow' or 'out-of-touch', not words one should be attributing to the largest employer in the country. But sadly many public sector workers will agree. Apathy appears to rule the roost. So will 2010 be the year of the new civil servant?



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Public sector at crossroads

The beginning of 2010 has revealed clearly that the public sector is at a crossroads; either it starts to embrace the technology within recruitment or it risks falling further behind the private sector in the war for talent. A culture entrenched in bureaucracy and a job for life culture is starting to take its toll.

It's not just local government that is suffering in this culture of masochistic boredom. The NHS, the Civil Service, the Courts (especially the Courts) are renowned for their tired, inflexible approaches to recruitment where large numbers of candidates are hired internally, neglecting a huge pool of talent from outside the sector.

In all 62% of current public sector employees have been in their role for six years or more. At face value, these figures do not necessarily equate to a 'bad' culture: after all, lower staff turnover can contribute to a settled, organised workplace. The fact that many public sector workers have been in the same role for over a decade is only half of the problem. The internal culture and attitude the public sector fosters is the considerable other half. Until very recently public sector employees have been guaranteed annual incremental pay increases, regardless of performance. Many public sector employers still do not have an appraisal system. Where is the motivation to perform, improve and develop within this system?

Wake up call for public sector employees

Increasingly it seems the threat of budget cuts and staff cutbacks are on the horizon and the majority of public sector employees are sitting ducks due to the environment they are a product of. If thrown out into the talent pool many long serving public sector workers will be in for a big wake up call.

David Marshall, co-founder of [jobsgopublic.com](#) says: "We've known about this eventuality for a long time. Many public service organisations have been paying lip service to the efficiency and modernisation agenda, now more than ever it is time to walk the walk."

For public sector employers the time is nigh to make a commitment to embracing technological efficiencies in an effort to reduce spend. They need to attract, recruit and develop talent in the most intelligent way. Leading public sector employers saw the power of the internet years ago and have been using digital technology to streamline cumbersome paper-based recruitment process and cut costs ever since. Shepherds Bush Housing is a good example, their HR director David Blackbum summed it up succinctly, 'Since implementing our digital recruitment strategy we have managed to reduce our recruitment costs by nearly 50%'.

Fear of public sector redundancies

Another approach is being employed by Tower Hamlets NHS, who are encouraging job seekers from their local community into the public sector by opening up ring-fenced entry-level vacancies to a website.

The job-ready can register with the online talent pool to gain exclusive access to these vacancies while those requiring additional skills and training can register with the skills portal for further support. Deb Clarke, director of Human Resources and Organisation Development at NHS Tower Hamlets advised: "We need to keep being

ambitious for ourselves and for the population that we serve. Achieved targets and department successes should be celebrated and learnt from. We need to make sure that Results matter even more and performance is incentivised.”

The Office of National Statistics reported in their December 2009 survey that 6.09 million people were currently employed in the public sector, (up 5% from 2008) this figure will gradually regress as the public sector recession gathers momentum over the next year or so. Many public sector employees are viewing this year with much trepidation and anxiety - and understandably so. The fear of redundancy and salary cuts weighs heavy, and for many this is the first time they have had to worry about such eventualities. The LGC predict that pay freezes across public sector organisations will have a detrimental impact on recruitment as well as staff morale.

Public sector organisations must ensure they have a detailed map of all employee skills, that way redeployment will always be an option. And if the regrettable process of redundancies is needed then the best talent is retained.

Exploit fresh talent in the public sector

Despite indications that the public sector is not immune to the recession it seems a growing number of job seekers still see it as an attractive career move. The economic instability of the last 18 months has made a lot of people reconsider their professional priorities and many see the public sector as an attractive option.

So just when the public sector needs an injection of new talent and fresh approaches, the increased interest couldn't have come at a better time. This renewed interest was reflected in a recent candidate survey undertaken by jobsgopublic.com. Of the 4000 candidates who completed the survey 94% currently working in the private sector would consider a move to the public sector, while only 73% would consider moving the other way. Surely a top priority for the public sector as 2010 gathers pace must be to ensure they recruit the best of this interested talent.

So standing here in February 2010 looking forward we see a desperate need for the public sector to embrace digital efficiencies and deliver on the modernisation agenda for their recruitment processes. This is the only way the public sector will be able to compete with the private sector in the war for talent. This war for talent will become even more important over the next six months as fewer hires are made, deadweight within a workforce could be catastrophic. Our figures suggest that despite all the highlighted shortfalls of the public sector it still remains an attractive career option among job seekers. This sentiment needs to be harnessed and intelligently exploited if 2010 is to be the year of the new civil servant.



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