DHS Eyeing Top Tech Talent From Silicon Valley

Federal agencies can't compete with the private sector when it comes to salary. But there are other ways to appeal to IT professionals.  

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Mon, 09/28/2020 - 15:37

Competing with the private sector for information technology talent is something the federal government will continue to face. But the Department of Homeland Security has a few strategies to lure top talent into federal jobs.

Two DHS officials said they’re trying to tailor the agency's tech jobs to look more like those at Silicon Valley heavyweights like Google and Facebook.
The DHS Science & Technology Directorate’s Transportation Security Lab, for example, is currently exploring artificial intelligence and machine learning to improve and expedite the Transportation Security Administration's security-screening process at airports.

But the office is struggling to find the talent to do the research, said Barry Smith, manager of the lab's Applied Research Division.

“Trying to get the talent is difficult,” Smith told GovernmentCIO Media & Research. “I have a posted opportunity now for synthetic data generation, essentially for a computational physicist or engineer. I've had a very hard time finding that person. They need clearance, which takes a long time — and a post-doctorate just gotten out of school needs to find a job quickly, and this takes a long time.”

Too often, Silicon Valley snaps up those post-doctorate graduates.

“We can't compete with the private sector — Google, Amazon, Apple or Facebook — when there's big money in machine learning,” Smith said.

One successful way DHS appeals to tech talent is by playing up the agency mission.

“I have talked to a number of people when I've been recruiting post-docs — they really like the idea of supporting homeland security and finding weapons and stopping the bad guys,” Smith said. “We do have a number of mid-level people, and new [hires] who are very interested in learning about machine and synthetic data, and they've stepped up to that challenge. We also have other contractors working on projects who are very interested in this.”

Travis Hoadley, director of innovation in the Cybersecurity Talent Management System Office of DHS’ Chief Human Capital Officer, thinks the agency's human resources department needs to change the way it recruits tech professionals.

“Most people working in cybersecurity are not active job seekers,” Hoadley said during an FCW event last week. “Framing an approach around posting a job and hoping the right people apply — it's simply not efficient. Determining whether someone can perform tech work is not an easy task. Interviews, if not structured a particular way, are a very bad indicator of whether someone can perform a job.”
Hoadley criticized the federal government’s job posting system as ineffective for recruiting tech talent and said federal recruiters should focus on networking and establishing a pipeline of tech professionals who they can reach out to when a federal agency develops a need.

“Our research at DHS suggests that leading organizations in public and private sectors are moving to a few core practices to assess applicants,” he said. Focusing on two competencies are key, he added. Those include technical competency and professional competency, like soft skills.

"Organizations are developing formal tests on critical thinking, problem solving, the ability to collaborate with others. This provides organizations with a common benchmark for whether people are coming to the organization with the requisite skills," he said.

To recruit top talent, DHS is looking to leading private companies for recruitment strategies, Hoadley added.

“Tech professionals have certain expectations about working jobs. In the case of the federal government, not all may desire a 30-year career with one organization,” Hoadley said.

Many tech professionals prefer remote work or project-based work, or prefer oscillating between public and private sector jobs. Thus, federal HR professionals need to rethink the way they recruit tech talent.

“I think it's critical that organizations understand their target tech workforce and the types of careers they want to construct,” Hoadley said. “In general what I'm talking about here is workforce analysis and guiding employee development to meet their professional goals, but also your organization's requirements.”

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