

# EXECUTIVE BRIEFING SERIES

## Reimagining how the government hires



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# Reimagining how the government hires — both through technology and people tactics

BY JASON MILLER

Let's make one thing clear: Federal human resources processes and procedures are not broken.

That is the first thing Traci DiMartini, chief human capital officer at the General Services Administration, said to kick off a recent panel discussion about how to improve federal hiring and recruiting.

DiMartini wanted to make sure that message was clear because too often agencies, employees, both current and prospective, and other experts bemoan all the challenges with federal hiring.

"HR does not need to be saved by the Hill or by the Office of Management and Budget. It is not broken. It is working as a merit systems principle as it is set up," she said during a **Federal News Network** discussion sponsored by Monster Government Solutions. "The problem is we have lots more applicants compared to the number of jobs open, we have not made investments in technology, and HR across the government is woefully understaffed and underresourced."

Despite that, DiMartini considers it an exciting time to be working on HR in the government. "At GSA, we are really reinvigorated about the idea of bringing in new talent, and there's a lot of flexibilities and exciting things we can do with what's already available."

## PANEL OF EXPERTS



**Eric Dilworth**  
Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer, U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission



**Traci DiMartini**  
Chief Human Capital Officer, General Services Administration



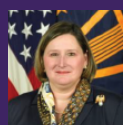
**Susan Fallon Brown**  
Senior Vice President, Monster Government Solutions



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



**William Malyszka**  
Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer, National Science Foundation



**Susan Yarwood**  
Chief Human Capital Officer, Secret Service

GSA, like many agencies, is seeking to hire employees at all points of their careers. But also like many agencies, it is struggling to keep employees who are experts in the field of human resources.

"The issue is HR offices across the board are really bleeding talent. HR in the federal sector is different. It's complex. It's unique," she said. "I'm not here to argue whether that's good or bad. There are probably a lot of things that could be modernized, but I have to just say over the last year, I feel like every article I read all starts off with 'HR is broken. How do we fix it?' And I'm just here to bust that myth."

## People, technology are part of the answer

DiMartini highlighted two important challenges: a growing dearth of HR professionals and technical debt among related systems to accelerate and ease the real or perceived burden of the federal hiring process.

The numbers back up both of these challenges.

OMB reported in President Joe Biden's [fiscal 2023 budget request](#) to Congress that "retention rates for HR management professionals have consistently trailed the governmentwide average retention rate (69.7% to 77.2%)."

The Office of Personnel Management's HR Shared Service Center is [conducting a survey](#) of agencies about their legacy systems this summer as the first step in analyzing how to move toward modernization.

The experts on the panel agreed that the challenges around HR have less to do with the process and more about the people and technology involved in it.

During the discussion, civilian agency and industry experts highlighted the long-standing challenge of needing a culture change and of making mission leaders part of the process much sooner.

At the Secret Service, for instance, CHCO Susan Yarwood said she is taking a two-pronged approach to improve hiring and recruiting processes and to institutionalize the desired culture change.

"We've really started out with business process reengineering and used the technology as the enabler for that reengineering," Yarwood said. "What we find is that there are some really easy things that are out there already. When the executive order came out, I could look at what Monster's library of assessments was because I have my industrial and organizational (IO) psychologists working on other things. They're doing some redesigning, but there's some existing technology out there that I could apply to that challenge, and it's really helpful." Learn more about Monster Government's assessments [here](#).

## Investing in the federal hiring process

OPM has been focused on helping agencies improve their candidate assessments for much of the past decade.

Recent data from GSA's Hiring Assessment and Selection Outcome [Dashboard](#) found 96% of competitive, public job announcements relied solely on applicants' answers to a self-assessment

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— Traci DiMartini, Chief Human Capital Officer, General Services Administration



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**— William Malyszka, Deputy CHCO, National Science Foundation**

questionnaire and a resume review to determine whether their experience made them eligible for positions. Of these, 53% resulted in a hiring manager moving forward to select applicants off the list.

William Malyszka, deputy CHCO at the National Science Foundation, said his agency is investing in IO psychologists to improve both the assessment process as well as broader hiring processes.

NSF has had success with its IT specialists using assessments. “We’ve had our hiring managers be able to make two selections when they were only looking for one specific candidate. ... That really resonated with them, and they see the value difference and the quality difference in the candidates we are getting,” Malyszka said.

NSF has also been working to improve the rigor needed for a structured interview process, he said. “We’ve been forming consultation teams from HR to go out and help hiring managers develop behavioral rating guides for interviews, tied to the competencies and positions. Not only does this better assess the candidates, but it’s a step toward mitigating unconscious biases and really making sure that we are looking fairly at candidates.”

The goal, he said, is to make sure NSF’s hiring managers are making decisions based on requirements and competencies that result in better employees over the long term.

Hiring is part art, part science, Malyszka acknowledged. To that end, NSF has focused its investments in tools and activities on helping hiring managers during the vetting and assessment of candidates.

“We created a new role in HR, actually, to form some of these consultation teams, and it’s the HR business partner,” he said. “One of the key things we wanted to assess was folks’ ability to manage customer relationships, establish personal credibility, be attuned to emotional intelligence in a conversation and be able to do active listening.” His team articulated behavioral indicators tied to each of those skills to help hiring managers be able to identify these skills in candidates.

It also had HR business partner candidates go through a structured interview, where they talked about their experience and the types of approaches they would take to address problems.

“We actually gave them a scenario, and they had to facilitate a 30-minute customer meeting simulation with a real NSF customer,” Malyszka said.

## **Setting the foundation for collaboration**

NSF’s focus on training hiring managers emerged as a common theme among panelists.

Jennifer Forrest, senior director for professional services at Monster Government Solutions, said expanding the team that is involved in the recruiting and hiring process is a common trend among agencies and private sector organizations.

Forrest said the [June 2020 executive order](#) on federal hiring is already having an impact on both the speed in hiring new employees and how agencies are collaborating and sharing candidates.

"One thing that we've done is invest more in our tools to make that easier," she said.

Eric Dilworth, deputy CHCO at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, said his office recently launched a pilot program to share certificates for job applicants across NRC offices.

"It sounds easy. You get a certificate and just share it out to different managers," he said. "But you've got to have a good process in place, and you have to have someone to manage that process."

It's not sufficient to have staffing specialists focused on pushing certificates out, Dilworth said. Additional people will be needed, he said. At NRC, "we went out to the organizations and found managers that wanted to lead that effort. They have a better knowledge of the various offices and the positions that can be combined and use it. We are setting up several different core teams, one for engineers and one for administrators, specialists, and those people are going to lead those teams and work with HR specialists to get the certificates gathered for the right managers that need to make selections."

## Better hiring hinges on collaboration

The initial results from this sharing of certificates effort at NRC should be available by this summer. The goal, Dilworth said, is to get more people involved in the hiring process so it's not just an HR responsibility.

Susan Fallon Brown, senior vice president at Monster Government Solutions, said HR teams are becoming business partners — a change from what their traditional role has been over the past few decades.

The Secret Service's Yarwood said part of the culture change at many agencies arises from the need to create a team of experts from across the organization to lead hiring and recruiting.


"We have for the past two decades taught HR people how to narrow the funnel to help the manager get who they want. I call that threading the needle," she said. Now, the goal is to identify a group of people with a

core set of competencies and then allow each hiring manager to go deeper and find the candidate with the program-specific competencies needed.

If agencies move in that direction, there's no reason why they can't share HR certificates across the government, Yarwood said.

Policy initiatives like these will enable agencies to be more effective and their HR teams to bring even more value to the recruiting and hiring processes, Fallon Brown said.

"Departments that embrace automation and enabling technologies, and don't settle for one-size-fits all solutions, are going even faster. Modern platforms and integrations make it easier and more cost-effective to launch solutions specific to an agency's unique needs. And if the policies are clear, if we can get the ambiguity out and have clear requirements, then the private sector can bring even greater innovation," she said.

In the end, Fallon Brown and the other panelists said it's all about getting the best candidates, ensuring there is diversity, equity and inclusion in every agency's pool of applicants, and hiring employees that will advance the mission of the agency. 

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