

Talent leaders, agents of public service change

Three ways talent leaders can
reinvent public service for
greater mission impact





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Reinventing public service delivery amid disruption

Public sector employees continue to do extraordinary work in challenging circumstances. From the pandemic to supply chain shortages and soaring inflation, the public sector has been severely tested in recent years. In fact, [Accenture's Total Enterprise Reinvention Report](#) finds disruption – driven in part by economic and geopolitical instability, climate change and emerging technology – has grown by 200% since 2017.

This turbulence may be here to stay. The World Economic Forum warns we may be entering a period of “polycrisis” with significant potential for ongoing socioeconomic and environmental disruption.¹ Organizations of all kinds will need to embrace continuous change and reinvention. Their approach to talent will play a key role.

In this report we'll explore what the findings of the [CHRO as a growth executive research](#) mean for public service organizations. And highlight how three key behaviors of high-performing CHROs could help enable reinvention.



Talent challenges in the public sector

To continue delivering their critical missions, public sector organizations will need to go beyond simply architecting the right programs and services. They'll also need people who are motivated and have the right skills to act on the changes to come. [Accenture's recent report](#) on generative artificial intelligence (AI) explores this shift, but the demand extends to technologies of all kinds.

However, the post-pandemic shake-up of the labor market has made attracting, developing and retaining this talent more difficult for all organizations. For public sector leaders, this has only added to existing talent shortages – particularly in technology and data – and demographic challenges.

In the United States, the public sector payroll counted 376,000 fewer jobs in March 2023 than pre-COVID-19 levels.² Job

vacancies in the Australian public sector have almost doubled, reaching 47,400 in November 2022.³ And in the United Kingdom, vacancies in public administration and defense increased from 22,000 in February 2020 to 40,000 in February 2023.⁴

Added to this is the challenge of replacing critical expertise as experienced public sector employees retire. In the US, for example, over half of retirement-eligible individuals chose to accelerate retirement between 2021 and 2022, the highest annual level on record.⁵ And there is the potential for this to have an even greater impact elsewhere. In 2020, more than one in four central government workers across OECD (The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries were aged 55 or over and this was significantly higher in countries like Spain (46%) and Italy (48%).⁶



Becoming high-performing talent leaders

Public sector leaders can't afford to ignore this convergence of socio-economic and labor market disruption. Now is the time to embrace reinvention for the future.

This applies to anyone with a responsibility for talent management, whether they're agency directors, functional leaders, or CHROs. This group, who we refer to as 'talent leaders,' should look to expand their horizons and set a new performance frontier for their people.

The greatest impact can be achieved when organizations empower talent leaders. Accenture's recent [CHRO as a Growth Executive report](#) found that a small group of high-performing organizations enjoyed an 11% productivity boost from leveraging the full potential of data, technology and people. But this productivity uplift fell to just 4% for companies focusing on data and technology alone.

What sets high-performing talent leaders apart?

Accenture's CHRO as a Growth Executive research found that high-performing CHROs share two key attributes. First, they're more proficient than their peers in cultivating next-generation capabilities that go beyond traditional 'people skills.' Examples include systems thinking and financial acumen, as well as technology and data know-how.

Second, they're more connection-focused and are able to nurture strong and effective relationships with leadership peers. They also look to build networks externally to influence broader change beyond their organizations.

The research found that, while 86% of cross-industry respondents said they're using next-generation skills and capabilities to meet objectives, only 67% of public service respondents said the same.

Lessons from the high performers

Public sector productivity will be key to delivering mission impact amid disruption. However, [the same Accenture research](#) found that just 41% of public sector respondents say their CHROs are performing above expectations in unlocking the potential of their organization's people compared to an average of 61% across all industries.

To bridge this gap, public service talent leaders should explore how their high-performing peers from within the sector and beyond are behaving.

Our research suggests there are **three key areas of focus:**

- 1 Access, create and engage talent in innovative ways**
- 2 Connect new dimensions of data, technology and ways of working to unlock potential**
- 3 Lead talent reinvention beyond the HR function**



01

**Access, create and engage
talent in innovative ways**



Acquiring and keeping the right skills is already challenging, particularly for in-demand digital talent. For public sector talent leaders, the regulatory environment that governs labor relationships can make it even trickier. Exploring new, innovative strategies across the full breadth of the talent lifecycle – recruit, reskill, and retain – could be the solution.

Recruit | Reskill | Retain

Recruit attract the right skills

The way an organization attracts talent sets the tone for ongoing employee experiences. It's essential that candidates feel a connection and sense of belonging from the first point of contact.

Employer brand, and the employee value proposition (EVP) that shapes it, are essential in building this relationship. However, research from recruitment agency, Randstad, suggests that public services rank lowest among all sectors when it comes to projecting a positive employer brand.⁷

A strong EVP is built around the organization's mission, values, careers and benefits offered to employees then communicated effectively to them. It looks beyond financial rewards to incorporate a deep understanding of candidates' motivations and affinities for the organization's mission. And it should put a particular emphasis on creating compelling career pathways based on organizational job catalogs and role descriptions.

As part of this process, talent leaders should also evaluate how to "filter in" rather than "filter out" potential talent. This powerful strategy for broadening talent pools beyond traditional candidates is outlined in [Accenture's Hidden Workers research](#). It calls on organizations to reevaluate candidate profiles and be clear about the specific skills – not just credentials – they need now and in the future.

Some organizations have already been exploring these approaches. In Australia, the **State of Victoria** has piloted a range of measures to improve inclusivity in recruitment.⁸ And in the US **State of Pennsylvania**, Governor Josh Shapiro recently eliminated the college degree requirement for 92% of jobs in state government to open up about 65,000 jobs to non-college graduates.⁹

Why employer brand matters

Employer brand defines an organization's reputation among potential and existing employees. It encompasses everything from the organization's culture and vision to the candidate experience as people apply for a role.

In an increasingly competitive labor market, employer brand is the currency for attracting and retaining top talent. Research by LinkedIn found that companies with strong employer brands attract 50% more qualified applicants.¹⁰ It also found that 'not knowing what it's like to work at an organization' was the number one obstacle cited by job searchers.



Reskill

develop existing talent

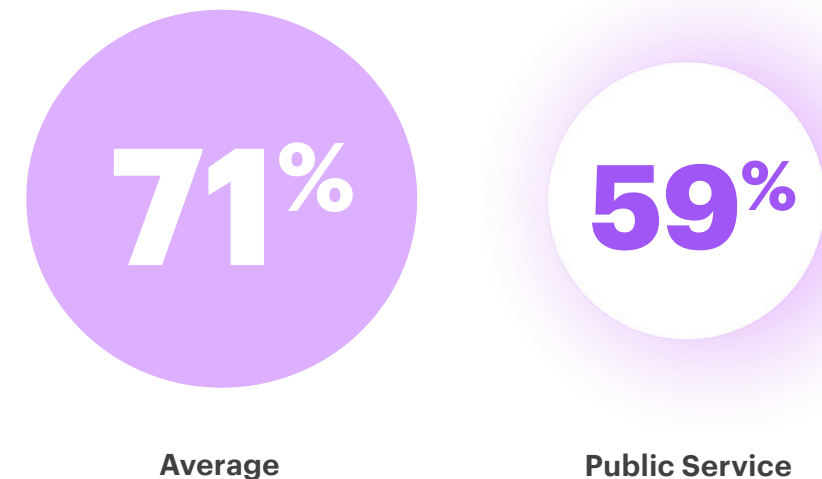
Public sector skills shortages are unlikely to be solved by recruitment alone. In most cases, complementary upskilling and reskilling programs will also be needed. These should look to augment people's existing institutional knowledge with the technology skills to embrace the change to come.

However, the [CHRO as a Growth Executive research](#) found that only 59% of public sector respondents are planning to increase investment in skills development and training to a large extent over the next three years, compared to 71% of cross-industry respondents. It's essential that talent leaders in the public sector take the right steps to close this gap.

First, talent leaders should build on the skills-focused approach to recruitment and align training programs with present and future skills gaps, preferably in collaboration with private-sector partners. This should then be used to develop customized role-based curriculums that balance on-the-job learning with training for the skill needs of tomorrow.

The skills investment gap

Proportion of respondents who are planning to increase investment in skills development to a large extent in the next three years



Source: CHRO as Growth Executive research



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Technology can play a key role. For example, **San Diego County used Accenture’s Virtual Experience Solution (AVenueS)** to train its social security caseworkers.¹¹ This tool allows new caseworkers to practice eligibility interviews in a realistic metaverse environment, allowing them to learn new skills, make mistakes in a safe environment and then review actions objectively with a trainer.

Public sector agencies of all kinds could make use of this technology. And, in combination with AI-powered forecasting tools, it could help them to prepare for new operational scenarios and future talent needs at scale. This could then feedback into a digital learning platform that combines training with job matching to help meet organizational needs and give people the insight and confidence to advance their careers.

Retain keep the highest performers

Enhanced recruitment and upskilling count for little if an organization can't hold on to its best people. Talent leaders should therefore focus on creating a culture of retention that extends beyond financial reward and meets the whole spectrum of people's needs.

Maintaining employee trust, motivation and a sense of belonging isn't easy. [One Accenture study](#) found that a third of government workers don't feel they belong in their workplaces, so more must be done to make people feel supported and purposeful.

Specific strategies will vary depending on the workforce in question. But all talent leaders across the public sector should start by viewing retention as part of their core remit. That then needs to be complemented with the right mix of organizational culture, processes and technology to empower them to support their team members.



This applies not only to key career moments, like internal transfers and pay rises, but also to everyday experiences, like sharing information with empathy and giving people the right tools to do their job.

The **British Royal Navy** undertook exactly this sort of project with the launch of its MyNavy App.¹² The goal was to make personnel data directly usable to the individuals themselves through a new user-friendly application. This has empowered sailors with greater insight into and control over their own career trajectories and created a clearer line of communication that strengthened the relationship between uniformed personnel and the Navy.

What is culture?

Creating the 'right' culture is something every organization aspires to. But what that means in practice can vary greatly. Culture is made up of many complimentary elements, broadly falling within three categories:

- **Agility** – for example responding quickly to changes or rapidly testing ideas
- **Leadership** – for example giving leaders autonomy or being transparent about strategic priorities
- **People** – for example encouraging collaboration or treating people equally

The way an organization prioritizes these different elements defines the type of culture it creates. But there is no single correct approach. A focus on agility can create an entrepreneurial culture. Whereas emphasizing people can support a more collaborative approach. It's about finding the right mix for each individual organization.

02 Connect new dimensions of data, technology and ways of working to unlock potential





Continuous reinvention is a critical capability in a modern organization. Public service leaders have an opportunity to rewire the organization to transform how work gets done and how people are empowered to make an impact for citizens.

Data | Technology | Ways of working

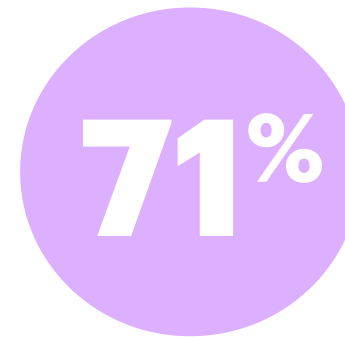
Data the foundation for transformation

Our [CHRO as a Growth Executive](#) findings suggest that high-performing CHROs are more proficient at using data to meet their goals. In fact, this emphasis on data extends even beyond the highest performers. Over two-thirds of all respondents (71%) said their organization planned to make a large investment in data solutions over the next three years. However, this dropped to less than half (49%) for public sector respondents.

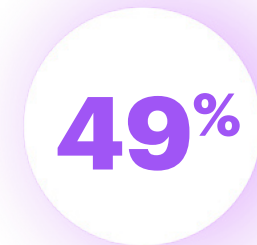
Addressing this gap should be a priority for public sector talent leaders. A strong data foundation creates a platform for all future technology-driven modernization efforts. Not only does it provide the insight to make better strategic decisions, but it could also be used to empower employees to take greater control of their careers.

The data divide

Proportion of respondents who are planning to make large increases in data solutions in the next three years



Average



Public Service

Source: CHRO as Growth Executive research



The **Government of South Korea's** e-Saram system is a prominent example.¹³ Introduced in 2000, it has digitized the entire employee lifecycle for individuals and departments.

More recently, the **City and County of Denver**, worked with Accenture to transform workforce management with a new data and platform strategy.¹⁴ This allowed the city to automate routine HR processes, empower recruiters with insights into their candidate pools, and give leaders a more holistic view of workforce needs. It also offered workers themselves faster and easier access to HR data and services.



Technology enabling people to reinvent

Technology is reinventing the way work gets done. It's vital that people recognize how technology can help them accomplish their goals and feel empowered to maximize its impact.

This is especially important in public service organizations, where data from the latest [Accenture Future of Work 2022](#) survey suggests employees tend to be less confident in their technology skills (Figure 1). The good news is [Accenture's Public Service Experience Through a New Lens](#) study found that a large majority (74%) of public sector workers are positive about the impact of new technologies and are eager to learn. This creates a big opportunity to support people as they develop the skills they need.

One way to get started is to review core business processes, breaking them into individual tasks to better reveal where technology can automate and/or augment work at scale. The **UK Department of Work and Pensions** scaled automation in this way to allow it to handle a projected 210 million additional transactions.¹⁵ Its people were then given data insights to help them perform complex and rewarding tasks more effectively.



Lacking the confidence to embrace reinvention

I am known for my skills in...
Percentage who agreed or strongly agreed

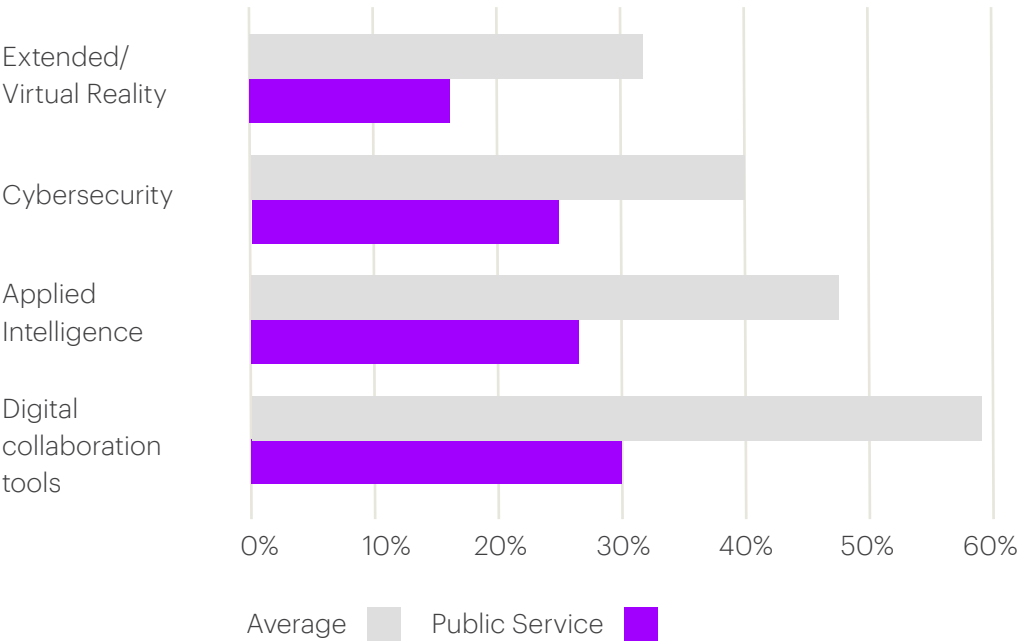


Figure 1: Future of Work 2022 survey

Ways of working

creating a culture of innovation

As organizations embark on these changes, it's essential that ways of working enable people to make the most of the new opportunities and encourage innovation. For example, the rapid emergence of generative AI is already transforming knowledge-based work.

However, data from [Accenture's Future of Work 2022](#) study suggests this might be particularly challenging in public sector organizations. It found that public sector employees are significantly less likely than cross-industry averages to agree they're rewarded for thinking outside the box (44% vs 72%) or their organization values innovation and change (54% vs 79%).

Accenture's [Total Enterprise Reinvention report](#) found that organizations that were successful in reinvention were significantly more likely to dedicate the right amount of time and effort to change management as well as empowering, recognizing and rewarding new ways of working. So, giving talent leaders the right tools to drive change could be essential to nurturing innovation.



Singapore is already applying this approach. In 2016, the **Public Service Division (PSD)**, a central government agency that was established to drive a first-class public service, launched the PSD Innovation Lab.¹⁶ The lab is intended to spearhead innovation practices amongst over 145,000 public service officers across the government and enable them to collaborate and address challenges more effectively.



03
Lead talent reinvention
beyond the HR function



[Accenture's CHRO as a Growth Executive research](#) suggests high-performing CHROs make connections across the organization and beyond. However, public service organizations appear to be particularly siloed.

Just 69% of public services respondents say they believe their CHRO is effective in collaborating with the rest of the leadership group, significantly below the 87% cross-industry average.

Break siloes | Build networks



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Breaking down siloes

Public sector talent leaders should be proactive about extending their influence and impact across the organization and with external partners. This can be particularly effective in catalyzing broader organizational change and finding new responses to systemic challenges like sustainability and climate change.

One way to get started could be for leaders to collaborate to define career pathways across the entire organization. This process can help identify siloes and develop new operational models that enable teams to share skills more effectively between areas.

The **Australian Public Service's Workforce Strategy 2025** and the Centre of Excellence established to deliver it, are a good example of this type of exercise.¹⁷ Based on survey data and built in collaboration with departmental leaders, this is a four-year plan to break down inter-departmental siloes. The goal is to create a more agile organization that is able to attract and retain the right skills and respond to changing needs.

Building inter-organizational networks

Similarly, talent leaders could build deeper relationships with peers in other public sector organizations, education, non-profits and the private sector. By collaborating to create new talent pipelines and exchange programs, talent leaders could improve retention and close skills gaps, particularly around digital.

Consider, for example, the work being done to boost semiconductor production in the United States. As part of a national initiative, the **State of Ohio** is working with Intel, workforce boards and the Ohio Association of Community Colleges to train people to meet demand for workers at a new fabrication plant.¹⁸ This holistic training is tailored to the skills requirements of the jobs being created, while also establishing new career pathways for underserved communities.

In this way, the program meets the needs of individual job seekers and employers while aligning with wider state and national priorities. This kind of collaboration model could be extended to other public service priorities, such as meeting inclusion and diversity goals or developing the new green skills that will be critical for tackling climate change.



A woman with long dark hair, wearing a blue and white striped shirt, is shown in profile, clapping her hands. She is in a meeting room with other people blurred in the background. The image has a purple gradient overlay on the left side.

The first steps towards **reinvention**

Talent leaders across the public sector have a critical role in catalyzing change. Applying the three behaviors of high-performing CHROs outlined in this report could help them take on this responsibility. Whether it's recruiting and retaining the best people in a competitive job market or augmenting people's skills with data and AI, these leaders now have an opportunity to proactively expand their roles and reinvent their organizations.

Now is the time to embrace that opportunity and empower talent leaders to become agents of public service change.



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