Skills Measurement for IT Talent—How Government Agencies are Putting Commercial Best Practices to Work

For the past decade, IT professionals have been flocking to companies offering attractive opportunities for growth and innovation. Meanwhile, government agencies have been lagging behind, unable to compete with the salary potential and well-developed IT culture of the corporate marketplace. But according to USDA Deputy CIO Ira Hobbs, things are starting to change.

Today, government agencies are catching up with the commercial IT marketplace, taking advantage of business best practices such as skills measurement to attract, retain and develop IT talent. The lessons they're learning along the way are paving the road for the development of a new government IT skills capability, and skills measurement is a crucial part of that effort.

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NAPA Report Defines Government IT Skills Challenges

In August 2001, Hobbs was involved with the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) as it published a report of its findings on the issues facing government IT recruiters. This report, *The Transforming Power of Information Technology: Making the Federal Government an Employer of Choice* for IT Employees focuses on compensation and benefits, skills and talent management, and other best practices for attracting and managing IT talent. Is measuring and tracking IT skills a big deal? The report raises some compelling answers:

- "In fiscal year 2001, the federal IT budget exceeded $42 billion."

- "The Bureau of Labor Statistics' [projects] that across all sectors, there will be 820,000 new IT jobs created by 2005. By factoring in turnover among current IT workers, 1,047,000 new entrants into the job pool are needed by 2005."

- "Experts in IT management contend that the best or star performers in IT are from 4 to 10 times as productive as the typical employee."

The report attracted considerable attention and soon became the subject of a government hearing. Convinced that conventional recruiting approaches would be inadequate for addressing the problem across government, Hobbs was part of a team that proposed the idea of a "Virtual Job Fair" to be held by the government recruiting organization, the Office of Personnel Management.

Virtual Job Fair Takes Skills Measurement to the Government IT Marketplace

From April 22–29, 2002, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) held its first IT Virtual Job Fair. "The idea was simple," Hobbs says. "When we do a job fair, we usually have to book a facility, engage recruiters, and advertise—all well in advance of the event itself. This time we put it all online." Skills measurement was a crucial ingredient in the virtual job fair. A candidate could access the site, find a listed position and its skills requirements, and take an online assessment to prove those skills. The OPM job fair listed jobs for multiple participating agencies, and the results were dramatic.

"We had 2 million visitors," says Hobbs, "and 18,000 people applied for jobs. In a matter of weeks we filled positions that normally would have taken several months to fill." For OPM, online skills measurement proved to be a critical component in job fair performance. Without offering online skills assessments, OPM never would have been able to process the large amount of applicants as quickly as it did.

According to Hobbs, the online skills measurement approach used in the IT job fair achieved some important goals. First, the measurement system supported a new competency-based approach to defining job qualifications. Traditionally, government agencies have defined job qualifications in terms of experience or seniority in a particular field rather than through proficiency with a particular skill.

"The Brainbench skills measurement solution used in the IT job fair highlighted the importance of skills competency," says Hobbs.

In addition to competency-based recruiting efforts, the skills measurement solution also supported the use of newly developed job titles known as the GS-2210 Information Technology series. By attaching an objective measure to new job categories, the online skills measurement solution helped the agency reinforce a definition for each of those new job roles.

For Hobbs, the real benefit of the new job role series and the skills measurement system that supported it was that it helped to reach out to IT talent from the commercial marketplace. "Our skills measurement solution helped us better define job requirements in ways that any applicant, from inside or outside of a government environment, could relate to," he says. "We held the job fair for two main reasons —we wanted to show that it could be done, and we wanted to show that it could succeed. We did what we set out to do."

Skills Measurement at Work—Defining Rules for Success

By establishing definitions for critical IT skills, agencies are now better able to define the requirements for a job or project assignment. Now that agencies are taking advantage of objective online skills measurement solutions, they are looking at new ways of examining the role of skills in the success of any project.

"We're finding that success goes beyond having a team with the right technical skills for a job," says Hobbs. "You also need to have people who know how to manage the project. That's part of our current focus —we're now working on ways to better identify and measure essential project management skills among existing employees.

Hobbs believes that many of the answers to immediate government challenges lie in adopting best practices from industry, such as increased reliance on "certification" for validating the skills of employees. One of the biggest challenges faced by decision-makers as they set out on a skills inventory management initiative is the need for best practice expertise. "Whether it's project management or any other skill that we're looking for," says Hobbs, "we are basing our assessments on all knowledge available. And much of that knowledge comes from industry."

Moving Ahead—Skills Measurement to Play an Expanded Role
in Government Skills Inventory Management

What happens when government agencies begin recognizing IT job roles, skills, and requirements? "The bottom line is we are attracting the IT talent we need," says Hobbs.

"The job fair showed that we can attract the people," says Hobbs, "and that was a major step forward. But we still have a lot to do. We need to develop better systems for processing applications, and more efficient processes for utilizing and developing the skills of our current employees. Skills measurement will play an important part in enabling these important initiatives."

Today, in addition to OPM, other agencies such as Hobbs' own USDA are using online skills measurement to track and improve skills of current employees. Online assessments are also being implemented by the FBI to determine the current proficiency levels of the agency's IT professionals. The results will then be used to help the agency focus its training initiatives. DISA (Defense Intelligence Systems Agency) is using skills measurement results to validate employee skills to support intra-government contracting initiatives.

"Skills measurement is not a punitive measure," says Hobbs. "It makes the road clearer. It eliminates the guesswork. It lets people grow. Ultimately, it is helping us evolve to meet changing demands of the federal agency workload. That's what we're working to do, and we are achieving success."

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