



Longest Federal Government Shutdown in History Created the Risk of a Federal Brain Drain

Like any organization, our government can only succeed and effectively serve the American public if it is able to recruit and retain high-quality talent. The recent 35-day shutdown poses a real risk to our government’s ability to do just that.

Analyses from three major job and recruiting websites show that there was a sizable increase in the number of federal employees, many with mission-critical skills, searching for new jobs during the partial shutdown that occurred from Dec. 22, 2018, until Jan. 28, 2019. At the same time, interest in obtaining government jobs fell, according to our analysis of traffic on USAJOBS, the federal job portal, and data from Glassdoor, a jobs and recruiting site.

While much attention has been paid to the harm the shutdown caused to our national security, the economy, air travel and a range of public services, the federal workforce bore an outsized burden. Not only were 800,000 federal employees denied their paychecks and in many cases required to work, but the shutdown increased the risk of valuable talent losing interest in and abandoning the civil service altogether.

This is an unfortunate development for our country, which faces growing and complex social, economic and national security challenges that require governmental expertise in highly sought after fields such as science, technology, engineering, finance, cybersecurity and health care.

Impact on Federal Recruitment and Hiring

Although many agencies across government remained open during the shutdown, interest in all federal job opportunities fell during December and January.

According to a Partnership for Public Service analysis of USAJOBS data, daily visits to the central federal job site fell by an average of 22.5 percent during the shutdown compared with the same period in December and January of last year.

Glassdoor reported on Jan. 24, 2019, that as the threat of a possible shutdown entered the news cycle in the middle of December, the number of applications for government jobs at affected agencies listed on

Glassdoor began to drop. As the shutdown took hold, the number of applications for jobs at affected federal agencies fell by 46 percent.¹

At the same time, hiring across government declined, likely because affected agencies—which employ about 40 percent of federal employees—were only able to review applications for open positions that were exempted from the shutdown.

According to LinkedIn, a professional networking site, the hiring rate among government agencies impacted by the shutdown was 50 percent lower than

1 Glassdoor Economic Research, “Government Shutdown Driving Both Current and Aspiring Federal Workers Away.” Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2WXQwYE>



Decline in applications for government jobs at affected agencies listed on Glassdoor



Increase in number of civil servants from affected agencies looking for jobs on Glassdoor after January 11 (when federal employees missed their first paycheck)



Decline in average daily visits to USAJOBS during the shutdown (compared with the same period in December and January of last year)

at unaffected agencies in January, despite the two groups having consistently similar rates during the past few years.²

Impact on Federal Employee Retention

On the retention side of the talent pipeline, recent analyses from Glassdoor, LinkedIn and the job site Indeed painted a troubling picture.

According to Glassdoor, the number of federal workers looking for new jobs outside of government increased as the shutdown dragged on. After January 11 when employees missed their first paycheck, the number of civil servants from affected agencies looking for jobs on Glassdoor increased by 10 percent.³ Similarly, LinkedIn reported that the number of employees at affected agencies who signaled a willingness to be contacted about private-sector job opportunities increased by 59 percent compared with their colleagues at unaffected agencies.⁴

Indeed found similar results. The job site reported that interest of federal employees at unfunded agencies in finding new work picked up substantially during the shutdown, including at the Department of Homeland Security, the IRS and the Census Bureau.⁵

According to Glassdoor, there was a roughly 36 percent increase in employees from the Federal Aviation Administration searching for new jobs during the shutdown. The site also experienced a 64 percent increase in job searches among affected Transportation Safety Administration employees, some of whom were in positions that required over 100 hours of training to begin work.⁶

In conversations with a number of chief human capital officers from agencies affected by the shutdown, there was a general sense that the experience caused a good deal of anger and frustration among employees, and hurt morale. They said it will take a while to determine whether the shutdown will have a lasting negative impact on the recruitment and retention of top talent.

One chief human capital officer said he and his team are “a couple of months away” from understanding the full effect of how the shutdown affected his department. But in the short term, he said, there is some concern because individuals who were offered federal positions ended up accepting jobs outside of government during the shutdown.

“I can’t be sure, but we probably would not have lost those people if we hadn’t had the furlough,” said the official.

Conclusion

While the future effect on attrition and hiring remains to be seen, it is clear that in the short term, the shutdown had a negative effect on the government’s workforce and prompted a sizable number of employees to consider alternate avenues of employment.

This should be a warning sign to our elected leaders that if these types of disruptions continue, skilled employees may seek employment in the private sector, qualified candidates will be deterred from applying for federal jobs, and the country will ultimately pay the price of a degraded and less effective government.

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2 LinkedIn, Corporation “Government Workers Begin to Think About New Roles Amid U.S. Government Shutdown.” Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2tj0hTL>

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Indeed Hiring Lab, “As the Government Shutdown Drags On, Many Government Workers Look Elsewhere.” Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2E9jvBK>

6 Government Accountability Office, “TSA Should Ensure Testing Data Are Complete and Fully Used to Improve Screener Training and Operations.” Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2E61Z2B>