TECH TALENT

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HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN TECH-SAVVY PROFESSIONALS

Lounging on the couch, you pull out your phone. Any consumer experience you want is right there. You can watch any movie, shop for groceries, buy a new dog collar, book a vacation, or sell Bitcoin.

Although if you try to interact with your local government to reserve a park, submit a permit, ask a question about your garbage service, or sign up for summer camp, you might be out of luck depending on where you live.

People are increasingly expecting their local governments to solve problems and deliver services in the ways that they experience as private consumers on Airbnb, Netflix, or Amazon.

Almost on a daily basis, however, the gap between the user experience in the private and public sectors is growing further apart.

This gap creates an innovation imperative for local governments if they are to meet the expectations of their constituents.

Many local governments are trying to bridge this gap by becoming a smart city, which you are reading about in the articles published in this issue. A smart city uses data and process improvement to do what local governments must do, better, and are already doing today.

Many smart cities, for example, are now using LED street lighting and programmable controllers; a 311 mobile app that allows easy reporting and quicker

response for common service issues; and networked fleet sensors to predict breakdowns, reduce maintenance costs, and improve response times.

Since the smart city is a destination at which an agency never really arrives, innovative organizations are "learning cities." They are always searching for ways to use technology and data in their efforts to become better and better in solving problems and delivering services.

It is this focus on people at the center, learning from data, and an interactive approach to execution that are the key ingredients in innovation and improved service delivery. To become smart communities, local governments need to develop an environment that supports tech talent—an environment that relies on effective hiring processes, as the following mini-case study illustrates.

San Jose Tackles Innovation Initiatives

San Jose, California, in the heart of the Silicon Valley, is the 10th largest city in the United States, with a diverse population of more than 1 million people. Mayor Sam Liccardo and the San Jose City Council have adopted a smart city vision that challenges local government to be as innovative as the community it serves.

To respond to this challenge, here is what City Manager Dave Sykes did:

- Created a deputy city manager position as part of the executive team to champion innovation and coordinate cross-departmental innovation.
- Elevated the information technology director to a chief information officer with broader authority across departments.
- Convened an innovation cabinet of department heads and senior leaders who identified a backlog of more than 70 potential innovation projects or initiatives.

To evaluate potential projects, the innovation cabinet asked three key questions of each project:

- **Is it important?** Is the problem that the staff is trying to solve causing a lot of people pain or annoyance?
- **Is it core?** Is this problem something our city can and should try to address?
- **Is it achievable?** Can the problem be solved, at scale, with improved technology or process improvement?

Asking these questions narrowed the innovation work to a focused roadmap of 20 projects and initiatives that were important, core, and achievable. If innovation is about saying "Yes!," then governance is often about saying "No." The innovation roadmap is where innovation and governance meet, and provides a focus for the innovation efforts of the entire organization.

Projects on the innovation roadmap include negotiating with telecommunications companies to deploy fiber and "small cells" to deliver the next generation of connectivity, using data analytics to send limited police capacity to the right locations at the right time, and moving business processes from paper to digital.

Each of these tech projects requires skilled staff. One of the problems causing a lot of pain for the San Jose organization was its staff vacancy rate. Of the 6,200 full-time positions, the city had 870 vacancies. It was simply not hiring enough good people fast enough.

To address this talent recruitment challenge, a new team composed of human resources (HR) and departmental recruiters, as well as labor partners and analysts, was asked, "How might we re-imagine the hiring process in San Jose?" The team took a customer-driven approach to innovating hiring by:

1. Gaining empathy for the customer (in this case the internal customers who are the hiring managers) by interviewing them and listening to their perspectives.
2. Mapping out the internal customer journey, including all the steps required to hire a new employee and the relative pain or joy experienced by the hiring manager along the way.
3. Identifying root problems.
4. Exploring, prototyping and evaluating potential solutions.
5. Piloting several experimental efforts and learning from the data.
6. Refining and scaling an effective solution for the entire organization.

The results from the newly revised hiring process were stunning. The pilot effort reduced the number of HR-required approvals from 15—each with a lag of days or weeks—to just two.

As a result, the city realized a 275 percent increase in the amount of hiring its team of recruiters was able to accomplish. The refined process has been scaled to the entire organization, and the city now is seeing dramatic reductions in vacancies.

Tech Talent

To become smarter, cities need both technology and talent. The right starting point is talent because, in the end, technology is powered by people.

Hiring tech talent means entering into a global war for technologists and technology leaders in direct competition with the private sector. Even when offering competitive salary and benefits, local governments often lose this war for talent because they do not understand what attracts, engages, and motivates different kinds of tech talent.

At a session at the 2017 ICMA Annual Conference, participants identified these challenges in recruiting and retaining tech talent:

- Tech talent does not know about opportunities in local government or the problems that we need to solve.
- Tech professionals do not perceive local government organizations as "cool" places to work.
- The top tech manager in a local government agency does not typically sit at the executive team table making top-management decisions.
- The organization may be vulnerable if the technology leader leaves the agency since it is often difficult to find a replacement.
- Local governments are not making significant investments in technology; therefore, tech talent does not want to join us.

Four Key Insights for Managers

To attract and retain tech talent, local government leaders need to understand what makes tech-savvy professionals tick. While local governments must

offer reasonably competitive salaries and benefits, the winners in the war for tech talent will be those that offer the working culture and environment where technologists thrive.

To succeed in this talent war, here are four key insights for managers:

1. Talent (the people you need).

It is crucial to distinguish three kinds of tech talent that you will need to succeed:

Technologists. The technologist is typically a subject matter expert and hard-core geek like an information technology systems engineer or architect. These tech experts are crucial to technology success. A core skill set for these technologists in local government is project or product management.

Technology leaders. Often overlooked are the people who are making the decisions about which technologies to adopt. Clearly the chief information officer is a key tech leader, but it is also essential to develop tech leadership across the organization. This involves a commitment to learning about new technologies and approaches by leaders outside of traditional IT functions.

The digitally fluent. In addition to hard-core technologists and leaders, successful technology adoption requires a much larger number of people to be digitally fluent, easily able to learn and apply new technologies and unafraid of technological change. Typically, young professionals are more apt to be digital natives, but digital fluency can come at all ages and can be trained.

2. Motivation (what they want).

Technologists as a group want to solve difficult problems using cool technology. This is where local government has a comparative advantage.

We have a wide range of problems that matter, and we can use cool tools and approaches that are actually surprisingly accessible. Using IBM's BlueMix, for example, one can grab information from Twitter's API and run all the tweets where people are talking about your community

through Watson's sentiment analysis to see what people think about your community.

3. Engagement (how to get them).

Tech talent wants to be compensated fairly and this may mean increasing the normal salary you offer. It may also mean paying some technologists or technology leaders more than the people they work for.

It is, however, not all about money. Daniel Pink in his book *Drive* argues that creative and effective workplaces generate engagement by providing purpose, autonomy, and mastery.

- **Purpose.** The desire to accomplish something larger than oneself. This is something local government offers as part of its very charter, to make the city or county greater and more beautiful than it was given to us.
- **Autonomy.** The urge to direct one's own life. Many local governments fall short here, but not necessarily so. Giving employees and teams more autonomy to solve problems could provide tremendous benefits for almost all employees and is crucial to engaging tech talent who have many choices on where to work.

Teams using such agile approaches as scrum, a simple iterative framework that allows teams to collaborate on complex products and problems, have increased autonomy and can show dramatic gains in productivity in everything from software deployment to policy development.

- **Mastery.** The drive to get better and better at what one does. Again, this is an area where local government could have the advantage. In a large tech company, it is easy to get stuck in a departmental silo or in a narrow IT range.

Local governments do not have that luxury and can offer employees the opportunity to learn a wide variety of skills and domains and

move towards mastery. A simple way to do this is create rotational opportunities and stretch assignments.

4. Retention (how to keep them).

The best way to retain tech talent is to gather a tribe of like-minded technologists and innovators and empower them to build a culture that champions the customer, learns from data, and iterates to improve. This will ensure that those who join your team find an environment they feel a part of and can thrive in.

Retention tip: Promote balance to meet the desire of tech professionals to have a fulfilling personal life as well as a great career. The technology industry is famous for the intense pressures and time demands on technologists and technology leaders. In the private sector, tech employees feel that the company owns your life and the purpose of your life is to relentlessly produce more and more.

The smart local government looking to recruit and retain top tech talent could turn this on its head. Offer people a life and the ability to do good in the world. Give them evenings and weekends free of responding to e-mails or global conference calls. Let them take regular vacations and completely unplug from the office while away.

Winning the War on Tech Talent

Many employees, especially tech talent, want to use cool technology to solve big problems. Local governments can identify potential smart-city projects, prioritize them, and experiment with a few.

In the process, smart cities must retool organizational cultures to align with the values and desires of tech-savvy professionals. These efforts will help the aspiring smart city attract, retain and grow the tech talent that it needs. **PM**

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