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# 15 Editions of Best Places to Work

Imagining the Next Era of Federal Employee Engagement



**PARTNERSHIP**  
FOR PUBLIC SERVICE



**BOSTON**  
CONSULTING  
GROUP

# About the Authors

## About the Partnership

For 19 years, the nonpartisan, nonprofit Partnership for Public Service has been dedicated to making the federal government more effective. We work across administrations to help transform the way government operates by increasing collaboration, accountability, efficiency and innovation. Visit [ourpublicservice.org](http://ourpublicservice.org) to learn more. Follow us on social @RPublicService and subscribe today to get the latest federal news and information on upcoming Partnership programs and events, and more.

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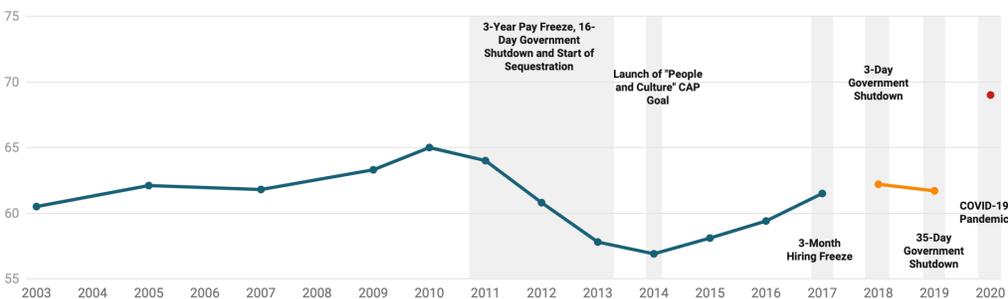
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# Introduction

During the past nearly two decades, the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® rankings have grown from a short list of agencies to the most comprehensive assessment of the employee experience across the federal civil service. When the project began in 2003, employee engagement was a niche human resources concept on the periphery of management concerns for federal leaders. Since then, employee engagement has become a priority for political and career leaders, garnered attention in the halls of Congress, and spun off into initiatives across the federal government.

Throughout the government, agency leaders and staff have dedicated time to expanding their knowledge of employee engagement, developing strategies and implementing changes to improve their workplaces. Those years of effort have paid off. Despite pay and hiring freezes, government shutdowns, budget uncertainty, political turmoil and increasingly complex missions, many agencies have made strides in engaging employees and creating more productive work environments.

## Government-Wide Employee Engagement Score Trend



\*In 2020, the Partnership changed how it calculates the percentage of positive responses to FEVS questions. Therefore, the 2020 scores should not be compared to scores from previous years. \*\*The Department of Veterans Affairs does not participate in the FEVS. The government-wide Best Places to Work employee engagement scores from 2003 to 2017 include the views of employees from the VA. The scores from 2018 to 2020 do not include their data. Because the VA represents approximately 18% of the federal workforce, the government-wide scores between 2003 and 2017 should not be compared to scores between 2018 and 2020.

Chart: Partnership for Public Service and BCG · Source: Best Places to Work in the Federal Government · Created with Datawrapper

To make the federal government a world-class employer that can compete for a diverse array of talent, the federal employee experience must evolve. And as the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, this evolution is even more imperative. Up to a [quarter of workers](#) in the U.S. may be thinking of leaving their jobs after the pandemic subsides. To stand a chance of competing with the private sector for this talent, federal leaders must build on the lessons of the past year by placing a heightened focus on engaging employees and addressing their workplace needs.

As we celebrate the 15th edition of the Best Places to Work rankings, we have an opportunity to reflect and begin imaging the future. Together with our partner, Boston Consulting Group, we mark this anniversary by assessing both the opportunities and requirements for the next era of federal employee engagement.

Our vision is clear: a future in which leaders treat strong employee engagement as a business imperative and invest in tailored approaches to improve the employee experience. In this report, we make the case for this vision by demonstrating the links between employee engagement and organizational performance, and by outlining specific strategies for engaging two groups key to government's future success: young people and career leaders.



# A Best Places to Work Primer

## DATA SOURCES

Most of the data used to develop the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® rankings are collected through the Office of Personnel Management’s Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. The rankings also include responses from employees at agencies that do not participate in the FEVS but conduct similar surveys with comparable methodologies.

## EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT SCORES

The Partnership and BCG use the term employee engagement to refer to the satisfaction and commitment of the workforce and the willingness of employees to put forth discretionary effort to achieve results. The Best Places to Work employee engagement score is the primary metric that determines an agency’s ranking.

The Best Places to Work employee engagement score is derived from the percentage of positive responses to three different Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey questions and is weighted according to the extent to which each question predicts an employee’s “intent to remain.”

- I recommend my organization as a good place to work.
- Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?
- Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization?

## WORKPLACE CATEGORIES

As a part of the Best Places to Work analysis, the Partnership and BCG also assess agencies on different aspects of the employee experience. We group questions from the federal survey into categories that measure employee views on various aspects of their jobs and workplaces, from leadership to work-life balance.

## KEY DRIVERS

Each year, we also analyze which workplace categories are the most important factors contributing to overall engagement. Effective leadership has emerged as the key driver every year since the rankings launched in 2003, followed by employee skills-mission match. The third most important factor, satisfaction with pay, emerged for the first time in 2010, replacing work-life balance as a key element for overall satisfaction and commitment.

## WHAT THE CATEGORIES MEASURE

**Effective Leadership:** Measures the extent to which employees believe leadership at all levels of the organization generates motivation and commitment, encourages integrity and manages people fairly, while also promoting the professional development, creativity and empowerment of employees. Effective leadership is also broken into four different subcategories – senior leaders, supervisors, fairness and empowerment.

**Employee Skills-Mission Match:** Measures the extent to which employees feel that their skills and talents are used effectively. Furthermore, it assesses the level to which employees get satisfaction from their work and understand how their jobs are relevant to the organizational mission.

**Pay:** Measures how satisfied employees are with their compensation.

**Strategic Management:** Measures the extent to which employees believe that management ensures they have the necessary skills and abilities to do their jobs, is successful at hiring new employees with the necessary skills to help the organization and works to achieve the organizational goals with targeted personnel strategies and performance management.

**Teamwork:** Measures the extent to which employees believe they communicate effectively both inside and outside their team organizations, create a friendly work atmosphere and produce high-quality work products.

**Innovation:** Measures employee perceptions of efforts to improve the way work is done, including their own personal motivation to promote change and the support and rewards they receive for promoting new ideas.

**Training and Development:** Measures the extent to which employees believe their development needs are assessed and appropriate training is offered, allowing them to do their jobs effectively and improve their skills.

**Work-Life Balance:** Measures the extent to which employees consider their workloads reasonable and feasible, and managers support a balance between work and life.

**Support for Diversity:** Measures the extent to which employees believe that actions and policies of leadership and management promote and respect diversity.

**Recognition:** Measures the extent to which employees feel they are rewarded and promoted in a fair and timely manner for their performance and innovative contributions to their workplaces.

## AGENCY SIZE GROUPINGS

Agencies that participate in the Best Places to Work rankings are grouped by size to provide comparisons of organizations that may face similar management challenges.

- Large agencies: 15,000 or more employees
- Midsize agencies: 1,000 to 14,999 employees
- Small agencies: 100 to 999 employees
- Agency subcomponents: Subcomponents, the agencies within agencies, need to have at least 100 full-time permanent employees to participate in the rankings.



# Pursuit of More Than Happiness: The Business Case for Federal Employee Engagement

**B**uilding a government-wide culture attuned to the specific experiences of employees and that considers engagement as integral to organizational success requires resources, effort and attention. To warrant these investments, leaders need a clear understanding of the business case for employee engagement.

According to a [Gallup analysis](#) of more than 112,000 work units at 276 different organizations, units with the highest levels of employee engagement experienced 81% less absenteeism than those with the lowest levels. Turnover in these teams was 18% lower, customer loyalty was 10% higher and the top performing units were 14% more productive.

While the link between employee engagement and outcomes in the private sector has been well documented by Gallup and others, there is considerably less analysis of the relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance in federal agencies. Public sector organizational outcomes are generally seen as more difficult to quantify and measure. How do you assess the performance of the Environmental Protection Agency? And how do you compare it to that of NASA or the Department of Education?

The answer – you get creative. The following research studies explored the links between employee engagement, customer experience, workforce attrition and performance in the public sector. Although these studies were conducted with different measures and analytical approaches, their results all point to a clear link between employee engagement and organizational outcomes in the federal government.

## A PRESCRIPTION FOR BETTER PERFORMANCE

What is the link between employee engagement within an organization and its ability to deliver positive outcomes for its customers? This was a question that the Partnership and BCG set out to answer with an examination of one of the largest customer service organizations in the nation – the Department of Veterans Affairs.

In 2019, we analyzed three years of performance and employee engagement data from nearly 150 medical centers operated by the department. Through this analysis, we found that medical centers with stronger employee engagement had higher patient satisfaction and better call center performance.

Our findings indicated that every one-point increase in a medical center’s engagement score was associated with, on average, a nearly half-point increase in patient satisfaction with the medical center overall, and a quarter-point increase in satisfaction with the center’s primary and specialty care providers. In other words, as employee engagement improved, so did the quality of services for veterans.

Another key finding revealed that call center employees performed their jobs more ably at medical facilities where employee engagement was high. Results showed that as employee engagement rose, the time it took to answer the phone decreased. During a three-year period, it took call centers over 69 seconds on average to respond to inquiries. Our findings revealed that a 10-point improvement in the Best Places to Work engagement score could reduce that number by nearly 15%. In essence, more engaged employees would respond faster to call center inquiries.

These results make clear that employee engagement had a notable impact on the patient experience at an agency with more than 300,000 employees who deliver care to over [nine million](#) veterans each year.

For more details on this analysis, see the methodology section at the end of this report.

## COUNTING ON ENGAGEMENT AT TREASURY

<b>Engagement at the Mint and BEP</b>		
A look at how the two Treasury subcomponents have performed in the Best Places to Work rankings.		
	<b>U.S. Mint</b>	<b>Bureau of Printing and Engraving</b>
2020 Best Places to Work Score	74.4	72.6
2020 Rank	148 out of 411	189 out of 411
2019 Rank	141 out of 420	113 out of 420
2018 Rank	165 out of 415	96 out of 415
2017 Rank	174 out of 339	94 out of 339

Table: Partnership for Public Service and BCG - Source: [Best Places to Work](#) - Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Assessing an agency’s performance can be a complicated task from the outside. Without an understanding of its mission and goals, it can be difficult to know which indicators are accurate and which outcomes are meaningful, making it hard to link performance and employee engagement. One researcher, however, recently found a novel way around this issue: use an agency’s own assessment of its performance.

In her 2020 dissertation,<sup>1</sup> Kimberly Steide uncovered a link between employee engagement and organizational performance using self-reported performance measures. Specifically, she found that as employee engagement within an organization increased, so did the chances that it met the performance goals outlined in its strategic plan.

To do this analysis, Steide examined employee engagement and performance data from two subcomponents within the Department of the Treasury – the U.S. Mint and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. To measure engagement, Steide relied on the Office of Personnel Management’s Employee Engagement Index as a guide and used 2017 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey data to calculate engagement scores for more than 1,200 respondents across both agencies.

Since the U.S. Mint and BEP had different performance metrics – profit per dollar issued for the former and currency manufacturing costs for the latter – she had to innovate. Rather than try to compare the performance of both agencies using incompatible metrics, she instead transformed the data into a simple measure – whether the organization failed to meet or exceeded its performance target that fiscal year as reported in the Treasury Department’s annual performance report.

Using a regression analysis, Steide found that as engagement increased, so did the likelihood that the organization met its performance target. In the end, she concluded that the study presented a valuable link between employee engagement and organizational performance in the federal context.

However, that was not the only contribution her research made to the business case for engagement. She also proved that complex performance metrics can be transformed into simple, comparable measures and used to study their relationship to employee engagement.

## **PREDICTING THE PREDICTABLE**

Workforce attrition is one of the only cross-cutting metrics to compare agency outcomes across government on a large scale. An organization’s ability to retain employees can serve as an indicator of its overall health. And while a certain level of turnover may be natural – or even healthy – for any organization, it does come at a cost, and high levels of attrition indicate internal challenges. With every employee departure, organizations incur expenses to recruit, onboard and train a replacement, all while risking losses in productivity.

The Partnership for Public Service and BCG hypothesized that satisfied and committed workforces see lower turnover rates, and we sought empirical evidence to support this idea, experimenting with an innovative analytical approach. In collaboration with a small team of data scientists, we investigated the link between employee engagement and workforce attrition.

To do this, we attempted to create a machine learning model capable of reliably predicting employee attrition rates at federal agencies using Best Places to Work and workforce demographic data – the idea being that if a link did not exist and attrition was not influenced by engagement, then any model we created would not be able to predict attrition any better than random chance. And after testing numerous models, we succeeded.

[Machine learning](#) is a branch of artificial intelligence that uses data, algorithms and statistical methods to make classifications or predictions. A machine learning model is a tool that can be taught to recognize types of patterns in one set of data and then make predictions about data that it has not seen before.

In this analysis, we trained and tested a regression model on five years of Best Places to Work scores and workforce data for 185 agency subcomponents from across government. In the end, we were able to create a model capable of predicting employee attrition rates at federal agencies with a fair degree of accuracy and generality, notably without controlling for many of the factors that might influence an employee’s decision to leave their agency, such as broader labor market conditions. And while the performance of the model could be improved with more data, it was strong enough to suggest that there is indeed a relationship between engagement and workforce attrition.

For more details on this analysis, see the methodology section at the end of this report.

## AGENCY SPOTLIGHT: EMPLOYEE WHOLE HEALTH AT THE VHA



**Data Snapshot: VHA**  
A look at how the VA subcomponent performed in the Best Places to Work rankings and the size of its workforce.

Veterans Health Administration	
2020 Best Places to Work Score	69.8
2020 Rank	243 out of 411
Full-Time Workforce	334,572

Data Coverage: Full-time, nonseasonal, permanent workforce as of the end of FY 2020 (Sep. 2020).  
Table: Partnership for Public Service and BCG • Source: Best Places to Work and FedScope • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

The Veterans Health Administration, the largest integrated healthcare system in the nation, has spent the past few years radically rethinking healthcare delivery. In 2015, the VHA launched a new approach to how it interacts with veterans that takes a holistic view of their well-being. In the early stages of implementation, however, the agency’s leadership quickly recognized the powerful link between the employee experience and customer outcomes.

This innovative approach – called [Whole Health](#) – is based on years of research that shows an expansive view of healthcare produces better long-term outcomes for patients. The Whole Health system represents a shift from “episodic points of clinical care focused on disease management” to care that is rooted in partnership between patients, providers and their communities. To implement this cultural shift, VHA’s Dr. Kavitha Reddy noted that bringing employees along had to be integral to the process. “Change management is about creating awareness and

desire. And in order to do that we wanted to really work with our employees,” she said.

During the early stages of implementation, VHA’s leadership realized that working with employees had to mean more than just teaching them how to deliver care in the new system, but applying the same principles of the Whole Health system to themselves if they were going to achieve success.

“It is important to bring the whole health approach to our employees. By helping employees feel this, do this, and understanding this approach for themselves, we increase the opportunities for similar, whole health, personalized interactions with the veterans we care for every day,” said Reddy, associate director for Employee Whole Health within VHA’s Office of Patient-Centered Care and Cultural Transformation.

And so VHA turned the approach inward and focused it on employees. The Employee Whole Health initiative empowers employees to assess their own well-being alongside the well-being of their patients. The goal is to create an environment that encourages staff to adopt healthy behaviors and approaches for their own self-care and well-being, reduce the incidence of preventable illness and injury, and foster a culture of employee engagement that results in the best care and improved access for veterans. “It is all about trying to help build and bolster resilience in our employees,” said Dr. Maureen Marks, VHA’s organizational development director.

With this new approach, VHA is now seeing a cyclical, positive relationship between employee engagement and customer outcomes. The more engaged employees become through Employee Whole Health, the better they can care for veterans, which in turn further boosts their engagement.

“Early employee survey data show a promising correlation between improved employee job attitudes and using the whole health approach for themselves and veterans,” Reddy said. “There is evidence to show that a personalized interaction with your veteran or customer creates a reward for you as the person delivering it. The fact that we are seeing an improvement is really exciting to us.”

This success has prompted VHA’s executive leadership to encourage leaders across the country to implement the system and build the infrastructure necessary to bring it fully to scale. “This year, Employee Whole Health is front and center in VHA’s modernization plans. And the majority of facilities are required to have an Employee Whole Health coordinator,” Reddy said.

The success has also prompted VHA to start sharing its approach and strategies with other agencies like the Department of the Defense and the Office of Personnel Management. Through the Whole Health initiatives, VHA has demonstrated that by focusing on the holistic employee experience and supporting employee well-being, it can enable staff to deliver more personalized, pro-active, patient-centered care for their customers.

## **MAXIMIZING THE BUSINESS CASE**

The business case for employee engagement is clear: investing resources to understand challenges, implement improvements and sustain engagement enables agencies to deliver on their missions more effectively and efficiently. With this strong case for prioritizing engagement, federal leaders should ensure that it is an integral component of their organizational cultures and management practices. And by embedding employee engagement into the goals, accountability mechanisms and the strategy of their organizations, leaders can create and sustain cultures of engagement and ensure their workforces are prepared to take on the known challenges of today and the unexpected of tomorrow.

However, simply investing in generic approaches is not enough. What organizations and leaders furthest along in their employee engagement maturity have realized is that a one-size-fits-all approach to engagement will only go so far. For the government to be competitive for the talent that it needs, leaders also should recognize that distinct groups of employees have diverse engagement needs. Government will continue to lag behind the private sector until leaders tailor their approach to improving the federal employee experience. In the following sections, we outline specific strategies for engaging two groups that we believe will be key to government’s future success: young people and career leaders.



# Call to Service: How to Engage the Next Generation of Talent

Our nation’s government is in desperate need of younger talent. According to the latest data, [less than 7%](#) of the federal civilian workforce’s 1.9 million full-time employees are under the age of 30. By comparison, [nearly 20%](#) of the employed U.S. labor force was under 30 in 2020.

The federal government needs young people not only to foster innovation and to bring in emerging skills and new ways of thinking, but to make the federal workforce more representative of the nation it serves. To its credit, the Biden administration included references in its fiscal 2022 [budget proposal](#) to expanding federal intern programs, as well as the need to “recruit and retain a diverse and inclusive federal workforce.”

To attract and retain the next generation of public servants, agencies will need to address specific and persistent issues in the federal employee experience that dissuade and disengage young people. We spoke with leaders from across government who have found success in engaging younger employees to better understand the challenges they face and how they are overcoming them.

### Data Snapshot: Call to Service

A look at employee engagement and the Under 30 workforces at the agencies featured in this section.

Agency	2020 Best Places to Work Score - Employees Under 30	% of Workforce Under 30
Army Futures Command	78.9	6.0%
Department of the Army	74.5	6.4%
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration	81.8	5.0%
U.S. Bureau of Reclamation	82.8	5.9%
U.S. Geological Survey	72.3	6.5%
Government-Wide	67.9	6.8%

Data Coverage: Full-time, nonseasonal, permanent workforce as of the end of FY 2020 (Sep. 2020).  
Table: Partnership for Public Service and BCG • Source: Best Places to Work and FedScope • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

## CHALLENGES

### Recruiting and Onboarding

For many federal leaders, one of the biggest challenges is finding young people who are familiar with the complex missions of their organizations. “Engagement starts during the recruiting process” was a common refrain. Several leaders attributed the difficulties to limited brand recognition.

At the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, for example, younger job candidates are often unaware of the full scope of the agency’s work, according to Sean Clayton, director of NOAA’s Office of Human Capital.

“Name recognition hinders us. The public is cognizant of the National Weather Service. But we need to do more messaging so that the public knows that all these organizations [such as the National Weather Service, National Ocean Service, and the National Marine Fisheries Service] that they are used to seeing actually fall underneath the NOAA umbrella,” Clayton said.

Katharine Kelley, chief human capital officer of the Department of the Army’s Futures Command, shared a similar sentiment. “The civilian population in our country primarily thinks of an infantry soldier when they think of the Army. They do not think of a scientist.”

However, getting talent in the door is only part of the issue. We know from the Best Places to Work data that making the connection between the skills that an employee brings to the job and the mission of the organization is an important component of engagement. This is especially true for younger talent, and the linkage should be clear on day one. Many of those interviewed said that consistent and effective onboarding is critical to ensuring that new staff members have a common understanding of organizational mission and how they fit into it.

### Diversity, equity and inclusion

In a 2018 poll, [Gallup found](#) one of the top characteristics that young millennials and Gen Z look for is leaders who support a diverse and inclusive workplace.

The federal government, however, has long struggled to build a diverse workforce, foster inclusion and implement equitable policies and practices. While nearly half of entry-level federal employees identified as people of color, according to the latest data, they made up less than 25% of the career Senior Executive Service – an indication that government has unaddressed issues of racial inequity in its hiring and promotion processes. Moreover, the latest Best Places to Work data available show that less than 60% of federal employees reported being satisfied with their agency’s support for diversity and inclusion.

While this poses a challenge to engagement across the federal workforce, agency leaders noted that it can have a particular impact on younger employees who often expect to enter organizations that are further along in their diversity, equity and inclusion journeys. Eleanour Snow of the U.S. Geological Survey put it this way: “Young people are really interested in diversity, equity and inclusion, and when they look around at an organization of mostly older white men, they wonder where their place is.”

### Advancement

Helping younger employees understand how they can grow within an organization can also be a challenge. Without insight into the advancement opportunities available to them, younger individuals can quickly become disengaged.

But federal leaders interviewed said that it is not necessarily being promoted quickly that

matters most. What most younger employees seem to care about is knowing what opportunities for development are available and understanding how they can grow within their organization. They want to be able to see the path ahead.

“There is a voracious appetite on the part of young and mid-career employees to not only see opportunities for themselves in the future, but to connect with people who they trust to help them navigate that process,” said Kelley of the Army Futures Command.

And when this appetite is not met, many noted, younger employees can become dissatisfied and seek opportunities outside of the agency or government altogether.

## **STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS**

### **Targeted recruitment**

One way agencies have found early-career employees who are attracted to their missions is through targeted and intentional recruitment. Rather than passively hoping prospective employees will come to them, the most successful agencies proactively pursue prospective employees needed to achieve their missions.

At the Army Futures Command, this involves establishing relationships with higher education institutions, their faculty and students. “When we connect with that university, we are not only getting the professor-level expertise to help us in our work, but there is the student population that is also learning from those same professors who are feeders into our labs,” Kelley said.

NOAA has been taking a different approach, focusing on external professional networks and affinity groups, particularly those that serve underrepresented communities.

“We target the Black Engineers of the Year conference and other professional organizations. Affinity groups and professional organizations help attract diverse talent to NOAA,” said Kenneth Bailey, NOAA’s director of inclusion and civil rights.

In addition, the agency uses a robust array of internship programs as a pipeline for young talent. “We bring hundreds of students on every year. They come in with incredible motivation and passion. And by the end of the program, most of them are interested in coming back to work for NOAA,” said Louisa Koch, the agency’s director of education.

Lara Grillos from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation said the bureau takes a similar approach. “We have a direct hire program available for recent graduates. They complete a rigorous, 11-week project and then we can hire them on directly without going through the competitive process. It is another great way that we can recruit.”

### **Experiential onboarding**

Onboarding a new employee should be more than just filling out paperwork and completing routine tasks. An [effective onboarding process](#) involves acclimating a new hire to the culture of their workplace, giving them a sense of where they fit into the organization, and setting them up to make positive contributions to their teams in the shortest amount of time.

And onboarding does not have to be a centralized, top-down process to be effective. Especially in large agencies with disparate workforces, onboarding programs can still be unique to an office or region and consistently educate new employees on their roles and give them a sense of attachment to the organization’s mission and goals. According to several federal leaders, the key is giving new staff opportunities for hands-on learning throughout their onboarding process.

At the Bureau of Reclamation, they have coined a term for this – “Technical Tuesdays.” Once a month, experts from across the bureau showcase their work and give staff, especially those that are new, an opportunity to learn about the different ways that the agency delivers on its mission.

“We get to see this cutting-edge technology that Reclamation is a part of. It is fascinating and so accessible to all employees. It is a great program,” said James Kirkland, formerly of USBR’s Civil Rights Division.

And within one of the bureau’s offices, they go a step further and get employees to see the work firsthand. Located in Denver, Colorado, USBR’s [Technical Service Center](#) provides technical assistance and innovative solutions for water and power resource issues.

“They have a world-class laboratory that includes scaled hydraulic models of dams to make sure they can pass floods safely, and a 5-million pound test machine to see how much pressure concrete can take, typically in very loud and dramatic fashion. It is a really neat place. And we offer tours to all new employees as part of onboarding in our Denver office,” Grillos said.

For the U.S. Geological Survey, another component of their success is continuously evaluating their onboarding program. “Within three months, new hires are invited to complete a survey to share their experiences from the recruitment process, through their first several weeks on the job,” said Ashley Cannady from the agency’s Office of Organizational Development. Cannady emphasized that evolution has to follow. “It is important that organizational leaders utilize the data to identify strengths and areas for improvement, then implement any necessary changes,” she added.

## **Mentorship and Empowerment**

Another way to engage younger employees is to give them opportunities to learn from their colleagues and explore the different career paths available to them, even if the journey will not be as fast as they might prefer. “There is a very significant need for people to see who they could be in the future,” said Kelley from Army Futures Command.

Peggy Gardiner, organizational development chief at U.S. Geological Survey, said that in the agency’s experience, mentorship for young people is critical. “When we reach them and connect them with a mentor, it is often a lifeline for them to stay engaged.”

According to Kelley, the Army Futures Command takes this idea a step further and has embedded a two-sided approach to coaching and mentorship. As part of the agency’s leadership development program, younger employees are given the opportunity to learn from mid-career and senior colleagues, and senior leaders are trained to find and elevate promising talent. “I am trying to grow good federal leaders. They need to know how to reach down and find that talent and pull it up.”

Enabling and encouraging younger staff to make an impact at their level is another way that the agency leaders have addressed the advancement challenge. In particular, many of the leaders mentioned employee resource groups and how they can serve as a source of empowerment and inclusion for younger employees.

At NOAA, employee resource groups help promote visibility and access for younger employees and those who identify as members of underrepresented communities. “They have been very instrumental in helping employees connect with their allies. They contribute so much to employee engagement. And they help break down some of the barriers that exist for newer and younger employees,” Bailey said.

At USGS, there is even a resource group dedicated specifically to supporting and empowering young scientists. The group was developed to create “a place where younger employees can network with peers, identify the unique needs of early career scientists, and strategize how to address those needs,” said Kristen Donahue, former president of the Early Career Scientist Network.

The agency has several other resource groups, including ones for minority employees, women and staff with disabilities. All are championed by a sponsor from the Executive Leaders Team, which is a critical feature, according to Donahue. “We have a direct line of communication between USGS leadership and our group. Having a connection with senior leadership, is an invaluable resource that allows us to make sure the voices of early career scientists are heard,” Donahue said.

For Laurie Hall, the president of the early career scientist employee resource group, it is this culture of empowering employees at all levels that helps USGS succeed. “Individuals who are motivated to make changes to the organization are really supported in those endeavors. That is separate from the USGS mission, but it is a critical part of us achieving our mission.”

## AGENCY SPOTLIGHT: MENTORING AND EMPOWERMENT AT THE BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS



### Data Snapshot: BLS

A look at employee engagement and the Under 30 workforce at the DOL subcomponent.

Agency	2020 Best Places to Work Score - Employees Under 30	% of Workforce Under 30
Bureau of Labor Statistics	88.6	12.1%
Government-Wide	67.9	6.8%

Data Coverage: Full-time, nonseasonal, permanent workforce as of the end of FY 2020 (Sep. 2020).  
Table: Partnership for Public Service and BCG • Source: Best Places to Work and FedScope • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

The [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) is responsible for measuring labor market activity, working conditions, price changes and productivity in the U.S. economy. While its work might not be as well-known as that of NASA, the FBI or the IRS, particularly among young people, the Department of Labor subcomponent has proven that with intentional onboarding, mentorship and empowerment, it can create an environment that not only appeals to the next generation of talent but also engages and retains them.

For Bill Wiatrowski, the BLS deputy commissioner, part of the bureau’s approach to engaging young talent starts with an effective onboarding process. Rather than weighing down new employees with paperwork and long training periods, they give them opportunities to “learn by doing” and contribute to meaningful work early on such as playing a role in producing the agency’s monthly Employment Situation report or the Consumer Price Index.

“Part of [our success] is getting staff involved quickly in work that has a clear output and a meaning. We do not have people sitting around for a long time,” Wiatrowski said. “They are up and running and working and they can see the fruits of their labor pretty quickly.”

Another key to the bureau’s success is professional development grounded in workforce and organizational needs.

“We push managers to ask, ‘What is the training that you need to keep moving forward, what are the skills that the program needs today and what are the skills that the program will need tomorrow,’” Wiatrowski said.

With this information, the bureau often creates opportunities to meet those needs, like the new data science training program that is currently being piloted. The program is intended to address skill shortages across the organization and consists of a combination of self-training through online courses, some group sessions and a project that is directly related to the work of each employee’s office or program.

In a similar vein, Wiatrowski created a writing course for employees to help the bureau’s technical employees learn how to write for a general audience and produce accessible analyses.

BLS also engages and empowers younger employees by encouraging them to take on new work that interests them. As an example, the bureau has an innovation detail program that allows for employees to transfer to another office or team for three to four months. Through this program, which has run for the past five years, employees have a chance work on a particular problem or product of interest that will also have an impact.

“They are things that otherwise might have dragged on for a long time because people did not get to focus their time and attention on them,” Wiatrowski said.

This focused time empowers employees to make significant change at their level and stay engaged. And while the program is open to staff at various levels, it is particularly popular with younger employees who have the chance to do something different while benefiting the organization.

BLS also tackles the advancement and inclusion challenges that dampen engagement for younger employees by regularly convening senior leaders to talk about their careers and paths for advancement within the agency. This “Senior Staff Roundtable” is moderated by a junior staff member and serves to inspire younger employees and give them an opportunity to have meaningful conversations about their career trajectory.

“Employees get an opportunity to hear about different career paths and how those paths can help them figure out where they are going,” Wiatrowski said.

In the end, it is not one particular action or strategy that has helped BLS succeed in keeping its younger employees engaged, but a range of different approaches and an emphasis on being responsive to their needs. And it seems to be paying off.

With a full-time workforce made up of nearly [twice the percentage](#) of employees under 30 as the rest of government and employee engagement scores consistently in the top quartile of agency subcomponents, the bureau has shown that even an agency whose name you may not recognize can be a model for the rest of government.



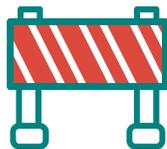
# Leadership Matters: How to Engage Supervisors and Senior Executive Service Members

**L**eaders and the cultures they create are a critical component of the employee experience. Every year as a part of the Best Places to Work analysis, we have found that the primary driver of employee engagement is effective leadership. Supervisors and senior leaders are particularly important components of the leadership ranks of an agency, but their engagement is often taken for granted in broader employee engagement efforts.

Satisfied and committed leaders are key to workforce engagement and organizational performance. After all, how can employees be engaged if the leaders at the top of their organizations who drive the culture they work in are not? “Employee engagement happens first at the most senior levels and cascades down,” said Bahar Niakan, former deputy chief human capital officer at the Department of Health and Human Services.

We spoke with senior officials and engagement leads at several agencies that have demonstrated a clear ability to engage supervisors and senior executives to learn more about the challenges this group faces, and the intentional actions other agencies can take to overcome them.

## CHALLENGES



### Lack of information

A leader’s ability to solve challenges for their staff and enable them to perform their jobs is a key component of what makes them effective. However, according to agency experts, getting leaders the information that they need can be a challenge. When career leaders do not have insight into what the issues are, where they are and how to fix them, it can lead to frustration and disengagement at the leadership and staff levels alike.

## Data Snapshot: Leadership Matters

A look at how the agencies featured in this section performed in the Best Places to Work rankings, and the size of their supervisor and career SES workforces.

Agency	2020 Best Places to Work Score	2020 Rank	Supervisor Workforce	Career SES Workforce
Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services	78.4	93 out of 411 subcomponents	871	66
Department of Health and Human Services	75.3	4 out of 17 large agencies	8,132	359
Federal Trade Commission	89.1	2 out of 25 midsize agencies	137	32
Government Accountability Office	89.4	1 out of 25 midsize agencies	--	--
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service	62.9	339 out of 411 subcomponents	3095	64
Government-Wide	69.0	--	242,521	7,324

Data Coverage: Full-time, nonseasonal, permanent workforce as of the end of FY 2020 (Sep. 2020).

Table: Partnership for Public Service and BCG • Source: Best Places to Work and FedScope • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

## Tools for success

Another challenge to engagement at the leadership level is that without the right tools and preparation, supervisors and senior executives can feel unprepared to take on management responsibilities when they are elevated to their positions. Often, leaders are chosen for their subject matter expertise or tenure within an organization and may not have had the training or opportunities to learn how to be effective managers. And when career employees step into leadership positions without the tools they need to be effective, they can become disengaged, and that can affect their employees.

Just as staff need training, mentorship and guidance to perform their work effectively, supervisors and senior executives need the same. When leaders do not feel prepared to effectively communicate, conduct a performance review or coach their direct reports, it can create issues for them and their staff. As Vicki Barber, chief human capital officer at the Federal Trade Commission said, “Leaders are people too” and they have needs just like the employees they serve. And when those needs are not met, and leaders do not feel equipped to do their jobs effectively, their engagement suffers.



## STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

### Two-way communication

One key to providing leaders with the information to solve workforce challenges and be effective is to provide multiple avenues for communication between leaders and staff, and to empower employees to speak up about issues that impact them.

By creating an open environment where employees can share feedback, agency leaders have easier access to the critical information to solve challenges and make their organizations better places to work, which in turn improves their own engagement.

The FTC’s Barber emphasized that by assuming everyone has a valuable perspective, leaders can ensure that good ideas flow to the top faster. But she noted that a critical component is offering employees numerous venues to share their feedback beyond just the annual federal survey.

Agency	2020 Best Places to Work Score - Supervisors
Federal Trade Commission	96.8
Government-Wide	71.5

Table: Partnership for Public Service and BCG • Source: [Best Places to Work](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Speaking on FTC’s approach, she said, “Ideas come from everywhere. We have anonymous boxes. We have climate surveys. We have customer satisfaction surveys. We have pulse check-ins. Our leadership has a standing ‘Ask Me Anything.’” And because of this, she said, the agency’s leaders are able to address employee concerns and accomplish a lot very quickly. Bahar Niakan, deputy chief human capital officer at the Department of Health and Human Services, also emphasized that leaders must move beyond their federal survey and Best Places to Work scores to make lasting change for their employees and be effective.

“If you want to improve employee engagement, engage people in real time on the real issues,” Niakan said. “The FEVS does not tell you the answer to your questions. It tells you where you need to follow up with employees, asking questions to understand better.”

However, leaders do not just need to hear from their employees, they also need to communicate to employees how they have responded to their feedback. This feedback loop is critical since employees will only feel motivated to share their thoughts and concerns if they know their leadership will actually use the information to improve the work experience.

David Robbins, the FTC’s executive director, shared one example of how he and other leaders addressed employee needs around telework within his office. Well before the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders within the Office of the Executive Director began to hear from their employees about the need for more telework, so they set a goal to fix it. However, their success was not only making changes, but also communicating those changes to employees.

“We showed people where we were making a difference for them. And that also made a difference,” Robbins said. “Not because it was about telework, but because of the process of asking people what they needed and then really taking it seriously.”

At the Government Accountability Office, where engagement among senior executives and supervisors has remained strong for years, a culture of collaboration also has paid dividends.

“The idea of being interconnected is very much a part of our culture,” said Karl Maschino, chief administrative and financial officer at GAO. “All of our mission teams are matrixed teams and that creates cross-cutting communication and engagement across all of GAO.”

By improving two-way communication, leaders will help problems rise to the top faster, lead to faster and more effective solutions, improve leadership effectiveness and engagement, and elevate organizational performance. As FTC’s Barber said, “If I’m helping employees, then ultimately we are going to have operational success.”

## Accountability

For many agencies, accountability is critical to ensuring two-way communication and actions that are necessary to address workforce challenges. We found that accountability is often implemented in both administrative and cultural ways. Administratively, it can be done by placing metrics tied to engagement in supervisor and senior executive performance plans and measuring progress on a yearly basis. Culturally, this can be accomplished by setting the expectation that engagement will be taken seriously and issues will be addressed by leaders.

At the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, for example, executives are “evaluating feedback and developing actionable plans to drive positive change and the culture of their organization,” said Tia Butler, the agency’s chief human capital officer.

For Kristine Eelkema of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, by formally putting employee survey metrics into leadership performance plans, agencies send an important message. “We are saying this is important to us.” GAO’s chief operating officer, Kate Siggerud, shared a similar sentiment. “Employee engagement has been a focus of ours for some number of years now, and we expect our executives to focus on that.”

We know from the Best Places to Work research that there is a link between leadership accountability and engagement. When leaders are held accountable in meaningful ways, and employees know that their feedback will be used to improve their workplaces, engagement tends to be higher.

Dr. Maureen Marks of the Veterans Health Administration noted that they have seen similar results with their own internal data. “What we have seen is that the higher the percentage of employees that report that their survey data was used, on the following year’s survey other scores tend to go up,” she said.

Holding leaders accountable for engagement ensures that they will address the issues and challenges that arise for their staff, which in turn will make the organization more successful, make them more successful leaders and improve their engagement.

As HHS’s Niakan put it, “You cannot help but be engaged when you are engaging everyone else.”

## Invest early

Just as employees need support and guidance early in their careers, leaders at all stages of development need to feel that their agencies are invested in their success. “Not only are they leaders, but they also have their own employee experience,” said Jonathan Gardner, director of human capital programs at the Department of Health and Human Services.

### SES Engagement at HHS

Agency	2020 Best Places to Work Score - SES
Department of Health and Human Services	91.6
Government-Wide	86.1

Table: Partnership for Public Service and BCG • Source: [Best Places to Work](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Agencies can create leadership pipelines by offering professional development throughout the employee’s tenure, starting early professional leadership training and extending to those who are well into their careers with coaching and other leadership growth opportunities.

Speaking of her own experience, Eelkema of USCIS noted how resources like the Treasury Executive Institute and the Department of Homeland Security Coaching Collaborative played a role in her development. “The coaching created a safe space for me to work on growing as a leader,” Eelkema said.

For the GAO, developing senior executives begins well before an employee reaches the final candidate development program.

“When you move into your first management role, we have a whole training program for you to go through to understand all the different aspects of being a manager. And then when you graduate into the next level of management, you go through it all over again but with a different nuance,” said Karl Maschino, the GAO’s chief administrative officer. “And that develops a team of people that are pretty well qualified to get into the Executive Candidate Development Program by the time they are ready for it.”

Due to this ongoing training, managers re equipped with the tools that they need to lead and are fully established in the agency’s culture, further setting them up for success. “By the time employees get into the Executive Candidate Development Program, they are already on board with how GAO works. Those expectations are set early on,” Maschino said.

## AGENCY SPOTLIGHT: A CULTURE OF LEARNING AT THE SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION



### Data Snapshot: SEC

A look at how the regulatory agency performed in the Best Places to Work rankings and the size of its supervisor and career SES workforces.

Agency	2020 Best Places to Work Score	2020 Rank	Supervisor Workforce	Career SES Workforce
Securities and Exchange Commission	85.7	4 out of 25	877	--
Government-Wide	69.0	--	243	7,324

Data Coverage: Full-time, nonseasonal, permanent workforce as of the end of FY 2020 (Sep. 2020)  
Table: Partnership for Public Service and BCG • Source: Best Places to Work and FedScope • Created with [Datwrappwr](#)

The Securities and Exchange Commission is home to one of the most robust employee development programs in the federal government – SEC University. In 2020, the program offered 57 different leadership and team effectiveness classes, with over 1,200 “student” managers. The size and scope of the program are due to the agency seeing leadership development and growth as integral to its success.

“It is really important that our staff, who bring so much to the table to fulfill the mission of the SEC, know how to think about their growth as employees and as professionals,” said Jamey McNamara, the financial regulatory agency’s chief human capital officer and director of the Office of Human Resources.

The SEC has managed to maintain high levels of engagement among its supervisors, in large part because it values their growth and preparedness. “Our supervisors understand that we are invested in their success and want to make sure that they have all the tools that they need to manager their teams,” McNamara said.

McNamara noted that supervisory training is especially important since many of their supervisors were hired by the SEC because of their technical background and not necessarily their abilities as a supervisor or manager.

“As folks ascend to higher levels in the organization, the jump to manager can be a big leap. That is why we invest so heavily in our leadership development programs,” McNamara said. “And not only for the purpose of preparing people to become managers, but also to support them throughout their journey as managers so that they do not stop learning and growing in their leadership competencies.”

One of the critical factors that enables the SEC to offer so much support to their leaders is a robust and well-staffed HR office that can quickly deliver on the needs of the workforce.

“We are fortunate to have such a talented staff that covers the entire waterfront of human capital management,” McNamara said. “From program administration to the core areas of HR functions that most people think of like staffing, benefits, and compensation program management, to areas that are on more of the strategic or policy-oriented end of the spectrum.”

Another key to the agency’s success is the open communication channels between staff and leaders when it comes to the employee experience. SEC’s leaders have formed an effective partnership with the employees’ exclusive representative, National Treasury Employees Union, both to encourage staff to share their feedback through employee surveys and to be transparent about the results. The primary mechanism for this is a suite of data dashboards that make Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey results accessible to anyone in the agency.

“By being so transparent about the results and making not only the staff aware that the data is available to see, but also managers aware that everyone has access to the data, I think it drives a high level of accountability,” McNamara said.

The SEC also holds executives and managers accountable through a “Leading People” element in their performance plans that considers federal survey results. “We make sure that our managers understand that we expect them to be continuously improving, as people, managers and leaders” McNamara said.

By investing in managers throughout their leadership lifecycles, and ensuring they are attentive stewards of workplace culture and the employee experience, the SEC has managed to maintain high levels of engagement amongst supervisors and employees alike.



# Conclusion and Recommendations

The coming years will be a critical time for our nation's government. From addressing the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic to confronting racial inequities and a host of domestic and foreign policy challenges, federal agencies will need to be effective and responsive. In turn, this will require a federal workforce that is adequately staffed, empowered and fully engaged to meet these challenges.

There are clear links between employee engagement and organizational performance. Agencies should invest additional resources to step up their employee engagement efforts, making use of the strategies outlined in this report to attract, retain and motivate the next generation of public servants as well as career leaders:

## **For younger talent:**

- Target recruitment.
- Prioritize experiential onboarding.
- Mentor and empower employees to succeed and grow.

## **For supervisors and senior executives:**

- Foster two-way communication.
- Hold them accountable for engagement.
- Invest early in their development.

Leaders also should invest in diagnosing and addressing employee challenges faced by different demographic groups within their agencies. Younger individuals and leaders are key government-wide, but other groups of employees – such as specific racial or ethnic groups, women, or those in particular occupations – may also be facing unique challenges that warrant attention if their organizations are going to be successful.

Ultimately, agencies armed with a strong business case should begin to transform the federal employee experience and step up their engagement efforts to better enable our government to meet the complex challenges of the future.

# Methodology

## QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

We conducted 13 interviews with a total of 30 human capital and employee engagement leads at 12 federal agencies from the executive and legislative branches.

After reviewing Best Places to Work data, we created a list of agencies that we wanted to profile based on their Best Places to Work performance, particularly among the demographic groups we were interested in highlighting. Some of the questions explored during the agency selection process to ensure a diverse sample included:

- What is the size of the agency's workforce?
- Is the target population substantially represented in the agency's workforce?
- What is the agency's mission area or focus?

## VHA REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Nearly all the data used in this analysis came from [Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning reports](#). SAIL reports, generated quarterly by the VA, function as report cards that assess each medical center's performance on a range of quality measures.

The Partnership and BCG compiled three years of SAIL data (fiscal 2016 to 2018) for each medical center. We then used an Ordinary Least Squares regression to test the relationship between employee engagement and a host of VA medical center performance measures:

- Independent variable: Best Places to Work employee engagement score
- Dependent variables:
  - Patient satisfaction with the medical center
  - Patient satisfaction with their primary care provider
  - Patient satisfaction with their specialty care provider
  - Call center answer speed
  - Call abandonment rate
  - Registered nurse turnover rate
  - Acute care in-hospital mortality ratio
  - Hospital-wide 30-day readmission rate
  - Rate of preventable in-hospital complications
- Control variable: The VA categorizes each of its medical centers by their level of complexity. To test the unique impact of employee engagement on the SAIL quality measures – in other words, filtering out any impact that a facility's level of complexity might have – we held medical center complexity constant.

For more information and detailed results, see our issue brief, [A Prescription for Better Performance](#).

## MACHINE LEARNING REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Using human capital data provided through OPM's FedScope database, and employee engagement data from the Best Places to Work rankings, we constructed a dataset that consisted of Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey scores, a handful of workforce characteristics and attrition rates for 185 agency subcomponents from across government from 2013 to 2017. Due to the structure of the human capital data from FedScope, we defined attrition as the total number of quits and retirements from an agency as the share of employees onboard at the end of the preceding fiscal year (as a proxy for the employees onboard at the start of that fiscal year).

For this analysis, we focused on four specific features (also known as variables): the average salary of full-time, nonseasonal, permanent employees, the percentage of employees that identified as female, the percentage of employees with an advanced (graduate or professional) degree, and the unweighted Best Places to Work score.

Because this analysis involved a regression task, we had a wide array of algorithms to choose from. We ran each of the following algorithms using default hyperparameters:

- Linear
- RidgeCV
- LassoCV
- ElasticNetCV
- Bayesian Ridge
- Kernel Ridge
- Orthogonal Matching Pursuit
- RANSAC
- Support Vector
- Gradient Boosting
- Random Forest
- K-Nearest Neighbors
- Neural Network

Using R-squared as our target metric, we tuned the hyperparameters of the best performing algorithms via an automated grid search with cross-validation. From these initial results we selected a subset of algorithms to investigate with hyperparameter tuning. We ultimately selected a manually tuned K-Neighbors regression model:

Algorithm: k-nearest neighbors regressor

Hyperparameters: `n_neighbors = 5` ; `weights = 'distance'` ; `metric = 'braycurtis'`

Results: Training R2 = 1.000; Test R2 = 0.484

To improve model performance, we tested different feature transformations. We scaled the features using standard scaler; we polynomialized the features; and we polynomialized and scaled the features. We ultimately settled on the first option, scaled features using standard scaler, because it performed best.

Throughout the assessment process, we did find that cross-validation scores for each split varied considerably, and that the average score was lower than our test R-squared scores. This suggests that our R-squared performance may be artificially inflated based on the train-test split. We also found that the learning curve on the cross-validation scores was still on an upward trajectory when training stopped, indicating that the model would benefit from more data.

There are several areas we plan to pursue further to improve on our attrition prediction model in the future. First is to add more years of engagement and workforce data to our dataset to hopefully improve the performance of the model.

Second, we may explore automated machine learning libraries and programs. While we conducted a thorough algorithm and hyperparameter search, we simply could not try everything. Particular attention will be paid to reducing overfitting to improve generalizability.

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