



HUMAN RESOURCES

Recruiting and Retaining IT Staff

How Indiana's tech services office is hiring, and hanging onto, top employees.

BY PAM GREENBERG

The high-tech workplace is known for competitive salaries, great benefits and fun perks like casual dress codes, free food and giveaways aplenty. They often receive cutting-edge training and get access to the latest technologies.

Government just can't compete with that, right? Wrong. Offering benefits and perks more commonly seen in the private sector is among the creative strategies one legislative information technology agency is using to attract and retain top talent.

Government's Challenges

A strong economy and a low unemployment rate have made it difficult for state agencies to land engineers, technicians and information technology professionals,

all of whom are in high demand in the private sector. In a new report, the National Association of State Chief Administrators identified several reasons the states' task has become more difficult, including changes in workforce expectations and the reduced appeal of "lifetime employment" among younger generations, less-competitive salaries, and negative perceptions about working for government.

Legislatures face the same challenges. Legislative IT directors and chief information officers said in a 2017 survey that the only thing harder than "finding and retaining skilled IT staff" was "keeping up with security threats."

About six years ago, the Office of Technology Services at the Indiana Legislative Services Agency started expanding as technology in the legislature grew in

importance. The office was developing a suite of legislative applications and updating others all while maintaining its existing systems and providing customer support.

Cues From the Private Sector

To improve recruitment and retention of IT employees, agency leaders supported several innovations suggested by their technology team. They adopted C-suite titles (chief operating officer, chief technology officer, etc.) and "lead" positions (team lead) common to the private sector. They agreed to hire workers with H-1B visas and went to area universities to recruit. They redesigned their office space to foster collaboration and gave IT staff access to the equipment best suited to the work they were doing.

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Jeff Ford, chief technology officer,
Indiana Legislative Services Agency

They even found a way to provide “free” food when team managers personally funded a snack pantry for employees.

The agency did salary surveys and was able to offer more competitive pay for most IT positions. And, finally, it created career ladders so that employees can earn promotions with associated pay increases over time.

Creating Change

The initiatives changed the organization, Chief Technology Officer Jeff Ford says. “More and more often, I’m able to hire the smartest people and pay them what they are worth.”

Ford, who also serves as chairman of NCSL’s National Association of Legislative Information Technology, makes training a priority. “I send them to the top training and conferences to learn about emerging technologies and to enhance their skills,” he says. Staff also can earn certifications.

The team allocates at least two full weeks per year for training and personal development. And contrary to the belief that training and certifications will just give employees the skills to move on to more lucrative jobs, Ford has found they have improved retention and productivity.

Government’s Advantages

The legislature has other benefits it can offer employees. “Sell your strengths,”

Ford says. His agency offers employees comp time and opportunities to convert unused paid time off into retirement deposits each year. It also offers a sustainable work-life balance—weeks over 40 hours are rare, and team members can use accrued comp time for vacations when the legislature is out of session. Ford compares that to the hours typically worked in private-sector tech companies and shows employees how that equates favorably when converted to an hourly wage.

Legislative employees also can qualify for the Federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program, which forgives remaining student loan debt after a person has worked 10 years for a qualified employer.

Focus on Employees

Ford’s agency treats employees as individuals, he says, celebrating promotions and anniversaries, even taking in the latest “Star Wars” movie or a local escape room. Personal development is a priority.

“We are hyper-focused on ensuring that our people are as happy as possible,” he says. “I let them choose how often they talk to me—some come every week, some less often. Some people want structure, others just want to write code.”

A three-day hackathon every year after session ends gives staff a chance to be creative. In 2018, they came up with a Google plug-in to enhance the legislature’s inter-

Coding Events Yield New Legislative Services

A hackathon—aka hack marathon, hack day, hackfest, codefest—is an event in which programmers collaboratively code over a short period of time. The events typically allow developers to work on whatever ideas or projects they want.

The Indiana General Assembly’s Office of Technology Services hosts annual hackathons for its IT staff in which teams compete over three to four days to develop new legislative applications. Each team prepares a demo and presentation to be judged on the last day of the hackathon.

Teams have developed a live-session dashboard, a bill-tracking and search plug-in, and a tool to visualize all bills in play during session and at each phase of the legislative process. The competitions further inspired the staff to create a way for citizens to register to give testimony from a tablet kiosk.

nal bill tracking system. “They were able to take it to production quickly and were ecstatic about the result,” Ford says.

The office also adapts roles and assignments to keep people challenged and engaged. “We try to give everyone opportunities to be a leader in different ways,” Ford says. “All senior-level people get there by being mentored, and one thing that will help you get ahead is if you mentor others.”

But being a manager is not what drives Ford. “No one wants to go to work to be managed,” he says. “When I see people congregating around desks, solving problems ... it’s one of the best things about what I do.”

Pam Greenberg tracks technology issues for NCSL.