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OPINION

Next Generation of Public Employees Must Understand Data and Policy

Cities need to attract and cultivate a workforce of tech-minded employees who can fully leverage new technologies and data initiatives to promote change and create public value.

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I no longer laugh at the joke in a meeting with public officials when someone says they need to go get their teenager to help them with technology. The fact that we have dramatic new tools often licensed by a city yet only a few individuals truly taking advantage of them is a public-sector crisis. For newer and more powerful software, vendors wistfully aspire for the tools they have designed and sold to cities to be more fully utilized. From predictive analytics to performance measurement, new data and tech initiatives have the power to reinvent every part of city hall. These tools and initiatives are allowing cities to better understand how their work is improving residents' lives, discover previously hidden problems and streamline their internal processes.

But technology is still only a tool and cities will not be able to evolve unless their employees do too. One of the most important skills the next generation of public employees can have is an understanding of both policy and data, enabling them to understand the social context, deploy the necessary analysis and craft targeted solutions for the most pressing civic problems. Cities need to attract and cultivate a workforce of tech-minded employees who can fully leverage new technologies and data initiatives to promote change and create public value. This requires both

discovering how to hire new tech talent and better cultivating and training existing workers.

Correcting the gap between capacity and use requires cities to rethink their recruitment and development processes to better attract suitable talent. This gap can be in part closed by cities changing their hiring methods: What standards they impose, how quickly they can offer jobs, where they recruit, and even the description of the job itself.

A stellar example is New York City's revamped NYC Tech Jobs website, part of its current effort to attract more tech-minded applicants. Internship and fellowship programs also provide another solution and a clear path into city government for motivated students or recent graduates. Increasing and publicizing these programs can help cities boost the number of tech-minded recruits.

New dual-degree options, such as the University of Chicago's master's in computational analysis and public policy (awarded jointly from the Department of Computer Science and the Harris School of Public Policy), provide a solid background in both areas and could be a great source of talent for cities searching for the next generation of employees.

Cities can also turn inward and focus on developing the tech skills of their current employees. For example, San Francisco's Data Academy offers a broad range of short technical classes to current government employees, with the goal of helping them understand and incorporate data and tech skills into their everyday work. These programs leverage the invaluable years of experience employees have in their fields and help unlock hidden potential with the addition of technology or data analysis.

But just attracting or developing new talent is not enough: Technical skills are only useful if they intersect the work and catalyze the imagination of a person who has substantial responsibilities. In order to fully leverage these new skills, cities should distribute skilled workers throughout government and empower them to work across departments, instead of keeping them siloed in a solitary department. This

can help ensure that tech-minded employees are thought of as partners in building better government.

Building the new generation of public servants is essential to allow governments to continue to evolve. New data and tech initiatives hold great potential for local governments, but they can only succeed if cities have well trained and motivated employees capable of running them.

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