

Talent spotting: taking it personally

To make real transformation happen, the public sector now needs to recruit people who will stick around in the current climate long enough to play their part in changing it, says **Ben Moss**

Talent. The word is everywhere I look at the moment – and not just in the sports pages and on TV’s X Factor. Gordon Brown has famously embarked on a quest to build a “government of all the talents” and in doing so, created a new political acronym and animal – “the goat”. Indeed, Public Servant recently reported that Brown wants to bring in talent from outside the world of politics to inspire the government in the coming years.

This is a laudable aim and it certainly sounds impressive in the context of a press release, but is the government really identifying, recruiting and holding on to the kind of talent that the public sector really needs? And what do people like the Prime Minister actually mean when they talk about talent?

To the government’s credit, it has certainly invested in talent – the fast stream scheme is designed to bring the best graduates in and there have also been several high-profile appointments of successful business people. These are all important initiatives, but are they working?

As anyone who has worked in the public sector knows, there is a very definite culture and a way of

doing things. It is not an environment in which everyone can be successful regardless of personality and background. This has to be factored into the design of recruitment processes. To make real change happen, the public sector now needs people who will stay in the current climate long enough to play their part in changing it.

For example, current recruitment processes rely on the tried and tested assessment centre approach to make selection decisions about job applicants. This is a proven method of identifying those capable of performing a particular role. Recent research has confirmed the value of this approach for predicting job performance – but general mental ability remains the most efficient single predictor of future performance (Hermelin, Lievens and Robertson, 2007). So assessment centres generally focus on actual job performance and are therefore less geared to predicting things like organisational citizenship behaviour and the potential to be committed to the organisation and its values in the long term.

The implication here is that an emphasis on the personal attributes that the public sector really needs to move forward is required, as well as a focus on competency and ability. The last thing the public sector needs is an army of super-intelligent technical specialists roaming around the organisation 10 years from now without the softer skills that cohesive and effective organisations need to succeed. The streamlined processes developed in recent years to attract and identify talent for the fast stream were a good example of how to improve this balance, but away from the entry level practice lags behind.

Of course, one traditional antidote and quick fix in this situation is to buy talent in from the private sector. However, while there are plenty of recent examples of talent from the private sector coming in, there are just as many stories of these moves being short-lived, as the reality of the challenge dawns upon job incumbents.

There are several issues at stake here, not least the cultural differences between the sectors. The pace of decision-making is almost always slower, while processes are much more inclusive and

workplace politics can be labyrinthine compared with those in private sector. This means that it takes a particular type of ex-private sector employee to thrive and stick around in the public sector.

So to what extent do recruitment decisions take this into account? Or is it the tendency to go for the best person on paper and the name that will look best in the business pages of the FT when it is a high profile role? I would suggest that it is very rare for characteristics such as patience, flexibility, personal resilience and a preference for taking a long-term perspective to be assessed as part of the selection process. Yet these are the very attributes that would contribute to and consolidate a successful transfer from the private to public sector for almost all recruits.

Then there’s the culture of the public sector itself. Incomes Data Services has just released the results of a survey of 24,000 NHS employees showing that 60 per cent have thought about leaving the service in the past year, while 61 per cent reported that their morale and motivation had deteriorated in same period. While this is an extreme example, it is not so different to the climate that prevails in much of the public sector – and how do you prepare new recruits from the private sector for that? A stark choice often faces them – either be assimilated or try to change things from the inside. While many succumb to the first option, the more determined often try to have an impact on the prevailing culture, but very often it is just too deeply ingrained. The result is that these well-intentioned individuals often leave and return to private sector, forced to admit that they didn’t realise what they were taking on.

The reality is that only the government can change this situation. This means making a substantial investment in working on the low-morale culture and linking this to how recruitment decisions are made. The attraction and retention of the best talent is one of the key areas that will be affected if the government does not get a grip of this issue and start to introduce proven methods for ensuring the engagement, motivation and morale of staff – wherever they come from.



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