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Technology, data need to drive transformation of the federal hiring process

The 8th annual exclusive survey by Federal News Radio of CHCOs, and deputy CHCOs found respondents want to adopt automation tools to improve all federal HR processes.



BY JASON MILLER

After more than 15 years worth of memos, policies, initiatives and discussions, chief human capital officers remain as frustrated as ever by the federal hiring process.

While the last two administrations have tried to remove those frustrations and hurdles, technology - of all things - may finally be the correct answer.

Federal chief human capital officers and deputy CHCOs said improving the technology they use and the access to the data in those systems is both a top priority and among their biggest needs.

The 8th annual exclusive survey by Federal News Radio of CHCOs, deputy CHCOs and other senior HR managers found respondents want to adopt automation tools and other technologies to improve the hiring, and more broadly, all federal HR processes.

"We need better and integrated technology and significantly more compensation flexibility to compete for talent. Veterans preference rules need to be updated for current circumstances, as do qualification standards," wrote one respondent.

CHCOs and deputy CHCOs ranked using data to make better hiring decisions as their third

most important priority behind improving the hiring process and workforce training and development.

Respondents also ranked improving their agency's HR systems and using data to make decisions as their second biggest area of need.

Federal News Radio conducted an online survey of CHCOs, deputy CHCOs and other senior HR managers during a three-week period in July. The survey received a 13.8 percent response rate. Of the 17 respondents, 12 were CHCOs, nine came from cabinet level agencies, 13 were career employees and three were political appointees (one respondent chose not to answer).

Fixing the federal hiring process has been a top priority in several of the past surveys, including in 2016 when the focus on bringing on more federal employees pushed it to the top. A majority of the respondents say it still takes on average 76-to-100 days to move a candidate through the hiring process starting with identification of an applicant to their first day on the job.

Today, CHCOs and their deputies say technology holds the key to ensuring success for the Trump administration's plan to modernize the federal workforce by reskilling and redeploying workers.

It's not surprising that the hiring process and the need for associated technology

rose to the top of the survey. The Office of Personnel Management found in February in its first-ever **Quadrennial Federal Workforce Priorities Report**, the current state of the federal workforce isn't necessarily bleak, but it's certainly missing some key skill sets and has some gaping holes. About 83 percent of agencies told OPM that staffing shortages hampered their agency's ability to meet the mission, and human capital challenges only inflate those issues. Generally, agencies are understaffed and unprepared to fill current vacancies and develop clear plans to fulfill their staffing needs, or recruit and retain top talent, OPM said.

GETTING AWAY FROM "LOW-VALUE" WORK

And this is why the Trump administration wants to shift the workforce away from "low-value" work to "high-value" work.

Respondents ranked making the hiring process simpler and faster as their most important area of the administration's workforce modernization plan, while adopting automated tools came in a close second.

The strong majority (64 percent) of the CHCOs and deputies said part of their challenge is bringing in technology fast enough to move workers out of the low-value work, while 55 percent said they don't have the necessary funding to bring in the automated tools.

At the same time, OPM and the Office of Management and Budget said OPM's guidance is not sufficient enough. 36 percent of the respondents rated it satisfactory and 36 percent said it was poor.

Respondents also want OPM to do more to address HR challenges; 91 percent said they should clear the outdated or unneeded regulations and policies, while 75 percent said the agency should provide or help with modernizing HR systems.

One respondent said OPM should teach "agencies private sector mining practices for LinkedIn, Indeed and other sites."

CIVIL SERVICE REFORM IS POSSIBLE

While 47 percent of the CHCO and deputy CHCO respondents said previous hiring improvement initiatives haven't worked, 64 percent said they think the Trump administration's plan to modernize the civil workforce, which includes hiring reforms, is achievable.

But 91 percent of the respondents said getting Congress to go along with the changes will be the biggest challenge, while 64 percent said both federal employee unions and a lack of clear direction from OMB/OPM will make civil service reform tough to accomplish.

One respondent said previous efforts have "helped drive emphasis on improving hiring; gave me some cover to try to push the envelope and get attention from my senior leadership to do something to address the internal challenges and lack of emphasis management puts on our HR program."

Another respondent said the previous attempts too often "provide incremental improvements as opposed to system change."

Yet another respondent said the initiatives may have made the process worse. "They have made hiring complicated and controlling, hiring managers have very little options once they receive a cert list to hire the skill set and attitude they need to enhance their work. I'm not saying we are not hiring well, I'm saying it takes too long to get to a good hire."

And a fourth respondent tied it back to the technology challenges, "A lot of great initiatives are set out, but they just become a paper process because there is no funding attributed to them ... making changes of the nature the initiatives demand takes resources that we just don't have available."

OUR DATA IS GOOD, BUT IT COULD BE BETTER

It seems one of the missing ingredients to these modernization and improvement efforts is data. CHCOs and deputies see better data and better analytics as one big answer to fixing the hiring process.

Not only did respondents rank improving the use of HR data as their third highest priority, they also ranked it second of the biggest areas of need.

What's interesting is one-third of the respondents also said they use data to find qualified candidates most of the time and another 33 percent said some of the time. So while CHCOs and their deputies feel good about the data they use, they want more and even better information.

The survey also showed agencies are split in where they get that data to find qualified candidates.

Every respondent said they use USAjobs.gov to find qualified candidates. 92 percent said internship programs like Pathways. 83 percent said on-site job fairs at colleges and universities also are popular.

58 percent of respondents said they also used private sector job sites such as Monster or Indeed. Virtual job fairs were popular as 67 percent said they were valuable.

Similar to the data question, respondents told a different story when asked to rank most to least helpful approaches to finding qualified candidates. CHCOs and deputies said private sector job sites are most helpful, while USAJobs.gov and internships came in second and third in the rankings.

One respondent offered their best approach, "Direct candidate outreach through personal and professional contacts produces the best candidates."

SPECIAL HIRING AUTHORITIES EFFECTIVE, POPULAR

Despite all the challenges, 55 percent of the CHCOs and deputies said their agency hires candidates that meet their needs most of the time.

The one saving grace in all of these hiring challenges seems to be special hiring authorities. Almost every CHCO and deputy respondent said their agency uses special hiring authorities, and 50 percent said it makes the hiring process 11-to-20 percent faster.

Many CHCOs, deputy CHCOs and other senior HR managers are mostly positive about the state of federal human resources.

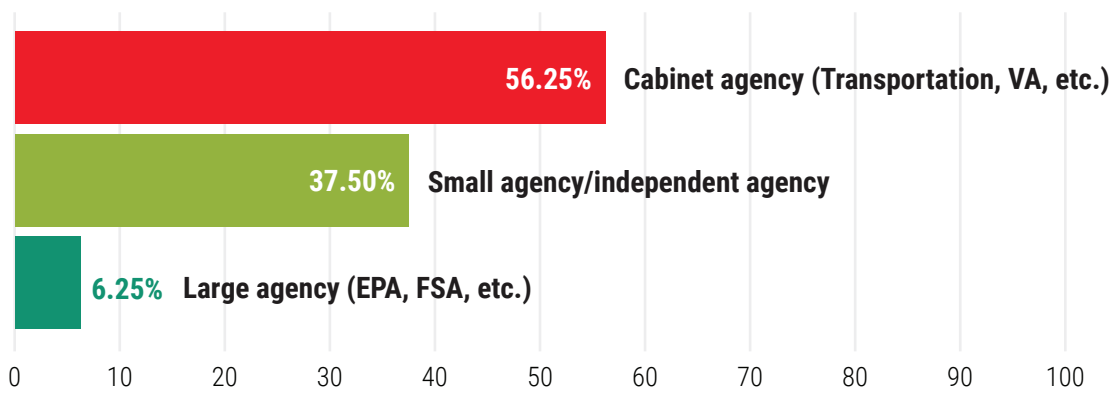
One respondent said, "Seems like many agencies are quick to blame 'the system' when the reality is there is a lot that could be done to improve HR that is simply good practice/execution."

Another said, "My team of HR professionals remain extremely motivated and committed to our agency's employees, managers and mission. It's inspiring to lead such a team."

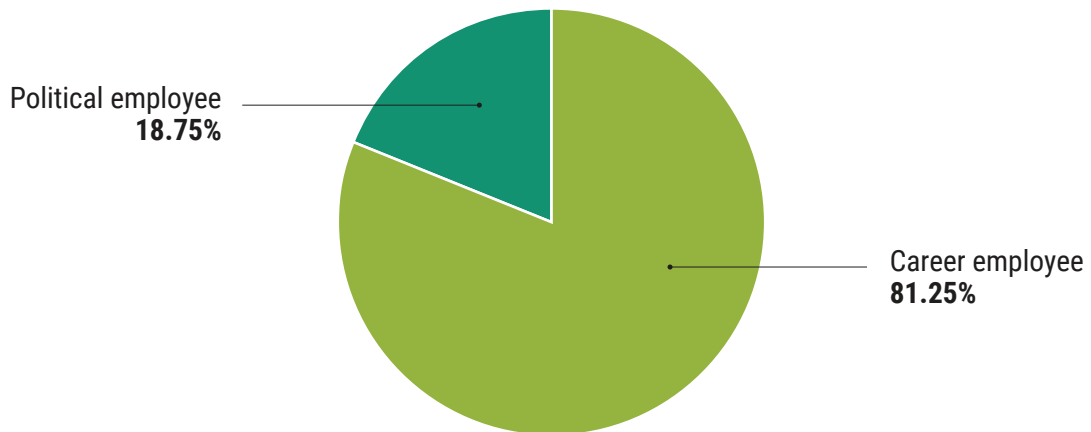
A third respondent, however, expressed continued frustration with the system and the support from the top, "It is broken! Too much regulation, archaic pay systems, Draconian classification processes, ridiculously difficult/long executive hiring process ... nearly impossible to find and retain HR talent. We need complete transformation of civil service rules and regulations. Also need to move Human Capital funding from general administration (GenAd) to its own appropriation- people ... providing services are the CORE BUSINESS of government. GenAd funding is constantly stripped away from programs essential to finding, developing and retaining top talent."

Jason Miller is Executive Editor of FederalNewsRadio.com. He can be reached at jmiller@federalnewsradio.com

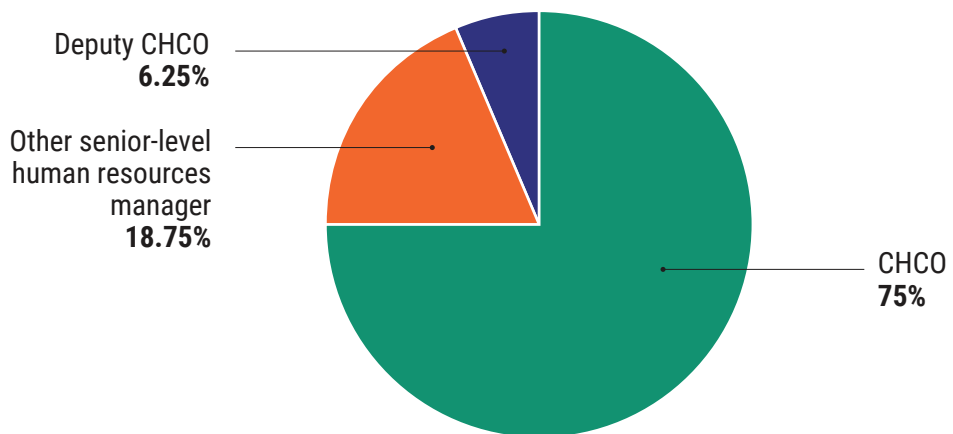
I work at a



I am a

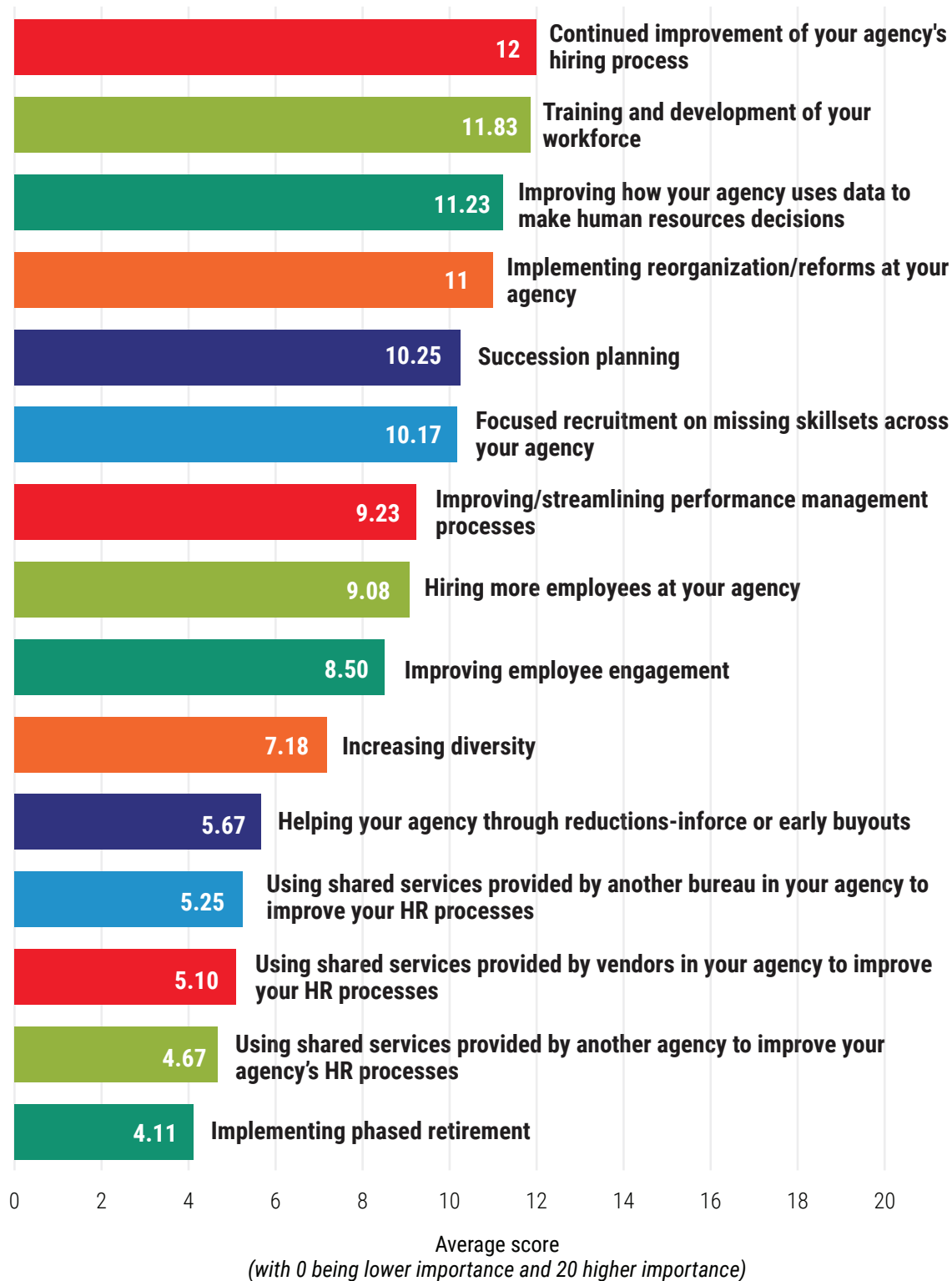


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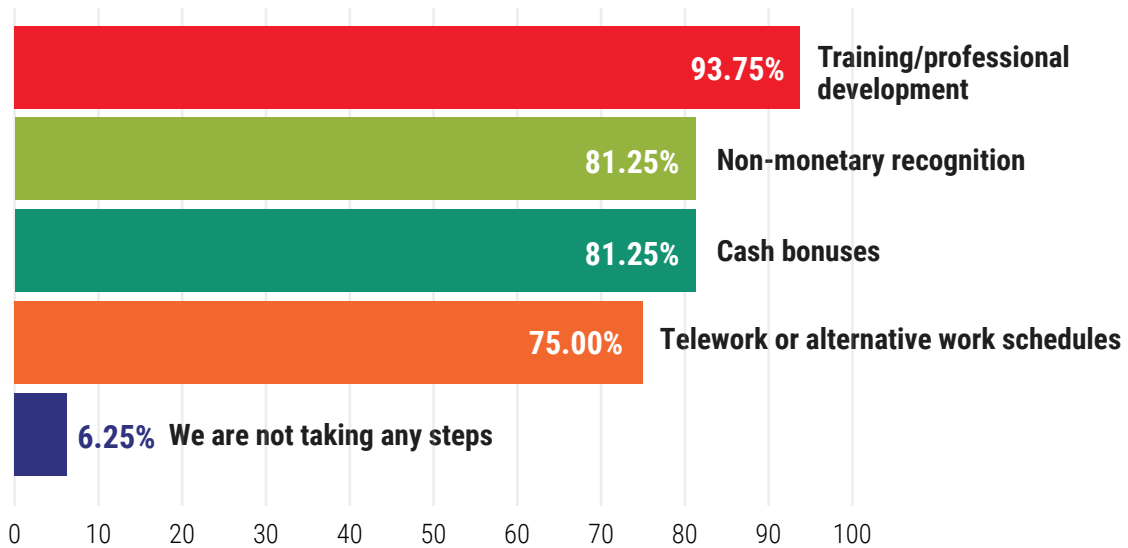
What are your top priorities for 2018?

(rank in order of importance)

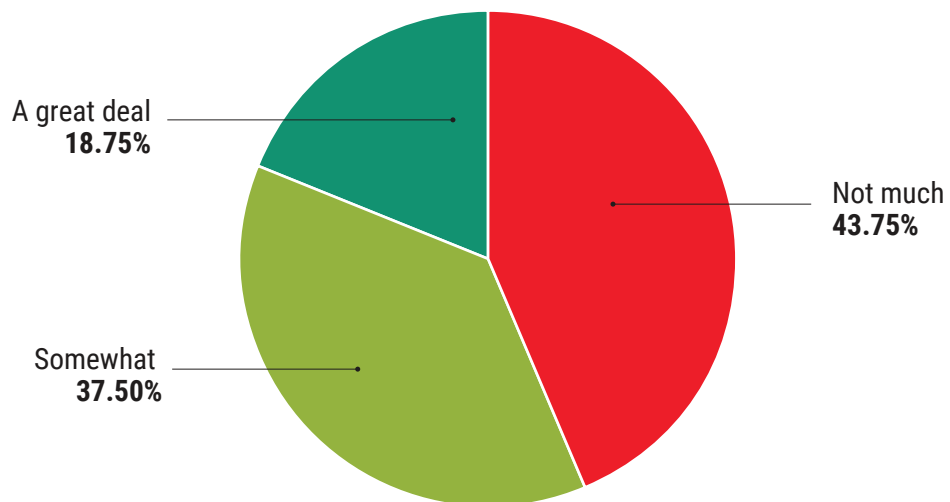


What steps are you taking to retain your best employees?

(check all that apply)

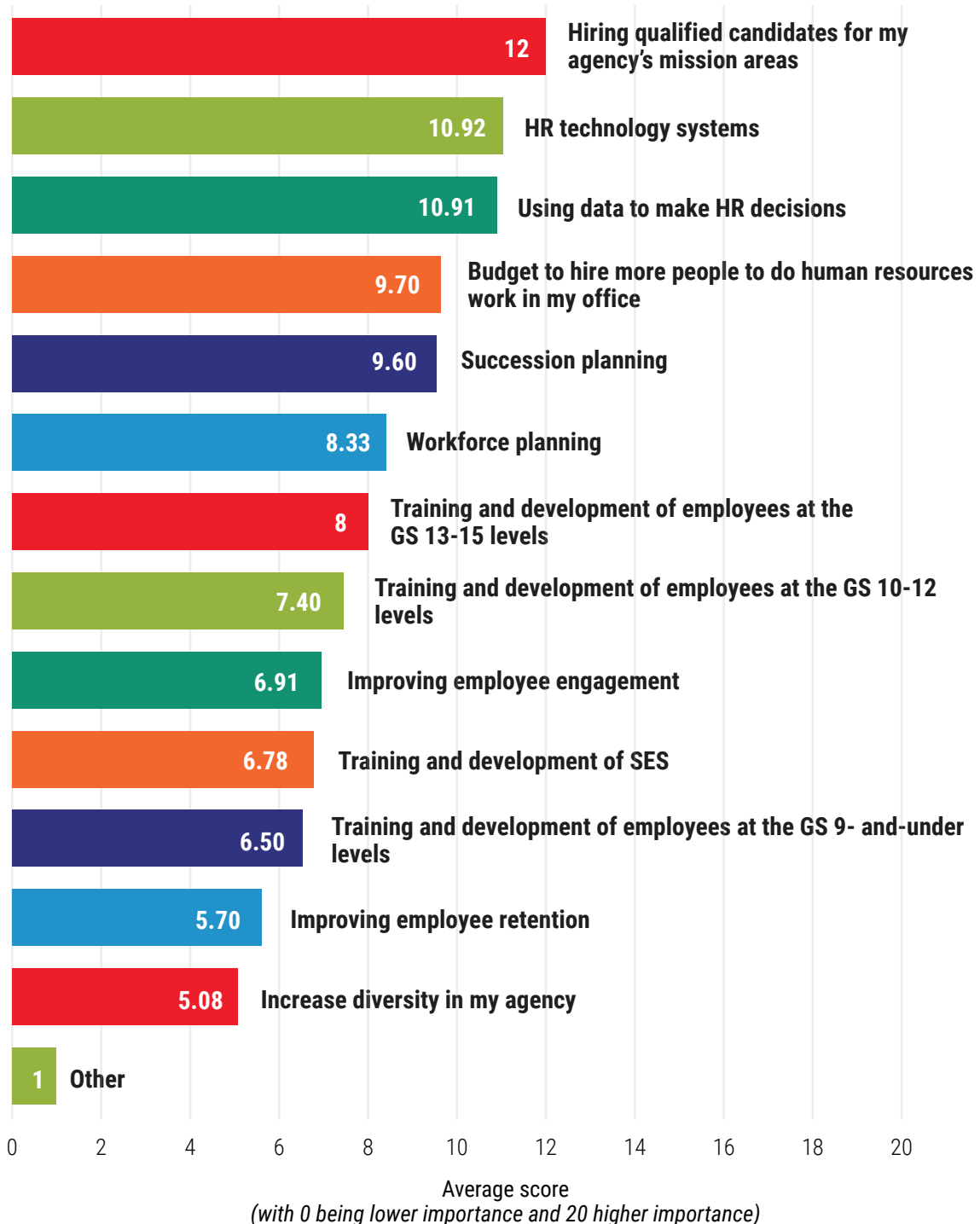


Retirements are affecting my agency



What are your agency's biggest areas of need around HR?

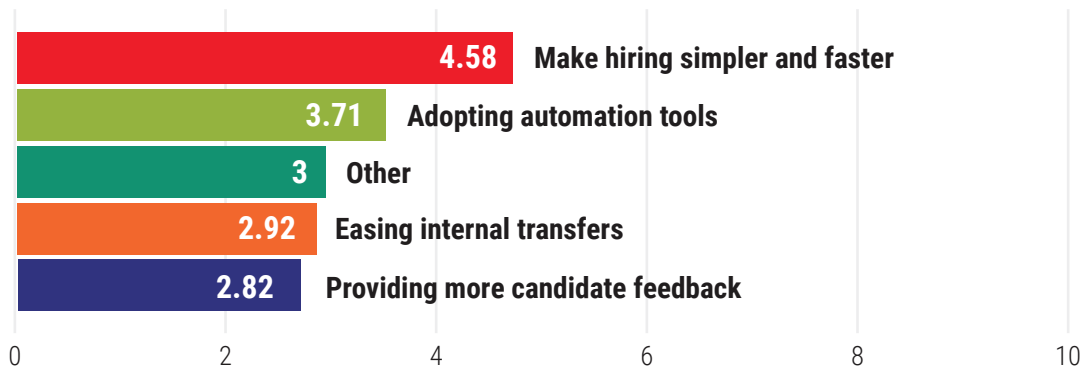
(rank in order of importance)



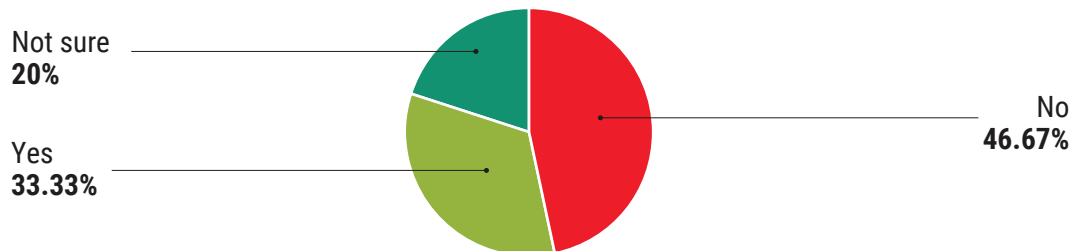
IF YOU SAID "OTHER", PLEASE SPECIFY:

- Hiring

The Trump administration made modernizing the federal workforce processes and practices a cross-agency goal. Rank the focus areas of that goal in order of importance.



OPM has launched several new programs to improve the hiring process: the End-to-End Hiring Initiative in 2008; the President's Hiring Reform Initiative; Veterans Employment Initiative; the Pathways Program in 2010; the Recruitment, Engagement, Diversity and Inclusion Roadmap; and most recently, the Hiring Excellence campaign in 2016—do you believe these approaches made a difference?



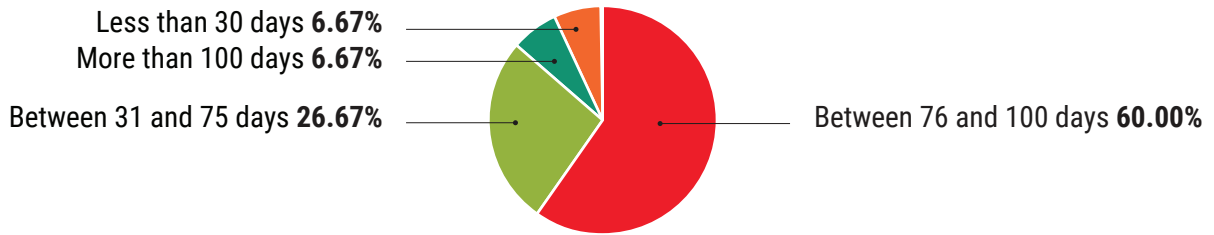
IF YOU SAID YES, PLEASE EXPLAIN WHY

- It helped drive emphasis on improving hiring; gave me some cover to try to push the envelope and get attention from my senior leadership to do something to address the internal challenges and lack of emphasis management puts on our HR program.

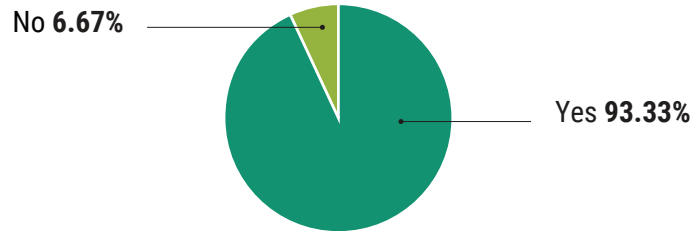
IF YOU SAID NO, PLEASE EXPLAIN WHY

- Campaigns provide incremental improvements as opposed to system change.
- Repackaging of the same ole same old.
- We need better and integrated technology and significantly more compensation flexibility to compete for talent. Veterans preference rules need to be updated for current circumstances as do qualification standards.
- It is still a laborious process to apply for federal positions and the HR process is still too complicated and time intensive.
- They have made hiring complicated and controlling, hiring managers have very little options once they receive a cert list to hire the skill set and attitude they need to enhance their work.
- A lot of great initiatives are set out but they just become a paper process because there is no funding attributed to them and making changes of the nature the initiatives demand takes resources, that we just don't have available.

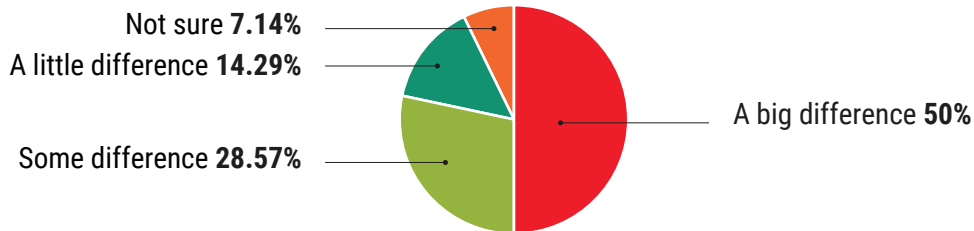
How long does it take for your agency, on average, to go from identifying a candidate to their first day at the agency?



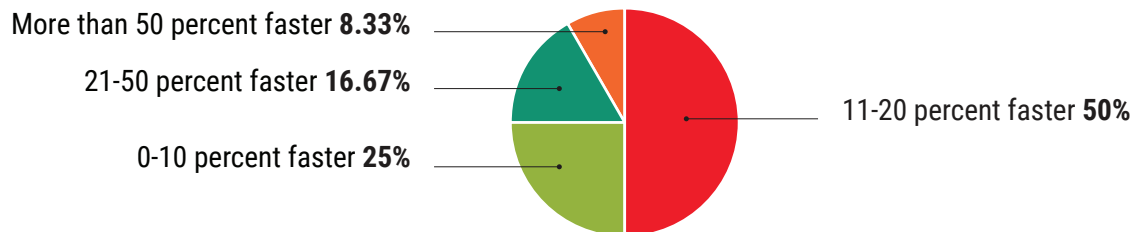
Does your agency use special hiring authorities?



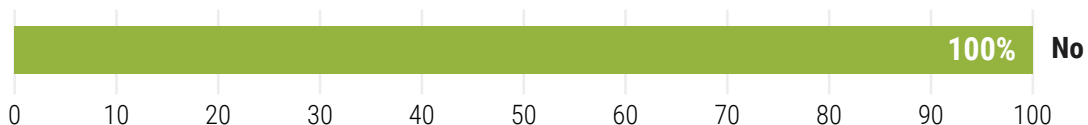
If yes, how much of a difference do they make in bringing in qualified candidates?



How much faster do you get candidates on board?

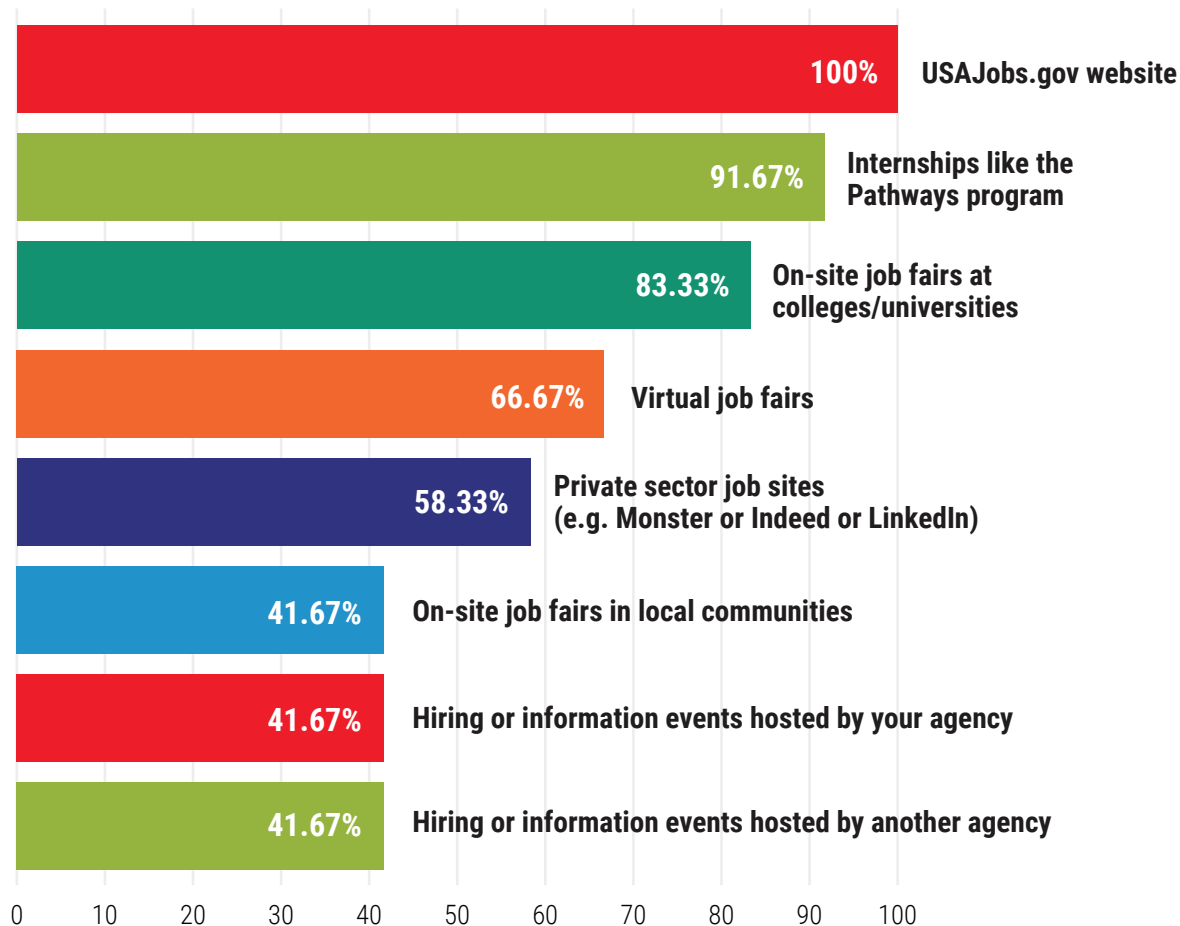


Do you believe your agency needs a special hiring authority?



How does your agency go about finding qualified candidates?

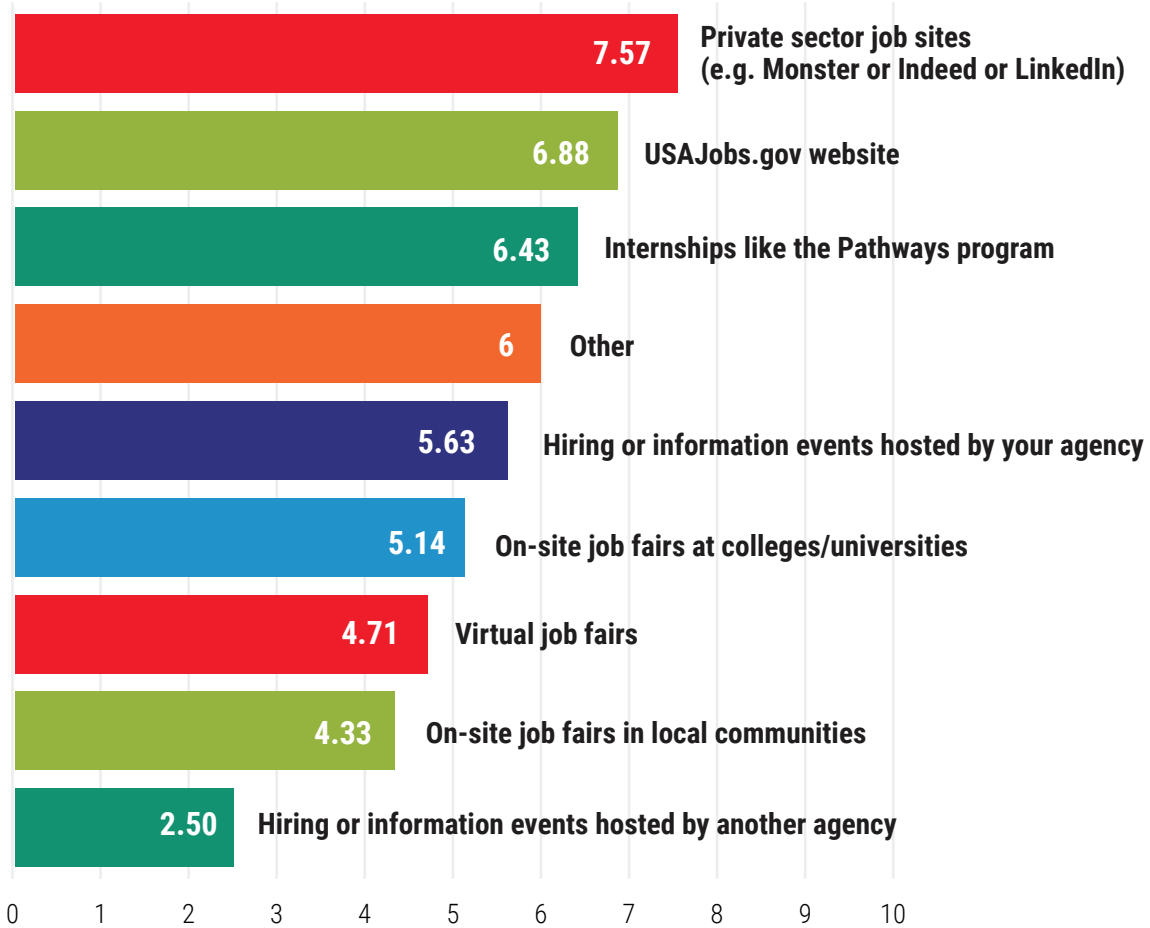
(Check all that apply)



OTHER, PLEASE SPECIFY

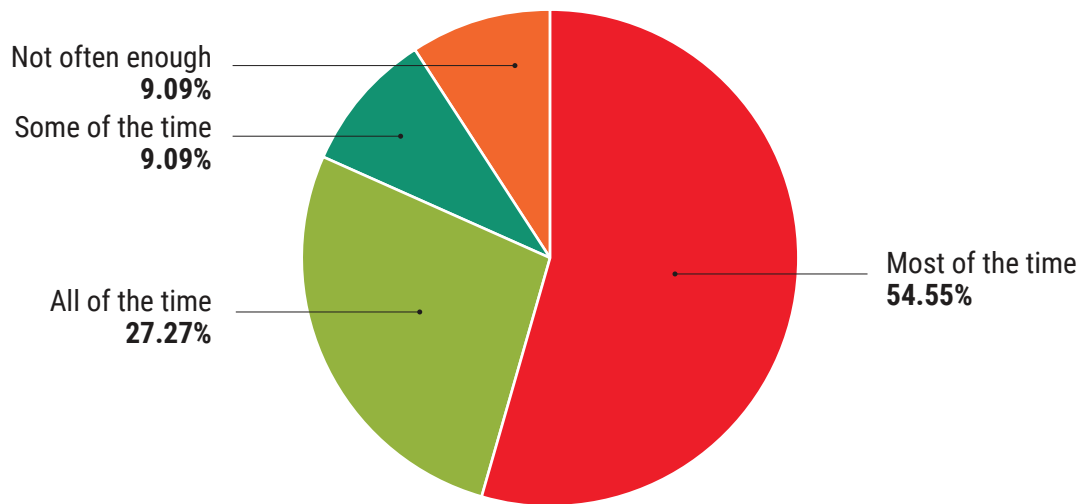
- Scientific and Technical Conferences, Collaborations, etc.
- Current hiring sites.

Rank in order of most helpful to less helpful the approaches your agency uses to find qualified candidates

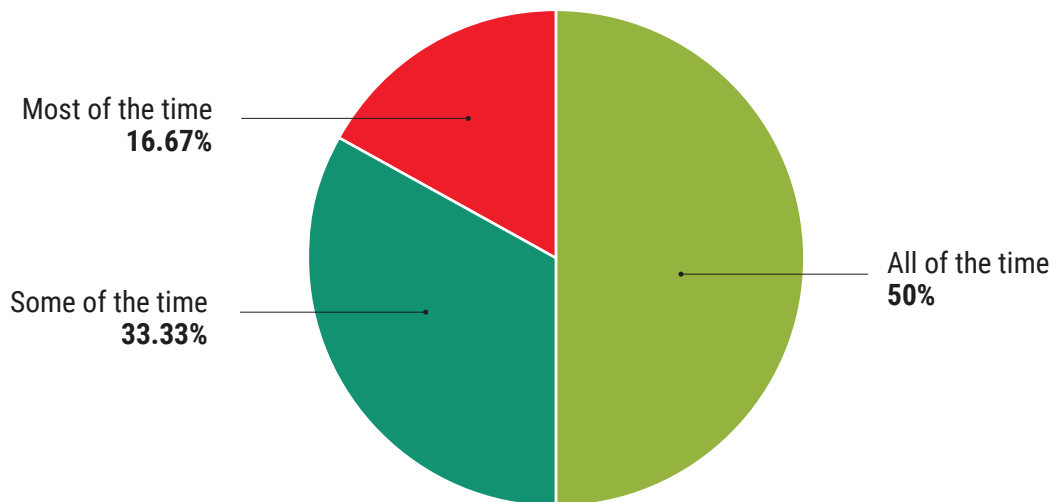


Average score
(with 0 being least helpful and 10 most helpful)

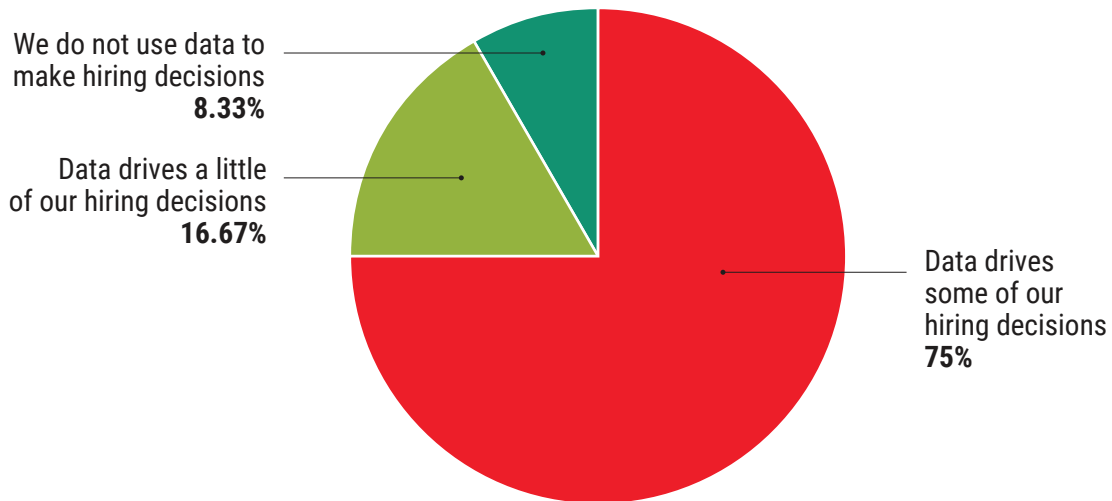
My agency is hiring candidates that meet our needs



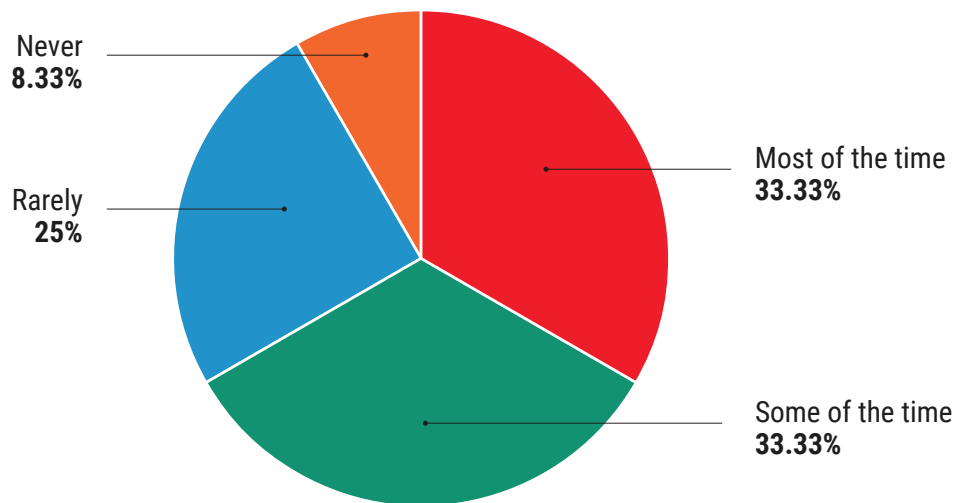
The hiring manager from the mission or office with the open position is involved in the hiring process



How big a role does data play in your agencies hiring decisions?

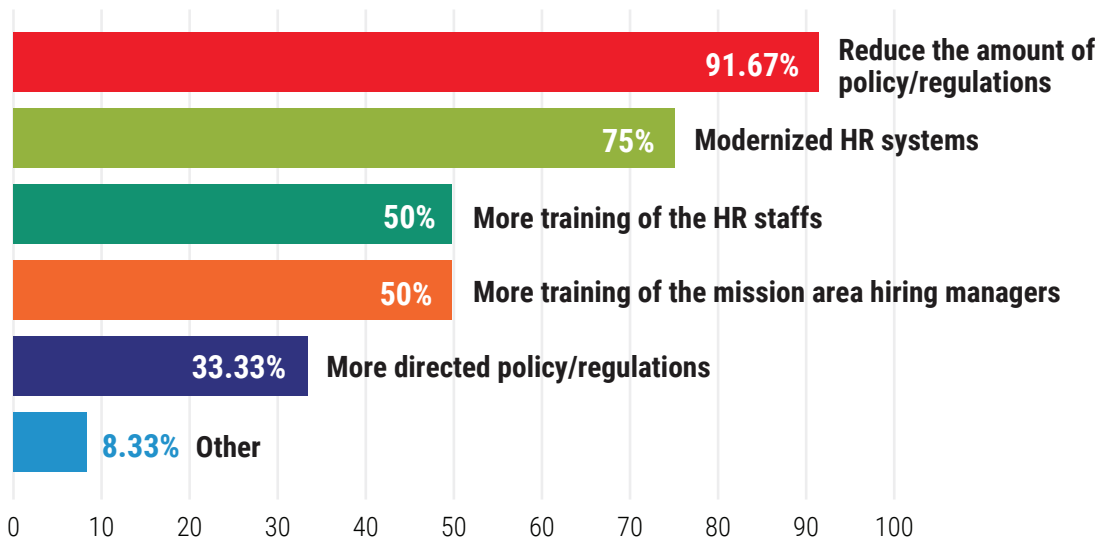


How often does your agency use data to find qualified candidates?



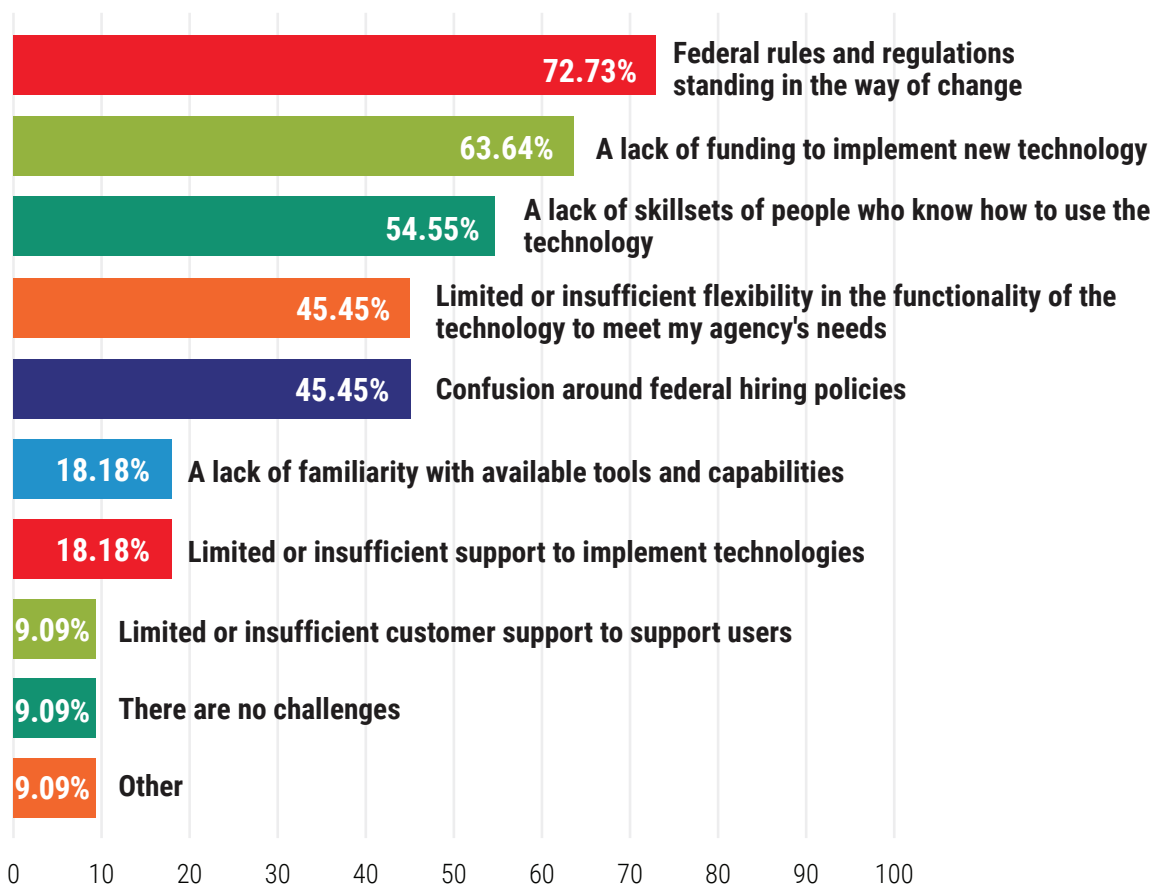
How should OPM help agencies strengthen the competencies of agency HR processes?

(Check all that apply)

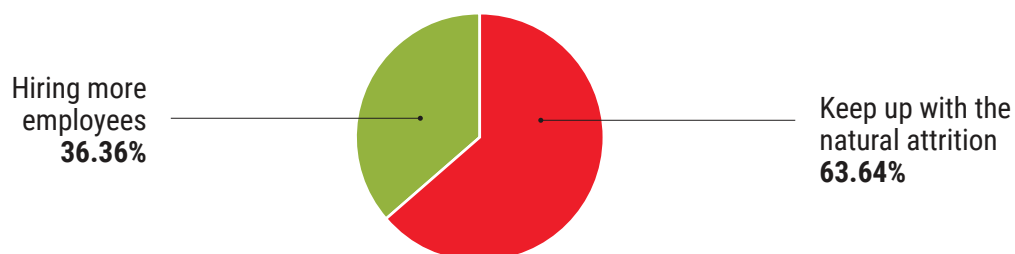


What are the biggest challenges to better utilizing technology to help achieve your hiring and human capital goals?

(Check all that apply)

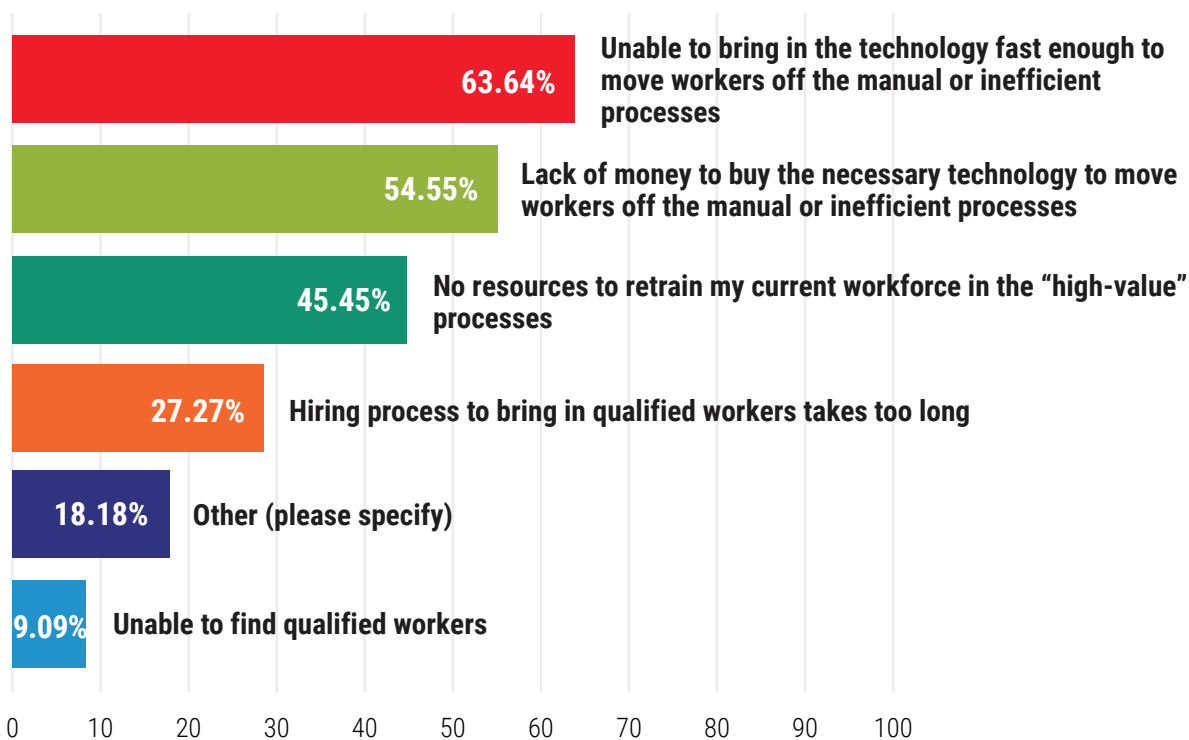


For the rest of 2018, my agency plans on:

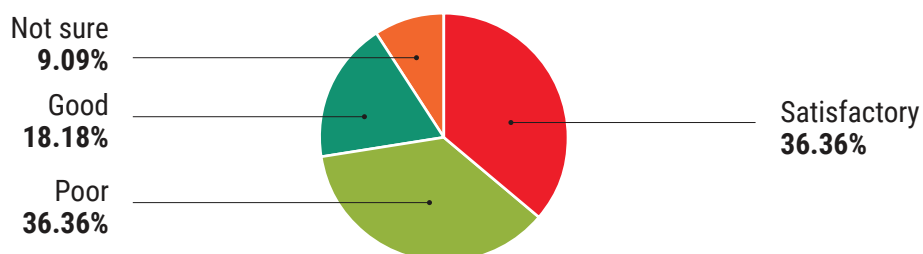


One of the administration's priorities is to move employees away from "low-value" work to "high-value" work. What are the biggest challenges in doing that?

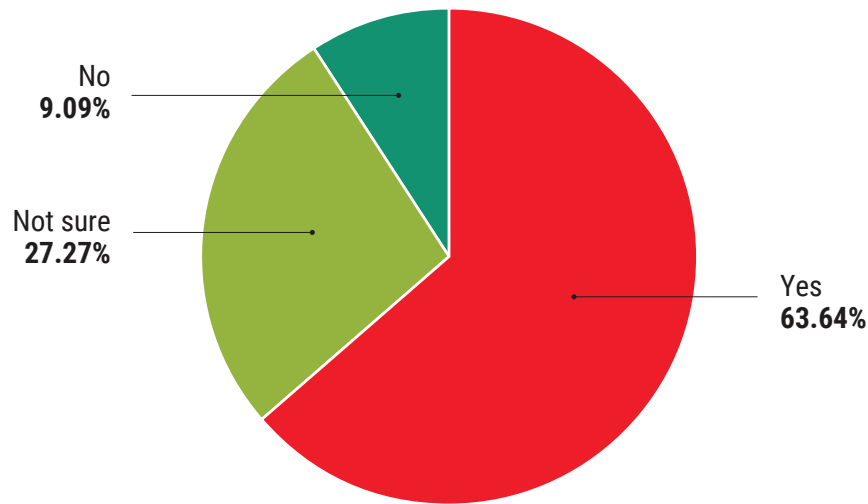
(Check all that apply)



The guidance OPM/OMB gives agencies on reskilling or upskilling employees toward "high-value" work is:

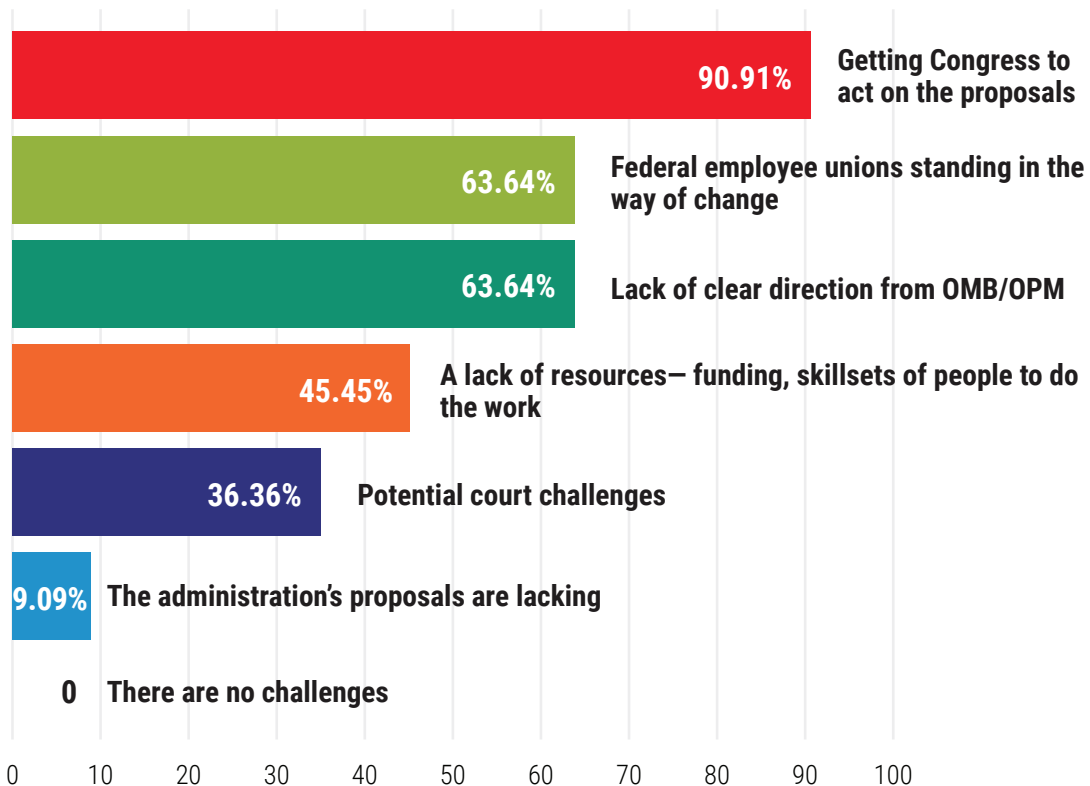


Do you think the administration's goals to modernize the civil service are achievable?

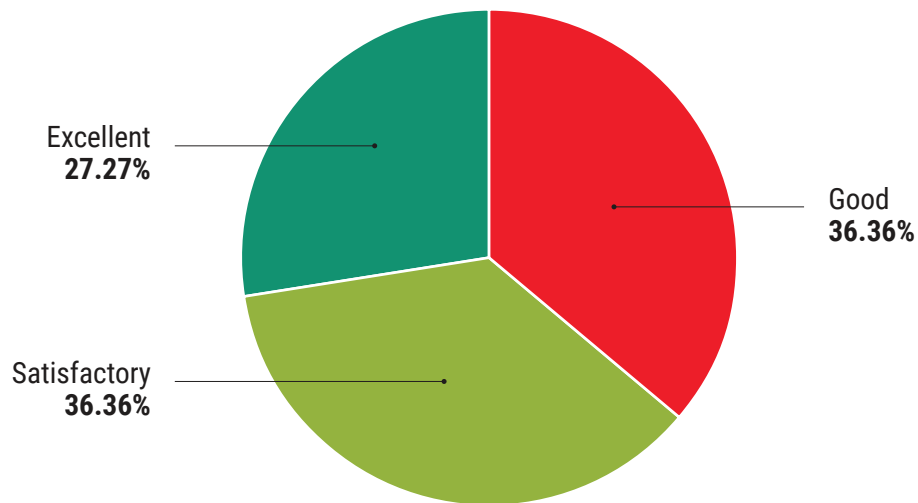


What are the biggest challenges to achieving civil service modernization?

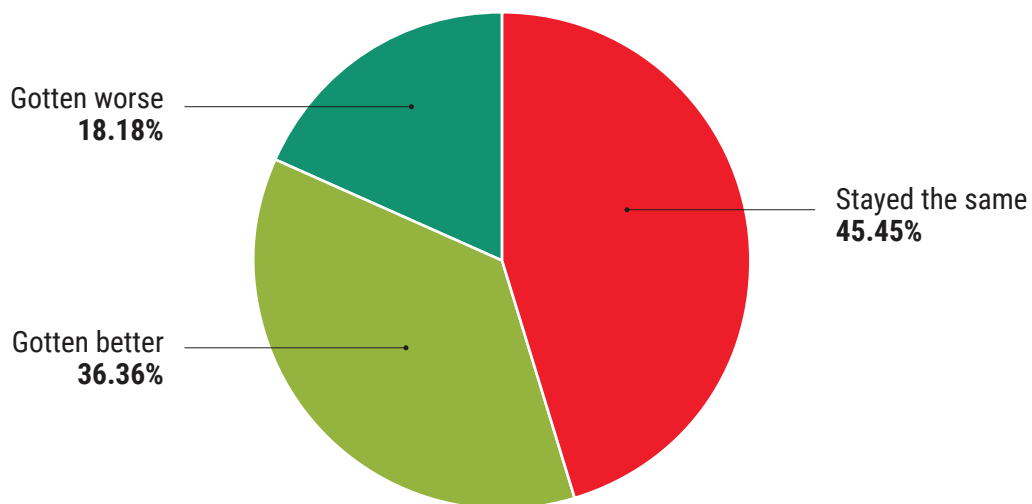
(Check all that apply)



How would you rate employee morale and engagement at your agency?



Over the last year, employee morale has ...



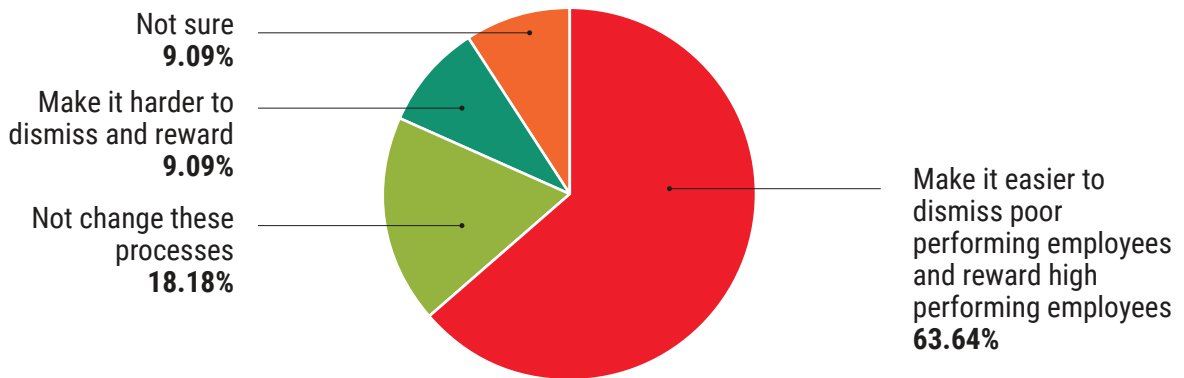
IF YOU SAID, GOTTEN BETTER, PLEASE DESCRIBE WHY

- Intentional effort on increasing employee engagement and improving first line supervisor skills.
- More engagement in mission; stronger efforts to deal with low performers.
- We actively work to improve employee engagement and it is working.
- Transformation efforts and new authorities in accountability, EOs limiting union control and congressional support give hope for real positive change.

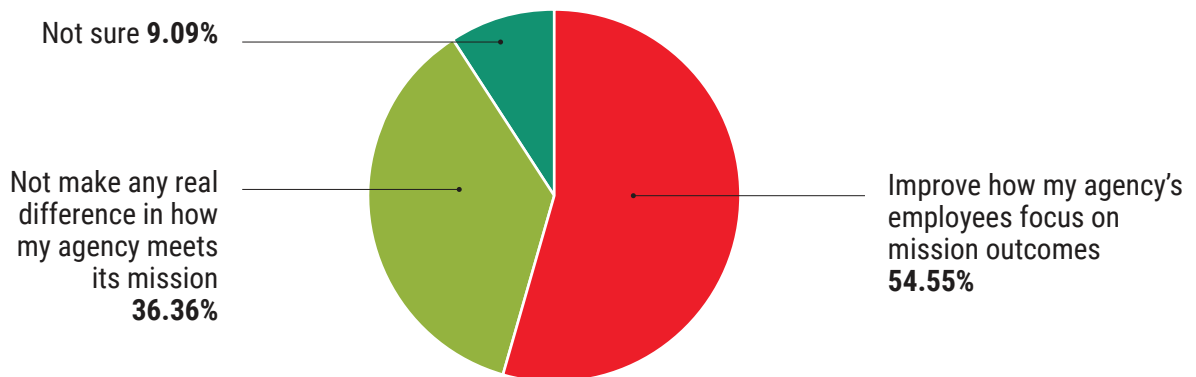
IF YOU SAID, GOTTEN WORSE, PLEASE DESCRIBE WHY

- Administration proposals create spectre of uncertainty.
- Change in civility.

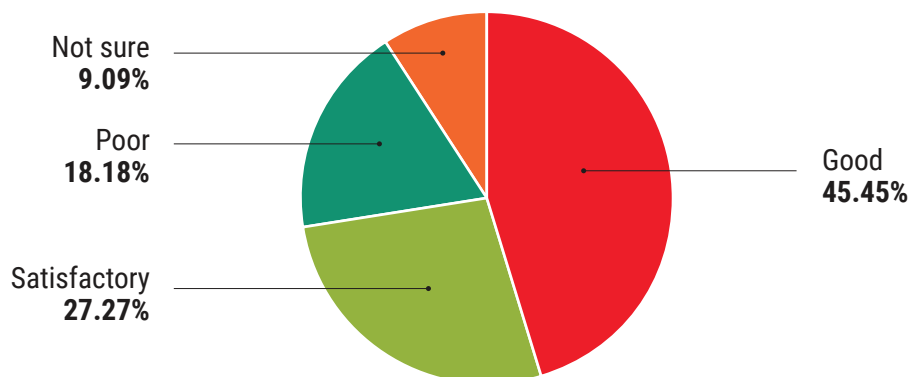
President Trump's executive order on employee accountability will:



President Trump's executive orders on official time and renegotiating labor contracts will:



Since the President rescinded the formal labor-management partnerships, how would describe your agency's relationship with labor unions?



Do you have any overall comments on the state of human resources in the federal government?

My team of HR Professionals remain extremely motivated and committed to our agency's employees, managers and mission. It's inspiring to lead such a team.

Seems like many agencies are quick to blame "the system" when the reality is there is a lot that could be done to improve HR that is simply good practice/execution.

Too cumbersome.

It is broken! Too much regulation, archaic pay systems, Draconian classification processes, ridiculously difficult/long executive hiring process... nearly impossible to find and retain HR talent. We need complete transformation of civil service rules and regulations. Also need to move Human Capital funding from GenAd to its own appropriation- people providing services are the CORE BUSINESS of government - GenAd funding is constantly stripped away from programs essential to finding, developing and retaining top talent.