

Government
Executive

Government's Quest to Attract

(AND KEEP)

Millennials



Introduction



By Charles S. Clark

"I got stuck in a bureaucratic quagmire that prevented me from doing the research I and my organization wanted to do."

That's the sentiment that drove Lucas Fisher, a computer engineer at the Defense Department, to trade in his government job for a more exciting position at a firm in Seattle. As agencies across government grapple with the challenge of attracting millennials with their critical technical skills, they must contend with a perception (also the reality sometimes) that government work is a path to soul-sucking boredom. While most employees—at least the desirable ones—prefer meaningful work, younger workers are less inclined to tolerate disappointment than their older colleagues.

What are agencies to do? While they may not be able to compete with the private sector on pay, this ebook explores some of the steps they could take to do a better job attracting and retaining younger workers.

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Charles S. Clark joined Government Executive in the fall of 2009. He has been on staff at The Washington Post, Congressional Quarterly, National Journal, Time-Life Books, Tax Analysts, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges and the National Center on Education and the Economy.

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I got stuck in a bureaucratic quagmire that prevented me from doing the research I and my organization wanted to do.

LUCAS FISHER



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Phillip Sheridan, a 34-year-old government technology contractor, believes his federal security clearance raises his earning power in the Washington metropolitan area by \$30,000.

"But it makes you insecure because you think you don't have skills to compete in Silicon Valley," he says. In his heart of hearts, he "wants to be around people who're excited about their job every day and absorb that energy from them."

In government, Sheridan adds, the only place you get that excitement is at "the tip of spear," such as serving in other countries or helping agency cyber-teams fend off hackers. Plus, "government undertrains its employees, and contractors [are] even worse because their companies don't have extra funds for training," he says.

Not being able to travel to cybersecurity industry conferences like his private-sector counterparts do is a burden because they're "mandatory for career advancement," Sheridan told *Government Executive*. "You have to be able to learn what's going on in the world."

The obstacles agency recruiters face in attracting the digitally-absorbed millennial generation (generally considered to be the 18-34 cohort) are by now a well-discussed litany of stereotypes: government is slow, bureaucratic and behind the technology curve, while millennials are entrepreneurial, impatient for results, restless to switch jobs and hungry for work that gives their life meaning beyond a paycheck.

But another reason the nation's 75 million millennials represent just under 17 percent of the workforce (according to the Office of Personnel Management), is their fascination with those necktie-less billionaires they associate with Silicon Valley.

"The attractions are the ability to do something completely independently, be your own boss, build something, have a great idea and implement it yourself," says Dave Wilson, a cyber-specialist with a federal agency who covered Silicon Valley for three years as a journalist. "Often, people will spend a lot of time in an agency building a specific skill set or program management and take that out in the world," where the main drivers are "the potential for making a transformative change on a societal level and the large amounts of money," Wilson says. Young people, especially, "are more inclined to take that risk and go for the brass ring."

Lucas Fisher, a computer engineer who left a decade-long career the Defense Department for a Seattle firm after making contacts at a conference on cloud computing, says, "I was okay in government for a while, moving around to several different positions, but I tended to get bored. Eventually, what got me was I got stuck in a bureaucratic quagmire that prevented me from doing the research I and my organization wanted to do."

Eric Gillespie, founder, CEO and director of the Arlington, Va.-based big data and analytics firm Govini (which has a partnership with Government Executive Media Group), notes that "millennials grew up in an era of rising globalization. They want work they believe in and a strong work-life balance. The rapid progression of new ideas is essential to them. It's no surprise that federal agencies struggle to attract the best and brightest from this talented generation" so inclined to question the status quo, said the tech-field veteran. "In government, the best idea doesn't always win. Relationships, tenure and structure are prized over innovation."



Room to Grow

Agencies must create opportunities for employees to develop new skills and experiences.

Older employees “live to work,” but Millennials “work to live,” says acting Social Security Commissioner Carolyn Colvin. “Young people are just not going to stay in the same positions, and we recognize that they have an outside life.”

That’s why the Social Security Administration has launched an array of programs addressing the four generations in its workforce, Colvin told an audience at a May 3 symposium on “Changing Government” put on by the National Academy of Public Administration.

The nation’s 75.4 million people age 18-34—the millennials—recently overtook the vast Baby Boomer generation in sheer numbers. According to the Office of Personnel Management, that younger cohort in fiscal 2015 makes up only 16.9 percent of the federal government’s full-time permanent workforce.

Millennials are more competitive, compare themselves with their peers, switch agencies more often and use mentors, says Tim Bowden, a consultant with Management Concepts.

SSA, which boasts an employee retention rate of 93 percent, seeks to engender loyalty with a career path program called SkillsConnect. It allows employees to spend 80 percent of their time in their main job and 20 percent learning new skills from managers in other units. Project opportunities are posted to a website and employees can submit applications to compete to participate for up to one year. The pilot program will expand agencywide this summer.

There’s also a type of suggestion box informally named “What action would you take or decision would you make if you were the commissioner?” Colvin says the agency has so far received 1,700 recommendations from employees. Like many agencies, SSA also encourages telecommuting, conducts

regular town hall meetings (not easy with 60,000 employees in 1,400 offices), and holds regular brown-bag lunches and group telephone talks to engage employees.

Ret. Adm. Lewis W. Crenshaw Jr., who spent decades in the Navy and served as commander of Navy Region Europe, says, “There is a reluctance at agencies to embrace technology, which is a turnoff for millennials.”

Dan Tangherlini, former head of the General Services Administration, says the Millennials he worked with “see culture as more important than compensation. They want experience,” he says.



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Fostering Entrepreneurship

Millennials don't want bosses, they want coaches.

Bad news for agency hiring managers came in a U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation [study](#) released last January that found only 2 percent of millennials planned on working in government. Half to two-thirds, the survey showed, are interested in entrepreneurship. Gallup Organization [data](#) this May included the disturbing figure that 21 percent of millennials report changing jobs within the last year—more than three times the number of non-millennials.

Gallup characterized the results as follows: “Millennials don’t just work for a paycheck—they want a purpose. For millennials, work must have meaning,” wrote Chairman and CEO Jim Clifton.

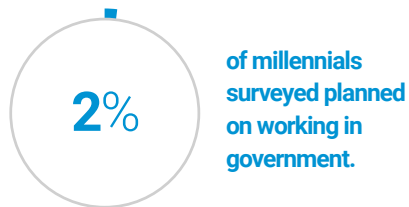
“Millennials are not pursuing job satisfaction—they are pursuing development. Most millennials don’t care about the bells and whistles found in many workplaces today—the ping-pong tables, fancy latte machines and free food that companies offer to try to create job satisfaction . . . Millennials don’t want bosses—they want coaches . . . Millennials don’t want annual reviews—they want ongoing conversations. Millennials don’t want to fix their weaknesses—they want to develop their strengths.

And finally, they don’t view the job as a job, but as their life.”

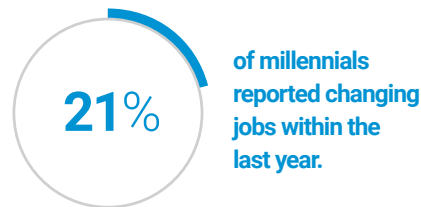
More promising for federal recruiters was an [Accenture Strategy research poll](#) of recent college graduates released in June showing that 19 percent are seeking work in federal, state or local government or nonprofit organizations, up from 13 percent in 2013, with 74 percent preferring the federal government.

Katherine LaVelle, managing director for Accenture Strategy, told *Government Executive* that the young people she sees “want to integrate work and life together. They’re okay working 60-70 hours a week, but they want to take time out during the day to get on their mobile devices to make weekend plans or chat with friends,” she noted. “They’re comfortable with assuming they can integrate work with life and social presence.”

Millennials prioritize having “a positive social atmosphere,” Lavelle added, even if that means a lower salary. “They’re no longer as interested in a straight career ladder, but more like a career jungle gym, which turns different experiences into a career,” she said. Some 92 percent surveyed want to work for an organization with social responsibility.



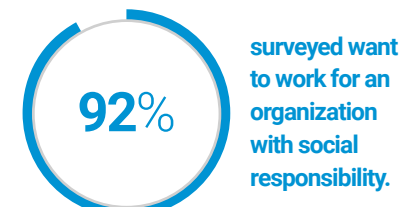
SOURCE: U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation



SOURCE: Gallup Organization



SOURCE: Accenture Strategy



The Government's Efforts

One of the most important tools is college loan assistance.

Ask OPM officials about the millennial problem and they cite a litany of ongoing federal recruitment programs. The cumbersome [USAJobs website](#) is being revamped. A “Hiring Excellence” [campaign](#) was introduced this spring. Officials point to President Obama’s 2010 executive order on recruiting students and recent graduates, a “GovConnect” program that allows federal employees to take a few hours a week to work on projects that interest them outside their main job. They cite a 2012 directive to close the government skills gap with Presidential Management Fellows.

The government’s millennial cutting edge is said to be the White House-based U.S. Digital Services team that, in one [profile](#) was said to view itself as “just as technologically nimble as Silicon Valley.”



OPM conducts nationwide outreach to students and recent graduates along with other agencies. “We are actively educating job seekers on how to find federal jobs, the federal hiring process, the Pathways Program and how to write a resume. Maintaining strong relationships with OPM’s key academic partners is fundamental to help agencies broaden their applicant pools to include a diverse mix of entry-level talent,” says an OPM spokeswoman.

In cybersecurity, in particular, OPM mimics the private sector in helping agencies use in-person and virtual outreach (through OPM’s [Human Resources University](#)). The current USAJOBS has a social media presence that includes Linked In, Google+, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, the spokesperson says, while 65 percent of agencies are recruiting through social media.

Finally, one of the government’s most important recruitment tools may be money—specifically, the college loan debt many young people carry. “The [student loan repayment program](#) allows agencies to repay federally insured student loans as a recruitment or retention incentive,” OPM says, noting agencies can target the program to occupations such as technology.

Will it be enough? Several millennials interviewed by *Government Executive* suggest not.

Rebecca Williams, 32, a veteran of data management at the Office of Management and Budget now an adviser for city strategies at Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Government Excellence, describes the culture shock she felt at OMB. In government, “the pace of work is slower, and the ability to travel or make decisions as small as downloading some extension tool on a [desktop] computer are complicated by policies,” she says.

“There’s an epidemic of legacy information technology at all levels in agencies, some of which have been trying to get off them

for years.” It’s not as if millennials can’t handle old systems, she adds, but it should be a matter of months, not years to update them. On the upside for her, Williams adds, “now that I have spent time in government, I come off as more experienced.”

By contrast, Amanda Nguyen, 33, a veteran of the press office in a component of the Agriculture Department who now crafts brand communication strategies for CHIEF, praised the “supportive leadership” she experienced in government that was open to tapping new digital tools to engage audiences. But there were limits. “I’ve always been one who appreciates the bureaucracy and the policy, and having those kinds of guardrails so you can be really creative within them, knowing the boundaries,” she says.

Nguyen had the unusual experience of parlaying her Agriculture work into a new position. There is a desire of many millennials to aim high and to demand feedback—“to throw caution to the wind and say what is wrong” in the organization, says Nguyen, who was named one of FedScoop’s “Top 25 Most Influential People Under 40” in government and technology.



Everyone wants to attribute the most flexible traits to the private sector and the most slow-moving to government, but it’s not uniform or a monolith.

LAUREL MCFARLAND

Executive director of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration

One close observer of recent graduates’ attitudes toward government service is Laurel McFarland, executive director of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration. “Everyone wants to attribute the most flexible traits to the private sector and the most slow-moving to govern-

ment, but it’s not uniform or a monolith,” she says.

Though McFarland knows cases in which the government “moved nimbly” and hired a young person quickly, “the vast majority tell the same story—it’s a slow, tedious, seemingly random process that usually ends in rejection over a long period.”

She worries that “government is starting to lose out at every stage,” as private employers such as Google “use social media way out in front to shape new graduates’ perceptions of the companies. Like a soft drink, you perceive it to be a cool employer,” she says, “and they’ve already got you long before you apply. I can assure you the federal government is not doing that.”

Despite the government’s efforts on Twitter and Linked In, the private sector is “way out in front in the passive application process,” McFarland says, referring to techniques of recruiting young people still in school by perusing their online profiles—even using artificial intelligence to mine the data, and acknowledging “alternative credentials” such as technical certificates.

McFarland recommends that agencies better target student loan repayment benefits to young people who commit to government service.

In general, she said, “I don’t think students today are demanding any more than they ever have. What’s changed is that we’ve seen the ability of the [private] workplace to adapt” to such issues as work-life balance. [G](#)

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