

Strategic Public Sector Learning and Development



Agencies should employ five guidelines to ensure current and systematic learning within the governmental workforce.

by Jerry Ice

From fighting terrorism abroad to managing the economic recovery here at home, the U.S. government has taken on more new roles and responsibilities in recent years than ever before in its history. That's translating into expanded missions and increased job responsibilities in many federal agencies and state and local governments. Effective continuing education and training are critical to sustaining the kind of skills-based government workforce required to meet the government's current and future needs.

If done wisely, an investment in education and development doesn't just affect individual employee performance and productivity on the job; it also has an impact on employee alignment, engagement, and overall performance. Not only can learning and development be a significant catalyst for driving culture change and organizational transformation, it can also

- ◆ socialize and quickly acculturate new hires to an agency's mission, organizational culture, and work values
- ◆ communicate clear and specific work expectations to employees at a departmental, team, or work unit level
- ◆ align and engage employees (both new and current) around changing mission requirements or priorities

A Case in Point—The IRS

“Projected attrition and current hiring rates show that between now and 2018, the IRS faces a shortfall of 3,400 leaders,” according to Mathew Ferrero and Marcia Pelberg, who are both from the Human Capital Office of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS). “We had to get serious about succession planning and leadership development.”

In 2007 the IRS developed its succession planning strategy and rolled out its leadership succession review (LSR) process, which includes the assessment of each individual’s leadership readiness, the identification of potential candidates for leadership positions at nearly all levels, and customized development plans.

The IRS firmly believes that leaders at all levels require development to ensure that high-potential individuals are prepared to assume responsible and demanding positions in the organization.

This framework addresses succession planning challenges by affording each IRS leader an opportunity to learn foundational leadership concepts and public service values using a best practice, competency-based development model of theory, practice, application, and reflection.

The IRS core leadership curriculum uses classroom and technology-enabled education, planned developmental assignments, a coaching and mentoring process, business-related challenges, and leadership simulations in an integrated fashion to achieve maximum organizational impact.

Rather than just a collection of courses, the curriculum offers a continuous developmental lifecycle from employee to executive based on the IRS transformational leadership model, leadership competencies, and common development themes.

- ◆ reward high-performing employees with customized professional development and career enrichment opportunities
- ◆ retain highly prized workers by giving them regular opportunities to enhance and refresh their skills
- ◆ create a nimble and resilient workforce accustomed to continuous learning on the job
- ◆ foster a strong learning culture.

However, many government organizations have yet to develop a truly comprehensive and systematic approach to employee education, training, and development. Mission-critical skills and competency gaps clearly exist, and are likely to become more apparent in the years ahead as Baby Boomers begin to retire in large numbers. These needs are most pressing today in some areas of defense, intelligence, and national security.

With these clear benefits in mind, we’ve developed five guidelines that professionals should employ when designing education, training and development, and performance improvement initiatives for government workers.

Guideline #1: Consider all the ways you can incorporate continuing education and training into the employee lifecycle—from the first day on the job to skills training and career advancement opportunities.

Despite research conducted by the Recruiting Roundtable revealing that effective onboarding programs can improve employee performance by up to 11.3 percent, many employees report that the initial process is often dismal—an experience that can negatively affect employee morale and long-term employee retention.

Robust education and training from day 1 brings new hires quickly up to speed with the organization’s culture, values, and work expectations. This is a critical point at which to cement strong ties with a new hire. Key onboarding activities, such as clearly communicating performance expectations; providing early feedback; involving co-workers and peers in early socialization of a new employee to the work culture; and providing early job training are critical to boosting performance (Partnership for Public Service/Booz Allen Hamilton).

James Perry, chancellor’s professor in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University and co-editor of *Motivation in Public Management: The*

Jerry Ice, EdD, is CEO and president of the Graduate School. Based in Washington, D.C., with eight field training sites around the United States, the Graduate School is a full-service continuing education, training, and academic institution that provides classes, certificate programs, degree programs, and other offerings in subjects ranging from governmental accounting, auditing, human capital management, and acquisition to foreign languages, economics, and leadership development. For more information, visit www.graduateschool.edu.

Call of Public Service (Oxford University Press, 2008), has been researching the public service motivations of government employees for decades. He said in a 2008 article in *The Public Manager* that the work motivations of public employees “are based on a different set of values than one finds in industry or even the nonprofit sector.” Specifically, they’re more strongly motivated by the call of public service, a desire to serve others, and a wish to do good. For these reasons, public sector leaders and managers should stress the social significance of public sector work when new employees first come aboard. According to Perry, initial training and orientation programs offer a powerful platform for doing this.

Use education and training as a tool not only to equip employees with critical skills, but also to empower and engage them on the job. “Training and development” received high rankings as a determinant of job success among employees of the 10 top-rated government agencies in the 2007 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government survey rankings (PPS and ISPP). More than 72 percent of employees who work at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC—the top-rated agency in the 2007 rankings), for example, felt the agency’s training and development (T&D) offerings enabled them to strengthen their skills and perform their jobs effectively. More than 70 percent of NASA employees surveyed felt the same way, as did 66.1 percent of employees at the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA). In fact, among many agencies and agency subcomponents in the survey, T&D ranked high as an important determinant of job success by a significant number of employees.

Clearly, the Best Places to Work survey rankings reveal the degree to which training and continuous learning can give employees a sense of control and competence to do their jobs effectively, and thus affect their degree of engagement and empowerment on the job. And helping employees feel more empowered on the job is at least as important as giving them specific, content-based knowledge with which to do their jobs.

Guideline #2: Conduct annual, or more frequent, assessments to determine training needs and knowledge gaps. These can change all the time.

Conducting thorough T&D assessments is essential to understanding your workforce’s education and training needs, learning style preferences, and the specific

Know Your Audience—U.S. Air Force

Sometimes, the simplest route should be taken when rolling out a huge training and development program—like enabling more than 4,600 U.S. Air Force (USAF) legal professionals around the world to effectively use information technology (IT) tools, such as Excel, Outlook, and Microsoft Word, to increase their productivity on the job. The training initiative consisted of simple three-to-seven-minute modules.

“We deliberately kept the training delivery system as low-tech as possible,” says Colonel Peter Marksteiner, director of legal services in the Directorate of Legal Information Services. “We wanted to keep things simple and straight-forward, so we opted for modules that included ‘talking PowerPoint’ slides instead of such things as streaming video.”

What is Marksteiner’s advice to other federal agencies or military installations that might want to implement similar training programs? “Keep the training simple and practical,” he says. “Focus on offering training that helps the greatest number of people, and get senior leadership involved in promoting its importance to the organization.”

mix of teaching tools that should be incorporated into courses, programs, and curricula.

Effective training will use a variety of technologies and formats with learners, including distance learning, classroom learning, and web-based training. Web-based offerings are very popular among government employees because they can access them directly from their computers or laptops at any time. It should incorporate the use of various learning tools such as instant messaging and helpful graphics. Online learning can be more cost-effective in many cases than sending employees to offsite training programs.

Guideline #3: Ensure that there is a strong succession plan in place—begin developing future managers and leaders now.

Enhancing the skills of middle managers has been identified as a critical need in government today, and as a potentially powerful way to drive workforce and workplace transformation. The reasons many middle managers in government lack critical soft skills are largely systemic: Many have been promoted into management jobs because of their previously demonstrated technical abilities rather than their ability to successfully manage people. Learning and performance solutions designed

to enhance management skills can do a lot to address this problem.

Using training to enhance a manager's job effectiveness has huge implications for federal agencies and state and local government organizations that are challenged with the task of breaking down functional silos to operate more efficiently, as well as unifying and aligning employees around rapidly changing agency missions or organizational priorities. (Think of the needs in the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security, for example.)

Arming mid-level managers with the tools to be effective communicators and influencers can go a long way toward reducing workplace conflicts, building stronger teams, and improving management-labor relations.

Guideline #4: Understand that people have different learning styles and preferences, and develop your education and training program based on these differences.

Today's government workforce is made up of at least three discrete populations of workers, including Baby Boomers (born between 1940 and 1960), Gen Xers (born between 1960 and 1980), and Generation Ys or Millennials (born between 1980 and 2000). Each generation has specific learning style preferences, and distinct attitudes toward work and authority.

Baby Boomers tend to be well-educated and hard-working, often putting in long hours on the job. Of the three generations, they're probably the most acclimated to instructor-led, classroom-based training, having generally completed their formal education before the widespread use of computers, much less the Internet.

Gen Xers, by comparison, are tech-conversant multitaskers. Designing T&D programs for this group requires mixing technology (for example, video or audio streaming and software simulations) with more traditional training approaches, which gives people ways to multitask even as they take part in training sessions, and incorporates an entertainment component into training and development curricula.

Gen Ys (Millennials) are even more tech-savvy than Xers, and very "social" as well. It's Millennials, after all, who have pioneered use of social media (think

Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace) both in their personal and working lives. Designing T&D programs for this group means incorporating social media (for example, chat or instant messaging) and other technologies

into training programs to making learning personal. Keep learning fast-paced and bear in mind that Ys have generally shorter attention spans than both their Boomer or Gen X counterparts.

Then there's the "Generation C" group, which is a blend of elements from all three of the generations. "Generation C," according to

Trendwatching.com, has been described as a cohort of individuals of "any age who actively use social media and engage others on the Internet." Their learning and interpersonal preferences favor creativity, collaboration, conversation, extensive use of online content-creation tools, and the creation of vibrant online learning and social communities.

Members of Generation C blog, tweet, text, and IM (instant message) their friends and colleagues constantly, and view the Internet and new communication technologies almost as extensions of their personalities. The ascendancy of Generation C represents nothing less than an intellectual, demographic, and tectonic shift in how people live, learn, connect, and communicate. We in the education business must pay attention to them and design future learning programs and solutions in response to their evolving communications habits and learning style preferences.

Guideline #5: Use education and training as a way to create a strong learning culture in your organization. It will help maintain day-to-day job satisfaction as well as increase recruitment.

Continuing education, skills training, and other employee development opportunities can serve as powerful recruitment and retention tools—if organizations know how to use them for these purposes. For example, new employees (usually recent college graduates) typically seek out career development opportunities at work (especially in a first job). For that reason, agencies should promote T&D opportunities to prospective college hires as part of their annual recruiting efforts

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on the nation's college campuses. Doing so can help agencies become "employers of choice" to more young college graduates, especially those with an inclination to national or public service.

Continuing education and professional development also can be used to reward high performers and to give valued employees more opportunities for continuing professional growth and career advancement. When used in this way, T&D can be an important channel through which an organization builds leadership bench strength, identifies and retains high-performers, and fills its leadership and talent pipelines with new talent critical to the organization's long-term success.

Given the pace of change in government, continuous learning is critical to building a strong and resilient workforce; one that is able to quickly scale up to meet growing challenges or increasing responsibilities. For that reason, government executives should make continuous employee learning a top-level priority. They can do this by creating strong learning communities and networks of best practices within their agencies. They also should embed more just-in-time training and continuing education opportunities into employees' everyday work schedules by using the power of the web and various social networking tools.

Taking on the Continuing Education and Training Mantle

As the T&D executive in your organization, you should embrace the role of strategic advisor to your organization's political appointees and top-level career executives as well as the newcomers and mid-managers. Doing so will ensure that your agency or department begins to take a truly strategic approach to education, training, and development in the years ahead. This approach should directly support your organization's workforce planning requirements and strategic plan.

If you're in the federal government, consider using the Obama Administration's management agenda as a strategic planning template. It will provide you and your agency with a very concrete and coherent approach to employee development and planning—one that focuses both on present training and development needs and on emerging workforce planning priorities. Meeting the management agenda's requirements won't just help your agency improve its current operating performance. It also will help your agency develop the

Be Realistic—Monroe County, Florida

"In an ideal world and workplace, training opportunities and social and professional networking are necessary and available," says Jerald L. O'Cathey, emergency management administrator of Monroe County, Florida. "But the current economy does not allow these venues as in prior years. From a Monroe County perspective, conference attendance is limited or prohibited, and inter-county networking is restricted due to travel cost considerations."

A logical outcome for this county and many other local governments is a greater reliance on virtual communication. Monroe County relies on WebEOC (an Emergency Management Tool), Microsoft Live Meeting, and GoToMeeting. These work well and will continue to be made more user-friendly and accessible. But as with student-teacher ratios and classroom communications, they will not equal the value of the traditional networking venues.

According to O'Cathey, "Employee development and the promotion of continuous learning should never be relegated to a priority less than 'high.' But to be realistic, it is the responsibility of all of us to adapt, improvise, and move forward in this less than accommodating political and economic climate."

employee' skills and competencies necessary to meet evolving mission requirements.

To position yourself as a strategic T&D advisor to your organization's leaders, reach out to colleagues in HR and to agency line managers and directors to help them assess existing skills and competency gaps, and to design education and training plans, courses, and curricula based on identified needs. By taking this approach, you position yourself as a trusted business partner to your agency's leadership and lay the groundwork for helping your organization meet its talent development needs both today and in the future.

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