

Improving people performance in government and the public sector

How online assessments help government and public sector employers make better people decisions



Questionmark Viewpoint

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Introduction

Government and public sector employers regularly get advice. Commentators frequently express views on how government workforces should be better managed. Few, however, understand the challenges that make most of the “easy answers” deceptively complicated.

Commentators urge public bodies to import skills from the private sector. But will business people be able to adapt to the political realities of working within government machinery?

They encourage employers to use the latest technologies to improve recruitment and people management. But how often do the technological tools available actually meet the stringent security requirements that government service demand?

We have worked with government organizations around the world helping to cut through these dilemmas. Doing so empowers employers to make better decisions about their people.

This white paper:

- Sets out the people-related challenges that are common among government and public sector organizations around the world
- Demonstrates how online assessments of the workforce can give employers the information they need to make better decisions about their people
- Confronts the problems of security and the challenges public bodies face in ensuring potentially helpful tools pass the safety test

Questionmark Viewpoint

Questionmark Viewpoint is a series of white papers and reports that we produce to explore the challenges that our customers are facing, and which we help them address. These papers are based on what we are hearing from customers, and on research from other experts.

Confronting the challenges

Many people-related challenges are common across different arms of government around the world.

- 1) An aging workforce** – according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, millennials will make up 75% of the US workforce by 2025. However, only 27% of public workers fit within that age range.¹ Just 35% of UK civil servants are younger than 40.² Millennial and GenZ workers – those born after 1981 - seem reluctant to apply for positions in the public sector.
- 2) Assessing the 'cultural fit' of outsiders** – during times of economic uncertainty, public sector employers typically receive an influx of applications from the business community.³ This can be a great opportunity to import skills that help drive efficiency and innovation. But will all potential recruits be a good fit for culture?

People with a background in the private sector can struggle to adapt to the political constraints of working in government.⁴ It is difficult to identify from applications and interviews, which potential employees will be able to make the shift.

- 3) Diversity** – a diverse workforce is a priority for many people seeking employment. In the UK, 79% of public sector employees believed there was more work to be done on diversity according to a survey supported by the Public Services People Managers Association (PSPMA).⁵ The US federal workforce remains mostly white.⁶ This could be a factor in deterring some potential applicants from applying for positions. 88% of millennials and GenZs identify working in a diverse environment as a priority.⁷

Diversity can be hindered by the problem of unconscious bias. Without realizing it, employers may be basing their recruitment and promotion decisions on factors

¹ <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/pages/hiring-challenges-confront-public-sector-employers.aspx>

² <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/age-civil-service>

³ <https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/article-details/the-key-challenges-facing-public-sector-recruitment>

⁴ <https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/article-details/the-key-challenges-facing-public-sector-recruitment>

⁵ <https://www.onrec.com/news/opinion/public-sector-battling-with-recruitment-challenges>

⁶ <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/workforce/2018/05/who-they-are-and-where-they-work-the-federal-workforce-by-the-numbers/slide/5/>

⁷ https://yello.co/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/TL_2018_Diversity_Study.pdf

other than who is best for the job.⁸ Hirers may subconsciously opt for familiarity and choose a candidate that reminds them of the current workforce. If they do so, they miss an opportunity to nurture diversity.

For more information on how employers can overcome decision bias, read our report [“Beyond Decision Bias: Making Objective People Decisions”](#).

- 4) **Slow recruitment processes** – while private sector companies can make quick hiring decisions, candidates often wait several months to hear if they have been successful in securing a job in government. Good candidates involved in a lengthy government recruitment process may accept an alternative position in the private sector before the process is concluded. This could be another factor in deterring young people from applying to public sector jobs.⁹

- 5) **Guarding against compliance errors and breaches** – public employees need to work within a tightly regulated framework. In the past 10 years, US spending on compliance reached \$7.5 billion.¹⁰ Government organizations are often targets for phishing and cyber-attacks. Some 32% of all data breaches involve phishing, while 29% involve stolen credentials.¹¹

Human error makes organizations more vulnerable to both. So it is critical for public employees to understand the rules they must work within and risks they must minimize.

- 6) **Security barriers to using the latest people management and recruitment technology** – public sector employers can struggle to use the latest management, recruitment technologies. Many remain reliant on pen and paper systems. This is not just because public-sector employers are reluctant to innovate. Stringent security requirements typically mean that incorporating new technologies is often not an option.

⁸ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pragyaagarwaleurope/2019/02/20/how-to-minimize-unconscious-bias-during-recruitment/#7816f16f5fd9>

⁹ <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/pages/hiring-challenges-confront-public-sector-employers.aspx>

¹⁰ <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/behavioral-economics/compliance-challenges-public-sector-programs.html>

¹¹ <https://vz.to/3dECow5>

Transforming people decisions with assessments

Government organizations and agencies often see the value of gathering and analyzing data. It is often essential for forming policy, implementing projects or encouraging behavior change.

Too often, however, employers fail to seek information to make decisions about their most important asset, the people they employ. A survey for the PSPMA found that only 20% of public sector respondents actively use data to drive their decision making and strategy development when it comes to people management.¹²

Online assessments can empower public-sector employers to make better people decisions.

- **Improving the quality of hire** – testing candidates before they are offered a job can ensure that new recruits are the right cultural fit. As well as identifying whether a potential recruit has the skills to perform the role, attitudes can be assessed. The results indicate whether a candidate is suited to the sensitivities of a particular role.

After implementing assessment technology, 76% of corporations have seen an increase in the quality of hire.¹³

By providing an objective measure of who is best for the job, assessments can help confront any unconscious bias that emerged during the interview process. Assumptions can be challenged. The best decisions can be made.

- **Speed up the recruitment process** – with our platform, papers are instantly marked. Results are instantly compiled. It is easy to spot trends and patterns. It is much quicker to decide on which candidates to take to the next stage of the process or offer the job to.
- **Test the effectiveness of training** – when investing in staff training, assessments, often in the form of surveys after the course, can reveal whether the right information has been digested and retained. Assessments can measure whether people liked the training, learned from the training and whether they now have the skills to put what

¹² <https://www.onrec.com/news/opinion/public-sector-battling-with-recruitment-challenges>

¹³ Brandon Hall Group, Assessing Assessments: Value and Impact

they have learned into practice. Assessments also allow employers to prove to stakeholders that staff have been effectively trained.

- **Nurture a diverse workforce** – when making decisions on promotions or recruitment, assessments can prove which candidates have the appropriate skills and competencies for the job. Any unconscious biases can be challenged. Where training is introduced to promote diversity and equality, assessments can measure what participants have learned.
- **Introducing internal certification programs** – setting milestones for staff and testing that they have achieved them, gives team members clear goals to work toward. By awarding internal certifications that demonstrate progress, a sense of career development can be increased, improving staff engagement. Given that government employers cannot always offer equivalent salaries to the private sector, demonstrating career development can help attract the best applicants.
- **Building a culture of compliance** – getting staff to attend training on the relevant regulations is not enough. Employers must test staff after training to ensure that the right information has been imparted and that it has stuck. Staff that have not learned what they should, can be retrained. Where the course is failing to make an impact, the content and delivery method can be revised.

Investing in safe and secure technology

While many government bodies see the value of making data-informed people decisions, many of the tools available for gathering data and information simply do not pass the security test. Governments recognize that they are often targets of cyber-attacks and espionage. Any technology they use to store and process data must meet the highest security standards.

Our enterprise-grade assessment platform can be used safely and securely by government agencies around the world.

- **FedRAMP Authorization** – the platform has achieved Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program (FedRAMP) Authorization. It meets over 300 security control requirements and can be used safely by the US government and military.
- **Experienced provider** – we power assessments for many public bodies. The United States Airforce has recently started using the platform.
- **Global confidence** – because our platform has met stringent requirements in the US, government organizations around the world can have confidence in our ability to deliver assessments safely and securely.

For more information about the security reassurances we can offer government, please see our [“Questionmark OnDemand for Government”](#) white paper.

We have worked with government organizations around the world, helping them to make better decisions and meet the challenges outlined in this paper.

If you are interested in beginning a conversation with us please visit our website and book a demo:

<https://www.questionmark.com/sectors-and-uses/public-sector-and-government/>





About Questionmark

We help organizations and their people unlock their potential to deliver better performance. Questionmark provides a secure enterprise-grade assessment platform and professional services to leading organizations around the world, delivered with care and unequalled expertise. Its full-service online assessment tool and professional services help customers to improve their performance and meet their compliance requirements. Questionmark enables organizations to unlock their potential by delivering assessments which are valid, reliable and fair, which can be defended.

Questionmark offers secure powerful integration with learning management systems (LMS), learning record stores (LRS) and proctoring services making it easy to bring everything together in one place. Questionmark's cloud-based assessment management platform offers rapid deployment, scalability for high-volume test delivery, 24/7 support, and the peace-of-mind of secure, audited U.S., Australian and European-based data centers.

Working with Questionmark

To further explore how Questionmark could work for your organization, or to book a free consultation and demo, please see: <https://www.questionmark.com/request-demo/>

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