The Talent Imperative:

5 Ways Agencies Can Prioritize the Employee Experience

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Introduction

It's referred to as "the Great Resignation," and it's happening in nearly every industry. A whopping 4.3 million Americans left their jobs in August 2021, many of whom say the pandemic made them rethink their careers, work conditions and goals.

Against this backdrop, public sector agencies have a tougher time than ever to recruit and retain talent. On average, it takes 100 days to hire federal employees, partly because of sluggish and antiquated legacy systems and processes. In the era of COVID-19 and remote work, employee experience isn't just a consideration; it's something agencies must do to compete with the private sector in the war on talent.

But how can agencies improve their employee experience? On "The Talent Imperative," a recent podcast produced by GovExec and sponsored by Salesforce, GovExec president Constance Sayers sat down with Casey Coleman, Salesforce's senior vice president of global public sector digital transformation to discuss this topic. Below are a few takeaways from their conversation.

Slow Processes, Old Tech Hamper Public Sector Recruiting Efforts

Government agencies are challenged to equip employees with the tools they need to succeed, said Coleman. She would know, having spent 12 years at the General Services Administration, most recently as chief information officer.

The first of these challenges is recruiting – specifically, the time it takes to extend an offer and then onboard new employees. The government can take months to even get an offer out, Coleman said.

"And in the meantime, it can be hard for a candidate or applicant to know where they stand," she noted. "Speeding up the process and giving visibility and connectedness through that process to people who want to come into the government, want to serve and want to give back and want to help with the mission [and] making it easy for them to do so."

The second challenge is onboarding and training. A new employee must navigate the rigmarole that often consists of security training, background checks and so on. These tasks are typically done in different places, by different teams, leaving employees to figure it all out by themselves.

"Connecting all of that around the employee, making it easy, intuitive, simple and fast, to get onboard, to get trained and start contributing," she adds.

The third hurdle is the tools employees need to effectively do the job they were hired to do, without being bogged down by siloed systems or laborious processes. Workers also need a simple way to connect data around processes and access it "in a way that's secure anytime, anywhere on any device," Coleman says.

These obstacles already existed before COVID-19, but the pandemic and the shift to a hybrid workforce shed new light on the government's pain points. Overcoming these hurdles in the age of hybrid work will require a different technology stack, a different leadership approach and a different way of engaging employees, Coleman said.

Collaboration Is Key to Solving These Challenges

One way to address these challenges is to establish partnerships between agency leaders and personnel managers. New Mexico did just that, with a successful outcome. When COVID hit, the state saw a 600% surge in demand for unemployment benefits. Meanwhile, call center agents were working remotely without access to their core tools.

State officials partnered with Salesforce to adopt a virtual contact center so agents could use at-home contact center skills and tools. Chatbots were also implemented to handle first-line inquiries automatically, which freed up call center agents to focus on more complex queries.

"...They were able to get over $1 billion in unemployment benefits into the economy and help people at a time of significant need and help their employees to not miss a beat," Coleman said.

Treat Employees Like Customers

Today's jobseekers have more options than ever. To become the employer of choice, agencies must automate tools, systems and processes to work for employees – not against them.

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> **CASEY COLEMAN | senior vice president of global public sector digital transformation, Salesforce**

People are drawn to the public sector because of its compelling mission and by the desire to make a difference, but if the tools are old, the systems aren't connected and the data is hard to access, "then they have choices and they can go somewhere else," Coleman said.

"The public sector government has to treat employees like customers in the sense of meeting them where they are and equipping them to do their work effectively, connecting systems, providing information, making things automatic and easy to use and remote and secure," she added.

Today, citizens expect their interactions with the government to be as seamless as when they order something online or conduct business with digital companies. Automated platforms can help deliver this experience to the public sector.

Help Employees Stay Connected

Agencies can help employees succeed by creating a connected experience, Coleman says. That means workers have a single platform where they can access all the tools they need.

Today, that's rarely the reality. "If you think about the employee experience in government, you have to get hardware . . . your phone, your laptop," Coleman said. "If you have an issue, you have to log a ticket. You need to know how to sign up for benefits. And you need to know how to . . . do your online training for security awareness. All of these things typically require going to different systems, [with] different logins, connecting with different teams and figuring out how to navigate this process."

This is precisely the challenge Salesforce's Employee Experience for Public Sector offering looks to solve. By providing government employees with a digital hub that unifies forms, tasks, resources and deadlines, government agencies can ensure their employees have access to the tools they need to be productive and successful.

Getting there can seem daunting, Coleman acknowledges. Legacy systems, constrained resources and not knowing where exactly to start can stall any onset. But this has been done before, so look to the trailblazers.

For example, at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Slack is a central hub for collaboration. Within Slack, NASA's JPL can communicate in real-time to tackle complex tasks. Thanks to integrations with JIRA and Google Hangouts, JPL employees now have a central location where they can assign tasks and meet to discuss project progress. The Defense Department, meanwhile, is using Slack to support an increasingly remote workforce. The human resources team at the Washington Headquarters Service leveraged the platform to onboard approximately 1,200 new DOD employees during the COVID-19 pandemic – including more than 40 employees at the Defense Digital Service. DDS also leverages this collaboration technology to coordinate hackathon events and protect federal data.

However, as with any big challenge, it's important to start small and work your way up.

"You've got to start with taking one step and taking a small step and building on that and moving quickly," Coleman said. "It's all about agility, about carving off one small piece and executing on that and using that to learn and iterate and hear from your customers, your employees, and then moving forward iteratively."

Communicate the Change

Agency leaders should also consider building a communications campaign around the change they're trying to address. During her time as GSA CIO, Coleman and her team took this approach whenever there was an impending change.

Together, they created short videos to communicate what change was coming, what to expect and how it affected employees.

"Personally, we [also] made sure that we talked to different audiences to leadership, to employees, to those in the field and those in headquarters and not just talk with them but listen to them," she said. "And then, we had newsletters where we were able to help them understand what's coming next and get them excited."

Coleman and her team also tapped "change champions," a cohort of early adopters who embraced technologies early, experimented and reported back on what was working (and what wasn't).

"It connected with the work of the agency and all of these little tools and all of these approaches created momentum and buy-in and excitement that really served to help us adopt new technologies quickly and effectively," Coleman said.

> **Watch the Employee Experience demo to learn how you can create a modern, digital employee experience within one central location.**