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Build a better sales pitch; Tell candidates why government benefits beat the private sector's

By FRANK JOSSI

If any agency knows how hard it can be to compete with the private sector for new recruits, it's the Treasury Department. The workers Treasury needs - among them economists, attorneys and information technology experts - are the same ones who could be drawn to the higher salaries and prestige of Wall Street and the banking community.

So how does Treasury succeed in the tough competition for new employees and midcareer professionals? It uses the same techniques corporate America uses, and it promises an appealing work-life balance in the mission-oriented public sector.

"We're finding we have to compete not only with the private sector but with other federal agencies like the Department of Defense and the Department of Health and Human Services," said Patricia Pointer, chief human capital officer. "But we're also finding it's not all about money - people are looking at the total package."

Treasury tempts applicants with recruitment bonuses and tuition reimbursement and with work-at-home and telework center options. IRS and other Treasury agencies aggressively brand themselves as great places to work and use online tools so applicants can apply for positions with the click of a mouse.

Full-time recruiters team with college minority-group associations in efforts to diversify the work force, and team managers are encouraged "to speak to potential workers and present a good face to them," Pointer said.

Treasury's game plan coincides with those of many other government agencies aggressively recruiting college graduates and others for careers in public service. While 9/11 may have helped recruit a new generation of workers interested in public service, the competition remains fierce, government officials said. Adding to the challenge is the projection that more than half the federal government's work force will retire over the next 20 years - a reality faced by many private industries, too.

"I don't think there's any question that we're in a competitive market in different areas with the private sector," said Kevin Mahoney, deputy associate human capital director at the Office of Personnel Management, which oversees federal human resources and recruitment activities. "We've done a lot of things over the past several years to position the government as an employer of choice, from upgrading the USAJOBS Web site to improving flexibility for agencies to bringing people in at a variety of different levels."

Unmet demands

"Where the Jobs Are," a February report by Washington-based Partnership for Public Service and the National Academy of Public Administration shows the government plans to hire about 150,000 people in the next two years, chiefly in five key areas: security enforcement, 37,515 new hires; medical and public health, 25,756; engineering and sciences, 23,806; program management, 17,373; and accounting, budget and business, 12,959.

As the demand for new employees has grown, agencies have stepped up hiring. A list compiled by Collegegrad.com shows four of the top 10 entry-level employers in 2005 are federal agencies and two others, Boeing and Lockheed Martin, have many large government contracts.

Max Stier, president and chief executive officer of the Partnership for Public Service, said many graduates and job seekers do not see "government service as first choice because they don't know enough about it and the advantages of working for it." Too often, the government is seen as a bureaucracy in which to work rather than as a place to make a difference in the lives of citizens, he said.

His organization, which promotes the government as a good place to work, has been working with three agencies - the National Nuclear Security Administration, part of the Energy Department; the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid, at the Health and Human Services Department; and the Education Department - on what it calls an "extreme hiring makeover" program offering the agencies ideas on how to best sell their work opportunities to applicants.

Stier sees a number of points on which the government could better market itself as an employer and improve its recruiting results. For one, once the government ropes in employees, they rarely voluntarily leave, a sign that employees are satisfied with their work and working conditions, Stier said. The government's annual turnover rate remains around 6 or 7 percent.

Also, said Mark Doboga of the Office of Personnel Management, the government has attributes private industry can't match. "There's a number of hooks the government has, No. 1 being public service. People want to serve their country," he said. "Then there's work-force programs, such as telework, which since 2001 has increased from 53,000 to 103,000 [participants]. We allow people to offer employees flexibility in their work-life commitments, and we've made reasonable accommodations for those with disabilities."

Moreover, as benefit packages get cut in private industry, the government's health and retirement options look unmatched, said Doboga, deputy assistant director of OPM's Division for Strategic Human Resources Policy. Benefits have, in fact, become a chief marketing tool for the government in recruiting and retaining employees, especially applicants coming from private industry, he said.

Governmentwide recruiting tools

To meet the government's hiring needs, OPM has instituted a variety of regulatory changes and programs to allow agencies more options when hiring.

It sponsors job fairs across the country and has targeted outreach efforts at veterans, especially those who recently served in Iraq and Afghanistan, Doboga said. Attendees at the fairs can gather information on agencies they want to work for and

learn how to write resumes, use government employment Web sites and interview for positions.

OPM has a program to remake the hiring process at four different agencies, an effort similar to the one under way at the Partnership for Public Service. Mahoney declined to elaborate on changes since not all have been completed, but he pointed to an example of improvements at the Housing and Urban Development Department. Vacancy announcements in the higher ranks of the agency - GS-13 to -15 - required a "significant number of signatures that alone took weeks out of the up-front process," he said. "We were able to reduce the number by 50 percent."

The HUD effort dovetailed with an OPM goal of requiring agencies to hire new employees within 45 days of a vacancy announcement's closure. OPM itself averages 36 days for filling jobs, said Mahoney, and about 75 percent of agencies governmentwide have managed to meet that goal.

Dithering over hiring in the past has forced the government to lose good applicants who could no longer wait for a final decision and may have taken private-sector jobs instead. Mahoney said shorter hiring cycles make the government competitive with other employers.

One regulatory change shortens significantly the time it once took for agencies to hire graduates who once interned for them.

OPM also has some changes in store that could pave the way for attracting more employees.

The Presidential Management Fellows Program, for employees with leadership potential who are between five and 10 years away from entering the Senior Executive Service, once was limited to 400 individuals annually and now can accommodate more people, said Doboga. A new Senior Presidential Management Fellows Program, for midcareer managers about three to four years away from joining SES, is under way, too. Both efforts can be viewed as possibilities for highly motivated applicants who want an opportunity not only to work for the government but to work at its highest levels at some point in their careers, he said.

Additionally, agencies and others can use a new program allowing government IT employees to train at private companies in an exchange program. "This program will increase our capacity on the IT side," said Doboga, while offering IT practitioners a new if temporary environment in which to hone their skills.

Of course, there are nontraditional ways to attract applicants, too. Stier points to the popularity of ABC Television's "Alias" as a reason the CIA may seem a sexy place to work these days. If Web sites, job fairs and collaborations with colleges fail to yield the fruit human capital managers want, they may want to knock on Hollywood's door.