

NEOGOV

THE
Quiet Crisis

IN 2023

WHAT GOVERNMENT JOB SEEKERS ACTUALLY WANT

LAST YEAR'S QUIET CRISIS REPORT REVEALED THE SHOCKING REALITY OF PUBLIC SECTOR RECRUITMENT.

You've seen it firsthand – employees leaving for the private sector and the growing wave of retirees, resulting in burnout, overtime pay, and reduction in services. But it's another thing entirely to look at the data and realize **these problems won't go away on their own.**

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OVERVIEW

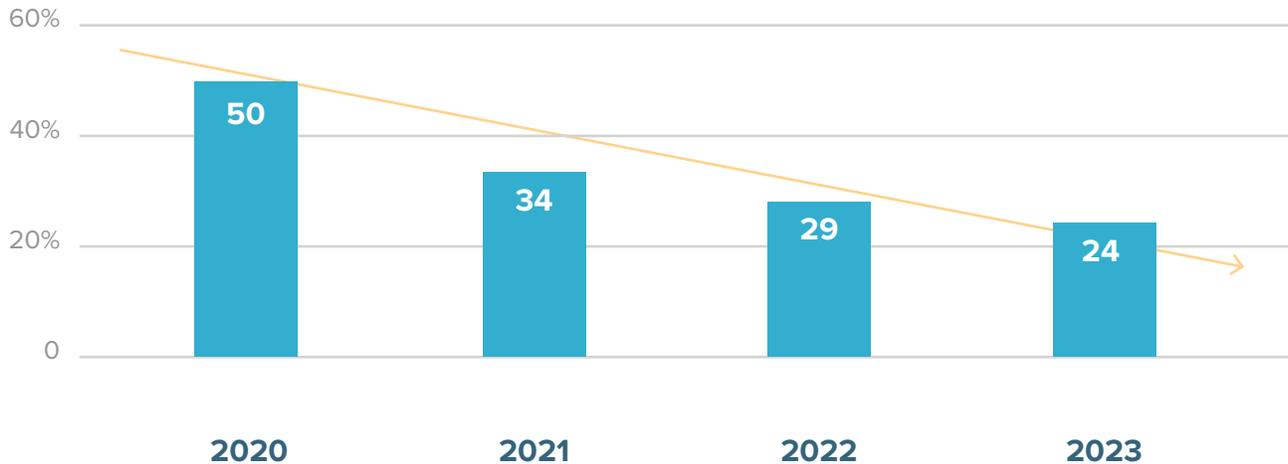
Last year's report showed a significant increase in job openings, while the number of applicants per job decreased significantly. **Over the past year, that trend has continued.**

An analysis of 45M+ applications on NEOGOV's Insight (an applicant tracking system) highlights this troubling trend. **In 2022 there was a 20% increase in job openings and a 15% decrease in applicants per job compared to 2021.** And data from 2023 doesn't look any more optimistic. Through Q1 of this year, the number of applicants per job has decreased by another 17% compared to last year.

Figure 1

Number of Applicants Per Open Job, 2020 - Q1 2023

Source: Applicant data from 45M+ applications in Insight



THE NUMBER OF
APPLICANTS PER JOB
HAS DECREASED BY

55%

SINCE 2019

If we look back to 2019, pre-pandemic numbers show 53 applicants per job. In Q1 of 2023, it was 24 (a 55% decrease) and that only accounts for applicants. The number of qualified applicants would have been even less.

If these problems aren't going away, what can you do to adapt and improve recruitment? We surveyed 140 HR leaders and 850+ job seekers to find some answers. Keep reading to get insider data on this quiet crisis, and discover strategies for competing in an ever-evolving job market.

THE PUBLIC SECTOR JOB MARKET

The public sector is caught in a cycle of turnover and burnout. Does this scenario sound familiar?

Employees work harder and longer to compensate for staff shortages. Over time they burn out and leave the agency, often earlier than planned. As employees leave, HR tries to fill critical roles, but there aren't enough qualified applicants to compensate for turnover rates.

This negative cycle has brought the public sector to where it is today, and it can be summed up in four words: more openings, less applications. **Public sector job openings reached a new peak in 2022, reflecting a 78% increase since 2020.** Meanwhile, the number of applications has remained stagnant (Figure 2).

The negative cycle becomes more apparent when splitting the data into quartiles. The bottom 25% of job postings only received 3 applications per open role (Figure 3). Some of these applicants may not even meet the minimum requirements. In other words, it's possible these job postings didn't have a single qualified candidate apply.

Quartile data also shows that 50% of jobs only received 5.5 applications on average. Meanwhile, the top 25% of jobs received an average of 70 applications. **If your agency is in the bottom 50% and you want to be in the top 25%, keep reading this report to discover what you can do differently.**

Figure 2

Jobs & Applications Compared to 2020

Source: Applicant data from 45M+ applications in Insight

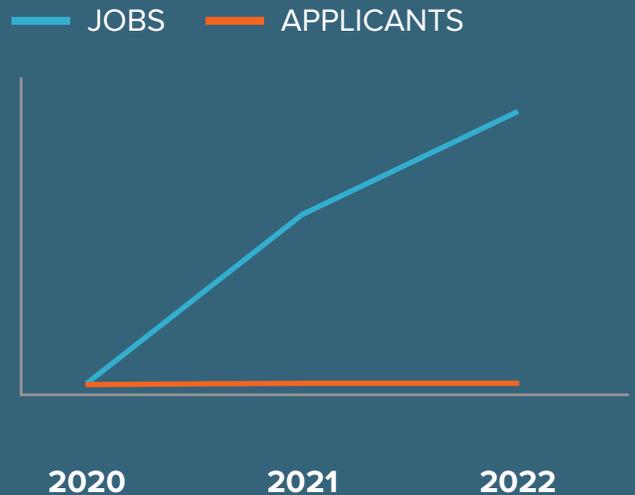
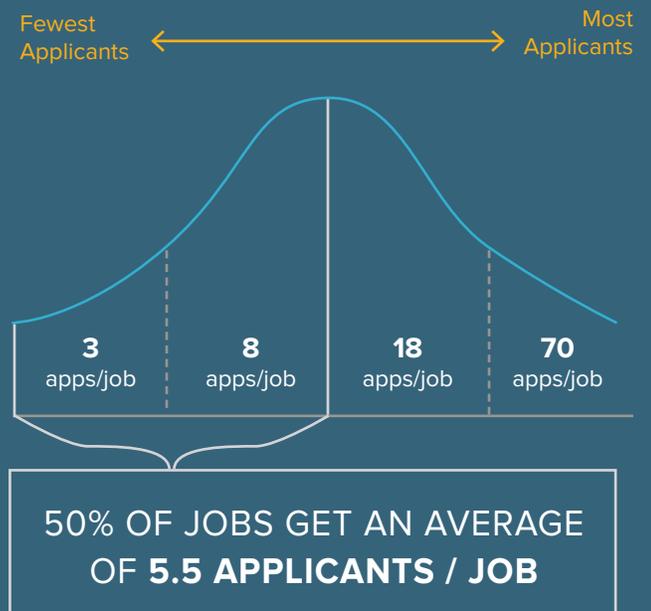


Figure 3

Average Applications/Job by Quartile, Q1 2023

Source: Applicant data from 45M+ applications in Insight



INSIGHTS FROM GOVERNMENT HR LEADERS

LEADING CAUSE OF JOB OPENINGS

This downward trend shows no signs of stopping. In our survey, **54% of HR leaders cited retirement as the leading cause of job openings.** Although the Silver Tsunami has started, it's far from over. By 2030 all baby boomers will be 65+, meaning we can expect this trend to continue through the remainder of this decade, at least.

Despite the retirement challenge, voluntary turnover is the leading cause of recent job openings, according to 82% of respondents. What's causing such high turnover? 67% of HR professionals say it's related to pay. Other contributing factors include remote work options, competition with other private and public sector jobs, and career growth opportunities.

Fortunately, employee benefits remain an advantage for the public sector. Only 7% of respondents reported benefits as a cause of voluntary turnover, confirming that these perks continue to be an attractive component of government work. As such, they need to be promoted loud and clear in job postings.

Figure 4

What is driving the increase in recent job openings at your agency?

Source: NEOGOV survey of public sector HR leaders

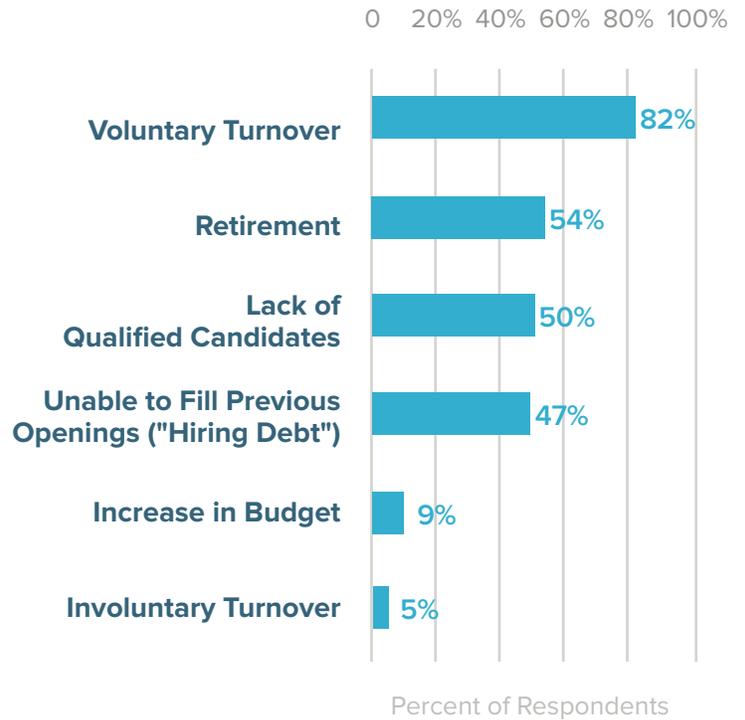
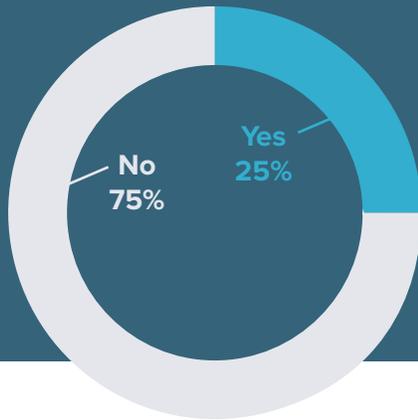


Figure 5

Are you finding enough qualified candidates to fill your roles?

Source: NEOGOV survey of public sector HR directors.



DIFFICULTY FILLING JOB OPENINGS

Many public sector HR professionals – 75% – struggle to find qualified candidates, leaving jobs unfilled and current staff working harder and longer. What’s the solution? Certainly not settling for unqualified candidates. However, as we’ll see in the job seeker data, it may be worth reevaluating your requirements. For example, some candidates may have relevant experience in the private sector but not government.

IMPACT OF UNFILLED JOBS

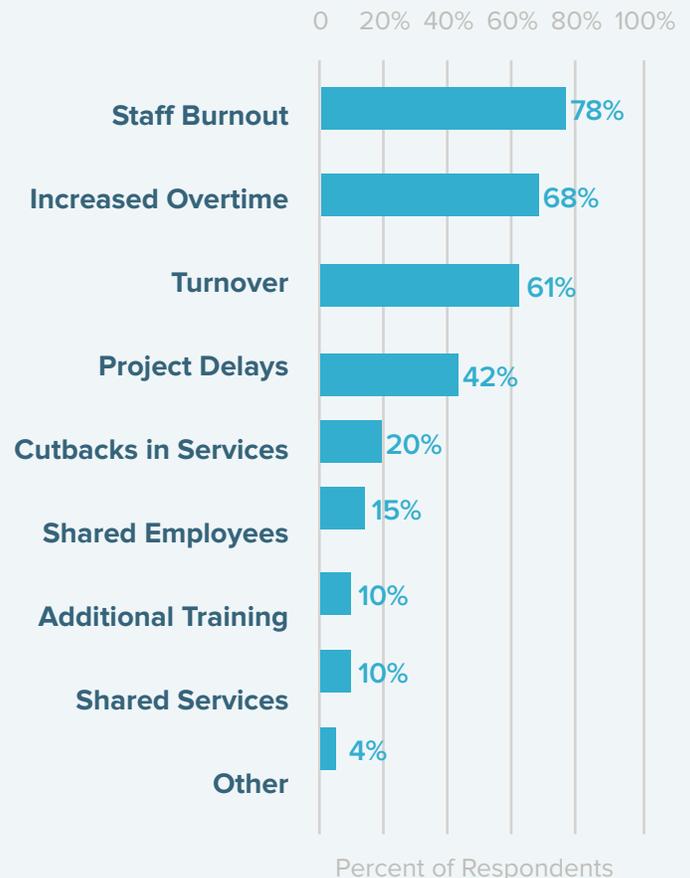
Unfilled jobs contribute to the negative cycle of burnout (78%) and turnover (62%). Other consequences include low morale, overtime costs, and project delays. But that may not be the worst of it.

Staffing shortages have forced 20% of public sector agencies to reduce services to citizens. And 50% of respondents admitted the *quality* or *number* of their services has declined. To address this challenge, HR professionals are offering overtime, hiring outside contractors, and modifying hours of operation. But these solutions only address the symptom, not the root cause.

Figure 6

Have recent hiring challenges resulted in any of the following?

Source: NEOGOV survey of public sector HR leaders





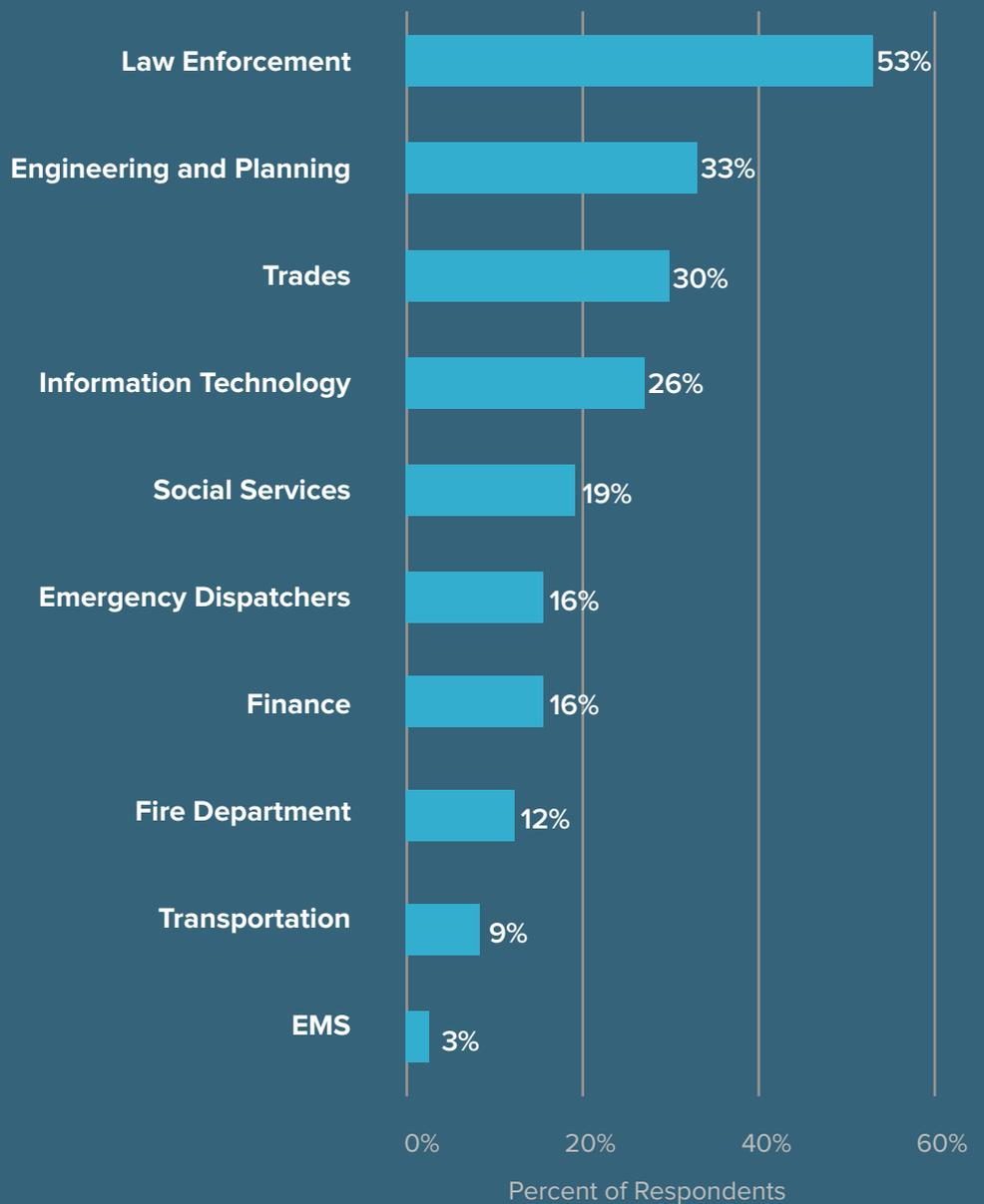
HARD-TO-HIRE CANDIDATES

Like last year's report, law enforcement is once again the hardest area to hire candidates, according to 53% of HR leaders. This isn't too surprising given the high rates of burnout in law enforcement and the negative media attention over the past few years. **To attract these tough-to-hire candidates, HR leaders are trying to increase pay, create flexible work schedules, and reduce job requirements.**

Figure 7

What are the top three areas you have trouble finding qualified candidates?

Source: NEOGOV survey of public sector HR leaders



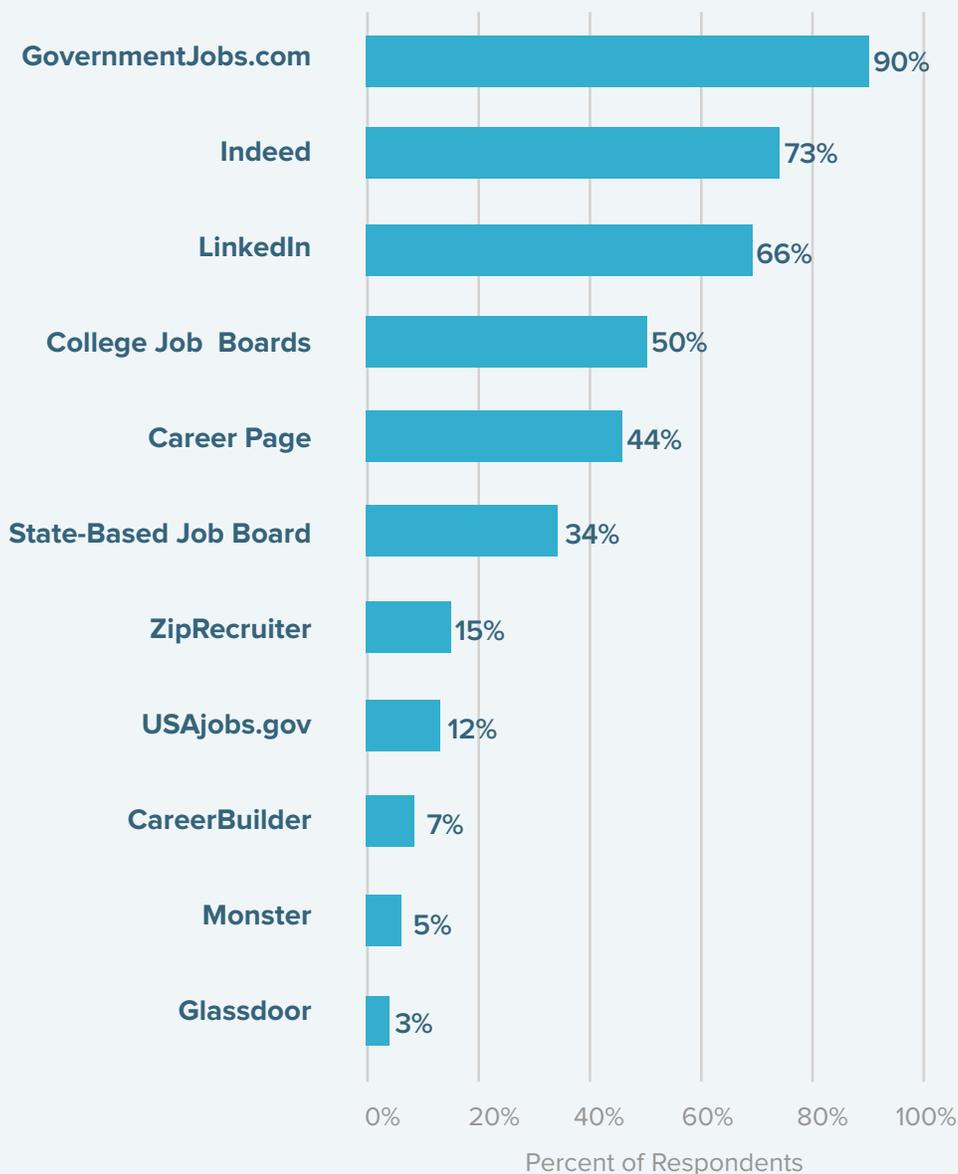
POPULAR SITES FOR POSTING JOBS

To hire qualified candidates, you have to go where they search for jobs. **The vast majority of public sector HR leaders (90%) post their jobs on GovernmentJobs.com, followed by Indeed and LinkedIn.** College and state-based job boards were also popular sources. In the following job seeker section, we'll see where candidates actually go to find jobs.

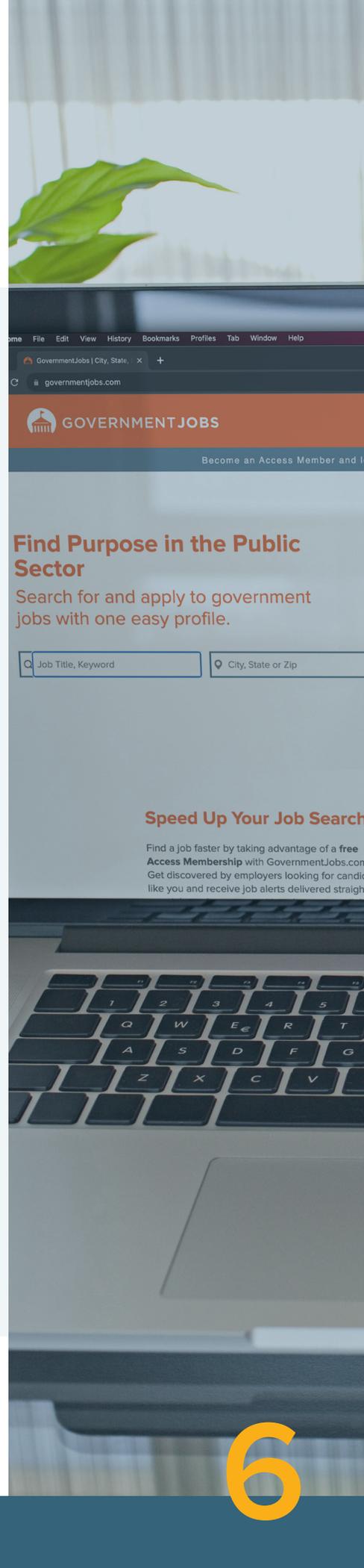
Figure 8

Which websites do you use to post your jobs?

Source: NEOGOV survey of public sector HR leaders



The public sector job market is stuck in a cycle of turnover and burnout. **Your agency can break the negative cycle. But it doesn't start with you. It starts with understanding job seekers and how to appeal to them.**



WHAT GOVERNMENT JOB SEEKERS ACTUALLY WANT

Attracting top talent starts with understanding what candidates actually want, providing it, and then promoting it. Based on survey data from 850+ government job seekers, **we'll help you discern their desires in five areas:**

1. **JOB SOURCING**
2. **JOB APPEAL**
3. **DESIRED BENEFITS**
4. **HIRING PROCESSES**
5. **JOB DESCRIPTIONS**



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JOB SOURCING

Over the past three years, we've seen a steady decline in public sector applicants per job. It makes sense then that 50% of HR leaders cited the lack of qualified candidates as a key hiring challenge (Figure 4).

Candidate sourcing is a solution to this challenge. **To source candidates effectively, you need to know where government job seekers look for new jobs. The maxim is simple: go where they go and build a brand presence there.** Figure 9 shows the channels where job applicants prefer to find new jobs.

As expected, online job boards came in the highest at 60%. Popular government job boards include Indeed.com, USAjobs.gov, and GovernmentJobs.com. A large percentage of job seekers also prefer using LinkedIn and employer career pages when job hunting.

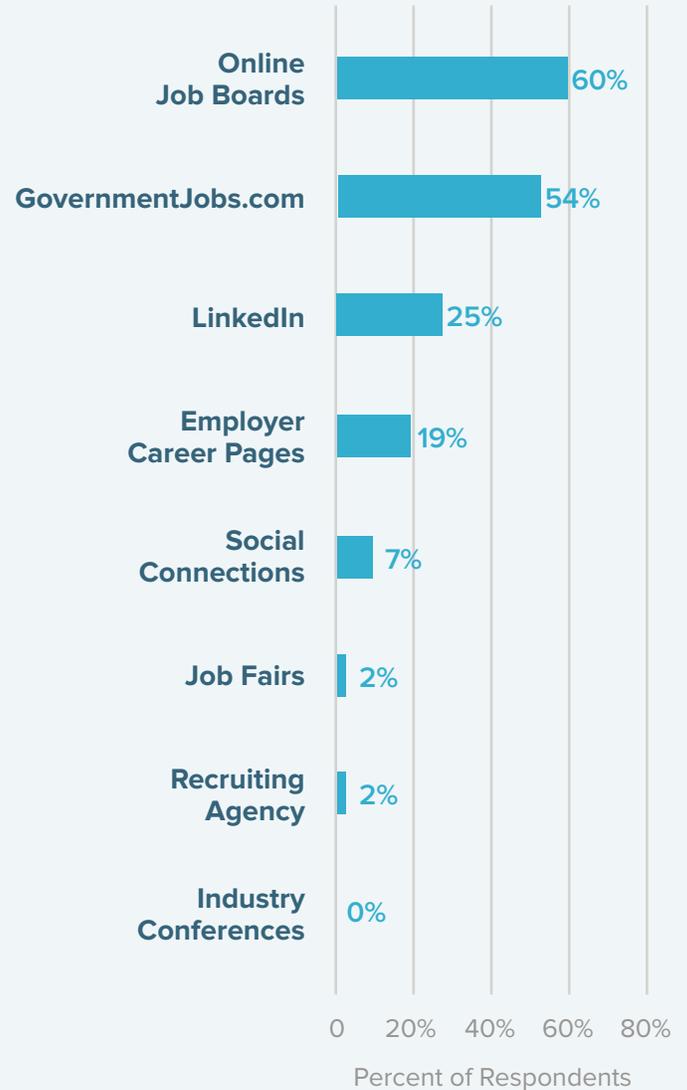
Key Takeaways

HR leaders should invest resources in the channels that deliver the most return. [Read this report for more tips on candidate sourcing.](#)

- Post your jobs on the leading online job boards.
- Develop a presence on LinkedIn that highlights work culture and shares job openings.
- Make your career page easy to navigate and write content that excites candidates to work for your agency.
- Reach out to passive candidates – those not actively searching job boards. With NEOGOV's Attract, you can automatically or manually invite past candidates to apply for new job openings.

Figure 9
Top Sources for Government Job Seekers

Source: June 2023 survey of 850+ job seekers on GovernmentJobs.com



JOB APPEAL

What makes government jobs most appealing to candidates? 53% of HR professionals said competitive salaries, 27% said work-life balance, and 6% listed better benefits as the most important factors. Let's explore how these results compare to our job seeker survey.

According to 850+ current job seekers on GovernmentJobs.com, "benefits" was the most important factor for choosing one job over another (58%). Salary and job security were also top factors.

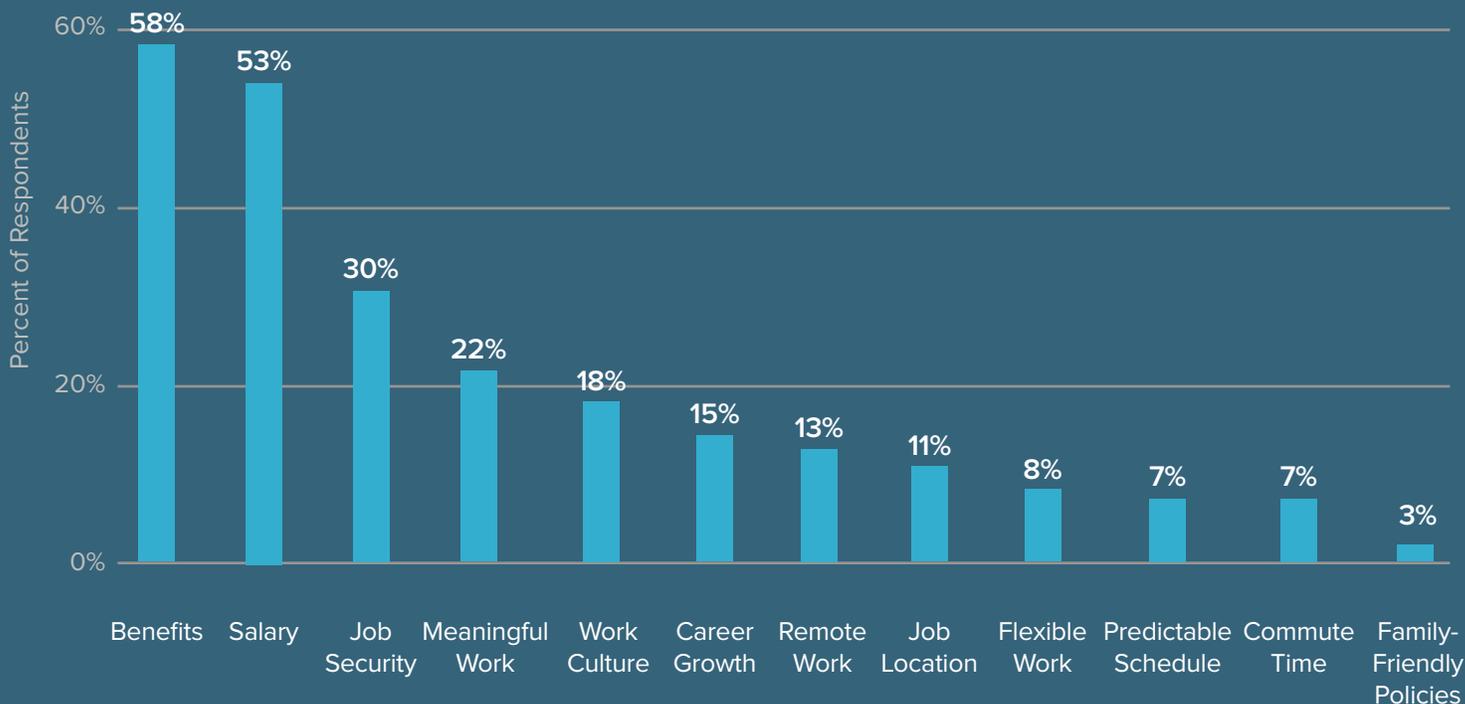
These results contradict the assumptions of many HR professionals that salary matters most. **Only 6% of HR professionals thought candidates cared most about benefits, but 58% of job seekers listed it as a top deciding factor.**

While "work-life balance" wasn't a specific option in this survey question, several options do fall under the work-life category: remote work, flexible work hours, commuting time, predictable schedules, and family-friendly policies. If you add them up, those responses total 38%, implying that job seekers may care more about work-life balance than HR professionals assume (27%).

Figure 10

Top Factors for Choosing One Job Over Another

Source: June 2023 survey of 850+ job seekers on GovernmentJobs.com



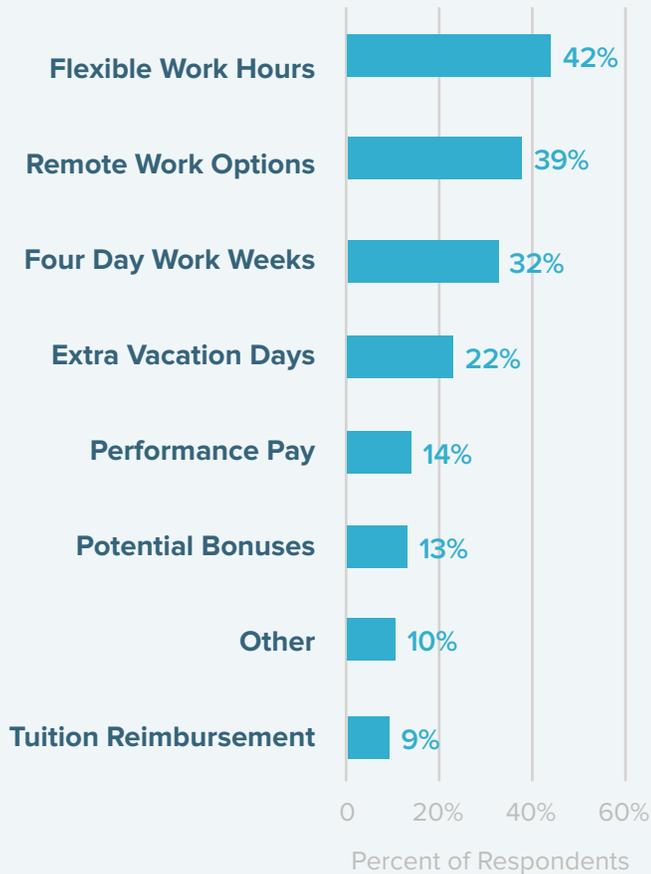
Key Takeaways

By promoting the things applicants care about, you can better attract top talent. To do so, start highlighting these factors on your careers page and job descriptions: benefits, job security, meaningful work, work-life balance, and career growth opportunities.

Figure 11

Preferred Benefits in Government Jobs

Source: June 2023 survey of 850+ job seekers on GovernmentJobs.com



PREFERRED BENEFITS

Government job seekers care most about benefits, according to 58% of our survey respondents. It's the number one factor compelling them to choose one job over another. But what benefits are most important?

Job seekers have a clear preference for benefits related to work-life balance. Figure 11 shows they prefer flexible work hours (42%), remote work options (39%), and four-day work weeks (32%).

The goal of this survey question was to highlight less traditional benefits. Understandably, “other” responses included pensions, health insurance, retirement plans, and 401k match. Providing these traditional benefits is table stakes – all public sector agencies provide them to some degree. **But finding benefits that differentiate your agency from others will make your jobs more competitive in the applicant market**

Key Takeaways

By providing and promoting benefits that differentiate your agency from others, your jobs will become more competitive in the applicant market. The top three benefits in Figure 8 are a good place to start. Of course, the stipulation for each of these is that employees continue to complete their work on time.

- **Flexible work hours:** Make your jobs more about getting work done and less about working a strict 9–5 schedule. For example, give employees the freedom to schedule an appointment during working hours, or restructure public-facing jobs to make them more flexible. Split a job into morning and afternoon shifts, covered by two part-time workers.
- **Remote work:** Let employees work remotely a certain number of days per week (i.e. Monday and Friday).
- **Four-day work weeks:** Four day work weeks have numerous benefits. The idea is that employees find ways to cut waste and work more efficiently. Instead of a 4-8 (four days a week, eight hours a day), you could also implement 4-10s or 4-9s.



HIRING PROCESSES

The number of applicants per government job has decreased by 52% since 2020. **When top talent does enter your hiring pipeline, you need to capitalize on it. This starts with creating a positive candidate experience.** Let's explore three specific areas of the candidate experience – what job seekers prefer when it comes to applications, hiring timelines, and communication.

In our job seeker survey, respondents shared their best and worst experiences applying for public sector jobs. Here are some of the most informative and helpful responses:

Best Experience

The application was simple and easy to understand. Lots of communication which is greatly appreciated.

Fairness in the hiring process, due to multiple people being present during an interview.

I received a notification of receipt of resume and notification of rejection.

The job salary, benefits, and clear minimum qualifications were clearly outlined.

The application status on GovernmentJobs.com was very helpful. Also, the follow up emails for testing and interview reminders.

Being able to use one account and one website to search and apply for different local government jobs. I don't have to re-enter my info for each application.

The government jobs system allowed me to search, save, apply and track progress of all the jobs I applied for. It shows when the job was posted and when it expires. Easy way to navigate open positions.

Worst Experience

The application process is outdated and the hiring process takes months (with minimal contact).

A single interview and one person determined the outcome.

Not hearing back and not hearing the reason for not getting the job.

Long wait times to hear back, to the point of needing to move on to other opportunities.

The length of time between applying, interview, paperwork, etc. This is long and only works if you have another job while waiting.

Answering a ton of supplemental questions, particularly about work experience, that has already been covered in my resume and the work history sections of online applications.

The long delay in responses to applications. Also, the exactitude with which requirements were specified. I think it costs you some great candidates who can't exactly match the experience but are capable of the work.

Job seekers desire timely communication – **73% of respondents preferred a response within 2–4 weeks of submitting an application.** This is perceived as a reasonable amount of time for HR and hiring managers to review their application and follow up with next steps. While only accounting for 10% of responses, “other” answers ranged from three weeks to “as long as it takes” (Figure 12).

Based on their positive and negative experiences applying for jobs, our surveyees shared the best ways to improve the public sector hiring process. **A whopping 40% desired faster hiring processes,** 17% wanted honest feedback if not selected, and 16% desired frequent communication. A lot of “other” responses in Figure 13 included “all of the above.”

Key Takeaways

Job seekers’ best and worst experiences revolve around the application process, level of communication, and hiring timeline. By improving in these areas, you give every candidate a positive experience with your agency, which leads to positive feedback and a stronger reputation in the applicant market. Here are five ways to get started:

- Respond to job seekers within 2–4 weeks of their application submission.
- Provide honest feedback to applicants if they’re not selected so they can become a more successful candidate for you in the future.
- Consider applicants without government experience if they have private sector experience in the same field
- Remember talented applicants for future vacancies if they’re not qualified for the current job posting.
- Post jobs on GovernmentJobs.com and other online job boards that simplify the job search and application process.

Figure 12

Time Willing to Wait for Response After Submitting an Application

Source: June 2023 survey of 850+ job seekers on GovernmentJobs.com

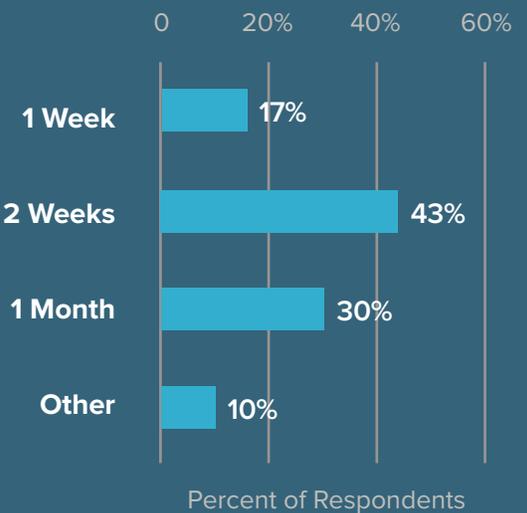


Figure 13

Best Ways to Improve Public Sector Application / Hiring Process

Source: June 2023 survey of 850+ job seekers on GovernmentJobs.com

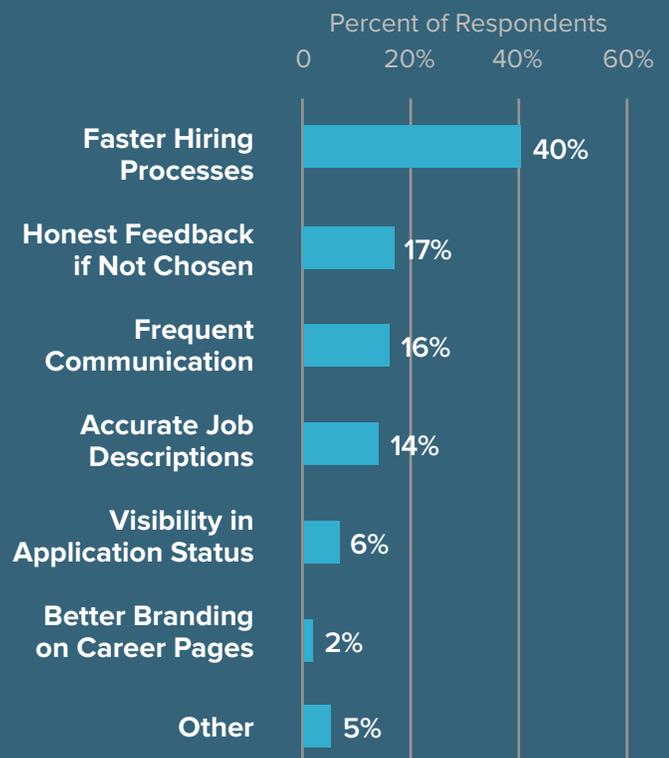
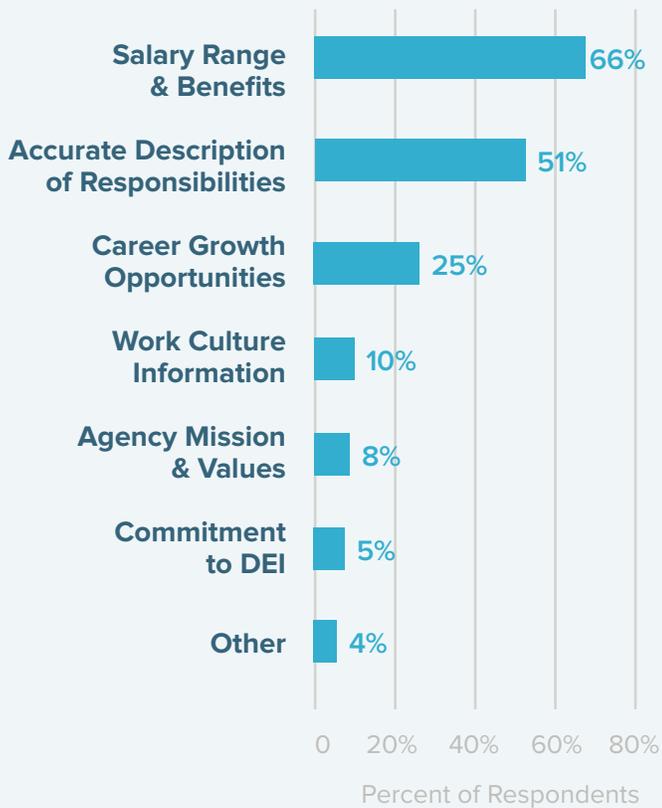


Figure 14

Most Appealing Elements of a Job Description

Source: June 2023 survey of 850+ job seekers on GovernmentJobs.com



JOB DESCRIPTION

Job descriptions are often the first impression of your agency. If you want qualified candidates to apply, you need to include the right information. Many government job descriptions are too long, overly detailed, and outdated. **They are focused on describing the position, not appealing to the job seeker.**

“THE [JOB] DESCRIPTIONS COVER EVERYTHING BUT THE KITCHEN SINK WITHOUT GIVING A GOOD IDEA ON WHAT AN ACTUAL WORKDAY IS LIKE. EVERY JOB SEEMS TO REQUIRE DIRECT EXPERIENCE, EVEN ENTRY LEVEL, WHICH DISCOURAGES APPLICANTS LOOKING TO SWITCH INDUSTRIES.”

– JOB SEEKER SURVEY RESPONSE

There are several key elements that make a description more appealing. 66% of government applicants said salary and benefits would improve a job description. An accurate description of responsibilities and career growth opportunities were also super important. By including these elements in your job postings (and others from Figure 14), candidates will be more likely to apply to your job.

Key Takeaways

Write your job descriptions with your job seeker in mind. Do this by leading with the benefits of working for your organization. Include the salary range, benefits, work-life balance, and career growth opportunities.

Job descriptions should showcase your agency culture, values, and mission, so potential candidates know how they can contribute and thrive. Highlighting growth and advancement opportunities helps candidates imagine their future with your agency.

NEXT STEPS

The public sector job market is in a cycle of turnover and burnout. Is your agency ready to break the cycle? A good place to start is the key takeaways listed in this report.

HR leaders sometimes assume what government job seekers desire (competitive salaries), but it's important to understand what candidates actually want (benefits). By providing it and promoting it in your recruitment efforts, you can start attracting and retaining top talent.

NEOGOV's Insight (applicant tracking system) and Attract (candidate relationship manager) can help you source, attract, and hire qualified candidates more effectively. **Designed for public sector HR, these tools save time and resources, helping you accomplish more with less. To learn how NEOGOV's HR software can help your agency, [sign up for a no-obligation consultation today.](#)**

NEOGOV serves public sector HR with a comprehensive suite of solutions for recruitment, onboarding, performance management, employee development, and more. We are proud to serve the people who serve the people.

13,000+

Public Sector Agencies

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Years of Experience