Connecting HR, IT and Contract Specialists to their Agency Missions

While many view human resources, information technology and contracting personnel as providing "back office" functions, they truly are mission enablers—an integral part of accomplishing the mission of their agencies.

These are the people who make things happen and get things done. They serve as catalysts providing vital support that is necessary to the work of their agencies. They design the computer systems, maintain the databases, advise on contracts, fund projects and seek out new talent.

Human resources professionals, for example, play a critical role in their agencies because of their responsibility for recruiting and hiring the best and the brightest, such as scientists working to find cures for cancer, while maintaining a productive work environment. Information technology professionals ensure that organizations like the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Social Security Administration have sophisticated and well-maintained computer systems, to help protect against cyber-attacks and facilitate easier online interaction with the public. Contract professionals are responsible for enabling the government to effectively acquire goods and services, including medicines for the Strategic National Stockpile and modern technology equipment used by NASA for space exploration.

To gain a better understanding of how these mission enablers view their jobs and work environment, the Partnership for Public Service and Deloitte examined the 2015 *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*® data for these professions. We also held a workshop with HR, IT and contract personnel from across government in May 2016 to gain insights into their unique workplace issues.

The predominant theme of the research and discussions affecting the workplace engagement of HR, IT and contract employees centered on the level of connectedness these professionals have to the mission of their respective agencies. We examined employee perceptions on this issue and what leaders and managers can do to better engage them.

Based on our review, we identified three key factors (see right) that had the greatest influence on the HR, IT and the contract community's job satisfaction and commitment, and how strongly they feel connected to the mission of their agencies.

KEY FACTOR 1
SERVING AS AN ADVISOR, STRATEGIC PARTNER AND TEAM MEMBER

KEY FACTOR 2
HAVING A CULTURE OF CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

KEY FACTOR 3
INVESTING IN LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT EMPLOYEES TO THE MISSION

2015 BEST PLACES TO WORK DATA

The *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*® rankings, derived from the Office of Personnel Management's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey data, measure the satisfaction and commitment of federal employees government-wide and by agency.

HR SPECIALISTS LARGE AGENCY RANKINGS

Rank	Agency	Index Score
1	Department of State	71.6
2	National Aeronautics and Space Administration	70.5
3	Social Security Administration	69.9
4	Department of the Navy	68.6
4	Department of the Treasury	68.6
6	Department of Justice	64.0
7	Department of Commerce	60.6
8	Department of the Army	60.1
9	Department of the Interior	60.0
10	Department of Veterans Affairs	59.6
11	Department of Health and Human Services	58.8
12	Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, Defense Agencies, and Department of Defense Field Activities	58.7
13	Department of Transportation	58.2
14	Department of Labor	57.7
15	Environmental Protection Agency	56.9
16	Department of the Air Force	54.4
17	Department of Homeland Security	53.5
18	Department of Agriculture	49.2

IT SPECIALISTS LARGE AGENCY RANKINGS

Rank	Agency	Index Score
1	Social Security Administration	71.4
2	National Aeronautics and Space Administration	69.7
3	Department of Justice	65.4
4	Department of Commerce	61.2
5	Department of the Treasury	60.4
6	Department of Labor	60.0
7	Department of the Interior	59.0
8	Department of State	58.2
9	Department of Health and Human Services	58.1
10	Department of the Navy	56.5
11	Department of Agriculture	56.4
12	Department of the Air Force	53.4
13	Department of Veterans Affairs	53.0
14	Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, Defense Agencies, and Department of Defense Field Activities	52.5
15	Environmental Protection Agency	51.7
16	Department of Transportation	51.3
17	Department of the Army	50.7
18	Department of Homeland Security	46.2

CONTRACT SPECIALISTS LARGE AGENCY RANKINGS

Rank	Agency	Index Score
1	Social Security Administration	78.6
2	National Aeronautics and Space Administration	78.0
3	Department of Justice	65.2
4	Department of the Air Force	64.9
5	Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, Defense Agencies, and Department of Defense Field Activities	64.4
6	Department of Transportation	62.0
7	Department of Labor	61.1
8	Department of the Navy	60.3
9	Department of Commerce	59.6
10	Department of the Treasury	57.0
11	Department of Health and Human Services	55.3
12	Department of Agriculture	54.1
13	Department of Homeland Security	52.2
14	Department of the Interior	51.5
15	Department of the Army	51.0
16	Department of Veterans Affairs	40.8
17	Environmental Protection Agency	37.8

Serving as an advisor, strategic partner and team member

Virtually all employees want to contribute and collaborate with their colleagues to achieve the mission of their organizations. However, many participants in our workshop expressed that those in the human resources, information technology and contract professions are frequently disconnected from the big picture, with their roles often seen as transactional in nature rather than being considered as an integral part of the team.

Federal agencies are not alone in the challenge to structure teams to support mission-oriented projects. More than 7,000 individuals across the world reported the need for new organizational team structures.[1]

A number of workshop participants said employees in these pro-

fessions usually perform a specific task without being brought in as a strategic partner or given a full understanding about how their work will contribute to the broader goals of a project, advance the agency's mission or meet its needs. For example, if an HR employee worked closely with hiring and program managers, they could better understand the job requirements and write a posting that draws in highly-qualified applicants who will meet the needs of the specific position. Quite often, however, this does not occur. One HR employee said during our workshop that she and her colleagues are "seen as an afterthought," not full participants in the hiring process, and that it works better when they are included from the beginning.

1   Deloitte, Global Human Capital Trends 2016 report, based on more than 7,000 survey respondents in over 130 countries around the world.

Question	Government-wide	HR Specialists	IT Specialists	Contract Specialists
My talents are used well in the workplace	55.5	59.8	55.1	57.8
The people I work with cooperate to get the job done	72.5	76.5	73.9	76.7
Employees have a feeling of personal empowerment with respect to work processes	41.0	46.0	42.0	41.7
Managers support collaboration across the work units to accomplish work objectives	49.8	53.5	51.3	52.2

Mission-enabling employees generally feel they can contribute to their organizations as strategic partners and advisors, but the *Best Places to Work* data show only a little more than half of HR, IT and contract personnel surveyed believe that their skills are being well used in the workplace. In addition, only slightly more than half of the employees surveyed believe their managers support collaboration across work units to accomplish work objectives, and less than half experience personal empowerment with respect to work processes. While the data for these occupations are comparable to the government-wide scores, they are low in comparison to the private sector. According to Sirota, 77 percent of private-sector employees believe their talents are used well in the workplace.[2]

To help organizations use the expertise of their mission enablers to the fullest extent, a number of workshop participants suggested that leaders build a culture of collaboration across the different occupations and create more of an enterprise perspective. Joanie Newhart, the associate administrator of Acquisition Workforce Programs at the Office of Federal Procurement Policy, for example, suggested that agency leaders create a work environment that encourages employees to seek out their counterparts in other function areas to solve problems together.

2   The private sector data, supplied by survey research firm Sirota, is based on more than 1.5 million employee survey responses at 115 organizations around the world in a wide variety of industries.

TAKING ACTION

➥ Revisit team design—look for ways to bring HR, IT and contract specialists into cross-functional "mission-driven" teams

➥ Include mission-enabling employees in project planning discussions and decisions, empowering them to be integral team members in the process

➥ Communicate the value of HR, IT and contract specialists to change the conversation toward how they help accomplish the mission, not just provide support services

Having a culture of creativity and innovation
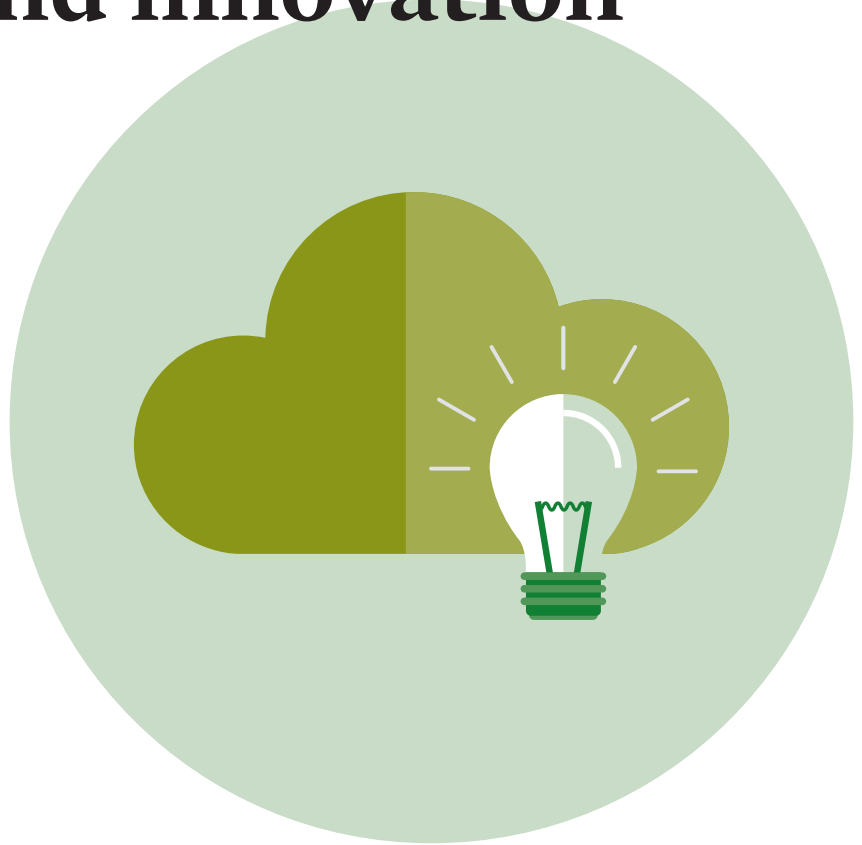
The *Best Places to Work* data show that more than 90 percent of the respondents in the HR, IT and contract occupations reported that they are looking for ways to do their jobs better, but only about a third of contract and IT specialists and about 41 percent of human resources employees believe that creativity and innovation are rewarded.

In our discussions with mission-enabling employees, there was a consensus that not having freedom to be innovative or creative diminishes job satisfaction. The group said part of the problem stems from risk-averse managers and leaders. In these three occupations, like others in government, employees must follow a number of set rules and guidelines that tend to inhibit risk-taking and may stifle creativity.

In the contracting field, for example, acquisition rules often give the perception that there is little room for flexibility in how contract specialists do their work and can discourage innovative approaches. In the HR field, there is a demand to fix the hiring process, but employees seeking new approaches often run into numerous barriers that slow the process and at times, make it hard to attract the most qualified candidates. One HR employee said she has been discouraged by her manager's unwillingness to listen to her ideas on improving her organization's operations.

Beth McGrath, the former deputy chief management officer at the Department of Defense, said that in order to meet mission requirements and invigorate the HR team, innova-

Questions	Government-wide	HR Specialists	IT Specialists	Contract Specialists
I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things	55.5	63.2	59.1	54.3
I am constantly looking for ways to do my job better	90.0	92.6	91.0	90.0
Creativity and innovation are rewarded	34.5	40.7	36.7	34.7

tive approaches, including new ways of hiring, must be encouraged.

There is a sharp difference between the private sector and government when it comes to encouraging innovation. In the private sector, 76 percent of employees feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things. The numbers are much lower government-wide (55.5 percent) as well as for HR (63.2 percent), IT (59.1 percent) and contract specialists (54.3 percent).

McGrath said that if employees do not feel they are free to take risks to be creative, they won't. She said it is critical for agencies to provide a safe place for employees to take chances and sometimes fail without repercussions.

In an effort to create space for acquisition employees to innovate, the Office of Federal Procurement Policy issued a memo enabling leaders to create acquisition innovation labs. Innovation labs help foster creativity in agencies by providing employees the opportunity to collaborate and innovate on a small scale without being fearful of repercussions.

The Office of Federal Procurement Policy also shares examples of innovative practices on the Acquisition Gateway, a new General Services Administration tool for acquisition employees. The gateway is designed to help the acquisition workforce make better purchasing decisions, increase productivity and negotiate better contracts. It provides information on pricing and leading practices and offers ways to implement those practices. This provides an opportunity for contract specialists to try different approaches that can help agencies fulfill their missions and improve employee satisfaction and commitment.

TAKING ACTION

- ➼ Create a culture that encourages employees to take risks and rewards them for trying innovative approaches

- ➼ Communicate that it is okay to fail sometimes and that failure is a natural part of innovation

- ➼ Launch innovation labs or other opportunities for employees to safely try new ideas and approaches to solving problems

Investing in learning opportunities to connect employees to the mission
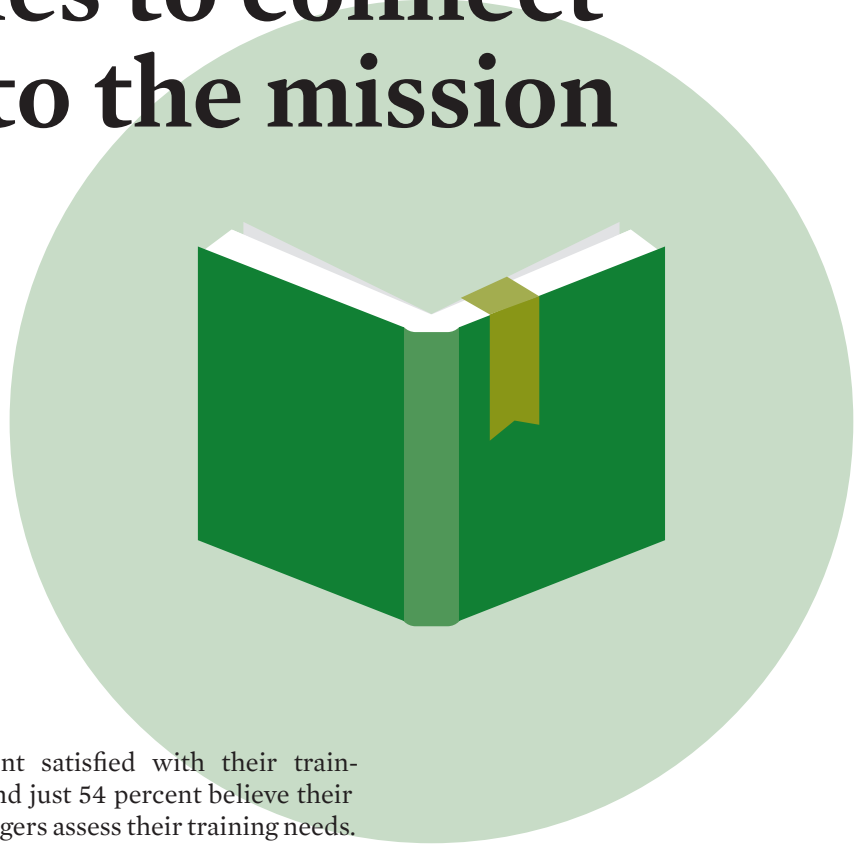
Employee satisfaction is generally higher when individuals are provided with on-the-job experiences that help them meet their long-term career goals, which can lead to them staying on the job longer and being more productive. Individuals across the government have reported that training must be more nimble and personalized to their needs.

Among the three job categories we examined, information technology employees have the lowest *Best Places to Work* scores when it comes to training and development. Only 43.5 percent report satisfaction with the training they receive for their current job, and just 47.1 percent believe their training needs are assessed. This is a particularly critical issue given the rapid pace of change in the information technology field, and one that the government has often struggled to adequately address in part because of tight budgets.

Human resources personnel also have low scores, with just 51.7 percent satisfied with their training and just 54 percent believe their managers assess their training needs. This is in contrast to contract specialists who have certification requirements, and therefore training tends to be highly prioritized for this group. For contract specialists, 57.3 percent report satisfaction with the training they receive and 61.9 percent said their needs are assessed.

Still, private sector employees report more positively on their training and development, with 63 percent reporting satisfaction with the training they receive and 71 percent saying their training needs are assessed. In a survey of more than 7,000 human resources and business leaders from 130 countries, more than eight in 10 executives reported that learning is important or very important.[3] Even though it is important to them, according to a Confer-

3   Deloitte, Global Human Capital Trends 2016 report, based on more than 7,000 survey respondents in over 130 countries around the world.

Questions	Government-wide	HR Specialists	IT Specialists	Contract Specialists	Private Sector
I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization	61.1	66.9	60.5	70.6	68.0
I have enough information to do my job well	69.3	71.4	63.6	69.7	77.0
My training needs are assessed	50.8	54.0	47.1	61.9	71.0
How satisfied are you with the training you receive for your present job?	48.9	51.7	43.5	57.3	63.0

ence Board study, these leaders know that this learning is not happening fast enough.[4]

Employees in these three professions require specialized skills and ongoing learning, whether it is keeping up-to-date on new technologies, understanding the newest approaches to personnel practices and policies or the latest acquisition rules. In addition to becoming more proficient in their specialty areas, our workshop participants said training also should focus on helping them better connect to the mission of their agencies.

Several employees said that if they had the opportunity to learn

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4   Conference Board, The Conference Board CEO Challenge® 2016: Building Capability–Seeking Alignment, Agility, and Talent to Innovate and Grow.

their organization's culture during onboarding, it would have helped them integrate more easily into their jobs. According to these individuals, onboarding and other training opportunities are focused on an employee's function area, but normally do not provide insights that would allow them to understand how their work fits into the larger mission.

At the National Institutes of Health, one training and development technique to expose employees to the organization's mission involves encouraging HR employees to interact with the organization's workforce at least quarterly in ways that go beyond their normal duties.

For example, HR staff members might go to a scientific or clinical lecture given by individuals who fall

under their purview. According to Julie Berko, acting director of human resources at the NIH, this can help employees feel more connected to the science and expand their appreciation for the role they play in obtaining the people that make it happen.

To serve their customers and organization more effectively, and as part of their own professional development, a number of workshop participants said it is critical for employees to fully understand the work of their customers. Interacting with customers or visiting other parts of the organization help mission-enablers to better understand the context and needs of an agency, which can inform their own work.

TAKING ACTION

➼ Explore non-traditional learning programs to augment the existing training within the agency

➼ Encourage mission-enablers to interact more directly with staff responsible for the programs they support, as well as visit other parts of the organization

➼ Provide learning opportunities during onboarding that address agency culture and mission

➼ Provide career development opportunities that allow employees to stay proficient in their own fields, as well as learn new skills and ways of thinking

MAKE MISSION-SUPPORT EMPLOYEES MISSION-ENABLERS

HR, IT and contract professionals are mission enablers, vital to accomplishing the work of their agencies. In order to retain these key employees and help ensure their productivity and contributions to the organization, it is important that they feel their value to the mission, a strong commitment to the work of the agency and satisfaction with their jobs.

To effectively foster an environment where they feel connected and engaged, agency leaders need to ensure these employees' talents are used well, that they are provided with the opportunity and freedom to be creative and that they have access to learning opportunities that can help them improve their skills and develop a better understanding of the work of the programs they enable and support.

Agency leaders should communicate with employees throughout their organizations about the importance of mission-enabling roles and the need for collaboration. These employees should be brought into the process earlier and included in decision-making.

Leaders need to communicate that failure is sometimes expected and reward innovative approaches. Mission-enabling employees also should be encouraged to think more holistically about their roles and how they can contribute to finding creative solutions.

These efforts can go a long way to helping the mission-enabling employees to be engaged and other employees to see these roles as critical elements to the success of their teams and the mission of their organizations.

METHODOLOGY

The *Best Places to Work* data is derived from the Office of Personnel Management's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey data, which includes the views of more than 421,000 respondents who participated in the survey from April through June of 2015. Government-wide scores represent the views of all respondents to the FEVS.

Findings are based on the views of panelists and HR, IT and contract personnel from across government that participated in a workshop in May 2016. References to the National Institutes of Health and the Office of Federal Procurement Policy are based on interviews conducted in addition to the workshop.

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