

FEDERAL BRAIN DRAIN



November 21, 2005

FED-ER-AL BRAIN DRAIN
(ˈfəd(-ə)-rəl ˈbrān ˈdrān)
noun

A departure of intellectually or technically skilled personnel from government employment to another environment.

FURTHER READING

Barr, Stephen. "OPM Sweetens Recruitment, Retention Incentives for Workers in Crucial Jobs," *The Washington Post* (May 19, 2005).

Department of Transportation, "Addressing Controller Attrition: Opportunities and Challenges Facing the Federal Aviation Administration" (June 15, 2004).

Government Accountability Office, "Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning" GAO-04-39 Washington, D.C.: 2004.

Partnership for Public Service, "Mid-Career Hiring in the Federal Government: A Strategy for Change" 2002.

Partnership for Public Service, "Mid-Career Hiring: Revisiting the Search for Seasoned Talent in the Federal Government" 2004.

The loss of experienced personnel is one of the surest ways to undercut an organization's effectiveness. When this loss occurs rapidly and is concentrated in critical positions, the results can be devastating. The departure of top-level employees at the Federal Emergency Management Agency is often cited as a key reason it struggled to respond effectively to Hurricane Katrina. Similar brain drains are likely to occur across government as 44 percent of all federal workers become eligible to retire over the next five years, with 61 percent reaching eligibility four years later.

TROUBLE ON THE HORIZON

Large-scale turnover. The federal government is particularly vulnerable to the coming baby boomer retirements. While the average age of the American worker has increased over the past decade, the federal civil service has twice as many workers over age 45 (60 percent) as the private sector (31 percent). According to Office of Personnel Management (OPM) estimates, among all full-time permanent employees in the federal workforce as of October 2004, 58 percent of supervisory and 42 percent of non-supervisory workers will be eligible to retire by the end of FY 2010. In addition to these retirements, well over 200,000 federal employees are expected to resign over the next five years, resulting in a potential loss of nearly 900,000 workers.

Loss of key employees. The impact on government effectiveness will be compounded by the concentration of turnover in high-level and hard-to-staff positions with specialized skills:

- ★ 40 percent of Department of Homeland Security managers and program analysts will reach retirement eligibility by 2009.
- ★ 42 percent of the Senior Executive Service is projected to retire by 2010.

- ★ 87 percent of claims assistants and examiners in the Social Security Administration and 94 percent of their administrative law judges will reach retirement eligibility by 2010.

- ★ The Federal Aviation Administration's air traffic controller attrition rates are estimated to triple by 2012.

NEW APPROACHES NEEDED

This growing brain drain has led to new efforts to keep valuable members of the workforce and increase hiring of experienced personnel. For example, with the Partnership's encouragement, OPM retooled its Presidential Management Intern program into a "Fellows" (PMF) program designed to attract both new graduates and mid-career hires.

Congress and the Executive Branch are moving to keep the government's most experienced and high-performing workers by giving agencies greater flexibility to offer retention incentives and rehire retirees with skills necessary for mission success. Finally, education loan repayment is increasingly being offered by agencies to help recruit and retain younger talent.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The coming wave of baby boomer retirements, combined with other turnover, threatens to dramatically diminish the federal government's effectiveness in meeting urgent public needs. Heading off this brain drain will require efforts to bring in more mid-career hires, including a robust PMF program, strategic application of workforce flexibilities to help retain and rehire greater numbers of experienced personnel, and wider use of student loan repayments and other incentives to recruit a new generation of top talent.



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

To learn more about the Federal Brain Drain, please visit
www.ourpublicservice.org or email
research@ourpublicservice.org