

How Agencies Can Make the Shift to Workforce Optimization



A GovLoop Playbook



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed how the federal government works. Although workforce optimization efforts have been underway in some form for decades, the crisis emphasized the need for diverse workers (think: call center workers who can speak multiple languages) and accelerated the adoption of some longstanding but underused work options (think: telework). Now, agencies have the opportunity to take the lessons of this challenging situation and create better workplaces now and for the future.

Several themes threaded through the fabric of the government's pandemic response, stitching together a picture of what's needed. They include ways to preserve institutional knowledge absent employees in the office, measuring employee engagement to prevent attrition, closing skills gaps through professional development and hiring, and committing to diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) efforts. The knot tying all of this together is analytics.

"The federal government, as you talk about it being the country's largest employer, should be a model employer," said Sharon Wong, Executive Director for Strategic Recruitment, Diversity & Inclusion at the Homeland Security Department (DHS).

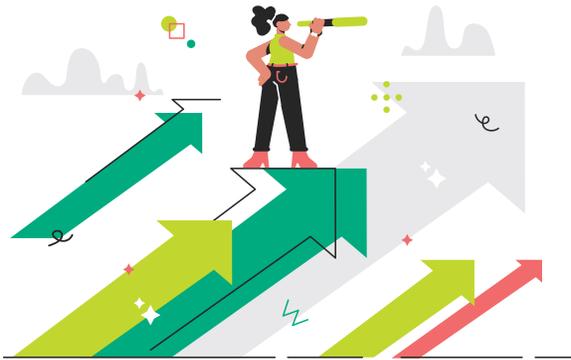
GovLoop and Workday, a provider of enterprise cloud applications for finance and human resources, created this playbook to look at how the federal government can optimize its workforce. You'll find details on:

- How the pandemic affected agencies
- Facts and success stories about workforce optimization
- Challenges with optimization and how to overcome them
- Insights from Loren DeJonge Shulman, Vice President for Research and Evaluation, Partnership for Public Service
- An interview with Tracey France, a government DE&I expert



Need to Know

Workforce-related mandates set examples for how agencies should treat their employees. Here's a look at six that have come about in the past five years under two presidents.



The Program Management Improvement and Accountability Act, which President Barack Obama signed in December 2016, called for the creation of standards, improvement plans, leadership responsibilities and cross-agency coordination to significantly strengthen program management, reduce waste and improve success in government programs.

Executive Order 13781, issued in March 2017 by President Donald Trump, asked agencies for reform plans that included human capital operating plans and near-term work reductions. It also changed the acronym from DE&I to DEIA to include accessibility.



HRStat Guidance from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) in June 2017 aimed to define and inform agencies about HRStat, "a robust data analysis process and an organizational development tool that cultivates partnerships between stakeholders within agencies who may not have previously partnered to develop, implement and monitor human capital strategies together."

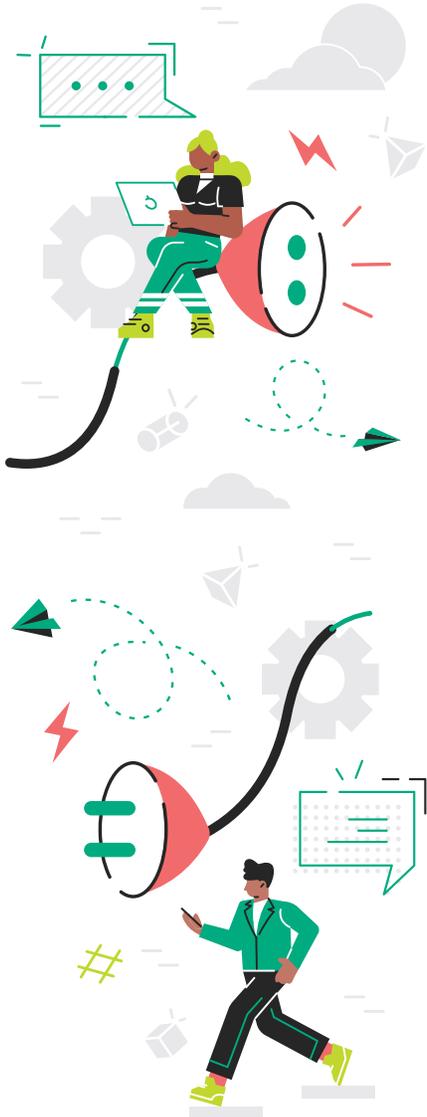
The Modernizing Government Technology Act, enacted in December 2017, and the Technology Modernization Fund provide a framework and funding for technology that improves service delivery.

The Federal Workforce Priorities Report that OPM issued in 2018 set six priorities for the workforce of the future: training and development, staffing levels, skills, hiring and recruitment, data and analysis, and planning.



The 2018 President's Management Agenda made shifting from low- to high-value work a cross-agency priority goal and called on agencies to "reduce burden through tools like integrated IT and automation software."

By the Numbers



54%

of employees reported working at a location other than their primary agency worksite for the majority of time during 2020.

(Source: [2020 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey \(FEVS\)](#))

71%

of FEVS respondents would recommend their organization as a good place to work.

(Source: [2020 FEVS](#))

70%

of customer interactions will involve emerging technology such as chatbots by 2022.

(Source: [GSA's "Emerging Technologies in Contact Centers"](#))

65%

of working women said the pandemic has made things worse for them at work.

(Source: [CNBC/SurveyMonkey poll](#))

32%

of workers across sectors say they never want to work in the office again, while 21% say they never want to work from home again.

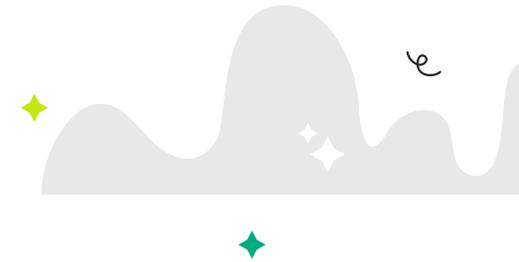
(Source: [Harvard Business Review](#))

50%

is the amount by which the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) plans to increase the frequency of coaching that employees get.

(Source: [NARA draft strategic plan for 2022-26](#))

In the News: How the Pandemic Is Changing the Workforce



March 2020

Agencies Shift Online

Seeking to slow the spread of COVID-19, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) released a [memo](#) directing agency leaders to keep the federal government operational while ensuring mission-critical activities continue. To achieve this, the memo states, “maximize telework across the nation for the Federal workforce (including mandatory telework, if necessary), while maintaining mission-critical workforce needs.”

The takeaway: [Remote work among federal employees increased 1,900%](#) during the height of the pandemic. Before the stay-at-home order, 3% of workers said they worked remotely, but 60% said they did at the peak of the health crisis, according to the Office of Personnel Management. What’s more, [almost 80% said they were more productive while remote.](#)

May 2020

VA Releases Coronavirus Chatbot

With government offices closed and much of the general public stuck at home, federal workers quickly felt overwhelmed by the crush of people reaching out for information. For instance, at the Veterans Affairs Department, the [number of telehealth](#) appointments using VA Video Connect grew from about 10,000 to 120,000 per week between February and May 2020. The department turned to technology to help workers manage the influx. It launched a [chatbot](#) that was available around the clock to answer questions about COVID-19 systems, testing and telehealth appointments.

The takeaway: Agencies experienced a crippling amount of inquiries, forcing them to get creative about providing much-needed information in other ways. Similar to the VA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in March 2020 built the [Coronavirus Self-Checker](#), which it named Clara, to give the public a self-service way to get facts without flooding contact center workers with phone calls.

June 2021

Returning to the Office?

In a [June 10 memo](#), the acting directors of the Office of Management and Budget, Office of Personnel Management and General Services Administration said that federal agencies could extend flexible work schedules and remote or hybrid work arrangements as offices began to reopen amid the pandemic. Jeff Neal, a former Chief Human Capital Officer at the Homeland Security Department, told National Public Radio that he estimates [half of the federal workforce](#) – about a million people – have jobs that can be done remotely.

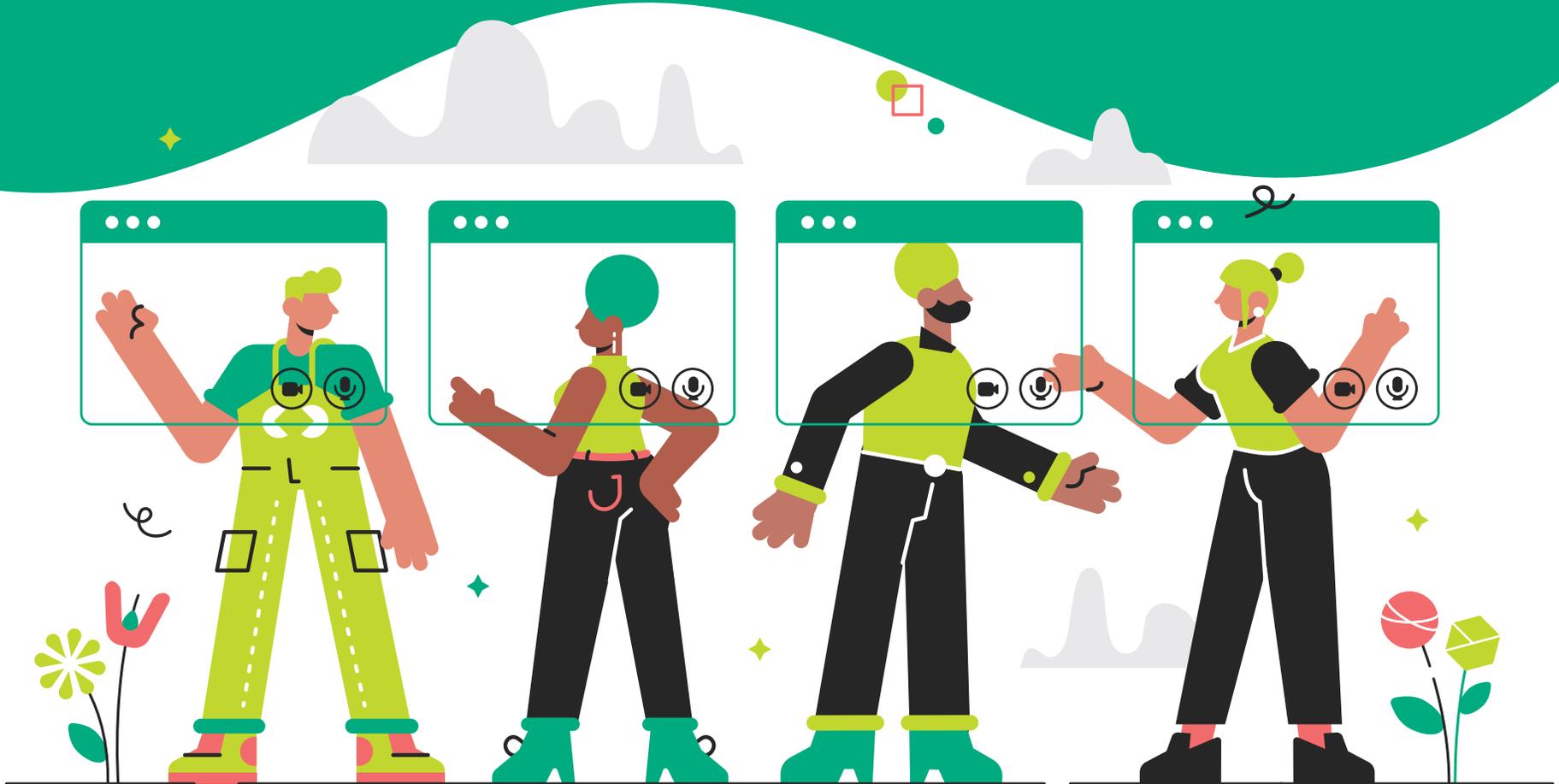
The takeaway: Even after more than a year of remote and hybrid setups, the potential for unfairness remains. Recognizing that, the same memo calls for “training managers on fair and equitable performance management for hybrid teams, including raising awareness among supervisors that evaluation of an employee’s performance should be based on factors such as accountability for results or quality of the work, and should not be affected by whether an employee is working in the office, teleworking, based remotely, or working a flexible work schedule.”

Social Unrest’s Powerful Part

Several high-profile incidents of police officers shooting Black people led to Black Lives Matter demonstrations nationwide, and put the spotlight on the importance of DE&I like never before. Public and private agencies alike quickly pledged to do better, and many agencies set to work on strategic plans that would put action where their promises were. For instance, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. issued a 2021-34 [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Strategic Plan](#) with five goals: culture, career, communication, consistency and community.

The Playbook: 4 Ways to Use Technology to Optimize the Workforce

Workforce optimization is not a new endeavor, but technological advancements, lessons learned about remote work and equity from the government's response to the pandemic are making it easier to achieve. Here are four ways to do it.





1

Preserving Institutional Knowledge

The challenge: With OPM data indicating that 30% of the federal workforce will be eligible to retire in 2023, and seven times more federal workers older than 50 than under 30, knowledge-sharing is crucial. Agencies need a knowledge management infrastructure to ensure operations remain smooth as workers come and go.

How to address it: Build a learning culture in which employees create and share references, resources and document trails to back up the work they do, said Loren DeJonge Shulman, Vice President for Research and Evaluation at the Partnership for Public Service. To foster that environment, agencies can offer opportunities to job swap, work on multidisciplinary teams to solve a problem that cuts across agency sectors and get together for lunch-and-learn sessions. That way, recording and sharing their processes becomes just part of the job for employees.

Why it matters: This is even more important in a hybrid workforce environment, she said: “Remote work has forced some agencies or some workplaces to become far better about document management and needing documentation in terms of going into meetings ... and infrastructure that is necessary to share knowledge because you can’t just walk around the corner and say, ‘Hey, can you tell me about this thing over here?’”



2

Measuring Employee Engagement to Help Retain Workers

The challenge: The main measure of employee sentiment is the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), but it comes out only once a year.

How to address it: Continue to check in on workers through internal town hall meetings, virtual happy hours and pulse surveys. Ask questions such as: Are you happy in your day-to-day activities? Then act on responses. “When given the opportunity, people do fill out satisfaction surveys, they do give you proper feedback, they don’t just check the box,” said Wayne Bobby, Vice President of Workday’s federal division.

But don’t discount FEVS. Leaders and managers can see down to the work unit level and understand how employees by demographics, career fields and locations are experiencing their jobs.

“You’ll be able to get information about how employees are doing and if they have enough resources available and how they feel the supervisors and senior leaders are supporting them,” DeJonge Shulman said.

Why it matters: “When people feel heard and can see that their opinions matter, it can make a huge difference. The more your organization reacts to the sentiments they hear from their staff and employees, the higher the satisfaction rate you’ll see among your people,” Bobby said.



3

Focusing on Professional Development to Close Specific Skills Gaps

The challenge: “Mission-critical skills gaps both within federal agencies and across the federal workforce impede the government from effectively serving the public and achieving results,” according to GAO. Yet in 2018, OPM reported that 63% of Chief Human Capital Officers Act agencies (24 federal entities) reported gaps in their employees’ knowledge and skills.

How to address it: “People want a career, not a job,” Bobby said. “They want on-the-job training or coaching to go from entry-level to rising through the ranks.”

The aging workforce and need to recruit younger workers has “spawned some initiatives in support of recruiting, hiring and onboarding, succession planning and learning development goals. All of these point toward providing the employee a career opportunity that is attractive and rewarding,” Bobby said.

Why it matters: Having someone who can walk alongside you, give guidance and answer questions about the best way forward shows employees they matter and are worth the investment. “You don’t know what you don’t know,” he said.

“In order to meet the needs of your taxpayers and citizens, your workforce should better represent the demographics of the people you serve.”



4

Using Metrics to Improve Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

The challenge: People of color make up about 40% of the U.S. population and about 38% of the full-time federal workforce, according to the Partnership for Public Service, but as of March 2021, only 23% of career Senior Executive Service members were people of color. And that doesn’t take into consideration other diversity factors such as sexual orientation, religious affiliation and gender.

How to address it: Study how many job applicants come from diverse backgrounds or whether they tend to come from the same universities or job fairs; what roles your agency hires candidates from underrepresented populations to serve; and what you’re doing to retain these new hires. Nearly one in five minority workers opts not to apply for a promotion or developmental assignment because they believe that no one from their race or national origin group will get it, putting agencies at risk of losing those employees.

“Data provides the input that you need in whatever your strategy is to say, ‘This is where we are and this is the progress we’ve made so far in getting to where we want to go,’” said Tracey France, a government DE&I expert. (See Page 9 for a Q&A with her.) “If you don’t have good data, you don’t even know where you’re starting from.”

Why it matters: “Whenever you bring in cultural diversity and a lot of different points of view... we all benefit. We learn from that,” Bobby said. “In order to meet the needs of your taxpayers and citizens, your workforce should better represent the demographics of the people you serve.”

Agencies Get a Broader Perspective of DE&I

We spoke with Tracey France, government DE&I expert, to get a better handle on one of the hottest workforce topics today. France was working with the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Inspector General at the time of the interview but has since joined another agency.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

Why should agencies care about diversity, equity and inclusion?

Any organization that involves people that come from diverse backgrounds and diverse experiences is going to have to have diversity management. Diversity just is. What makes diversity work is inclusion because you need to have an inclusive workplace culture where people can feel like they can bring their full selves to work, they can contribute without any inhibition. We don't even have to talk about race and somebody's color or somebody's gender. We're just talking about people coming with different personalities, skill sets, different experiences that shape how they view the world. All of that is coming together and could potentially collide if you don't have a way of managing it and helping people understand how to navigate differences.

How does DE&I translate into healthier organizations?

One of the things that DE&I says is, "We are going to teach you how to appreciate differences. We're also going to show you how making systems equitable makes it so we can all participate so you don't have to have that disharmony in your organization. Then, we're going to teach you how to be inclusive so that everyone has an opportunity to shine, flourish and thrive." That is going to drive the health of your organization. It's something you have to be very intentional about. The health doesn't come just by happenstance. With your physical body, there are things that you have to do in order to be healthy. There are things you have to maintain in terms of practices that will keep your organization healthy.



When doing workforce planning, what are the key issues around DE&I to consider?

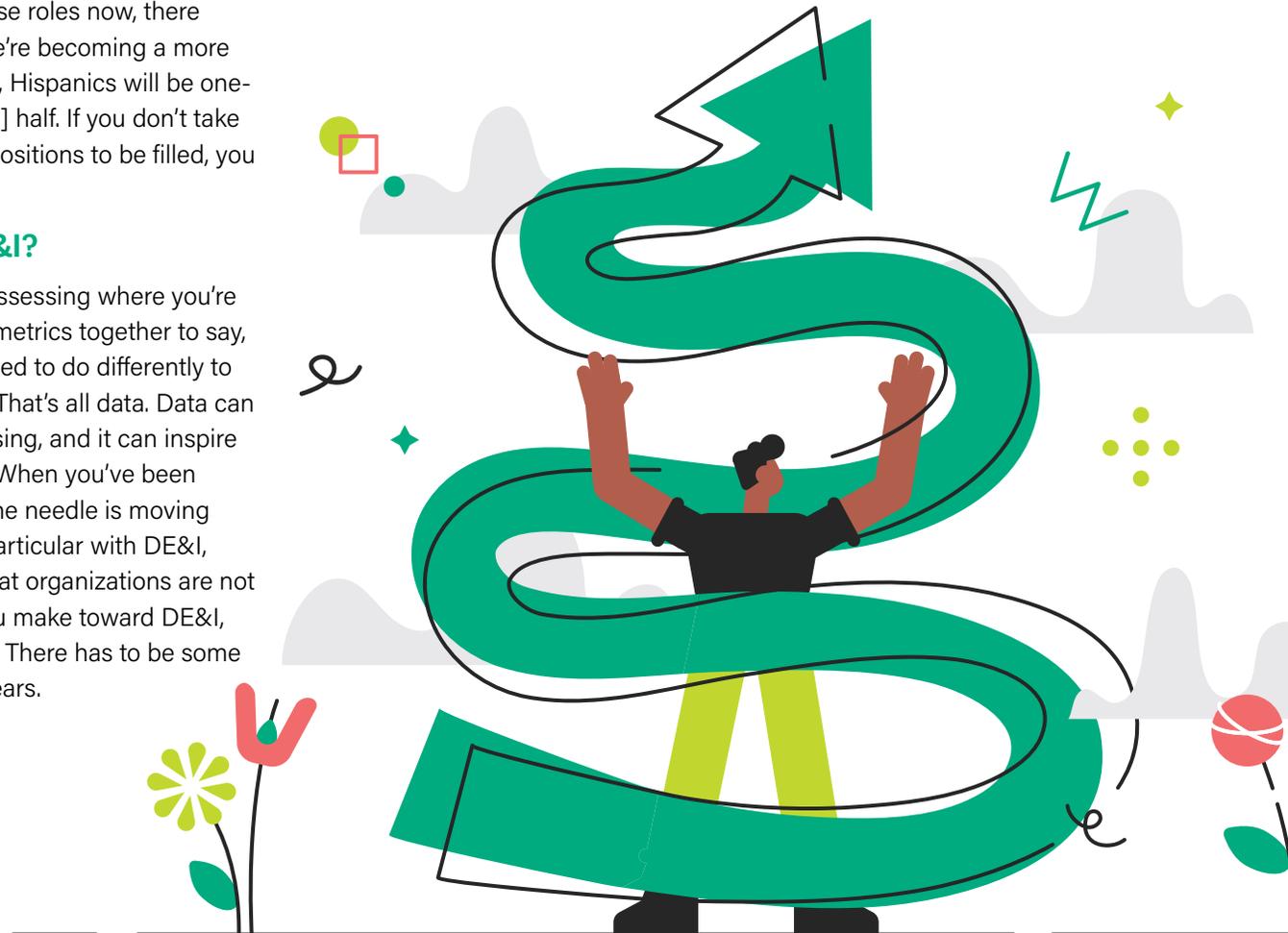
Some of the time, succession planning is a concern. How are we able to identify who's currently in our workforce, and how do we maintain that in order to know where the gaps are going to be in the future? What are the skills that we would need not only now to do the current job, but where are we heading? What skills are going to become more obsolete? What skills will we need in the future as we go deeper into this digital world that we are in? Artificial intelligence (AI) is not the future. AI is today, so what jobs may even be replaced with automation? Because of who's in those roles now, there will be a significant impact on the future workforce. We're becoming a more diverse nation. They're projecting that in the year 2024, Hispanics will be one-fifth of the labor force and white people will be [almost] half. If you don't take that into consideration, when it comes time for those positions to be filled, you will not be prepared.

What is the role of data in tracking DE&I?

Data is helpful to know what your baseline is and for assessing where you're trying to go because then you can start putting some metrics together to say, "OK, we are here. We want to be there. What do we need to do differently to measure if we're inching closer to there verses here?" That's all data. Data can be a tool for measuring and it can be a tool for diagnosing, and it can inspire you and in some cases it can make you feel defeated. When you've been doing something for so long and it doesn't seem like the needle is moving at all, it can become demoralizing to do this work. In particular with DE&I, minority groups are kind of fed up. The data reflects that organizations are not doing nearly enough. Any kind of commitment that you make toward DE&I, eventually people will want to see the data match that. There has to be some alignment or it's going to seem like it's falling on deaf ears.

What tips do you want to share with readers?

I would encourage people to jump outside their comfort zones and look at it as an opportunity to learn something about themselves and others. That sounds a little Pollyanna, but in one sense, diversity, equity and inclusion is not that deep because if we all just try to think about other people in our actions and look for those points where we can connect, that's going a long way toward furthering diversity, equity and inclusion because that becomes a practice. If it's not practice, it's not going to stick.



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Industry Spotlight: Improving the Workforce VIBE



An interview with Wayne Bobby, Vice President, Workday Federal Division

Following – or perhaps in light of – the events of the past 18 months, workforce optimization looks different. Leaders are looking to make flexible work options available to more people in the long term and addressing several challenges in the process.

“The pandemic got the federal government out of its comfort zone,” Bobby said. “This is going to create the opportunity to question what we do in terms of people teleworking, your job scheduling in terms of when you need to be at work, when you go to work, dress code, the type of IT tools and mobile devices you use – all these things factor in. You start to change the paradigm from ‘We don’t do that here’ to asking, ‘How can we do that here?’”

Government leaders are putting a sharper focus on tools such as mobility and telework, which removes the limitation of location for job applicants. No longer would workers have to reside in or near Washington, D.C. to take a job at an agency’s headquarters, and that means a wider pool of candidates can apply – and get hired.

Mandates for cloud use and cybersecurity for far-flung network access further support the government’s ability to offer opportunities to

workers that better fit their needs. What’s more, by offloading back-office IT functions to private sector partners like Workday, agencies free workers to focus on intellectually stimulating work, which can increase retention.

Advancements in analytics are also driving workforce changes – not just in terms of the data collected, although that is crucial, but also in how the government uses it.

“The government is trying to be less transactional and more informational,” said Bobby, who worked at the State Department for 17 years. “When you’re transactional, you’re feeding a lot of data in, so you’re data-rich, but you could be information-poor. You have a lot of data, but you can’t really do anything with it.”

The need for workforce optimization is more pressing than ever, and that’s where companies like Workday help, he said. A leading provider of enterprise cloud applications for finance and human resources, Workday breaks workforce management into three main areas handled by one system: financial management, human capital management and planning.

“In a human capital management solution that you have in place, there are all kinds of opportunities to develop and mature skills in the workforce,” Bobby said. “This whole idea of optimizing your workforce is gathering all the information about your workforce that may be relevant, that allows you to be much more responsive to the day-to-day activities.”

Recognizing today’s emphasis on DE&I, Workday VIBE – a program designed to Value Inclusion, Belonging and Equity – is cultivating a diverse and inclusive workforce at the company, and also driving how it helps agencies. For instance, the VIBE Index can measure everything from hiring and promotions to employees’ sense of belonging, and the VIBE Central dashboards show metrics at a glance so leaders can quickly take actions based on them.

“When we talk to agencies, it’s not a software conversation, it’s a discussion around the benefits they can expect to achieve,” Bobby said. “We talk openly about our DE&I initiatives at Workday and want to explore how those same principles can apply to and benefit the public sector.”

Success Stories

U.S. Forest Service

In 2019, the Forest Service rolled out [12 dashboards using existing datasets](#) to create a single, trusted version of the truth. “These dashboards can be a primary mechanism to aid communications, achieve goals, drive insights, and increase transparency of data. **These can also facilitate shared leadership within the Forest Service by giving multiple viewers insights that inspire critical thinking about where our performance is, and where we want it to be,**” according to the service.

U.S. Health and Human Services Department

The Health and Human Services Department (HHS) launched in May 2017 a three-year effort called [Reimagine HHS](#) aimed at making the agency more effective and efficient. A major part of that was including employees in all phases of the initiatives and passing the torch to them in 2020, when the effort concluded. **“Reimagine gave a voice to our ideas and helped them be implemented at scale,”** an employee said in the HHS Reimagine Retrospective Report.

U.S. National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases

HHS’s National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) developed in 2018 the Employee Viewpoint Survey Analysis and Results Tool to pore through FEVS data and uncover actionable information. It cut an analysis that once took 30 hours and \$1,350 to produce to five minutes at a cost of \$3.75. Since then, NIDDK has worked with other agencies on using the tool, and OPM and OMB have endorsed it. **“It is a free and easy-to-use Excel-based tool that sorts survey data into relevant, customizable metrics that enable leaders and staff to see their organization’s strengths and opportunities for improvement,”** [according to OPM.](#)



U.S. Homeland Security Department

In August 2021, the [Government Accountability Office](#) applauded the Homeland Security Department for identifying the positions in its IT workforce that handle cybersecurity. **“This action will improve the reliability of the information DHS needs** to identify its cybersecurity workforce roles of critical need,” according to a report.

General Services Administration

The pandemic led the General Services Administration to create [Workplace 2030](#) to build on the shared experience of teleworking to reconsider what working looks like in the future. **“For some agencies, on-site work will continue to be essential to mission. Others will move toward a more distributed model, redirecting real estate costs toward technologies and services that empower the workforce.”**

Takeaways

Here are three key takeaways that can guide how your agency optimizes its workforce:

1. Analytics drives optimization.

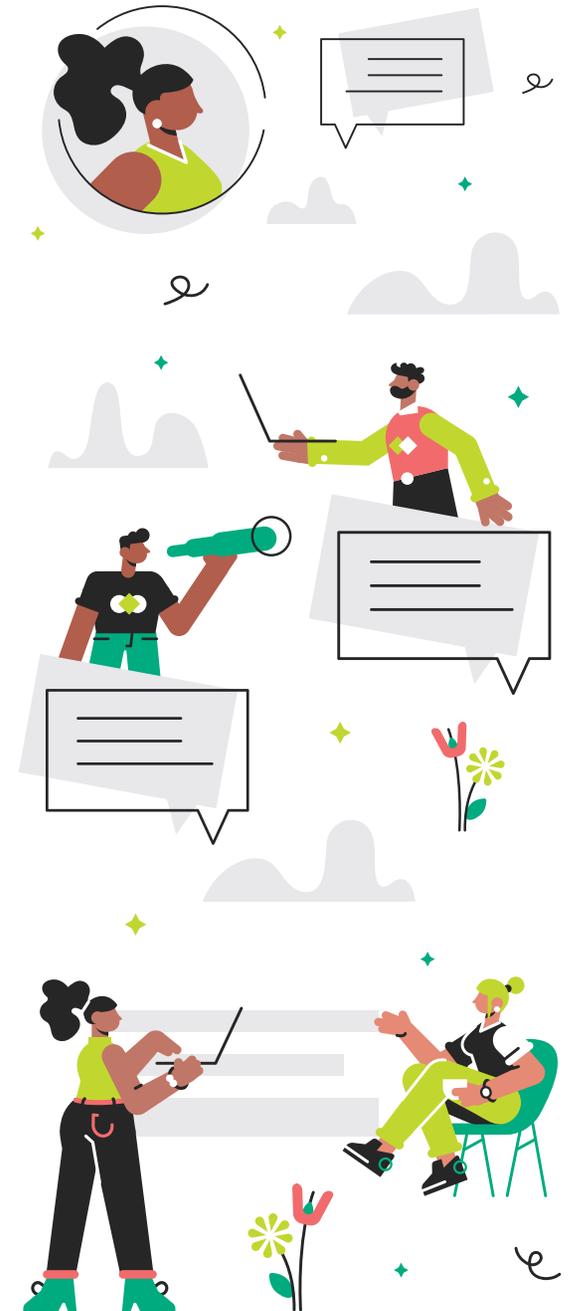
"Analytics have become more and more important," Bobby said. "You can't learn from anything, or you can't set a plan to improve, unless you start to measure. You have to draw a line in the sand of where you are now and then determine where you want to be next month, next year, five years from now."

2. Remote work opens opportunities.

The federal workforce has realized that it can execute most of the mission remotely and with technical and other hardships along the way. "This is laying the groundwork for a real sea change for how we approach recruitment and retention of the federal workforce," DeJonge Shulman said. "The assumption is that the federal office building is where the abundance of work needs to get done, whether it is in Washington, D.C., or elsewhere around the country, and the last year and a half has demonstrated that that does not need to be the case and therefore the talent pool available to the federal workforce could, if they wanted to, widen considerably. When they don't have to worry about the location of workers, they can think about the effectiveness of workers to be able to execute their roles elsewhere."

3. Make DE&I a central part of your agency's strategy.

"DEIA is like any management principle. It has to be data-driven and evidence-based," DHS's Wong said. "We can't serve the American people if we're missing key voices and don't understand the needs of these voices."





Thank you to Workday for their support of this valuable resource for public sector professionals.



About GovLoop

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