

# Attracting and retaining the right workforce

Civica sponsored roundtable

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Public sector finance departments are under pressure to compete in the war for talent. Organisations must work hard to attract and retain new, capable staff at all levels and across the many specialisms of the finance profession. The importance of this is underscored by the need for effective leadership that creates the right work culture and environment; offering engaging career opportunities and creating a compelling narrative that positions senior finance roles as both attractive and socially beneficial.

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) recognises these challenges and is actively working towards solutions. We are therefore grateful to CIVICA for sponsoring this roundtable discussion and allowing us to explore this topic with a wide range of finance practitioners from different sectors and different areas of the country.

The participants covered a great deal of ground, which we captured around two themes, effective leadership and attracting the right staff. However, it is difficult to encapsulate the passion and enthusiasm this topic engendered from our finance professionals.

As one of our contributors said: "while I'd get out of bed for a spreadsheet, not everyone would."

## **Effective leadership that creates the right work culture and environment**

Ensuring the organisational tone aligns with the values and expectations of potential candidates is crucial. This involves the communication of values as well as their embodiment in the organisation's culture and practices. Going beyond that it is also

about valuing that sense of public service and contribution to society.

Participants talked about the value of seeing employment in the public service as positive and important:

*"The public sector often has an image problem. People don't understand what we do - we need to educate people and provide success stories."*

One contributor had seen a surge in applications for their finance graduate role, many of which became interested after reading about it in the media. Despite some of the less positive stories in the media, it still raised the profile of the public sector.

Unsurprisingly, hybrid working was discussed. All recognised that getting the right office to home working ratio was a key area where leadership culture and recruitment came together.

While there was a strong leaning towards the right balance, there was a consensus that office working played an important part in attracting and retaining the right workforce. Leadership was key to setting the tone and the office was the place to pick up certain knowledge and skills in an informal way. One of the newly qualified participants spoke of her preference "to go into the office if I need strategic support but otherwise, I can focus at home." She also reflected that she was part of the first generation of the workforce that had never experienced pre-Covid working so full time in the office was an alien concept. There needs to be a compromise to get people in the office to create that faster learning environment and this is where leadership needs to step in.

One of the more experienced contributors identified that as

a result of home working, newly qualified staff who were technically experienced had not developed softer leadership skills as they are not exposed to this in a regular office environment. Solutions that resonated within the group included mentoring from senior staff, supporting less experienced staff to engage with leadership teams such as minute taking at senior meetings or observing at cabinet meetings. This would support personal development and is appealing both for new starters and retaining staff wanting development.

There were several suggestions around development opportunities:

*“We offer one year development opportunities to new staff as often as possible. We might not have the money for a full-time role, but it gives people a taste of something new.”*

All agreed that, due to funding constraints, some full-time roles could not be established and so flexibility was key.

### **Attracting the right staff**

The offer must be compelling enough to attract the right talent. This includes competitive compensation, opportunities for professional development and a clear path for career progression.

“It can be as obvious as the job title,” one attendee explained, stating that there are so many different job titles, it was often difficult to know what you could apply for. Renewing and refreshing job descriptions and titles seemed obvious but there are internal barriers such as HR recruitment policies. One contributor said: “I don’t see myself as an accountant but more of a finance manager enabling colleagues around the organisation to achieve goals. We need to frame the job in this way to generate interest - and job descriptions need to reflect this.”

Recruitment and job descriptions must align with the need of the organisation. All agreed that data and analytical skills were highly prized, but understanding artificial intelligence would also be important. “We need to recruit from a wide pool of people to get the skills for the future” was a message that landed well.

One participant shared their view that: “the response from CIPFA trainees to data analytics and AI training has been positive,” suggesting a growing interest in these areas. This presents an opportunity to tailor training and development programs to include more data and AI components, aligning with the skills needed for modern public finance roles.

There is a need to make the job offer relevant for those with these skills, who can then build up their finance qualifications. The discussion also reinforced that the qualification needs to be updated to make sure that CPD (Continuing Professional

Development) and qualified professionals continued to keep up to date with new skills and competencies.

There was full consensus that the role was far more than attracting people who were good at numbers. One comment that was well-received was: “it is the attitude and approach of the individual that is important. We can teach the technical skills.”

Some participants also talked about the fact that organisations needed to recognise that the idea that “a job in the public sector was a job for life” is not necessarily true.

### **Final parting thoughts**

All agreed that succession planning is important. While high staff turnover and vacancies can adversely affect retention, individuals who are comfortable in their current roles and are reluctant to move can make it difficult to create a career pathway for those wanting to progress. In the public sector, it can also be hampered by limited resources and short-term funding.

Fairness and equity in recruitment are also critical considerations. With smaller finance teams, opportunities may be limited, prompting the need to explore collaborative arrangements with other councils to expand opportunities and allow for greater flexibility and movement between roles and councils.

### **Summary**

The key to attracting and retaining the right workforce in public finance lies in creating a compelling value proposition that encompasses leadership, development, and a supportive environment. The take aways from the conversation included:

- Developing a value proposition to attract individuals
- Offering an agile working solution that combines home and office working
- Selling the diverse skills sets that finance professionals have, beyond the numbers
- Creating a vision for a career that offers growth and development
- Addressing internal barriers such as limited job descriptions and policies
- Promoting the positive contribution that public finance professions make to society
- Emphasising the diversity of opportunity within different finance disciplines
- Highlighting the relevance and contemporary nature of the qualification

By addressing these areas, public finance organisations can ensure they have the talent necessary to meet current and future challenges.