White Paper

Real Answers Steer Strategic Workforce Planning

Want to put the right people, with the right skills, in the right positions in your organization? One federal agency answered this question with a resounding "YES" and proceeded to gather the data needed to develop an effective workforce action plan.

ICF shares the valuable approach to data analytics that drove this agency's strategic workforce planning and improved its ability to meet current and future mission requirements.

First off, what are data analytics?

At a basic level, data analytics are a set of metrics and tools designed for comprehensive measurement and improvement in organizations. They can be used to analyze a full range of strategic human capital issues, from recruitment and staffing to development and training to succession planning. Analytics can also make it easier to evaluate operational issues--including time to fill positions, accession and replacements rates, and workforce diversity--which helps to fine tune human capital systems and processes.
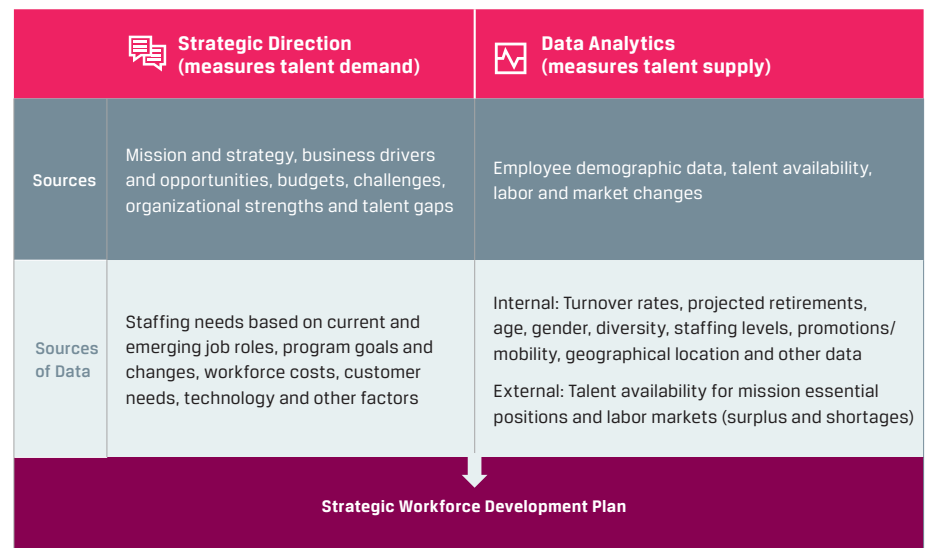
A Federal Agency Case in Point

Following a major reorganization that transferred in new programs and more than doubled the size of its workforce, one U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) agency needed the ability to evaluate workforce capacity and better position itself to recruit, develop, maintain, and motivate its people. The agency had conducted prior workforce planning activities, but with the expansion of its program responsibilities and staff, ICF's expertise was required to conduct a more comprehensive strategic workforce plan grounded in data analytics.

Blending information about the agency's strategic direction with data analytics, as shown in Exhibit 1, revealed the demand (need) for talent. A comprehensive review, which included labor market patterns and trends, helped to identify potential supply sources for that talent.

EXHIBIT 1: BLENDED APPROACH TO STRATEGIC WORKFORCE PLANNING

	Strategic Direction (measures talent demand)	Data Analytics (measures talent supply)
Sources	Mission and strategy, business drivers and opportunities, budgets, challenges, organizational strengths and talent gaps	Employee demographic data, talent availability, labor and market changes
Sources of Data	Staffing needs based on current and emerging job roles, program goals and changes, workforce costs, customer needs, technology and other factors	Internal: Turnover rates, projected retirements, age, gender, diversity, staffing levels, promotions/mobility, geographical location and other data External: Talent availability for mission essential positions and labor markets (surplus and shortages)

Strategic Workforce Development Plan

Strategic Workforce Plan

This approach helped the agency answer some key questions for workforce planning:

- What are the current and projected estimates for supply of talent, both internal and external to the agency?

- What is the demand for talent, given the agency's direction and business strategy?

- Is there a gap?

Data on Strategic Direction

To better understand the agency's strategic direction and specific workforce strengths, opportunities, and challenges, ICF conducted interviews and focus groups with managers and staff. Unlike past workforce planning efforts that focused primarily on gathering feedback from management, these groups included all levels of the workforce that gave both a "top down" and "bottom-up" assessment, allowing for a balanced view of current workforce. More insights about the demand for talent were gained by reviewing recent organizational and workforce reports, such as the Federal Employees Viewpoint Survey, organizational analysis reports, resource plans, and strategic workforce plans (from other organizations of a similar size).

Workforce Data Analytics

The agency already collected a wide range of workforce demographic data, so it was important to thoughtfully select the right data to analyze to determine the supply sources of talent. Selection criteria included:

- Readily available and easily mined
- Accurate and current
- Relevant for making workforce decisions and taking action

Internal Sources

Internal data used included elements of the current workforce makeup (e.g., age, diversity, position level, span of control); turnover and attrition rates; retirement projections; and staffing levels both in headquarters and field locations. Available data was discrete--drawn from different databases and sources—and while each data element was valuable in and of itself, the individual elements did not provide a holistic picture of the current workforce.

Using the right commercial data analysis tool enabled connection of the various distinct data sources to present a more complete story of the workforce and gain answers to pressing questions. For example: What might be the impact of retirement projections on mission-critical occupations in distinct program areas by geographic location? Integration of separate data elements into one graphic display illustrated how the retirement eligibility of Washington DC-area employees in critical occupations might impact short and long-term staffing levels for a variety of agency programs. With data analytics and effective visual presentation, the agency was able to specifically evaluate the degree to which its current workforce could meet future talent demands, by program area, position, and geographic location.

External Sources

To fill job vacancies, many organizations concentrate on an inward-focused approach to workforce planning without taking into account what is going on outside the organization in the labor market and how markets may be rapidly changing. Labor market data enables better understanding of emerging trends for creating new jobs and changing roles in current jobs. Such data can also inform organizations about the talent supply by location and provide critical market intelligence on issues like competitiveness and salary range.

To examine the external supply of future talent, research focused on labor market data and trends related to the agency's mission essential occupations. Data and job projection reports from the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics led to a better understanding of the supply and demand for these essential occupations and the competitiveness of the job market in what might viewed as a "battle for future talent." Analysis of the labor market data:

- Uncovered the required skills for essential occupations.

- Enabled a comparison of future skills needed to those of the agency's current workforce.

- Underscored the need for job training resources and employee development planning in cases where the demand for essential occupations was on the rise and current staff needed more preparation to take on new jobs and roles.

Gap Analysis and Findings

By analyzing the data highlighting the gap between the demand and supply for talent, the agency gained an actionable workforce plan. Short and longer-term actions based on the biggest gaps addressed recruitment and hiring practices, leadership and employee development, performance management, and employee motivation. The analysis highlighted potential changes and expansion of certain job roles, and also uncovered potential career transition opportunities to new program areas where the demand for talent was greater. When appropriate, career transition of more senior-level employees to new work can allow for recruitment of employees at lower levels with career development potential in other program areas.

Summary

By producing a data-driven strategic workforce plan, an HHS agency was able to:

- Align its strategic direction with current staffing levels and talent management.

- Develop a clearer understanding of the demand and supply for critical mission-oriented occupations and talent.

- Employ a more objective approach for using metrics when making decisions and prioritizing future workforce investments in recruiting and staff development.

In this case, a blended approach to data analytics in workforce planning followed a systematic methodology, tailored to meet the agency's goals and its need for attracting, developing, and maintaining a ready, willing, and able workforce.

With integrated tools, organizations are able to quickly use and compare disparate sources of raw data, present them graphically to view historical trends, and run a range of workforce planning scenarios. With targeted use of big data--a term that describes voluminous amount of data that has the potential to be mined for actionable information--organizations are able to use predictive analysis and get answers to "what if" questions that help build and maintain a high performing, well-prepared workforce.

In other recent workforce projects with the Departments of Agriculture and Transportation, the states of Colorado and Oklahoma, San Diego county, Ireland's SOLAS agency, and other Federal, state, county and international organizations, ICF has successfully customized and integrated our systematic data analytics approach in workforce planning.

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