Branding the Government As An Employer of Choice

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If governments are both to compete successfully for talented applicants and retain high performing employees, they need to brand government as an employer of choice that provides challenging work, progressive human resource policies, and opportunities for promotion and career development. Employer branding involves developing and communicating the culture of an organization as an employer. It is based on an assumption that all employees are consumers who must be recruited and retained. Employment branding defines and delivers the employment experience.

Governments need to emphasize the advantages they can offer as compared to the private sector. This will require the development and implementation of a comprehensive marketing and public relations program.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has issued a Policy Brief entitled “Public Service as an Employer of Choice,” which is based on a review of how eleven OECD member countries are addressing difficulties in recruiting and retaining civil servants, particularly those who are highly skilled. Of the eleven countries that participated in the study, four (Canada, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden) are experiencing recruiting problems and three (Austria, Germany, and Norway) soon expect to face this problem. In addition, six countries (Canada, Italy, Korea, Poland, Portugal, and Spain) suffer from critical skills shortages.
There are several reasons cited for the recruitment problems:

- Demographics – Due to demographics, a large portion of employees will be eligible to retire soon. In most countries, more than a quarter of the national government employees are over 50 years old. Exacerbating this problem is the fact that the generation entering the labor force tends to be smaller than the generation retiring. This will increase the competition among employers for a smaller pool of available workers.

- Compensation – Wages are low leading to a loss of government competitiveness. While salary is not the only factor for attracting high performers to government, it is important when competing for new graduates. Wages have proven to be a crucial retention factor especially after two to four years of service.

- Declining image of the public sector – With few exceptions, young people tend not to rate public employment highly. There is a belief that the public sector is bureaucratic, old fashioned and the prestige of the civil service is low in many countries. The trust that citizens have in government has decreased and this has a negative impact on the image of government.

- Human resource management – Old-fashioned human resources management deters high-quality staff. In many countries seniority is more important than merit
and promotions are not clearly linked to performance. Career paths can be unclear and little emphasis is placed on staff development.

The OECD found that a number of countries are implementing strategies designed to enhance the competitiveness of the public sector. Improving the image of the public sector so that it is seen as an attractive place to work is of critical importance. Disseminating positive information about the public service should be considered. Since people tend to respond more positively to individual agencies rather than to the whole of government, consideration should be given to advertising individual agencies. There is a need to emphasize the advantages of public service over private employment. Key points identified by the OECD are: working for the common good, interesting tasks, use of advanced information and communication technologies, and clear promotion and training opportunities.

Creating better working conditions is necessary if government is to be seen as an employer of choice. OECD countries are developing new compensation policies and creating additional performance-based pay systems and other incentives. Previously, according to the OECD, public service was attractive due to workplace safety, generous pensions, and less daily work stress. As a tradeoff, employees accepted lower salaries. However, recently the pressure of work has increased, conditions of service have deteriorated, thus making low salaries no longer acceptable, especially to younger staff.
There is a need for governments to identify incentives other than salary if they want to be able to recruit and retain high quality employees. The OECD cited Germany as a positive example, since it has implemented flexible working hours, flat hierarchies and the use of the latest technical equipment. Other non-monetary incentives cited in the report include: co-operative leadership, open communication; sufficient freedom to display initiative and make decisions; good working conditions; good opportunities for training and personal development; telecommuting; family-friendly personnel policies; job rotation; assignments in private sector companies, other public services or international organizations; and opportunities for educational leave or leave for other personal reasons.

The OECD believes that there is a need for professionalism to be enhanced in the public sector. This requires that the public service develop a commitment to life-long learning. Staff development programs are key to motivate and retain staff and also are important for an employer to be competitive.

Additionally, the OECD found that reforming human resource management systems must be undertaken. The competitiveness of the public service would be enhanced if human resource management systems helped to ensure high-quality leadership, improved mobility of public employees, and promoted equal opportunity. The public service needs to develop good recruitment processes to ensure that senior civil servants and appointed officials have the required leadership skills and competencies to perform in these high-level positions.
Shifting from seniority to merit when determining promotions also could help to retain younger staff. An opportunity to be given more challenging assignments and to be promoted based on achievements rather than length of service could help recruitment and retention.

The OECD report concluded, “A critical solution to the forthcoming shortage of workforce and critical skills is to make sure that the full use is being made of the national pool of talent. This involves creating workplaces based on equal opportunities in terms of gender, age, ethnic origin, and other comparable criteria. The goals of increasing the number of women in top civil service positions and recruiting ethnic minorities are important in this respect, as well as efforts to prolong the working career of older employees.” Additional information on this report is available at http://www.oecd.org.

In addition to the research done by the OECD, other governments have implemented strategies to enhance its recruitment and retention efforts. For example, some governments have successfully used recruitment and retention bonuses as ways to encourage talented applicants to join the organization and to keep high performing individuals from seeking other employment. These bonuses are usually restricted to highly skilled professional and technical positions, particularly those for which there are shortages of skilled personnel. Where recruitment bonuses are paid, some organizations require the signing of service agreements to ensure that the employees remain with the organization for a specified period of time.
Providing “finder’s fees” to employees who assist in recruiting employees for high-demand positions is another possible initiative that could be considered. However, the use of such fees should be limited to employees who are not involved in the recruitment and hiring process. Clear criteria needs to be established as to when such fees will be paid. The criteria could include requirements for the prospective hire to take the position and remain employed as a satisfactory employee for a specified period of time