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David H. Coursey

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Human Resource Management Challenges in Government Information Technology

DAVID H. COURSEY
Florida State University

Information technology (IT) personnel practices are often cited by IT scholars as requiring special treatment. This symposium seeks to merge work from human resource and IT management to address just how, if at all, IT personnel practices are, or should be, different from mainstream personnel management.

Keywords: *e-government; information technology; human resource management; computing; Internet; intranet; recruiting*

Human resource (HR) management is perhaps the most commonly cited challenge in government information technology (IT) systems. Many of the problems, such as recruitment and retention difficulties, are not unique. This fact raises an important question: Just how different is IT HR practice? Does it justify special consideration? Typically, government IT articles arise from an IT perspective and not from traditional public HR management. Likewise, public HR management researchers rarely venture into the IT field. This situation creates a notable void where government IT could learn from general HR management, although the HR field remains silent to perceived IT differences.

Specifically, this symposium requested articles addressing topics such as the following:

- What are the primary factors influencing retention and recruitment of government IT staff, especially in comparison to other professional government employees?
- How does IT staff differ from other professional government employees, and what role do these differences play in HR management issues?
- How are job performance and productivity best evaluated?

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- What continued training programs (often considered one of the benefits of government IT employment) are offered, and are they still a viable benefit over private sector IT?
- How do public and private IT professionals differ in backgrounds, performance incentive preferences, and attitudes toward public service, among other important considerations?

Three articles were accepted after double-blind peer review. Although the collection does not address all these questions or many more related ones, as a whole, the articles provide a fresh look at many of these issues.

One of the most frequently cited HR management issues in government IT is the comparative difficulty in hiring and retaining workers (see, for example, DeMers, 2002), especially in competition with the private sector (for a review, see Coursey & McCreary, 2005). Although the recent dot-com bust has alleviated some of the pay and incentive differences, the perception remains, especially at state and federal levels. Moreover, the concern is that many of the employees are displaced private sector workers who will leave en masse once the economy improves. Combined with continued outsourcing of government IT activities, such an exodus could produce a severe shortage of government IT expertise.

Two articles address the hiring issue. First, Gregory Lewis and Zhenhua Hu (2005 [this issue]) ask whether federal IT workers are different from their fellow public servants in turnover, qualifications, and performance ratings. Using a 1% sample of the U.S. Central Personnel Data File from 1976 to 2003, their work directly addresses whether key HR issues are different for IT versus other federal workers. They find that the federal service fares no differently in hiring an IT workforce than it does in recruiting for other professional positions. Although the two researchers found federal IT workers did not have ideal qualifications, their performance ratings were as high and turnover rates as low as other employees. The work seriously questions the presumption among government IT researchers and the resulting policies that focus on special incentives in IT recruitment and retention.

The second article, by G. Zhiyong Lan, Lera Riley, and N. Joseph Cayer (2005 [this issue]), reports how the city of Phoenix, one of the country's finest local government IT operations, recruits and retains technical workers. The article is a good example of the innovative practices followed by many local governments. It demonstrates how, even within the usual limitations

of public HR practice, local governments can have a successful IT workforce.

The last article, by M. Jae Moon and Eric Welch (2005 [this issue]), tackles another issue: differences between citizens and public IT workers in e-government (e-gov) perspectives. Traditionally, public IT workers were rarely concerned with direct public interaction because their work primarily provided staff support, an activity internal to their agencies. However, e-gov applications potentially change the level of citizen input and interaction. The call for citizen-driven government presumes citizens are the best judge of the online services they need. Yet are they really so qualified? Who is best left to judge application merit? Is it the government IT professionals (who might evaluate, based on technical quality, how internal operations are benefited), citizens (largely concerned with convenience and personal cost savings), elected officials (where state-of-the-art and business connections are involved), or some combination?

Moon and Welch (2005 [this issue]) use a 2001 survey sample of just under 1,000 citizens and 400 senior public employees at the federal, state, and local levels. They address possible differences in e-gov knowledge, optimism about e-gov, sensitivity to security and privacy issues, and implementation support. Overall, they find that public employees, compared with citizens, are better acquainted with e-government and more sanguine about its possibilities. One important conclusion is that citizen perceptions rise from a general distrust of government, whereas public employees' attitudes are generated from confidence in government institutions. This difference is an important one when considering e-gov application development and evaluation.

Overall, the articles offer valuable reflections on many of the traditional government IT HR issues. Certainly, they do not address every suggested topic of this symposium, but that leaves plenty of room for future inquiries. As symposium editor, I would like to thank the following noted experts in public HR and IT for their diligent work in double-blind reviewing the submitted manuscripts: Evan Berman, James Bowman, Maureen Brown, Joseph Cayer, Dennis Daley, Sharon Dawes, Gerald Gabris, Jon Gant, David Garson, Joseph Franzel, James Llorens, Eric Welch, and Lois Wise. Finally, a special thanks to Mary Ellen Guy and Meredith Newman for their support.

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DAVID H. COURSEY founded and directs the public information management concentration in the Askew School of Public Administration and Policy at Florida State University. His work includes numerous research publications and pioneering e-government training modules and applications across the United States.