

Get Ready for the N-Gen

● YOU'VE HEARD IT — a lot. Over the next 20 years, an entire generation of baby boomers will retire, creating an exodus of knowledge and skills that will increase competition for young talent. The flip side of that statement is less gloomy: That exodus will reward early adopters of Web 2.0 technologies. The question in government information technology circles is, “Can Uncle Sam be one of the winners?” Maybe.

In the United States, this demographic shift will see more than 60,000 civil-service employees retire annually between 2007 and 2012. The Defense Department, for example, is set to lose 20 percent of its workforce over the next five years. Many of these people hold executive, managerial or key administrative positions. Replacing experienced leaders will be nearly impossible, but capturing their knowledge using new Web 2.0 technologies is not only possible but also mission critical. Indeed, if ever there was an imperative for embracing new technologies in the federal workplace, this is it.

A Whole New Net

Second-generation Web technologies, such as blogs, wikis and social networking, can democratize the ability of ordinary users to create and distribute content on the Internet. User-generated sites, such as Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia, epitomize the participatory and collaborative nature of Web 2.0.

But it's not retirements that's driving the adoption of these technologies; rather, it's the arrival of a new generation of digital natives. The Net Generation, or N-Gen, is the first group of young people to be immersed in an interactive, hyperstimulating digital environment since birth. The N-Gen's lifelong exposure to digital technologies has given rise to generational attributes that distinguish its members from previous generations.

Recruiting and retaining N-Generations, however, will require public-sector organizations to counter an alarming trend: Just when government most needs an infusion of fresh-thinking talent, there's growing disinterest in public administration as a profession among young people.

The stereotypical image of agencies as rigid, repetitive and hierarchically managed work environments must change if the government wishes to remain competitive in the battle for talent. All too often, young employees arrive in the public-sector workplace to discover that many of the applications and devices they are accustomed to using in their personal lives are not available to them professionally. Drawing on their experience on sites such as Facebook and YouTube, young government professionals have organized ad hoc communities using blogs, wikis and social-networking tools to transcend organizational boundaries.

COMPETITION

20% FOR TALENT
of young Americans
between the ages of 13
and 30 consider the public
sector their ideal employer,
compared with nonprofit
organizations (25%) and
the private sector (55%).

SOURCE: New Paradigm

More often than not, senior managers put the kibosh on such enterprising, under-the-radar efforts, citing concerns about data security or legal constraints. Truth be told, there is considerable trepidation among middle managers in particular, who worry that Web 2.0 could flatten workplace hierarchies in the same way that consumer-empowering technologies are democratizing entire industries, such as media, entertainment and software.

Even so, some agencies have seen past these constraints and are demonstrating how Web technologies can promote knowledge sharing, better communication, increased collegiality and cross-departmental collaboration. At the State Department, Diplopedia provides a living repository of organizational knowledge and lets Foreign Service officers share vital information with colleagues worldwide. Similarly, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence created Intellipedia, a wikified (but highly secure) portal, to promote intelligence gathering and sharing across intelligence agencies. State and intelligence officials note that these technologies help build bridges between the incoming generation of young employees and their senior peers.

Contrary to popular opinion, wikis, blogs and other Web 2.0 technologies are not about letting employees run wild, and they needn't constitute a risk if efforts are made to properly secure and support them. They provide a vital platform for innovation, collaboration and problem solving in the public sector and are part and parcel of 21st-century work environments. Migrating to such an environment can create apprehension and fear, but the need to compete for talent, create efficiencies and increase the value that government delivers to citizens makes that migration a necessity — and an urgent one. **FT**

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For another take on this topic, turn the page to Jim Shanks' column. Plus, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency's Chris Rasmussen offers pointers on real-world use of Web 2.0 tools now, Page 57.

