Institutional Changes Necessary for Building Government Tech Workforce

Changes among agency management may be a precursor for better utilizing talent from private industry.

Adam Patterson
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The federal government may be able to drive recruitment efforts from private-sector tech by developing better understanding of technology and innovation, according to industry leader and tech accelerator Dcode.

"An actual understanding of technology and innovation is necessary for processes to improve," said Dcode Managing Director of Technology Programs Nate Ashton. Streamlining the private-public hiring pipeline means changes within government agencies would be necessary to better leverage the talents of
technically oriented employees.

While the federal hiring process remains opaque and challenging to navigate for those looking to enter government, Ashton noted there are still wide-ranging cultural changes that will need to occur within the government to better accommodate its current tech workforce as well.

“The issue that is biggest and most pervasive is the actual enablement of the current workforce,” Ashton said.

Most prominent among these is a gulf in technical comprehension between upper-level management and the employees they’re responsible for overseeing — a disconnect that can lead to delays or inefficiencies in project completion.

“You need more technical understanding, training, even cultural change among the people running government programs,” Ashton said.

While long-serving civil servants carry essential institutional knowledge, their familiarity with new technical applications or practices may lag behind those of their staff. Ashton emphasized that failing to rectify this knowledge gap among contract managers could blunt the impact of hiring reforms irrespective of their scope or success.

The solution may lie in combining these institutional changes with new hiring practices. “How do you both hire new people and enable them to do more once they’re in [government]?” Ashton added.

Noting programs that have already proven successful in solving this dual challenge, Ashton singled out the Air Force’s Kessel Run project — a department that draws employees from within the armed forces to foster skills development in a less formal workplace environment that borrows from private-sector tech. Rather than hire the majority of its workforce from external firms, Kessel Run focuses on developing the potential of workers drawn from its own institutional network.

A similar challenge rests on reconciling the particularities of federal hiring with the tendencies and expectations of the tech workforce.

“There will always be certain controls and unique processes around government hiring you won’t see in private industry,” Ashton said.
While many of these are necessary precautions around security and disclosure, certain prohibitions may need to be relaxed in order to best leverage available human capital. Ashton cited the practice of rejecting the security clearance of any applicant who has consumed marijuana within the preceding year, a potentially antiquated barrier in light of cannabis' legal status across multiple jurisdictions — Silicon Valley’s home state of California included.

Ashton detailed promising instances of employee exchange between the federal government and private industry, noting these could serve as models for human capital and knowledge transfer. The Department of the Army’s Training With Industry program allows federal employees to spend a year’s tenure at outside firms in order to develop new skills and familiarity with commercial practice. Ashton noted an inverse program is being considered to bring private-sector employees directly to federal agencies in order to foster a more direct understanding of government institutions.

Ashton outlined that improving technical knowledge among federal contract managers would also be crucial for better coordinating with the government’s substantial contractor base. While the precise amount of contractors on government payroll is difficult to ascertain, Ashton has “seen estimates as high as 15 million.”

This can result in a problematic dynamic between contractors and managers with less technical expertise, especially on more complex initiatives.

“If you go to a government office working on a data analysis project, the upper-level management will be government, but most of their technical employees will be contractors,” Ashton said.

The solution, Ashton proposed, may lie in more broadly educating contract managers on new technology — an investment of resources that will yield gains from productivity that ultimately outstrip the initial cost.