

Managing Talent on a Budget: A Guide for the Public Sector

By nature, the public sector needs to be discerning about who will suit their organisation, and their approach to talent development must be flexible and affordable.

Talent management is a hot topic in public sector organisations due to the changing dynamics of the workforce. The baby boomer generation of employees who have been the core of the public sector are now retiring, and the need to attract and retain skilled workers has become critical given the niche abilities the public sector requires. Proactive HR management and planning is necessary to contend with lengthy approval processes and multiple stakeholders.

The public sector is budget conscious and target centred, and as a result talent can go unrewarded. The need to invest in people is constantly at odds with pressures to save money. There is a risk of losing valuable talent to competitive corporates with savvy brands and deep pockets.

The coming years are likely to be increasingly difficult for the public sector...

What are the benefits of having a talent acquisition, development and succession strategy in place?

"Talent Management" and "Succession Planning" are not just HR buzz words. A clear strategy supported by an efficient system will further development, drive engagement, build high performance, and result in quantifiable financial return. Key benefits include:

1. Better positioning in the 'war-for-talent':

In such a competitive market for talent, particularly from private companies with larger budgets, talent management strategies and employee benefits packages can enable the public sector to compete with big brands from a recruitment, retention and engagement perspective. A clear approach to talent strategy informs prospective employees that you look after your people.

2. Improved operational efficiency:

Having an overarching talent strategy in place, with appropriate support systems and processes, equals time and cost savings. This will also help to embed talent initiatives and make them 'business-as-usual'.

3. Improved people performance:

If you are lacking an approach to talent and succession planning, chances are you are not making the most of the right people in the right roles at the right time. A structured approach to performance and talent management can result in increased productivity and efficiency, increased engagement, improved time-to-competence and higher retention. For the public sector this can also mean doing 'more with less', utilising the talent that exists in the organisation to lower costs, fill gaps in talent and leadership, and increase overall performance.

4. Decreased risk:

Improved line-of-sight over people and performance will enable you to monitor engagement and performance levels, helping you address issues of poor performance and reduce turnover. This is critical from a compliance perspective.

Supporting talent and performance management technology will also allow for efficient identification and utilisation of talent, making succession planning simple and accurate.

What is a best-practice approach for public sector organisations?

Although many of the large enterprise approaches to talent acquisition, performance development and succession planning do not suit the structure of public sector organisations, there are some key components of these approaches that do work:

1. Have a real-time talent acquisition and retention strategy and plan:

To attract workers with the unique skills the public sector seeks, you should always be thinking about your operating model, how it aligns to your structure, and where the critical roles are in your department (including any 'hot spots' where talent is hard to attract). This picture should align to a plan of what type of talent you are trying to attract at different levels within the department. It sounds simple, but in fact takes a concerted effort and regular review to get it right.

Succession planning in the public sector is critical. As a retiring baby-boomer workforce leaves essential roles vacant, considered role succession allows public service organisations to sustain performance despite the increasing rate of turnover. Succession planning also allows public service organisations to avoid potential skill shortages, and can help manage the tendency of Gen Y workers wanting to climb the career ladder quickly.

Recruiting from within the department and moving people into new roles can be used to engage and grow talent. Nurturing the talent you have, allowing employees to experience other aspects of the organisation and develop new skills, can contribute to the strategic management of internal talent and overall business performance.

2. Make the most of what you have with clever and targeted performance management:

There are so many options available to organisations around how to measure performance; from nothing at all in place, to paper based approaches, online systems and completely integrated talent management approaches. Public sector organisations need to be able to link talent management objectives to the performance plan and approach of the department and wider governing organisation. You should be targeting a small number of KPIs in the organisation and aligning top to bottom performance focus on these metrics. There must also be a focus on the behavioural side of performance in addition to the financial or tangible side. Measuring the impact of performance on the organisation will also identify any talent gaps that exist. Failure to do this could negatively impact your culture in the long term.

3. Identify critical roles, critical talent and develop individual talent pathways accordingly:

There is so much jargon surrounding 'best-practice' engagement, succession, and talent planning, but with increasingly tight budgets, most public sector organisations have to be selective about where they invest their dollars. Organisations need a methodical and efficient process to identify talent. When your organisation can't afford to invest in a bells-and-whistles HR program or a million-dollar employee benefit program, it can be difficult to determine what to prioritise. Automate what can be automated and focus your development investments on your critical roles and people. This will ensure you get the most out of limited budgets and HR capacity.

Where do I start?

Employees of public sector organisations are usually very aware of budget limitations – therefore any benefit is perceived as a good benefit! While you are executing a broader talent strategy, there are also a number of quick-win initiatives you can implement for immediate improvements in engagement and performance levels.

- **Devise a talent acquisition and development strategy:** ensure all of your people initiatives are aligned to this.
- **Be transparent with your talent:** Make sure every person in your department knows what is important when it comes to performance. Build visibility and transparency around your key performance metrics and expectations.
- **Invest in cost efficient development technologies:** In identifying a gap in the market for cost-efficient development solutions, Maximus has designed an interactive learning portal featuring over 600 professional development strategies, activities, techniques and tools. You can also take your own approach by introducing e-learning or an intranet with professional development modules.
- **Implement affordable recognition programs:** Introduce initiatives to celebrate both individual achievement and team performance and keep a strong focus on reinforcing the right behaviours.
- **Design your own benefit package:** This can be as simple as offering group personal training sessions, extended Friday lunch-breaks, industry magazine subscriptions, coaching and mentoring opportunities or giving each individual a small budget per year to spend on personal development.
- **Refresh your Employee Value Proposition:** Who says public service organisations cannot compete on a brand level? Ask the employees of your department what really matters to them and revisit your internal messages to ensure you are creating a culture that people really want to be part of.

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