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Prioritizing talent management catapults HR modernization efforts forward

As Don Bauer, the State Department's chief technology officer for global talent management, points out, "Every single thing we do has a nexus with technology."

It's the same for nearly every other organization across the federal government that manages personnel activities in some way, shape or form.

Coupled with efforts by the Office of Personnel Management and Biden administration to make the government an attractive career option for a broader talent pool, agencies are actively seeking new ways to use technology to improve how they manage their current workforce and recruit the next generation of highly skilled employees.

In the pages ahead, we share how HR and talent leaders at the Department of Health and Human Services, the Office of Personnel Management, as well as State, are modernizing personnel tools and leveraging artificial intelligence to make finding, hiring and keeping great federal employees easier and speedier.

Ultimately, all these efforts must be human-centric. As Catherine Manfre, OPM's chief transformation officer, puts it, the agency's "north star has been 'People first.'"

So dive in to discover tips, tricks and tactics that will help your own organization continue to adopt commercial capabilities and streamline business processes that make your agency a great place to work while delivering on a mission that serves the country.

Vanessa Roberts
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'An extraordinary opportunity': How HHS uses shared certificates in hiring

BY DREW FRIEDMAN

In just the last couple of years, shared certificates have become an increasingly popular recruitment practice across government — and the impact is hard to miss.

At the Department of Health and Human Services, using shared certificates in some instances has cut the agency's time-to-hire in half.

"We are seeing significant impacts in terms of hiring efficiencies, and we seek to further increase that share of hiring that takes place, not just for the HR shared service centers, but across the department," HHS Chief Human Capital Officer Bob Leavitt said on [Federal Monthly Insights —Trustworthy AI in the Workforce](#).

Over time, HHS has increasingly relied on shared certificates, particularly for the types of positions that are similar across many of the department's organizations, Leavitt said.

There really are fewer unicorn positions out there than we all imagined.

— Bob Leavitt, Chief Human Capital Officer, HHS



He called shared certificates "an extraordinary opportunity."

"One, it uses our resources more productively, and two — and more importantly — from a candidate's perspective, the sooner we're able to follow up and eventually onboard a candidate, the better," he said.

With shared certificates, agencies or offices that make a hire can then give their list of unhired candidates, already determined to be qualified for a position, to another agency or office hiring for the same position. And hiring for the same type of job happens quite often, Leavitt said.

"There really are fewer unicorn positions out there than we all imagined," he said.

Using shared certificates shortens the hiring process by identifying candidates who are already vetted and assessed by hiring managers and deemed qualified for a position. If multiple candidates are hired off of one certificate, that can cut time-to-hire even further.

"It affords selecting officials a quicker mechanism to bring people into the workforce and meet their needs more efficiently," Kimberly Steide, associate deputy assistant secretary for human capital at HHS, said in an interview with Federal News Network.

That then allows HR managers to focus more strategically on how they spend their time, Steide added.

And the process isn't only helpful for hiring managers — using shared certificates benefits job candidates as well. They can be considered for positions they might not have otherwise known existed.

"You can apply once and be considered for multiple vacancies as they come open," Steide said. "That expands that applicant's reach in terms of what's available to them."

HHS hires made using shared certificates*

2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
2,680	2,737	2,950	3,555	11,922

* Hiring numbers exclude FDA data

(SOURCE: HHS)

HHS shared certificates by the numbers

The idea of sharing certificates isn't new, as it stems from the 2015 Competitive Service Act and subsequent guidance published in 2018. But the practice has gained traction in the last few years.

At HHS, the use of shared certificates began years ago in just a handful of components, like the National Institutes of Health, Food and Drug Administration, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But it's more recently become a fully departmentwide effort.

Between 2020 and 2023, HHS hired nearly 12,000 employees using shared certificates and increased its shared certificate hires by 33%.



Currently, HHS' Office of the Secretary leads in use of shared certificates. Nearly half of all hires made from shared certificates in the last four years have gone through that office, including all of its staffing divisions.

This year, 11% of hires made through the Office of the Secretary's HR shared servicing center have been pulled off of shared certificates.

"It might seem like a small number, but that's coming from a vastly smaller number, and it is increasing significantly," Leavitt said.

HHS involves SMEs in recruitment

For HHS, like many agencies, a crucial part of the recruitment process involves subject matter experts (SMEs) when writing job announcements and assessing candidates. Federal hiring experts say SMEs — usually officials working directly in the office that's recruiting — offer a helpful perspective on what hands-on skills a candidate actually needs to be qualified for a position.

Especially with recruitment efforts that use shared certificates, HHS involves SMEs when writing solicitations, as well as when reviewing candidate pools.

There are, however, busier or more challenging times of the year for SMEs to be able to take the time to get involved in recruitment. But Leavitt and Steide said they've found officials are generally willing to take part, as it helps their office land better job candidates.

"We do have to be attuned to the broader environment, but overall, people appreciate the opportunity to engage," Leavitt said. "But we have to do our bit as well to make sure that the timing works."

The amount of effort and time that you put in on the front end just yields you a better product at the outcome.

— Kimberly Steide, Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Capital, HHS



Shared certificates across government

Of course, HHS is far from the only agency that uses shared certificates. For all agencies, the process of sharing certificates generally happens one of two ways.

One option is for OPM to initiate a governmentwide pooled hiring announcement. Agencies can then sign onto the announcement and select from a list of qualified job candidates for a common position.

The other option involves a specific agency initiating its own shared certificate announcement. That announcement can either stay internal to share among the components within a large department or otherwise be shared more broadly with agencies across government.

HHS uses shared certificates in multiple ways, and the announcements are not always departmentwide. For example, different divisions can also move shared certificates from job announcements they've already done in their specific office, and later post them to HireNow for other components to view and make selections.

To decide where and what positions to use shared certificates for, Steide said HHS often



looks at where the most vacancies are. But it's also not as simple as that.

"We've had a lot of success with pooled hiring for military spouses [and] for public health associates, which is a huge occupation that spans across the department," Steide said. "So it really depends on where we have vacancies, where we have the most need, and ... unique situations, where we can have one certificate that we can maximize across the department."

For internally shared certificates, Steide said HHS will look across the department to figure out which occupational series would be the best fit for pooled hiring.

Once an HHS component or office creates an announcement with a shared certificate, that component then has about 40 days to assess and select candidates, before the candidates become available for selection at HHS more broadly.

Depending on the number of certificates that are available on a job announcement, it can be a time-consuming process, but the value is clear, Steide said.

"The amount of effort and time that you put in on the front end just yields you a better product at the outcome." 🔄

To listen to the full discussion with HHS' Bob Leavitt and Kimberly Steide on using shared certificates to find better job candidates faster

State Department leans into AI, modernization to support federal workers

BY DANA SUKONTARAK

As technology continues to evolve and reshape entire industries and work environments, the federal workforce is no exception. Agencies increasingly look to innovative technologies that can enhance productivity, efficiency and effectiveness of talent management.

Today, at the State Department, “every single thing we do has a nexus with technology,” said Don Bauer, chief technology officer for global talent management at State.

“That’s part of my job — not only to make sure that we have technology but to make sure that the actual technology interacts well with the rest of the technology that we have,” Bauer said.

The department supports a global workforce of 278 locations worldwide — and “when it comes to technology and having systems talk to each other, it’s always a challenge when you have to integrate platforms,” he said on [Federal Monthly Insights — Trustworthy AI in the Workforce](#).

“The biggest challenge in the federal government has been, ‘I don’t want my data going outside into other people’s systems,’” Bauer said.

Challenges to modernization

Keeping as much corporate intellectual property within the department’s own control, as opposed to putting it into a third-party platform, is ideal,

HR modernization is somewhat unique in the fact that we don’t get to stop doing our jobs while we’re modernizing. Pay doesn’t stop. Promotion doesn’t stop.

— Don Bauer, Chief Technology Officer for Global Talent Management, State Department



he said, because platforms “go away, they change. Then you eventually have to take that logic and put it somewhere else.”

Modernization often happens because there’s no choice, Bauer said. He points to the cyclic nature of his organization’s work — recurring seasonal bidding seasons and performance management cycles, to name a few — as another challenge to evolving systems that support talent management.

“HR modernization is somewhat unique in the fact that we don’t get to stop doing our jobs while we’re modernizing,” he said. “We have to continue to fly the plane while we’re working on it because pay doesn’t stop, promotion doesn’t stop. These cycles continue, and the systems have to support it.”

Leveraging the power of trustworthy AI for HR

Some technologies, like artificial intelligence, offer the potential for implementing new, effective and efficient solutions for the federal workforce.

AI is already making significant strides in the federal sector, and Bauer said State has already started to implement generative AI internally, for what it currently calls “State Chat.” Users can upload documents and ask questions related to documents.

“If I can upload 100 policy documents and then interactively ask a question about it, that’s powerful,” Bauer said on the [Federal Drive with Tom Temin](#). “It brings it to the masses. ... I don’t have to be a guru in order to get it. And the beauty of what they’re building right now internally is that every single answer comes with a little icon with an eye. You click that eye, and it shows you where it got that data.”

The quick and easy ability to identify the source of each AI result is key to its trustworthiness and use in the federal workforce, he said.

“Not only do I want the answer, but I want to know where it came from so that I can make sure that it isn’t a hallucination,” Bauer said.

Embracing modernization in global talent management

To support global talent management, federal agencies are implementing comprehensive talent acquisition and retention strategies. Perhaps just as important, the use of technology to modernize these strategies and processes is helping to streamline recruitment and onboarding efforts.

I’m still kind of weaving my way through my legacy platforms. I call it ‘subsumption.’ I’m subsuming a lot of these tools into my current platform.

— State’s Don Bauer

The integration of advanced technologies and strategic global talent management is transforming the federal workforce, Bauer said. Modernization plays a crucial role in this transformation, keeping agencies and their workers poised and ready with the best tools to succeed.

Bauer views connectivity and integration as paramount to building an optimal modern user experience.

“I’m still kind of weaving my way through my legacy platforms,” he said. “I call it ‘subsumption.’ I’m subsuming a lot of these tools into my current platform. ... I’ve already built all this connectivity. I have integration with my personnel system, with my electronic personnel records. All those integrations are built on one platform.”

He explained that he then has fewer integrations to manage.

“I don’t have all this extra overhead because every single integration point now is a vulnerability, potentially, and it has to be remediated if there’s a security breach,” Bauer said. “So this is reducing my footprint while consolidating and giving the modern user experience. It’s a win-win, but it’s a slow process.” 🔄

Listen to the full discussion with State’s Don Bauer on how his team is forging ahead to modernize global talent management at the department

OPM introduces new IT pilot to improve CX for soon-to-retire feds

BY DERACE LAUDERDALE

The Office of Personnel Management is in the midst of a pilot with a small number of agencies to improve the applicant experience for its retirement systems, part of a broader push to get the organization away from paper documents altogether.

Catherine Manfre, chief transformation officer at OPM, said the agency's "north star has been 'People first.' And what that has meant to us is: How do we think about putting our customers first and our people first?"

The initial focus of the pilot is the front-end experience, "allowing future annuitants to go through a digital application process," she said on [Federal Monthly Insights — Trustworthy AI in the Workforce](#).

"What we're trying to understand in the pilot phase is really the applicant experience and some of the things that we can make improvements on — to make that part of the journey more seamless and easy for both the individual annuitant but also actually for the agency itself," Manfre said, "because there are different handoffs in that new retirement process."

Her team not only wants to think about whether OPM is delivering great technology but if it's delivering technology that is "usable and functional, and people can understand how to use it," she said.

"We really want to make sure that we're thinking about all the people involved. Our customers are a primary input to understanding both their pain points and how the pain points can be solved. But we also are asking how any of our technology changes, whether they're about our retirement systems or in other places, impact our workforce."

Diving into the metrics

OPM has recently been gathering data, both quantitative and qualitative, for better insight on what is working and where improvements can be made with the system. That collection effort will continue through the end of 2024.

Manfre said the office has also been using external dashboards as a way to help collect high-quality data.

"We've thought about the dashboards as actually accomplishing a couple different objectives.

Our customers are a primary input to understanding both their pain points and how the pain points can be solved.

— Catherine Manfre, Chief Transformation Officer, OPM



There's basically a job for every kind of job occupation you can think of in government. That is the message that we're really trying to make sure that early career talent across the country understands.

— OPM's Catherine Manfre

One objective is helping to make sure that the data is actually high quality because one of the strategies is if you put the data back in front of people, it's easier actually to validate whether or not there's a problem with the data," she said.

"We felt it was important to show the capability of the data in a way that people can really easily digest. Ultimately, what dashboards and what data is all about, though, is really allowing people to make more real-time decisions about their workforce."

Data also plays a key role when it comes to artificial intelligence. Manfre said "it's really important to make sure that data ... can be trusted to be used in whatever the AI algorithm that organization is using."

New recruitment strategies

OPM has also been making efforts to recruit the right AI talent into government.

"AI is only as good as the people that you have — not just the people who can do the work of the large language models and some of the more technical aspects of AI, but the people that also

understand the business problem of what it is you're actually trying to solve with AI," she said.


Manfre cited the agency's Tech to Gov initiative as one example of helping agencies attract a broader AI talent pool to federal technology jobs. OPM also is working on projects to create new position descriptions, libraries and playbooks to serve the same purpose.

"The last piece is making sure we have the right governance in place to have responsible use cases of AI and making sure that we have the right processes to really make sure that we're using that in the most appropriate way," she added.

Manfre said tracking early career talent at OPM has been a high priority over the years. With 85% of government work outside of the Washington metropolitan area, there is widespread opportunity to find a government career.

"There's basically a job for every kind of job occupation you can think of in government," she said. "That is the message that we're really trying to make sure that early career talent across the country understands."

OPM has been supporting agencies with a few objectives to recruit early career talent too.

"One thing is we've made some updates to our Pathways regulations, which would make it easier for agencies to convert interns into full-time hires. There's a suite of initiatives around how to make the intern experience itself better, so that people feel connected to one another," she pointed out. "The last initiative is around apprenticeships — how we think about how people that are going to nondegree programs, or people without bachelors or other types of college degrees, can come into government." 

Listen to the full discussion with OPM's Catherine Manfre on creating a new federal retirement portal

Cloud, AI and SaaS form path to modern HR capabilities

BY TOM TEMIN

Agency after agency is pursuing modernization of human resources applications. And with good reason. HR touches everyone.

Updating the processes for everything from changes of permanent station to checking available vacation days can help ensure a more satisfied workforce. It can help the government compete for talent too. Modernization can also help federal managers evaluate the workforce, plan for future needs and create more effective job descriptions for skills-based recruitment.

Fundamental to modernizing HR applications is distilling out data from legacy applications and creating a new, integrated data source powering a range of applications, said Matthew Cornelius, managing director for federal industry at [Workday](#).

One of the things that agencies need to do is understand the skills out there that they're looking for. And then they need to be able to hire the right people using a skills-based hiring search.

— Matthew Cornelius,
Managing Director for Federal
Industry, Workday



Agencies “have dozens or sometimes hundreds of legacy systems that all have data captured in very different ways that perform bespoke roles,” Cornelius said on [Federal Monthly Insights — Trustworthy AI in the Workforce](#).

That’s why modernization “all starts with the data,” he said. “The systems go away once the data moves to a place where it can be leveraged and used more effectively.”

The systems that went away are typically replaced with cloud-hosted, commercial platforms. Cloud services can help ensure security and integrity of data in such a way as to enable agency staff to concentrate on application functionality, said Shannon Judd, global director of federal partner sales at [Amazon Web Services](#).

“Not even the most privileged admins within AWS can access a customer’s workloads or data,” she said.

CX in an HR context

Judd said data thus secured becomes available to address one of the driving questions when it comes to HR modernization: “How do you take artificial intelligence capabilities for process and workflow modernization?” Generative AI applications built in a secure cloud will automatically have built-in security and privacy, she added.

Ultimately, the point of software as a service from sources such as Workday and secure infrastructure from cloud providers such as AWS is to allow the deployment of effective applications for use by candidates, employees and managers.

“When I think about customer experience at agencies,” Cornelius said, “one of the keys that comes out to me is, it’s all about the recruitment and the retention and the hiring of new employees.” He pointed to one statistic indicating the government has hired about a million people since 2019.

“One of the things that agencies need to do is understand the skills out there that they’re looking for,” he said. “And then they need to be able to hire the right people using a skills-based hiring search.”

Applying generative AI to HR in the cloud

The Workday platform lets hiring managers employ generative artificial intelligence to create job descriptions “that more effectively reach the kinds of candidates that they want and test those messages to see if they’re attracting the right level of talent,” Cornelius said. “We allow them to use AI to evaluate skills-based hiring.”

He said a growing number of agencies have become comfortable with the idea of generating job descriptions using AI for federal positions in areas ranging from law enforcement to financial management.

Use of AI provides benefits upstream as well. For example, it can streamline the process of coding applications in the first place, Judd said. “Think about AI as building and amplifying more powerful new applications. That’s going to help agencies really boost productivity across the enterprise.”

Think about AI as building and amplifying more powerful new applications. That’s going to help agencies really boost productivity across the enterprise.

— Shannon Judd, Global Director of Federal Partner Sales, AWS



She added, “It’s streamlining coding and simplifying business intelligence. It’s improving clinical efficiency or efficiencies in the back office. And it’s doing it with security and privacy built in.”

Judd and Cornelius stressed the importance of data integration to get the most out of genAI. But organizations must choose the correct data for each specific use case, consistent with careful handling for privacy and security requirements.

Because HR applications work so widely across an agency, modernizing them in this manner elevates the skills of the IT staff generally in using safe and secure AI, Judd said. In that way, an agency can establish a purpose-built infrastructure that “can scale across multiple use cases,” she said.

Cornelius added that acquiring cloud and SaaS will produce savings over time.

“Part of the value is in how it’s going to enable the workforce to be more productive, be more efficient and leverage data more effectively to drive mission outcomes,” Cornelius said.

Cloud and SaaS “are going to give you the ability, in the next year or two or three, to get rid of 10 or 50 systems — or 100 applications — that you no longer need.” 🚀

Watch or listen to the full discussion with Workday’s Matthew Cornelius and AWS’ Shannon Judd on deriving value from cloud, SaaS and AI when modernizing HR