BRINGING MODERN RECRUITING SYSTEMS TO STATE GOVERNMENTS

INTRODUCTION

State governments manage a large workforce and replenishing that workforce requires sophisticated recruiting systems. In many cases, due to budget constraints, state governments' use of recruiting technology has lagged behind the private sector. Fortunately, many states have now implemented cloud-based applicant tracking systems that are easier to manage, and budget for, than older alternatives.

States usually look to recruiting software for help with administrative efficiency. Technology can make very significant improvements to efficiency by eliminating the need to handle paper, automating the pre-screening process and improving workflow. However, administrative efficiency is only half the story. Ultimately, states seek to attract high-quality candidates and quickly fill vacancies. Administrative efficiency is a prerequisite; however, beyond that, HR leaders need to ensure that their processes attract the right people and create a positive candidate experience.

The good news is that clear progress is being made. New technology is not just adding capability; HR leaders are using the adoption of technology to drive improvement of the overall recruitment and evaluation process.

PRIMARY ISSUES IN RECRUITMENT

States are currently focusing on tackling the bread and butter issues of effective recruiting, with just the beginning of interest in new tools like social media and video. The main issues are:

- **An employment brand that attracts the best candidates:** The ongoing debate about "high" taxes has had the unfortunate consequence of leading the media to often portray civil servants as ineffective. This makes government jobs appear less appealing and makes it more difficult to attract the best candidates.

- **A positive candidate experience:** People rarely enjoy applying for a job; if the process is cumbersome or tedious, then it both discourages job seekers and undermines the employment brand. Creating a positive experience does wonders for countering negative impressions.

- **Dealing with a large volume of applicants:** The ease of applying for jobs online has increased the number of applicants. States need to be able to efficiently screen applicants to create a manageable list of interviewees.

- **Selecting the best candidate:** Even among a group of candidates with good qualifications, there can be significant variation in ability and cultural fit. Identifying the best choice is difficult.

- **Administrative efficiency to control costs and time to fill:** Two of the most important operational metrics in recruiting are costs and the time to fill vacancies. Anything HR can do to improve these two metrics will matter to the organization.

- **Technology that is easy to manage:** HR has enough on its plate without taking on technology headaches; they need technology that is powerful yet easy to manage.

- **Buy-in:** The HR function has many different stakeholders and often has long-serving employees who are comfortable with existing processes. HR cannot just mandate change but has to bring the people along and get alignment.

- **Venturing into social recruiting:** The use of social recruiting tools from LinkedIn to Facebook to Twitter to customized talent pools is taking the world by storm; state governments need to decide how they can use these tools.

CASE STUDIES: THREE STATES

HR leaders are well aware of the recruiting challenges on their plate. They are making progress on a variety of fronts, gradually improving and modernizing their approaches. We look at three states that have introduced new applicant tracking systems as one step on the journey to better talent acquisition.

CASE 1: REPLACING AN OUTDATED SYSTEM

The first state in our study adopted a cloud-based applicant tracking system in 2008 as its platform for improving its recruiting function. There are many advantages to adopting an up-to-date recruiting system; however, what stood out for the state was the administrative ease of having the service in the cloud. It wanted to focus on recruiting, not maintaining technology.

"We love having a cloud-based recruitment system; we no longer need to worry about replacing legacy systems or finding the budget to do so."

In conjunction with putting the software in place, the state turned its attention to making sure that the whole recruiting process was effective both for the state and the candidates. One area of improvement involved minimizing or eliminating the long examination process that had been a prerequisite for applying in the past. The state reduced its workload because the whole application process is done in the online environment, which eases screening and data capture. Candidates are spared a tedious exam and instead answer "supplemental questions" that focus on points relevant to the specific job.

A recent step forward has involved expansion of the use of the applicant tracking system for more than just civil service positions. For example people can now apply for more categories of jobs, including jobs for laborers, using the system. Workers apply online, filling in a shorter form than civil service applicants, and when a job opening is available the system will randomly pick a short list of qualified applicants from the pool. In addition to adding more types of work, HR is getting requests to bring non-civil service exempt positions, which agencies handle on their own, into the system. There is an advantage to centralizing this part of recruiting, as agencies often look for the same kinds of candidates and since there is a limited budget for advertising it makes sense to have central HR reach out to find candidates.

One challenge is to get staff to use all the tools that exist within the system. For example, pre-screening applicants using software filters can help with creating a shortlist, but some experienced examiners are more comfortable going through the applications manually. Another useful part of the technology is the interview scheduling capability, which is helpful for examiners setting up interviews and HR leaders who need to track how the recruitment effort is proceeding. However, examiners are used to picking up the phone and scheduling interviews on paper.

Looking ahead, HR is thinking about improving the experience of program managers who ultimately make the hiring decision. There is still too much manual work for them. Thanks to the cloud-based system, program managers only need an Internet connection and appropriate role-based security privileges to access the recruiting system and have real-time control over the process.

There is also a move toward using social media as an advertising media. Video is also a promising tool for attracting candidates and building the brand. Candidates have reported that YouTube videos of civil service work left them with a very positive impression. Videos can be a simple way to provide a realistic preview of jobs and showcase the commitment and dedication of public employees.

CASE 2: TENNESSEE GOING ON THE CLOUD

Like most state governments, it was not so many years ago that the State of Tennessee's recruitment process was dominated by paper applications. It created a significant workload, and made it almost impossible to run a smooth hiring process; paper would get "lost" on someone's desk and there was no easy way to determine where the application was located. Slow time to hire could result in losing skilled candidates.

> "My most important piece of advice is don't force your old administrative processes on the new system. Figure out what you do not need to do anymore and take full advantage of what the new system can do out of the box."
>
> – Stephanie Penney,
>   Director of Recruiting, Tennessee

In 2008, Tennessee adopted a cloud-based applicant tracking system, a significant step up from the mainframe tool they had been using. The most obvious impact was how the piles of paper evaporated; the State quickly went to receiving 99% of the applications online. Applying online was easier for candidates and that made a good first impression—like walking into an office with an attractive lobby. However, the bigger impact on the candidate experience was improved workflow behind the scenes; HR could track exactly where an application was in the system and address any bottlenecks. The end result is that the hiring process moves faster, which is good for both the candidate and the State.

Improving processes went hand in hand with the improved applicant tracking system. Initially, Tennessee tried to customize the software to reproduce old manual processes; however, that added complexity and missed opportunities for efficiencies. For example, one of the main gains in efficiency was using the applicant tracking system to do most of the work in screening out people who did not meet minimum qualifications. The system can do a lot for efficiency, but only if processes are tuned to leverage the capabilities of the software. The number of applicants has dramatically increased since Tennessee implemented the cloud-based applicant tracking system. In 2008, they handled about 80,000 applications; in 2013, they were able to process 330,000 applications with the same number of people. This is a remarkable improvement in efficiency—and a bigger candidate pool is likely to include better-qualified candidates.

A key to handling this increased volume was the use of automated tools to screen out unqualified candidates. However, the last step in the selection process still rests in human skill and judgment. A well-structured job interview, conducted by a thoughtful manager, is still the single best method for deciding whom to hire for most jobs.

The success of implementing a more candidate-friendly and efficient recruitment system is timely; Tennessee has 44,000 employees and roughly 40% will be eligible to retire in the next five years. To keep the State staffed with the best talent, the recruitment function will have to be at its best.

CASE 3: LEAVING BEHIND PAPER

It may be difficult for younger people to imagine a world where job applications came in by paper, yet before going to an applicant tracking system, our third case operated in a world where most applications came in by mail. Applications were screened, photocopied and sent to the department doing the hiring. Naturally, there were huge delays between posting a job and filling it.

When the state went looking for a new applicant tracking system, they chose a cloud-based system because they simply did not want the burden of having to manage the servers, deal with scheduled downtime and do quarterly upgrades. Furthermore, security was a prime concern because the state is committed to protecting the confidential information of applicants, and it is easier to let a vendor specialized in recruitment handle security than for HR to do it. Upgrading the technology was half the battle; the other half was tuning the processes to create the most effective candidate experience. There are many opportunities to put a marketing spin on every aspect of the online application. For example, rather than saying, "Enter your experience here," one can say, "We would love to know about your background." Rather than asking for all the information up front, which can be a long and tedious process, break it up by asking for the essentials to get started, then get more information after pre-screening. The state's focus on creating a better candidate experience is not complicated; it is just putting on a marketing hat and seeing the experience through the candidate's eyes.

Another important step in getting the most out of the recruitment system is educating the stakeholders. The state has launched a quarterly recruiting forum for HR professionals at the agencies. The forum is a chance to share best practices and get people enthused about what they can achieve with the right systems, processes and mindset.

In the future, the state hopes to do a better job of mining the large database of applicants it has collected to fill jobs more quickly with qualified candidates.

> "The ease of accessing our applicant tracking system is a delight. It is much easier for applicants and for the HR staff too. For example, I can connect to candidates in the evening by logging on from home. Managers can use the system to schedule interview times. And it is easier for IT too; all we need is a computer that can connect to the Internet."

SOLUTIONS

Recruiting is one of the fasting moving areas in human resources. Technology has made rapid strides and the speed at which cloud-based solutions have advanced has surprised even the enthusiasts. As our case studies show, state governments are making solid progress in addressing the challenges they face in efficiently acquiring talent. The solutions fall into five areas, each of which is an important pillar in the overall success of the recruiting function:

1. **Create a marketing mindset.**
   Recruiting is not just about administration; it also involves marketing. States need to promote their employment brand. They need to get out the message that the civil service offers challenging careers where people can make a difference. Furthermore, all aspects of the candidate experience should reflect a marketing perspective. Everyone who applies for a job, whether they are eventually hired or not, should walk away with a positive impression of the state government. As our case studies show, there are many opportunities to make the candidate experience a positive one.

2. Get an up-to-date applicant tracking system.
The marketing goal of acquiring the best talent cannot be achieved without excellent systems. These days, this usually means a cloud-based system. Cloud-based solutions have inherent advantages to the point that they are becoming the solution of choice for most HR technology, not just applicant tracking.

3. Understand the solution's full capabilities.
The move to an up-to-date applicant tracking system brings so many advantages that even limited use of the features can feel like a big advance. However, to get real value, states need to take the time to understand the system's full capabilities and then make the effort to implement them. Furthermore, to get full value out of the system, it is important to revisit recruitment processes to make them more effective and to create an excellent candidate experience.

4. Re-evaluate screening and selection processes.
Use the screening tools in the applicant tracking system to quickly get to a reasonable shortlist, rather than investing a lot of time to get a slightly better list of candidates to interview. However, during the interviewing stage, ensure that there are skilled interviewers with sufficient time to pick the best candidate on the short list.

5. Invest in getting buy-in from stakeholders.
HR is center stage for recruiting, but it cannot do everything alone. Having an excellent cloud-based scheduling tool will not help if people do not use it. The candidate experience lies in large part in the hands of the agencies and other stakeholders that HR serves. Investing effort in educating and winning support from stakeholders is crucial.

CONCLUSION

Acquiring the right talent is one of the most important functions in any organization. States face several challenges relative to the private sector when competing for talent. However, the advent of cloud-based applicant tracking systems can bring dramatic improvements to the administration of recruitment. Improved administration creates time for HR to focus on the candidate experience and employment brand—and that in turn leads to a higher quality of hire. One of the biggest administrative gains is automated pre-screening to quickly get to a more manageable list of applicants. The good news is that if states are suffering from an unfairly poor employment brand, then it should be easy to exceed expectations, and candidates will feel, "Wow, the civil service is a great place for a meaningful career."