

Volunteers: Beyond Government Partners

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Abstract

Practitioners and academics have expressed concern about the deteriorating morale and effectiveness of the public-sector workforce, citing its aging employees and competition for human capital from the private sector. Recruiting qualified public servants is complicated by negative perceptions of government, due in part to the rhetoric of politicians from all sides. Therefore, finding new ways to recruit and retain the best-qualified young graduates has become critical. This commentary examines an untapped resource—volunteers—an underutilized supply of well-qualified future public servants that also have the potential to transform the negative image of government among youth.

Key Words:

volunteers, public service, government

Introduction

Over the past several years, practitioners and academics have expressed concern about the deteriorating morale and effectiveness of the public service (Lewis & Frank, 2002), citing the aging workforce and competition for human capital from the private sector. President Obama's promise to make working for government cool again and his recent call to serve is significant given that recruiting qualified public servants is complicated by a negative perception of government. Attacks by politicians from all sides have perpetuated the image of bloated bureaucracies and lazy bureaucrats and created a negative stereotype of the American civil service (Stier, 2004). Consequently, this contributes to difficulty in recruiting qualified civil servants, because citizens "simply aren't aware of the many ways government workers touch their lives" (Steir, para. 5).

Finding new ways to recruit and retain the best-qualified college graduates has become critical for all levels of

government. In order to address this issue, the federal government has developed programs, such as the Partnership for Public Service's Fed Experience and Call to Serve, that focus on recruiting government interns. However, these programs overlook volunteers as an underutilized resource in government programs that constitute a potential supply of well-qualified future public servants. How public-sector volunteers can contribute to recruitment and retention is of particular relevance to all levels of government, in particular local government, given that 80% of public-sector volunteers are found in local government. Moreover, given the recent signing of the landmark Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, we can expect an increase in government volunteers; thus, increasing the pool of potential recruits.

The Federal Workforce

According to a study entitled *Tapping America* (Partnership for Public Service [PPS], 2002), the federal

government needs to hire more than 250,000 employees within the next two years in order to replace workers who will be retiring, have been reassigned to the Department of Homeland Security, or have resigned. The study also reported that youth are unaware of the work that civil servants do, and that few are informed about available government work opportunities. Youth see government and the bureaucracy as incompatible with being young (DeSena, 2003), i.e., government is perceived as not providing challenging work to maximize their skills, as well as being unprofitable, lacking mobility, and discouraging creativity.

In addition, according to a 2001 Hart/Teeter poll commissioned by the Partnership for Public Service (2002) and the Council for Excellence in Government, 40% of students felt that the private sector offered interesting and challenging work, whereas only 9% felt the same about the public sector; 69% felt that the private sector allowed employees to take initiative, whereas only 3% felt the same about the public sector. Thus, two of the major obstacles to recruiting faced by federal agencies are a negative perception of government and competition from the private sector for the best-qualified young graduates.

Volunteers: Untapped Resources

Unlike interns, who seek to obtain skills and experience to develop their future careers, today's youth volunteer because they have a can-do spirit and believe that service matters (Conant, 1989). Although participation in civic life is on the decline in America (Ellis, 1998) and most youth appear uninterested in government, many youth feel an increasing desire to serve, especially among college youth. Dote, Cramer, Dietz, and Grimm (2007) noted that a large percentage of college freshmen

maintain that it is "essential" or "very important" to help others who are in need. In 2005, approximately 30% of college students volunteered compared with 29% of the general population. Twenty-two percent more college students volunteered in 2005 than in 2002 (i.e., 3.3 million in 2005 compared with 2.7 million in 2002). Furthermore, college students were twice as likely to volunteer (30%) as their 16-to-24-year-old peers who were not enrolled in college (15%). Nearly 32% of college students volunteered with educational or youth service organizations; almost 23% of college student volunteers served with religious organizations.

College students' commitment to serve has even helped redefine spring break—from a reason to travel to sunny vacation destinations in Florida and Mexico to an opportunity to help others and make a difference. In March 2007, 36,000 students from 300 schools spent their spring break cleaning up debris and painting houses along the Gulf of Mexico or elsewhere in the world (Johnston, 2007). Six months after hurricane Katrina, more than 31,000 students took alternative spring breaks. The following year, because students had more time to plan, that number increased by 16%. "So many young people were sitting in school watching the horrible devastation and wondering what they could do about it. . . . Because they're students. . . they just can't write checks and feel like they did something. In order to contribute, they have to do it with their physical labor" (Johnston, 2007, p.15). This willingness and can-do spirit is as critical to our democracy today as it was at our nation's inception; it perpetuates the openness and optimism that make a democracy work (Friedman, 2007).

Conclusion

As noted, there has been a surge in volunteering among youth, especially

college students. This interest in serving has been connected to a desire to make a difference. Some of these volunteers are already serving in government. What is being done so that they will continue to serve once they have graduated?

Volunteers are beyond government partners. Public-sector volunteers provide the catalytic framework to change the perception of government work as unchallenging and unsuitable as a career choice for qualified young college graduates. Volunteers are some of the best-qualified college students to recruit from because they not only have experience, but they are motivated to serve as well. There is ongoing difficulty attracting youth to public-sector jobs, yet many youth do contribute their time as volunteers in the public sector. The critical question is how to communicate positive images of volunteers in the public sector in order to overcome one of the major obstacles faced by government in its recruitment of employees.

Before college students can be actively recruited into public service, however, public administrators and managers need to better monitor these volunteers' contributions, and also look at the volunteer pool as a potential hiring resource. Although it is necessary to recruit interns and baby boomers, volunteers should not be overlooked. College-age, public-sector volunteers are motivated to serve and are just beginning their careers; they therefore have the potential to become lifelong career public servants.

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