

The Human Side of IT:

BUILDING A POSITIVE IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICE DELIVERY

With federal funding from ARPA and the infrastructure bill streaming into local government, agencies are able to procure more IT tools, applications and solutions. But city and county technology executives are finding it increasingly difficult to retain current staff and find new employees to maintain IT operations at an effective level.

The CompTIA Public Technology Institute conducted interviews with technology executives regarding the human side of information technology operations, specifically on the issue of IT staffing. The following is a picture of the local government IT workforce landscape—what executives are experiencing today with IT personnel.

Some are calling this the time of the “great retirement,” as many employees reach retirement age and move on with their lives, or the “great resignation,” as many employees deal with burnout or have simply had enough and move to the private sector or another career.

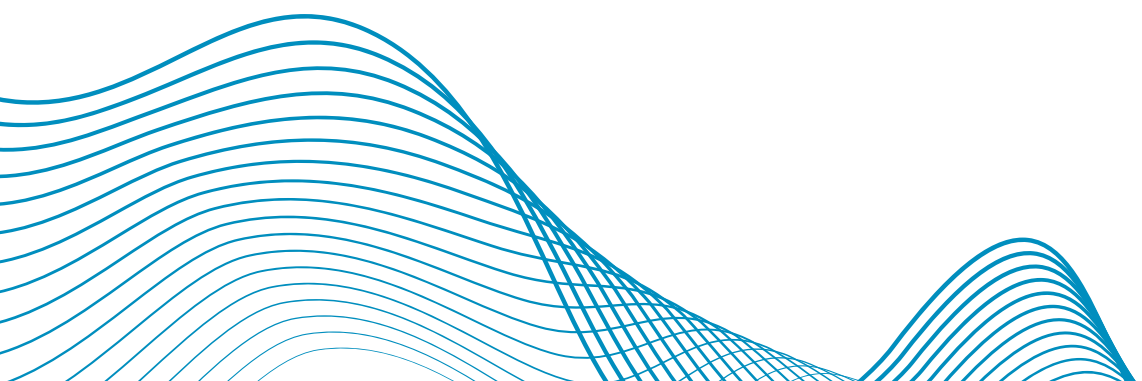
This is a hot market right now for IT professionals. As we know, it is difficult for local governments to compete with the private sector when it comes to salary and benefits, and the remote work opportunities that are much more pervasive—and accepted—in the private sector. By some estimates over half the technology workforce is looking at changing jobs.

There is also the often-overlooked issue of IT employee burnout. Add to the tremendous pressures that IT professionals faced during the pandemic—ramping up and sustaining alternative work and service delivery environments—and the tremendous responsibilities of ensuring a safe cyber environment, some employees are feeling overwhelmed.

For some they feel underappreciated and underpaid. Many more are feeling the stress and want something different. Others may be receiving mixed messages from their organization’s leaders, leaving them uncertain about the future of remote work in their department.

Regardless of what is impacting your organization, the successful IT leader must have a true view of the workforce environment you are currently facing and will face in the months to come. There must be no delay in developing strategies to retain and grow your IT workforce. It should be remembered that it is much more expensive to recruit and hire a new employee than it is to retain a current employee.

Turnover in the technology area can weaken the organizations security posture as new employees with elevated permissions are onboarded. Employee morale and the once-valued culture of the organization may suffer. Stemming the tide of departures from the organization is worth the investment of time and resources.



This is easier said than done. Of course, local government can't compete with private sector salaries; working in government is unique and not for everyone; and the cost of living in some communities hinders some possible job applicants from relocating.

However, there is hope.

If possible, be flexible. Many local governments can continue with some form of a hybrid remote work policy, and we have found this has true appeal to many in the IT workforce: No time spent commuting, reduced costs for meals and parking, and a less harmful impact on the environment. Hopefully, your management and elected leaders see the value and opportunities in this setting. Your organization has likely expected flexibility from the workforce over the last 18 months. Your workforce now has the same expectation of the organization!

The strategies to retain and grow the IT workforce need to change in response to the changing work environment. This may be an opportune time to begin a career development program, invest in staff training and certifications, and promote employees from within. Many local governments are proud of the culture they have built over the years and are loath to see it change. Adapting the culture to an environment of greater communication, flexibility and career-focus will ensure movement in a positive direction.

It is important to recognize that "one size does not fit all" regarding the return to city or county work facilities. The job functions and work requirements vary by department. Particularly for many IT organizations, the job function does not have to be done from a government office or cubicle. Leaders should resist the temptation to only implement hybrid work schedules for the lowest common denominator of job functions. In other words, they should accept the fact that some in the organization will be able to work remotely and some may not.

When it comes to attracting IT talent, look at partnerships that will help to identify and attract new talent, whether it be apprenticeship programs for those entering the IT environment, partnerships with community colleges and IT education programs that tout the benefits of local government service. Consider partnerships with other organizations that will enable you to collaborate and save on resources. And consider the network and infrastructure services that could be better maintained by a managed services provider. When recruiting talent, always be on the lookout for candidates that are mission-focused and service oriented. Candidates that express an interest in making a difference and refer to a "career" and not just a "job" may be a better fit. It's not always just about the money! Many job seekers simply want their work to matter, to have made a difference at the end of the day, and to be compensated fairly.

It is not an either/or option: It is an "all of the above" plan that needs to be considered as we look at the human side of IT and maintaining the quality services that our residents and agency partners expect.

Most important, be in tune with your IT team. Be aware of their issues and struggles and the overall employee wellness of your IT organization. Valuing employee health and wellbeing are important components of any employee retention strategy and help to ensure the overall success of the IT organization. Here are some approaches that IT leaders can take to help IT staff stay motivated:

- Seek employee feedback and act on it.
- Invest in employee learning and development; ensure career pathways exist for all employees.
- Recognize and reward your team members regularly.
- Establish positive communications channels.
- Encourage workplace socialization.
- Offer meaningful opportunities to grow.
- Hire and promote employees based on skills.
- If your organization allows, adopt flexible schedules.

About the CompTIA Public Technology Institute

PTI merged into CompTIA in January 2019 yet remains a distinct and semi-autonomous membership and service delivery organization. Established in 1971 by the several major national associations representing state and local governments, PTI has been viewed as the focal point for thought leaders who have a passion for the furtherance and wise deployment of technology. PTI's initial funding was through a grant from the National Science Foundation. Today, PTI actively supports local government officials through research, education, professional development, executive-level consulting services, and national recognition programs. Visit www.pti.org

