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Utah's Other Brain Drain

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Policymakers often fret about Utah's "brain drain," talented young people who gain a solid education in Utah's schools, colleges and universities then go outside the state in search of better paying jobs. However, there is a quieter and potentially more damaging brain drain that is going to hit the state within the next few years. This brain drain has gotten very little press and only minimal attention from those that are going to be most impacted: government agencies.

National estimates place the percentage of government workers that are in the baby boom age group at 43.6%. This means that as this age group retires over the next twenty-five years; federal, state, local governments as well as school districts, fire and police forces will lose almost half of their total workforce and up to 75% of their management force. While the private sector will also experience high rates of attrition, the public sector will experience the brain drain first and the results will be felt more keenly than in the private sector.



Why?

Government jobs aren't as well paying as those in the private sector and there has been very little inducement given to recruit younger workers, especially in critical sectors such as IT. Government cannot compete with the wages paid in the private sector and the once-heralded government health and retirement benefits have been slowly eroded by legislative bodies unwilling to pay increasing costs. When baby boomers started their careers, government benefits were used to off-set low wage rates as incentives to these new workers. That is no longer the case and young people considering careers in the public sector often find out the benefit packages are similar or less generous than those offered by private employers. Therefore, fewer and fewer Gen-X and Gen-Y workers have entered public service and the median age of government employees has grown older. Faced with this, how government deals with the loss of its key personnel and their institutional knowledge could serve as a model for the private sector. Unfortunately, very few state governments have taken steps to plan for this inevitable reduction in force.

Utah is in a unique situation, demographically. We are the youngest state in the nation with a median age of 27.9 years; the result of the large number of children in the state potentially means that we don't have to worry as much about retiring government workers.

If it were only that easy; this is where the two "brain drains" collide. As public sector wages have stayed stagnant or declined, in inflation-adjusted terms, young people have turned to the private sector for jobs. Additionally, turnover within the public sector in Utah is low, thus there are few openings, outside of certain sectors, for these young people to apply for. Thus, government is "graying" faster in Utah than the private sector. As government employees retire, more openings will be available to younger workers but the fear is that these new employees won't have the skills or training to work in the public arena. Thus, succession

planning becomes key for any government agency. What is succession planning and how can it help agencies prepare for the boomer brain drain?

By definition, succession or workforce planning is “an ongoing process of systematically identifying, assessing, and developing talent to ensure the leadership continuity for all key positions in an organization” (Radtke 2001, 19). Utah government agencies that successfully prepare now for the impending retirement of the boomers will not have to expend greater effort later when these workers start retiring in large numbers.

According to the one of the key proponents, succession planning is a process that needs to include the following steps:

1. Analyze the organization’s current workforce capabilities (e.g., the people and competencies available right now)
2. Project the organization’s future workforce needs (people/competencies needed to do the work of the future)
3. Compare the current workforce to future workforce needs (i.e., to identify people/competency imbalances-both gaps and surpluses)
4. Develop HR policies, plans, and approaches to eliminate gaps and surpluses and therefore build the workforce of the future
5. Do it again and again. That is, put in place a permanent process to continually assess workforce needs and capabilities, identify gaps, and eliminate imbalances (2005, 8).

While working on this process, HR staff in government offices needs to keep in mind a few realities. First, agency economics are going to drive the process. Since succession planning is difficult to tie to agency mission and other goals important to top-level staff and legislative bodies, most likely the resources-both monetary and otherwise are not going to be sufficient to the task. Second, the demographic composition of the younger workforce is vastly different than the boomers they are replacing. In addition, if these workers are coming from the private sector, their expectations for job flexibility, telecommuting and other “fringe benefits” are likely different from their predecessors. Finally, having faced the huge cost of retiring boomer employees, state and local governments will want to eliminate positions, outsource work to the private sector and utilize other labor cost-saving methods at an even greater rate. Therefore, HR offices need to ask the critical question “Can the agency do without replacing this person?”

These issues as well as an analysis of what other states are doing in regard to succession planning are available in a piece written by a University of Utah graduate student in the Master of Public Administration program. To access that paper, please [click here](#).

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