



The Best Places to Work

IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT®



GETTING TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER

ENGAGING EMPLOYEES TO IMPROVE THE WORK EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

The best private sector companies understand that a positive work environment and high levels of employee engagement can lead to better performance, improved outcomes for their customers and a healthier bottom line. The federal government, however, lags behind the private sector not only when it comes to employee engagement, but the entire work experience.

One tool that leaders can use to improve the employee experience is known as human-centered design. Borrowing from the approach used by designers to create products and experiences for customers, leaders can address workplace issues *with* employees instead of *for* them.

In a series of three sessions hosted by the Partnership for Public Service and Deloitte, more than 60 federal leaders across 20 agencies came together to apply human-centered design concepts to their most pressing workforce challenges with the aim of improving personnel and management practices, as well as how employees perceive their jobs and workplaces.

WHY IS EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE IMPORTANT?

In a 2017 survey, 80 percent of private sector executives reported that the experience of employees in their day-to-day work life is important for their organizations, but only 22 percent believed their companies excel at making this a priority.¹

Other studies have shown that the level of employee engagement in their jobs affects customer interactions across organizations and drives business value. Fully engaged and committed employees are four times more likely to stay in their jobs,² for example, and highly engaged workers are 22 percent more productive than their less engaged peers.³ In addition, a recent study found that increased employee engagement was accompanied by a 12 percent increase in customer satisfaction.⁴

1. 2017 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends, p. 51. Retrieved from <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/human-capital/articles/introduction-human-capital-trends.html>

2. Corporate Leadership Council, Driving Performance and Retention Through Employee Engagement. Retrieved from <http://cwfl.usc.edu/assets/pdf/Employee%20engagement.pdf>

3. John Baldoni, "Employee Engagement Does More than Boost Productivity," Harvard Business Review, July 4, 2013. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2013/07/employee-engagement-does-more>

4. Gallup, Q12 Meta-Analysis Report. Retrieved from <http://news.gallup.com/reports/191489/q12-meta-analysis-report-2016.aspx>

In general, the federal government lags behind the private sector when it comes to delivering the best employee experience. A comparison of data between the *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*® produced by the Partnership for Public Service and Deloitte, and company surveys,⁵ shows the government significantly underperforms the private sector on such issues as the best use of talent, training and development opportunities, and providing rewards and recognition to those who excel.⁶

The need to recruit and retain skilled employees is pressing, with the baby boomers retiring and many millennials not enamored with federal government service. At the

end of fiscal 2017, only six percent of full-time federal employees were under the age of 30 compared to 21 percent of all employees in the private sector. At the same time, the workforce is aging. At the beginning of fiscal 2017, 21 percent of full-time federal employees were eligible to retire, and there were nearly eight times more full-time federal employees over the age of 50 than those under 30.⁷

If federal leaders do not take steps to attract the younger generation, improve the employee experience and retain high performers, agencies will find it increasingly difficult to effectively deliver on their missions.

	Government-wide Score	Private Sector Score	Gap
Deployment: My talents are used well in the workplace.	58.3	78.0	19.7
Recognition: Employees are recognized for providing high quality products and services.	48.5	67.0	18.5
Training: How satisfied are you with the training you receive for your present job?	51.6	64.0	12.4
Development: I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization.	64.0	69.0	5.0

Government and private sector *Best Places to Work* scores for dimensions of the employee experience. Scores are on a scale of 0-100.

USING HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN TO ADDRESS WORKPLACE ISSUES

Traditionally, leaders in the federal government have approached workplace management and personnel issues by making decisions unilaterally and then assigning staff to implement them. This top-down approach stifles the ability of employees to have a say in how their work will be done, and can lead to morale problems, low levels of employee engagement and a poor overall employee experience. Human-centered design flips this approach, starting with the people who are affected by a problem and engaging them in finding and implementing new approaches.

HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN APPROACH

Agencies can use human-centered design to better address challenges throughout the entire employee experience and better achieve mission outcomes by:

- **Identifying problems:** Use *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government* data to identify areas for improvement and work with employees to diagnose and prioritize problems

Activity: Problem-framing

- **Understanding employees:** Take time to solicit feedback from employees through interviews, focus groups and observation to uncover the “moments that matter”
- **Generating ideas:** Work with employees to brainstorm key challenges in the moments that matter in the employee experience

Activity: Journey mapping

- **Designing solutions:** Work with employees to develop solutions that fit their needs and address the root causes of problems

Activity: Prototyping

- **Piloting and improving:** Test concepts and continually solicit feedback to improve effectiveness

5. Data are provided by Mercer | Sirota as a part of the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings

6. <http://bestplacetowork.org/BPTW/analysis/>

7. Partnership for Public Service analysis of data provided by the Office of Personnel Management



EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE SPRINTS

In October of 2017, the Partnership and Deloitte set out to test the simple theory that agency leaders can use human-centered design to address critical issues faced by employees. During three half-day discussions over three months—called sprints—a select group of federal leaders applied the concepts and tools of human-centered design to some of the government’s most pressing workforce challenges that related to leadership, innovation, and diversity and inclusion.

In these three sessions, participants identified areas of concern using their Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey and *Best Places to Work* data, learned about research methods to better understand employee needs, mapped the journey of employees to uncover moments that matter, and created prototype solutions that could be piloted at their agencies. The group included both human resource and policy leaders to provide diverse perspectives and practical solutions.

During the first sprint, participants were introduced to the concept of employee experience and the principles of human-centered design. Participants then used *Best Places to Work* data to identify issue areas that they would focus on for the remainder of the series and use human-centered design to address.

In the second sprint, participants were joined by employees from their agencies. They conducted mock interviews to learn important information that would help them identify needs and pain points, and used this information to create journey maps that identified and prioritized issues highlighted by the employees. For example, one group selected leadership as its challenge and mapped the journey of a supervisor, including significant moments that matter such as weekly check-ins, performance reviews and the individual development plan process.

During the final sprint, participants proposed possible solutions to issues that were raised. A key aspect involved identifying steps in the employee’s experience that have affected employee engagement.

Instead of trying to improve the employee experience overall, the groups generally focused on targeted components. In response to feedback that employee learning and development could be strengthened, one group focused on improving individual development plans that electronically link to relevant training and development opportunities. Other groups suggested identifying and codifying leadership philosophies, developing a leadership succession plan and creating diversity and inclusion training programs.

A CALL TO ACTION

Federal leaders should rethink some of the processes currently used to manage the workforce and handle concerns of employees, moving away from the top-down approach to one that engages individuals and incorporates their feedback in the decision-making.

Human-centered design, a system that starts with the people who are affected by a problem and engages them in finding solutions, can be applied to many workplace issues. These include ways to improve management systems,

strengthen interactions with other departmental units, refine employee onboarding, create incentives for high performers or enhance training and leadership development programs.

Adopting this approach means leaders must solicit and understand the needs and concerns of employees, and devise solutions through constructive engagement and collaboration.

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For more information visit our website at bestplacestowork.org or contact bptw@ourpublicservice.org.

The *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*[®] rankings, produced by the Partnership for Public Service and Deloitte, offer the most comprehensive assessment of how federal public servants view their jobs and workplaces, providing employee perspectives on leadership, pay, innovation, work-life balance and other issues.