



# The Next Big Thing

*The first in a series of articles on recruiting and hiring in the federal sector*

By Tim Barnhart

The Bush administration has made strategic management of human capital a major management agenda item, as well it should. This newfound attention has been great for HR. It has led agencies to conduct strategic workforce planning, in many cases for the first time ever. It has led to succession management plans, alignment of individual performance objectives with strategic goals, pay-for-performance, alternative personnel systems, a federal human capital survey and an emphasis on accountability. These are all positive, valuable steps that address serious problems.

But in many ways these last few years have been HR's warm-up act—the setting of the stage. Now it's time for the main attraction. HR must focus on doing well—no, doing exceptionally well. The functions that I would argue are at its core: locating, assessing, attracting and keeping the talent the agency needs to accomplish its mission.

The signs are clear. The retirement wave is finally beginning to crash down. Contracting, as an alternative sourcing strategy, has begun to reach its limits. OPM is focusing on the issue through its 45-day hiring model, career patterns and other initiatives. But most telling to me are the consistent anecdotes I hear from my clients: “we’re one deep at best,” “our vacancy rate is 25 percent,” “the hiring process takes forever,” “the applicants referred to me are barely qualified,” “HR has been cut to the bone; they have no capacity to do real recruiting and hiring,” “we don’t have a hiring strategy; it’s whoever applies to a standard announcement,” “we’ve got contractors doing stuff we wouldn’t dream of having them do 10 years ago,” “finding people, government people, is my top priority right now,” and so on.

We need to start with the recognition that, at this juncture, the federal government isn't doing a very good job at recruiting and hiring talent. The reasons agencies struggle with this are many and complex. In the '90s we almost stopped doing it, as we focused instead on drawing down federal employment. Even in this decade, there has been more attention paid, I would argue, to reshaping the workforce than to replenishing it. The HR function has gone through its own transformation—HR's role, functions, processes, rules, tools, automation and its own workforce have changed dramatically in recent years. Recruiting and hiring has gotten lost amidst all these other HR changes. Finally, recruiting and hiring has just become harder. Recruiting requirements have become more focused and specialized—many agencies are often looking for one or two with a specific skillset, not

hundreds all stamped from the same mold. The hiring strategy, for many, has become extremely blurred. Who are we trying to hire and why and where can they go in their careers? There's a general sense of paralysis out there with respect to recruiting and hiring.

Of course, successful recruiting and hiring programs and practices can be found.

The purpose of this article isn't to criticize or to focus merely on explicating the problem. My purpose is to initiate a discussion of what needs to be done to improve federal hiring and recruiting, drawing on what's working now and the many good ideas that are surfacing.

Each month for this newsletter, I will write an article that explores a specific aspect of the recruiting and hiring issue. For example, I'll write one on automated hiring systems, another on the lost art of job analysis, and one that provides a review of assessment tools agencies should consider. I think I'll have no shortage of material to write about (as I said before this is a large and complex issue), but I'd also like to use this series of articles to identify and share the experiences of specific agencies and HR professionals. I'd like to hear about the specific recruiting and hiring issues agencies are struggling with and the strategies and practices they've found that work for them. If you would like to provide input to these articles, please e-mail me at [tbarnhart@fmpconsulting.com](mailto:tbarnhart@fmpconsulting.com).

I look forward to learning much more about this issue and the many solutions I'm sure exist or will be created by the very talented HR professionals who are out there. Hopefully, I can capture what I hear clearly and in a way that's helpful to the Federal HR community. I'm certain it's the next big thing HR professionals need to address.