Federal agencies, the White House and OPM have all identified the need to hire, retain and reskill IT workers as a critical management challenge.

In the second of a series of reports, FedScoop and WorkScoop explore the factors that could foster more effective IT workforce planning and development to meet mission goals.
The rapid evolution of cloud-based computing, APIs, agile application development and artificial intelligence — and new security threats — have created significant demands for new and more advanced IT skills in government.

In a previous study, WorkScoop and FedScoop identified which technical skills and interdisciplinary strengths were likely to be in greatest demand over the next two years in government. We also assessed how IT leaders were attempting to bridge the chronic skills gaps they continue to face.

That study raised new questions. Notably: How do agency IT, budget and human resource officials collectively view the need to foster long-term IT workforce development plans.

We also wanted to better understand the urgency and concern in addressing IT skills gaps in government.

We wanted to gauge the extent of IT job vacancies, and the leading constraints to hiring and reskilling IT workers.

And finally, to hear where IT, budget and HR leaders saw the best opportunities to improve IT workforce planning and development.

This new study — conducted as agencies were confronting the needs of remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic — provides fresh answers and insights to those questions. And it proposes recommendations for ways agencies to consider.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Top-Line Findings
Among federal IT, HR and budget leaders surveyed:

1. **8 in 10** respondents said they are moderately or highly concerned about being able to replenish the federal IT workforce with a younger generation of talent.

2. **1 in 3** respondents reported more than 10% of their full-time IT jobs are currently vacant; and 6 in 10 have at least some full-time IT positions open. Roughly **2 in 3** said IT vacancy rates are higher, or the same, compared to a year ago.

3. Roughly **half** of respondents cited the government’s complicated hiring process and the lack of focus around IT workforce planning as key constraints to improving the federal IT workforce.

4. Respondents identified multiple opportunities to improve IT workforce development, including:
   - Support changes to the General Schedule to better align IT salaries with market norms
   - Prioritize funding for upskilling and reskilling
   - Revise IT descriptions to align with private sector jobs, based on capabilities vs. qualifications

5. **Over half of respondents** said their agency has an IT workforce development plan; but a majority didn’t know how often those plans are reviewed.

6. **Nearly half** of respondents believe the pandemic presents greater latitude for agencies to hire remote IT workers.
WHO WE SURVEYED

WorkScoop and FedScoop conducted an online survey of prequalified IT, human resources and budget decision makers from federal government agencies.
A total of 126 qualified federal decision makers responded to the survey. The survey was conducted in July 2020.

RESPONDENT BREAKOUT BY JOB TITLE

- Overseeing/managing IT programs, projects or operations (e.g. CIO, IT/Systems manager, engineering, security) 70%
- Providing strategy and guidance for IT staff development and training (e.g. Chief Learning Officer, training facilitator) 24%
- Facilitating IT investments, budgeting and finances (e.g. financial/budget manager) 21%
- Helping manage workforce planning & development (e.g. CHCO, human capital official) 19%
- Other (analyst, administration, specialist) 25%

RESPONDENT BREAKOUT BY AGE

- 29 years or younger 2%
- 30 - 39 years 13%
- 40 - 49 years 22%
- 50 - 59 years 34%
- 60 years or older 28%
- Prefer not to comment 4%

RESPONDENT BREAKOUT BY GENDER

- Female 36%
- Male 54%
- Prefer not to comment 10%

YEARS EMPLOYED WITHIN GOVERNMENT

- More than 25 years 30%
- 16 - 25 years 22%
- 6 - 15 years 33%
- 0 - 5 years 16%
Government IT, HR and budget leaders in the survey indicated a high level of concern at being able to meet their IT workforce needs.

81% said they are moderately to highly concerned about being able to attract a younger generation of staff to replenish the federal IT workforce.

Q: On a scale of 1 to 5, how concerned are you about being able to replenish the federal IT workforce with a younger generation of IT staff?
Government respondents also indicated a high level of concern at being able retain their IT expertise. 72% said they are moderately to highly concerned about maintaining knowledgeable IT workers to maintain legacy systems as the phase into new technology over the next 3 to 5 years.

Q: On a scale of 1 to 5, how concerned are you about being able to retain knowledgeable IT workers to maintain legacy technologies over the next 3 to 5 years?
6 in 10 of respondents reported full-time IT positions are currently open within their IT department, and ...

63% indicated the percentage of open positions is higher or the same compared to one year ago.

Openings Compared to 1 Year Ago

Q: What percent of total full-time equivalent positions are currently open in your IT department?
Q: Is the percent higher, lower or about the same as the percentage of positions open from 1 year ago?

% OF IT POSITIONS CURRENTLY OPEN

- More than 20%; 12%
- 11 – 20%; 22%
- 1 – 10%; 26%
- None; 10%
- 31% - Don’t know
Government IT, HR and budget leaders cited a complicated hiring process, lack of focus around workforce planning and competing priorities among departments as top constraints to improving IT workforce development.

Q: What are the biggest constraints to achieving agreement between the budget, IT and human resources offices on best actions to improve hiring, retention and reskilling IT workers? (Select up to three)

1. **49%** The current recruitment/hiring process required to screen candidates discourages promising or qualified talent
2. **48%** Lack of focus around future IT workforce planning strategies
3. **43%** Competing priorities among departments take away focus from hiring, retention and reskilling activities
4. **34%** Inadequate funding, training or reskilling for the IT workforce
5. **18%** IT managers aren’t engaged enough in the hiring process
6. **12%** The lack of clarity concerning who has final authority to acquire the necessary IT talent

**OTHER 16%**
- Government has old tech; new talent goes where the new tech is
- HR screen candidates but doesn’t know what they are looking at
- Lack of transparency/communication with candidates and IT management through the process

Base - 89
39% of government IT, HR and budget respondents also indicated their resources and ability to hire necessary IT talent is “less adequate” than 2 years ago.

Q: Would you say the resources and ability to hire the necessary IT staff at your agency are more, or less, adequate than 2 years ago?

The IT budgets are controlled within the CIO office and individual programs. This creates competing efforts and strategies for how to best leverage technology and creates confusion for new hires.
Government IT, HR and budget leaders suggested changes to the GS schedule, prioritizing funding for skills acquisition and adopting job descriptions based on capabilities as top opportunities to meet IT workforce needs.

Q: What are the biggest opportunities to improve hiring, retaining and reskilling the workforce that IT, budget and human capital offices can agree on? (Select up to five)

1. Support changes to the GS schedule to better align IT personnel salaries with those in the private sector for comparable skills (55%)
2. Prioritize funding to support upskilling or reskilling opportunities (46%)
3. Rewrite IT job descriptions to more closely align with those in the private sector that are based more on capabilities than qualifications (42%)
4. Develop more robust workforce planning and recruitment strategies that align with IT department and agency missions (34%)
5. Relax requirements for 4-year college degrees and allow for relevant experience (25%)
6. Provide greater opportunities for cross-agency, cross-government experiences (24%)

OTHER (18%)
- Reduce time-to-hire lag
- Allow more remote work opportunities outside of DC
- Increase availability of online IT and mid-career training
- Hire qualified non-government IT professionals instead of underqualified younger talent
- Mid-career retraining resources
- Public/private exchanges
More than half of respondents indicated that their agency has an IT workforce development plan that aligns with strategic plans or mission goals of the agency. However, nearly 6 in 10 respondents didn’t know how often that plan was reviewed, suggesting more attention is needed to align IT and agency needs.

**Frequency of cross-departmental workforce planning meetings**

- 11% Weekly
- 10% Bi-Monthly
- 10% Quarterly
- 12% Semi-Annually
- 57% I don’t know

Q: Does your agency have an IT workforce development plan that aligns with the strategic plans/mission of your agency?

Q: How regularly do leaders from your agency’s Budget Office, IT Departments and Human Capital (HC) Office meet to discuss workforce planning issues such as IT hiring, retention and reskilling?
47% of government respondents believe that the pandemic presents greater opportunities to leverage a remote workforce to narrow IT skills gaps.

Did COVID-19 present greater latitude to hire remote?

**Agencies can improve the hiring and retaining of the workforce by creating more opportunities to work outside of DC — permanent telework, flexible remote work or with satellite offices in other locations.**

Q: In light of the COVID-19 pandemic — and the new level of interest it generated to mobilize a remote workforce — do you believe you have greater latitude at your agency to hire remote IT workers to help narrow your IT skills gaps?
Federal agencies are facing not only a growing shortage of IT talent, but increasingly, the skills necessary to operate and secure today’s cloud-enabled IT environments.

Those skill gaps are becoming more pronounced as agencies endeavor to modernize and meet the demands of today’s ever-changing digital economy.

However, agency officials also contend with systemic constraints to hiring and upskilling IT talent. This latest study suggests the following opportunities to narrow government’s IT talent gaps:

**Engage Leaders to Foster IT Workforce Development Plans.**
Only half of agency leaders surveyed said their agency had an IT workforce development plan aligned with strategic agency goals. Given IT’s fundamental importance to mission, senior leadership should ensure workforce planning processes and resources are in place to develop requisite IT skills — and review them regularly with leaders across their agency.

**Address Constraints in the GS Schedule.**
Agencies need to put renewed pressure on OPM, Congress and the administration to lift the antiquated salary and qualification barriers that make it so difficult to compete for talent in today’s marketplace.

**Rewrite IT Job Qualifications.**
Align job descriptions with today’s technology world — and streamline the federal hiring gauntlet.

**Put Experience Ahead of College Degrees.**
Provide wider recruitment and development opportunities to younger workers who may not have taken the traditional path to government.

**Give Current Employees Time to Upskill and Reskill.**
Current and prospective employees want to work where they can continually upgrade their skills. Agencies need to set aside time, resources and opportunities to upgrade or recast staff skills.
WorkScoop is positioned at the intersection of the government, tech industry and academia, covering the latest news and trends around the most critical topic in the public sector technology space: the workforce. WorkScoop engages top government and technology leaders to discuss ways to recruit, hire, retain, develop and reskill top talent for a more effective IT workforce, bridging the gap between the decision makers in search of top technologists today and the IT leaders of tomorrow.

FedScoop is the leading tech media brand in the federal government market. With more than 210,000 unique monthly visitors and 120,000 daily newsletter subscribers, FedScoop gathers top leaders from the White House, federal agencies, academia and the tech industry to discuss ways technology can improve government and identify ways to achieve common goals. With our website, newsletter and events, we’ve become the community’s go-to platform for education and collaboration.

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