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Agencies seeking more tools, resources to meet ‘hire right, hire fast’ goals

BY NICOLE OGRYSKO

The federal government has made numerous attempts at “hiring reform” in the last two decades.

First, it was all about improving the time-to-hire.

Then there was an effort to improve education for hiring managers, teaching them about the tools and flexibilities they already have to recruit and onboard new talent.

Agencies have made another pivot in recent years. The Trump administration urged agencies to **stop using** assessments where candidates simply self-rate their skills. Those self-based assessments have **gotten poor marks** from hiring managers, because candidates **often inflate or exaggerate** their own skills and abilities.

PANEL OF EXPERTS



Traci DiMartini, Chief Human Capital Officer, General Services Administration



Mary Lamary, Chief Human Capital Officer, Nuclear Regulatory Commission



James Otto, Deputy Director for Administration and Management, Defense Health Agency



Tracey Therit, Chief Human Capital Officer, Department of Veterans Affairs



Susan Yarwood, Chief Human Capital Officer, U.S. Secret Service



Susan Fallon, Senior Vice President, Monster Government Solutions



Jennifer Forrest, Senior Director, Professional Services, Monster Government Solutions



Under the Biden administration, agencies are supposed to **develop a plan** for embedding more skills-based assessments into their processes for screening and vetting candidates by the end of 2021.

Ask agency chief human capital officers which approach they're deploying to hire new talent, and the answer is yes, all of the above. Their agencies are desperately seeking ways to hire the right talent for the right positions – and do so quickly.

At the Department of Veterans Affairs, the motto is "hire right, hire fast."

That means VA, like several agencies, has a rough goal of hiring new talent within 80 days. But in many cases, that's simply too long. The Veterans Health Administration is trying to keep up with an intense demand for medical professionals during the pandemic, where burnout and turnover is high.

"80 days is not our goal, and it has to be much less than that, talking more in terms of weeks and months as opposed to months and years," Tracey Therit, VA's chief human capital officer, said.

Other agencies have similarly daunting hiring goals.

In many ways, the Defense Health Agency is competing for talent with VA, said James Otto, the agency's deputy director for administration and management.

His goal? Find the right person, for the right place at the right time.

"Innovation is great, but if you don't understand the problem of what you're trying to solve and how you're trying to solve it, you get short-term things," he said. "[With] time to hire, everybody jumped up and down and [said], 'Oh, we're all in!' But did you get the right person at the right place at the right time? No. You got a person, because that's what the goal was."

The Secret Service is on track to increase the size of its workforce between 20-and-25% over the next four years. The agency wants to grow about 500 special agents between now and 2026 or 2027, Susan Yarwood, the Secret Service chief human capital officer, said.

"Because of attrition issues such as a retirement bubble, we have to hire 1,050 people to net a 300-person [annual] growth," she said. "That's not a surprise; we have pretty strict and high standards, including full-scope polygraphs for our law enforcement."

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission is trying to keep its head above water with 5% of its workforce retiring each year, said Mary Lamary, the agency's chief human capital officer.

But hiring right and fast is easier said than done.

"Hiring is not broken in the federal service. HR is not broken," Traci DiMartini, chief human capital officer for the General Services Administration, said. "The fact of the matter is we have a civil service that is built on a strong foundation of merit staffing. We have a lot that we have to consider to make sure that we are playing by very clear rules to make sure we have a world-class bureaucracy. Unfortunately, for years it's been maligned, abused, neglected, underfunded and any other adjective you want to throw in there."

A 2020 study from the Merit Systems Protection Board **found agencies struggling** to recover from the mid-1990s downsizing era, when they lost thousands of HR positions through the National Performance Review.

Budget cuts due to sequestration and a **hiring freeze** in 2017 didn't help either, CHCOs said.

Finding the right candidates quickly becomes more difficult when agencies receive hundreds or even



thousands of applications for one post. VA received more than 2 million applications for open positions in 2020, Therit said. The department onboarded about 100,000 people.

Wanted: More assessments, better evaluation tools to find 'right fit' hires

To help them weed through hundreds of applications for the right hire, GSA is looking for tools that give their candidates a chance to articulate why they have the skills for the job, DiMartini said.

Data shows the practice of having candidates rate their own skills and abilities works about half of time. According to **data collected through** GSA and the U.S. Digital Service, 90% of federal positions open to the public relied solely on an applicant's answers to a self-assessment. Agencies selected a candidate from those assessments just 54% of the time.

"That self-assessment has gotten a bad-rap," said Jennifer Forrest, senior director of professional services for Monster Government Solutions. "But there are certain areas where it is useful. There are certain types of questions that you can ask through a self-assessment survey that are successful, but you can't use it alone."

For Yarwood, she's looking for assessments that can evaluate a candidate's critical reasoning and writing capabilities – and tools that can help her decipher an individual's aptitude for a career in public service.

"We don't just want to hire for the skills for the particular job they're entering with us on," she said. "We want to hire for a longer career."

Therit said creating or finding better assessments and tools that measure a person's public service acumen is particularly important at VA. She's looking for

candidates who can adapt to the unique nuances that come with working for the department.

The results and data from those assessments should, ultimately, help the agency better engage with their applicants, Therit added.

To meet the Biden administration's 2021 deadline for agency assessment strategies, the Secret Service is exploring off-the-shelf assessment tools.

"That's how we get started," Yarwood said. "That's how we work with the managers; that's certainly the path that the Secret Service is going to go down. But then as we get smarter about how to use these assessments -- and we also start to see if there's disparate impact in any of these assessments – then we start to hone and maybe customize a little bit for what our unique employment situations are."

Identifying and using a variety of assessments is the first step, but agencies can't forget about collecting feedback on those tools. Susan Fallon, senior vice president for Monster Government Solutions, said organizations new to the assessment game are still building the capabilities they need to evaluate which tools are effective in identifying high-quality potential hires.

"Did it work? Were these individuals hired? Did they succeed? Did they exceed expectations while they were there?" she said. "It's the science and the art of anything in human capital, but especially when we're talking about people and talent."

In many ways, agencies say it's a constant battle to stay current, if not forward-thinking, in developing their hiring and assessment strategies.

"Too often for speed of hire, somebody leaves, [and it's] replace them, replace them, replace them," Lamary said. "If they were in that job for five years,



even two years or three years, the role of that job has changed.”

Ideally, agencies would spend time understanding how the position has changed, perhaps rewriting the position description and identifying new skills that are necessary to succeed in that job over the next few years, Lamary said.

“Technology and innovation are causing these things to come about so quickly, that just because you hired for that job two years ago, doesn’t mean you can use that same position description and core qualifications, as thus, the same assessment,” she said. “All of those things have to be looked at, and they impact your ability to get good quality candidates.”

Hiring managers have to be part of the game

These assessments aren’t effective, chief human capital officers said, unless hiring managers can identify the skills they need for a particular job. HR practitioners must understand those goals, and they need to recommend viable paths forward for identifying and onboarding talent that fits those needs.

It’s a challenge, again, when time and resources are tight.

DiMartini said she tries to facilitate conversations between her HR staff and GSA hiring managers. The goal, she said, is to find out what those managers want in their ideal candidate.

“To be more agile and flexible does take time, and it is a skill set that we need to develop in our HR practitioners,” she said.

Therit said her HR specialists are trying to build more consultative relationships with VA hiring managers. Her office is exploring a “menu” of assessment options, one for mid-level positions that uses an occupational questionnaire, one for senior level jobs that uses a situational judgment test, another for specialty areas that draws on writing samples and a final method that uses a leadership assessment for Senior Executive Service positions.

“If the HR specialist and the hiring manager are having those conversations about what level of talent do you need and what kind of tools do we have available to assess that talent, that was one framework that we were using to look at this,” she said.

At Monster, both Forrest and Fallon say they see private sector companies reprioritizing their resources in favor of HR and workforce capabilities. Technology is helping them handle a growing workload, but it isn’t a panacea.

“You can’t just throw technology at something,” Fallon said. “We approach technology as a means of creating greater efficiencies so that the human touch can be more effective, and our team members can put their time into interacting and building those relationships, whether it’s with candidates or applicants or hiring managers themselves, to create value there.”

Agencies agree automation and other IT capabilities will help. But in a resource-strapped environment, they see the most success when hiring managers and HR experts truly work together.

“You can overcome the resource challenges, the assessment challenges and the time-to-hire challenges as long as you have that partnership,” Yarwood said. 