INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The quiet revol

Digital generation eyes Canada's public service

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Attracting and retaining the best and brightest information management and information technology (IM/IT) professionals is becoming easier for Canada's federal public service. Although encumbered by a reputation for providing a less-than-stimulating work environment and slow, rule-bound hiring, new government programs and a more fluid labour market are now paying dividends. The private sector would be wise to pay attention.

"Today, the public service provides IT professionals with unique opportunities to work in a diverse range of business lines doing meaningful work, work that really matters," says Ed Fine, executive director of the Organizational Readiness Office (ORO) in the Chief Information Officer Branch of the Treasury Board Secretariat. In partnership with other government departments and agencies, the ORO develops and promotes the tools, training and business practices that IT professionals need to achieve the federal government's business goals.

Over the past five years, the public service's CS (Computer Systems) occupational group, which represents the vast majority of government IT workers, has grown by approximately 3,600 persons, or 55 percent. This increase was jump-started by Y2K. Faced with a disruption of critical services, government exercised its only realistic option – it hired consultants, contractors and term employees in unprecedented numbers to provide the necessary IT capacity. When Y2K passed, many of these professionals joined the public service.

But the Y2K "crisis management" approach was anything but ideal. While it got the job done, it was extremely costly and it focussed attention on government vulnerabilities in its critical infrastructure. This approach also bore witness to the public

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by Brad Latta

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service's inability to put the right people in the right jobs at the right time.

Today, Government On-Line (GOL) – the Government of Canada's initiative to provide information and services on the Internet by 2005 – poses new challenges for IT workers. GOL focusses on citizens as clients and calls for an integrated, multi-channel service environment. That, in turn, demands a whole new approach to management, staffing, and learning and development.

So broken that we need to start over… described public service staffing system

The Task Force on Modernizing Human Resource Management in the public service gave the IM, IT, and Service Delivery communities the opportunity to speak out on the issues. The IT community's submission of August 2001 was blunt: "So broken that we need to start over" was how it described public service staffing systems. The other two communities' reports were also candid. Combined, the three communities made the following recommendations:

- fewer rules and a more values-based approach to HR management;
- more flexible HR management practices with maximum delegation to operational managers, wherever possible;
- new legislation and frameworks that promote appointments to a level, rather than a specific position, using competency-based as opposed to position-based pay levels;
- increased staff development from within;

- generic pools of pre-qualified candidates;
- customized offers to external candidates in order to meet operational needs; and
- staffing and compensation processes that are market driven, including allowing local operational levels to provide bonuses to staff members who acquire new "hot skills".

If it all sounds decidedly unlike government, that's because it was. And while the public service was in no position to "reinvent the wheel" of its human resource framework, these reports and other pressures from within (particularly from its own IT leaders) have led to significant changes.

"New approaches to staff development, notably the emphasis on individuals' responsibilities for continuously improving their skills, represent a significant culture change," says Fine. "A community-led E-learning gateway, for example, allows great-

er access to continuous learning so that all employees can excel in their work assignments, while taking themselves and those jobs to a higher level of performance. As a result, individual workers are better equipped to handle the jobs they are in, while at the same time preparing themselves to move into new opportunities quickly, as operational requirements demand."

In this environment, knowledge management and career development play important roles. According to Fine, this conforms perfectly to public service's commitment to become a "learning organization." The approach emphasizes identifying competencies required for certain types of work, and is moving towards developing an HR framework that manages IT needs horizontally, on a government-wide basis.

For example, the IT community is exploring staffing options such as the creation of pre-qualified pools of candidates like those developed for senior IT (EX2 and EX3) positions. This is a radical departure

from the norm on two counts: the process is open to non-public servants as well as those already employed by the federal government; and the successful candidates aren't ranked, which means that anyone in the pool can be considered for appointment. In the near future, there will be a similar process for CS-5s. This will provide a precedent for using generic pools to meet staffing needs *across* government below the executive level. On the compensation side, the public service has continued to pay yearly allowances, first introduced to meet the needs of Y2K, to members of the CS group.

But how do changes such as these impact individual departments at the operational level? "It's a much better environment," says Joël Comeau, director of IM/IT Architecture and Planning at Transport Canada. Comeau maintains that staff morale, performance and career possibilities have improved for his department's approximately 120 IM/IT workers. In addition, these changes have made Transport Canada more attractive to new candidates by promising them meaningful and challenging work.

"In our role as functional authority for IM/IT across Canada, we set the strategic IM/IT direction and provide ongoing support of Transport Canada's entire operation through effective and efficient use of IM/IT," says Comeau. "Our IM/IT staff have the opportunity to experience various facets of a national/cross-organizational project, from A-Z, while in other environments they may be involved in a small piece of the overall puzzle. It's important to IM/IT types that they have opportunities – to work with the right tools, to work on exciting projects, to experience various points of view – all part of their continuous learning and career advancement."

Comeau says that his department provides those who want it with development opportunities, challenging projects and formal training. "As well as technical skills, we concentrate on developing the appropriate 'soft skills' to work in multi-disciplinary teams. Skills such as being able to effectively communicate with people outside the IM/IT community – to make presentations, to sell concepts and services using non-

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technical jargon," Comeau explains. "In many of our IM/IT positions it's imperative that employees create effective partnerships with our business and program areas. They are asked to be marketers and expected to demonstrate business savvy when dealing with our stakeholders."

The next challenge, says Comeau, is to map competencies to job functions and then career paths. Then, the department's goal is to ensure individual IM/IT employee learning plans relate personal and professional learning objectives to career opportunities.

Outside government, at least one consultant is impressed by what he sees happening within government departments. Brian Marchant, of Northeast 45 Degrees, a human resources organizational development consulting firm based in Kingston, Ontario, says that much progress had been made in making the public service a more attractive destination for IM/IT types. But Marchant warns that in one area – recruitment – it continues to lag far behind. "The private sector is far ahead of the public sector in how it recruits IM/IT types. Many firms have a high profile to begin with but add significantly to this through their efforts on campus, with faculty members, university project work and, particularly during the dot.com craze, through programs offering signing bonuses to grads. By comparison, the federal government's approach is very dated and the hiring process is much too long."

On this last point he'll get no argument from either Fine or Comeau. "Candidates don't hear back from us soon enough," says Fine. "The IT community is working on a process to identify applicants with high potential so that we can get back to them with a personal contact within five to ten business days."

Ironically, the staffing process can be even worse when it comes to hiring someone who is already *in* the public service. "The internal competitive process simply takes a while," says Comeau. "There are still many rules and hoops to jump through."

Having made significant strides in improving its IM/IT environment, the public service hopes to improve in these staffing areas as well. If it does, the private sector will be faced with even stiffer competition for IM/IT workers.

In addition, those companies that offer IT services to government departments would be well advised to recognize a few new realities: government clients and their IM/IT work forces are "smart buyers" – they know what they want and won't accept anything less. They are looking for meaningful and workable partnerships. Increasingly, this will be reflected in the quality of their requests for proposals.

Fine offers these final words of advice: "Put simply, if someone wants to do IT business with a government department, they must be prepared to invest time to understand the unique requirements of government, which can be quite different from those of the private sector." ∿∿

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