4 Special focus: Recruitment in the public sector

This chapter presents a selection of comparative indicators on attraction and recruitment practices in OECD countries. The data were gathered as part of the OECD survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability in 2020-2021. The chapter presents the context for the survey, explains the importance of attraction and recruitment in the future, and discusses insights from data analysis. The chapter concludes with questions for further consideration.

Introduction: Recruiting the future public servants

Across the OECD, the public sector is increasingly competing for talent. This can be seen in the context of the public sector response to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which illustrates many of the features of the 'Future of Work' explored by the OECD. Sudden and highly complex policy challenges call for skilled and motivated public servants, as well as public employment and management systems able to attract, recruit and retain the best talent. However, potential candidates with in-demand skills, such as in digital or science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, have a great variety of choice of employers.

In this context, this chapter explores recruitment in the public sector, so that governments can attract and hire the workforce they need. The COVID-19 pandemic may be an opportunity to change the image of government as an employer, emphasising innovation, agility and impact. Government-run innovation hubs are popping up, bus shelters carry engaging advertisements for public sector jobs, and candidates with professional and academic backgrounds outside the relatively narrow list of 'traditional' backgrounds are finding that there can be a place for them in public sector work.

With increasing competition for certain skill sets, the public sector has scope to learn from organisations where competition for jobs is tough. Many candidates apply to big companies not only because they feel that they have good compensation packages, but also because working there provides a level of status that suits their personal image and values, and might be helpful for their future career development. Companies in this bracket invest energy and resources in understanding what makes them appealing to the types of people that they want to hire. In other words, they see recruitment as a proactive marketing activity – rather than wait for candidate to come to them, they actively promote their image to those they want to target and seek out the employees they want to hire. Like a good sales pipeline, effective marketing practices have a distinct impact on the quality of candidates.

Organisations then have to be sure that their recruitment processes are able to test and select candidates for the types of things that will add value to day-to-day work and longer-term organisational effectiveness. Why invest more in attracting better candidates if recruitment doesn't deliver?

Attraction and selection are two key aspects of recruitment that build public service capability: without effective strategies to reach candidates, recruitment processes will suffer from lack of candidate quality and volume. And without regular updates and reviews, selection processes risk not keeping pace with changing skills requirements. In practice, this calls for public sector recruitment systems that align the full end-to-end range of activities: employer branding, job advertising, application, testing and selection processes – and employee on-boarding and induction. This is why the 2019 OECD Recommendation on Public Service Leadership and Capability (PSLC) includes two specific provisions on recruiting public servants (OECD, 2019[1]). The first emphasises the need to be an attractive employer, and the second focuses on the important of rigorous, well aligned merit-based selection processes.

This chapter analyses the results of the survey on Public Service Leadership and capability conducted in 2020, in order to provide insight on how countries address the two principles of the PSLC Recommendation on recruitment. The first part presents and discusses data relating to various aspects of attraction; the second focuses on recruitment systems. The chapter concludes with reflections on how public sector attraction and recruitment systems can be more forward-looking, flexible, and fulfilling.

Key messages

- **Skills gaps are common in the public sector.** Most governments across the OECD find it hard to recruit candidates with specific skills, usually in IT or Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics-related fields (STEM). This may be because these skills are in-demand in the private sector, suggesting that the public sector will have to get better at reaching out to and recruiting these candidates.
- **Some countries are beginning to use more proactive recruitment practices.** This illustrates the shift from an administrative approach to candidate recruitment to one involving proactive marketing, sourcing, networking, evaluation and adjustment. This may call for up-skilling in the HR function.
- **There is scope to improve data on attraction and recruitment.** While many countries use different tools to improve attractiveness, fewer countries measure how effective these tools are. This may be an area that public employers can focus on and collaborate in the future.
- **Most selection processes test for analytical and behavioural competences** in addition to traditional areas based on knowledge and experience. This is important as these skill sets are fundamental to the future of the public sector – however these tests can be complex and require new skills among recruiting managers.
- **There is an increasing effort to attract under-represented groups** through a variety of tools and practices – but measurement is patchy and use of various bias mitigation tools is limited.

Attracting high quality candidates to public service positions

Convincing the right candidates to consider and apply for a public service job is the first step in recruiting needed talent. In the past, recruiters acted as the arbiter of information – centralised career websites described the job and conditions, allowing them to set the tone for much of the exchange between the organisation and the person applying to it. Now, prospective employers are ranked and reviewed across multiple online platforms (e.g. Glassdoor and LinkedIn) or through third-party accreditation ('Great Place to Work'). Ultimately, candidates have to select a potential employer before an employer gets the chance to select a candidate. As such, the balance of power has swung in favour of the candidate.

The public sector does lots of different things, so there is an urgent need to attract a diverse range of skills. Moreover, this urgency is underlined by a context in many countries of ageing workforces, uncompetitive wages for some professions, negative public sector image, and relatively slow recruitment practices. Following the global financial crisis in 2008, many public sector workforces suffered falls in trust levels as well as substantial cuts and freezes to recruitment and learning and development (OECD, 2016[2]). These may have contributed to reinforcing the image of some public services as less attractive career options. With the COVID-19 pandemic, public administrations across the OECD are currently in the spotlight as arguably never before through provision of economic support, healthcare and vaccine rollout. This means that public administrations have an opportunity to show the impact of a public sector career and the range of personal and professional opportunities it entails. To do this, they may have to consider aspects such as the following:
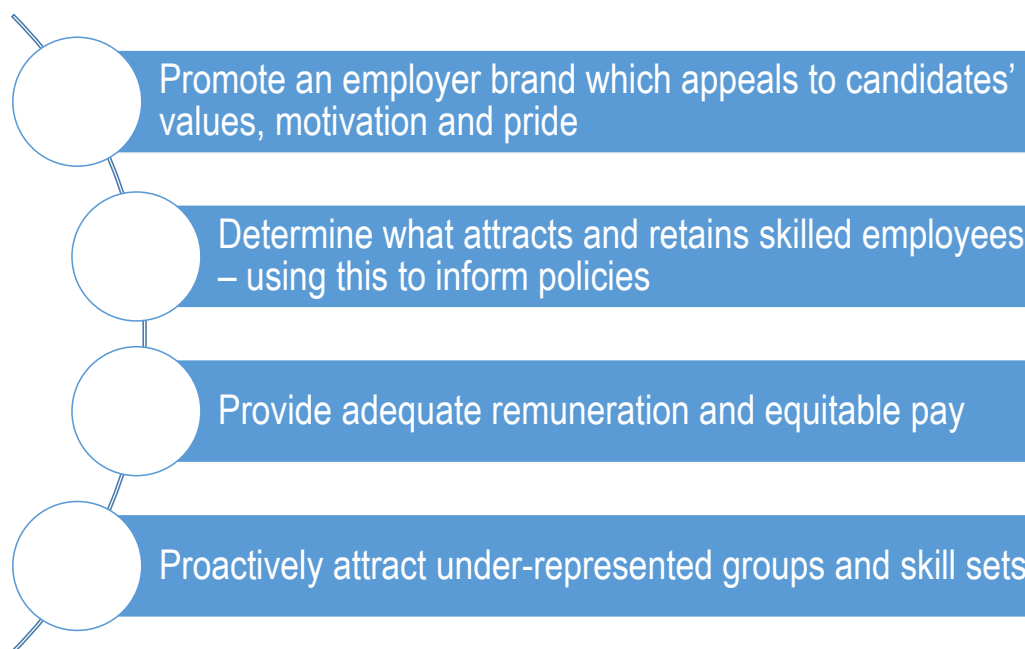
- Employer brands have multiple components: one way to frame them is as "the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the

employing company" (Ambler and Barrow, 1996[3]). Promoting this brand to candidates is a key part of attracting candidates with the right skills.

- Effective employer branding thus builds on insights into what attracts skilled candidates. Public sector recruiters can survey existing staff as well as prospective candidates (e.g. groups of university students who will soon be on the job market) to identify aspects of work in the public sector that matter to them. Identifying these aspects in a systematic manner and integrating them into advertising and recruitment campaigns can help increase employer-candidate fit and improve an employer brand.

- Uncompetitive pay is often cited as a barrier to hiring the right people in the public sector, particularly for in-demand skill sets and leadership positions. Some public administrations are working to embed flexibility in their pay and reward systems so that, under certain conditions, compensation for some key positions and skill sets can come closer to matching relevant market rates. Administrations can also explore non-pay elements of attractiveness, such as working conditions and opportunities for career development.

- Attracting more candidates with the right skills depends on making recruitment as inclusive as possible. This might call for going beyond traditional recruiting grounds, such as top-ranked universities, and developing new ways of reaching out to, and engaging with candidates from backgrounds that are less represented in the public service.

As illustrated in Figure 4.1, these points are codified in the OECD Recommendation on Public Service Leadership and Capability (PSLC).

**Figure 4.1. Principles relating to employer attractiveness**

Promote an employer brand which appeals to candidates' values, motivation and pride

Determine what attracts and retains skilled employees – using this to inform policies

Provide adequate remuneration and equitable pay

Proactively attract under-represented groups and skill sets

Source: OECD (2019[1]), *Recommendation of the Council on Public Service Leadership and Capability*, OECD/LEGAL/0445, OECD, Paris, https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0445.

OECD countries face challenges attracting specific skill sets

Countries across the OECD face challenges attracting candidates. However, lack of attraction is not uniform: candidates with specific professional backgrounds and distinct types of experience are harder to attract to a government job than others. Figure 4.2 illustrate that the main difficulties lie with people who have backgrounds in data and technology: 23 countries are actively trying to attract more data professionals and candidates with specific technical and IT expertise. Fourteen countries indicate challenges in attracting senior public servants. At the other end of the spectrum, most countries have little difficulty attracting clerical officers. While relatively few indicate challenges attracting candidates with skills in user-centred design, this may be because this field has only recently come into play for the public sector. Human resource professionals are a different case – just less than half of the responding countries indicate challenges in this area, many indicate these are not being addressed. Given the increased importance of quality HR professionals in the public service, this may a particular issues to track.

Figure 4.2. Attraction challenges in the public sector

Number of OECD countries, n=33, 2020
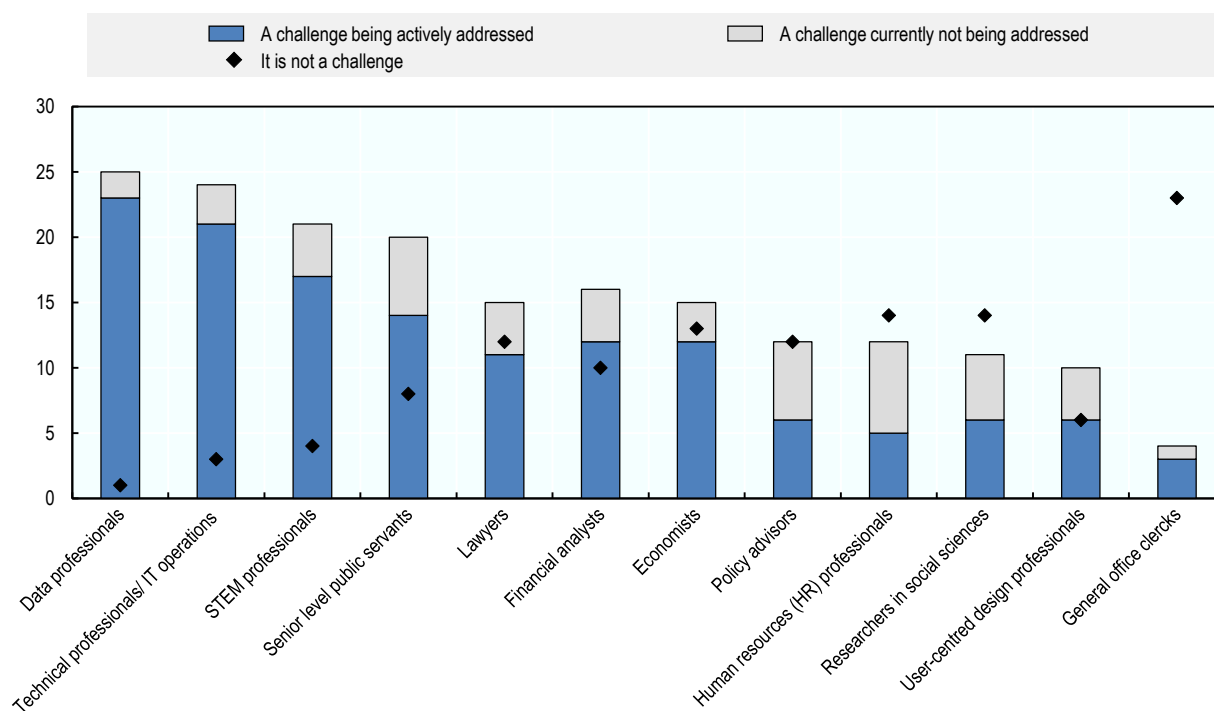
Note: N varies depending on the option, as some options were unknown by some OECD countries. Original survey question: "Does the central/ federal administration experience particular challenges in attracting any of the following groups of applicants/ skills?"
Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability, Module 2.

These types of skills gaps matter because of the nature of the policy and service delivery challenges that the public sector faces: data professionals in government, for example, have been able to work with third-party providers to frame the need for technology solutions, like developing smartphone apps to facilitate travel or notify of contact with a suspected Covid case.

In the context of specific skills gaps, effective communication and branding can help countries attract the talent they need. But doing these activities successfully may require a change of mind-set to go beyond existing talent pools and ways of finding candidates. Candidates with skills in data and IT may not necessarily think of a public sector job in the first place, especially if they are highly sought-after in the private sector. And if they do apply, they may have markedly different attitudes toward recruitment processes than candidates from more traditional public policy backgrounds. Experience from an OECD case study involving attracting candidates with cyber-security skills in Israel suggests that the best candidates expect highly personalised recruitment processes with access to information on their future managers, colleagues and career development opportunities.[1]

The challenge for public sector recruiters is then to identify new ways to meet the expectations of candidates with specific skill sets while still upholding the principles of fairness, transparency and merit. For example, the UK civil service has launched the 'No. 10 Innovation Fellowship' programme specifically aimed at bringing digital and technology talent into government. This programme aims to reach people that do not usually apply for government jobs and who tend to work mainly in the private sector. The recruitment conditions, tasks and branding of the programme set it apart from regular recruitment to government.

Proactive recruitment practices can help fill skills gaps

The ability of public administrations to fill skills gaps is related in part to how proactively they recruit, as well as the variety of tools they have at their disposal to do that. As illustrated in Figure 4.3, public administrations in OECD countries use a variety of tools to attract candidates. It is important to note that the data do not measure relative attractiveness from one administration to another. Rather, countries that score well on this indicator – like Hungary, Canada and New Zealand – use a broad variety of methods to proactively reach out to desirable candidates to promote the public service as a good place to work, and to convince them to apply.

Figure 4.3. Use of proactive recruitment practices
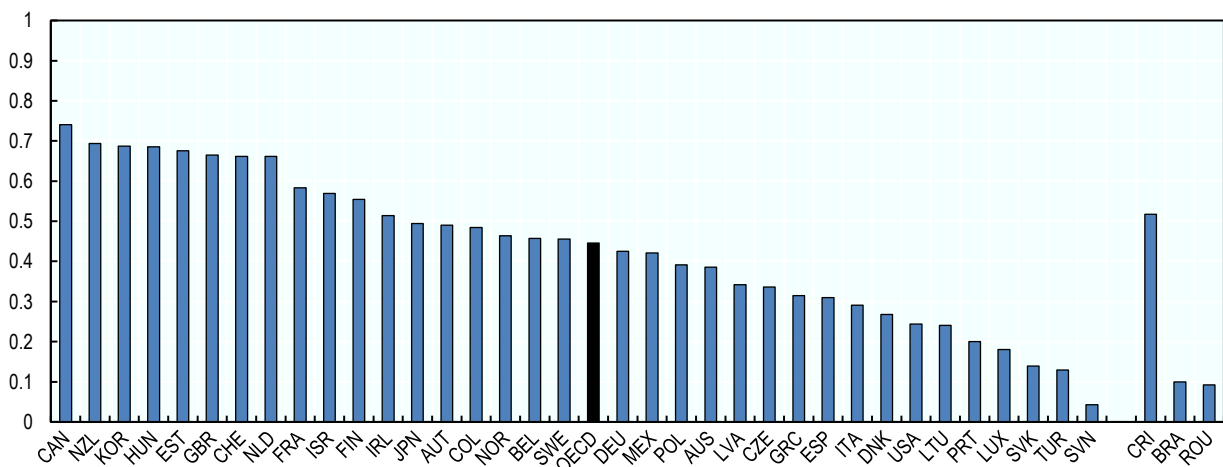
Note: this composite indicator is made up of weighted responses to questions regarding the following aspects of employer attractiveness: (1) elements highlighted in recruitment material; (2) the policies to attract more and better candidates with in-demand skills; (3) the use of methods to determine what attracts skilled employees; (4) adequate pay systems to attract good candidates; (5) the actions in place to improve the representation of under-represented groups. The variables composing the index and their relative importance are based on expert judgements. They are presented with the purpose of furthering discussion, and consequently may evolve over time. Missing data for countries were estimated by mean replacement. Data for Chile and Iceland are not available.
Source: OECD survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability (2020).

This indicator captures the most important and widely-used tools to improve employer attractiveness. The key message is that attracting candidates is a complex task that involves a variety of tools and methods that can be reasonably adapted to meet the needs of specific groups that the public sector is trying to recruit. The traditional practice of placing long, jargon-heavy job descriptions on government websites and waiting to see who applies is not effective to fill skills gaps (for a useful study on France, see (Profil Public, 2019[4]).

Countries that score well on this indicator periodically assess their 'offer' to candidates and develop communication strategies to communicate that message. These practices are strongly related to the concept of an 'employee value proposition', defined by the UK Government Digital Service as "everything that matters to employees at work, and […] the things they proudly talk about to friends and family away from the workplace and across social media (Shamsi, 2015[5])." This reflects both the inward-looking and outward-facing aspect of 'Talent Acquisition' (see Box 4.1): a clear employee value proposition can provide the basis for communication strategies and material, and hence an employer brand. Use of employee surveys can be a valuable tool to gather data on what staff enjoy about their job.

Box 4.1. Talent Acquisition in government

The Human Resource function has gone through various stages of evolution, from the admin-heavy 'personnel' departments of the 1960s through to the emergence of sub-disciplines in their own right such as Learning and Development, Talent Management – and Talent Acquisition. In its broadest sense, 'Talent Acquisition' refers to the spectrum of activities like deciding what types of skills are needed, how candidate with those skills can be encouraged to apply, and then developing assessment and interview methodologies before hiring and onboarding the candidate. Talent Acquisition as a discipline has also been heavily affected by the rise of social media, blogs, podcasts, and professional networking sites like LinkedIn – all rich areas of information for the recruiter eager to find talented candidates.

By its nature, talent acquisition is selective: recruiters make conscious decisions about encouraging specific individuals or groups from specific backgrounds (like high-ranking universities) to apply. This has a direct effect on the candidate pool and ultimately on the quality of candidate hired. If done right, organisations can benefit from greater match between the candidate and the organisation; if done poorly, talent acquisition can skew diversity and harm the organisation by creating perceptions of unfairness.

A key question for human resource professionals in the public sector is to consider how proactive – or not – their recruitment strategies are, and what resources they have available to develop more strategic engagement with the types of candidates they need. In some cases, this may call for a review of procedures for job posting as well as greater co-ordination of messaging and brand across multiple platforms like government career websites and LinkedIn/Twitter. This might suggest the need for public sector human resource professionals to develop additional skills like candidate sourcing, survey techniques, community management, campus recruiter, etc.

Employer branding based on what attracts candidates to work for the government

> *As organisations seek both to attract new employees and retain existing staff, employment advertising and employment branding will grow in importance. This can only be done effectively once organisations understand the factors contributing towards 'employer attractiveness' (Berthon, Ewing and Hah, 2005[6])*

The starting point for a successful recruitment strategy is to understand what candidates are likely to find attractive about working for a particular organisation, and then using this to communicate an employer brand. Berthon, Ewing and Hah's (2005[6]) framework for measuring employer attractiveness focuses on understanding how individuals or groups of candidates are likely to prioritise aspects of attractiveness based on their own circumstances (see Box 4.2.)

Box 4.2. Measuring employer attractiveness

Berthon et al. (2005[6]) propose five factors for assessing employer attractiveness:

- Factor 1, labelled '**Interest value'**, assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides an exciting work environment, novel work practices and that makes use of its employee's creativity to produce high-quality, innovative products and services.
- Factor 2, labelled '**Social value'** assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides a working environment that is fun, happy, provides good collegial relationships and a team atmosphere.
- Factor 3, labelled '**Economic value'**, assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides above-average salary, compensation package, job security and promotional opportunities.
- Factor 4, labelled '**Development value'**, assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides recognition, self-worth and confidence, coupled with a career-enhancing experience and a springboard to future employment.
- Finally, factor 5, labelled '**Application value'**, assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides an opportunity for the employee to apply what they have learned and to teach others, in an environment that is both customer orientated and humanitarian.

Source: Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005[6]), "Captivating company: dimensions of attractiveness in employer branding", *The Quarterly Review of Marketing Communications*, Vol. 24/2, pp. 151-172, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2005.11072912.

Research on public sector attractiveness has typically focussed on 'Public Service Motivation' (PSM) – defined as "an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organisations" (Perry and Wise, 1990[7]). The theory suggests that candidates with higher degrees of PSM are likely to find public service jobs attractive and thrive in them, and to respond favourably to communications that emphasise the public and value-driven nature of work.

Figure 4.4. Aspects of public sector attractiveness
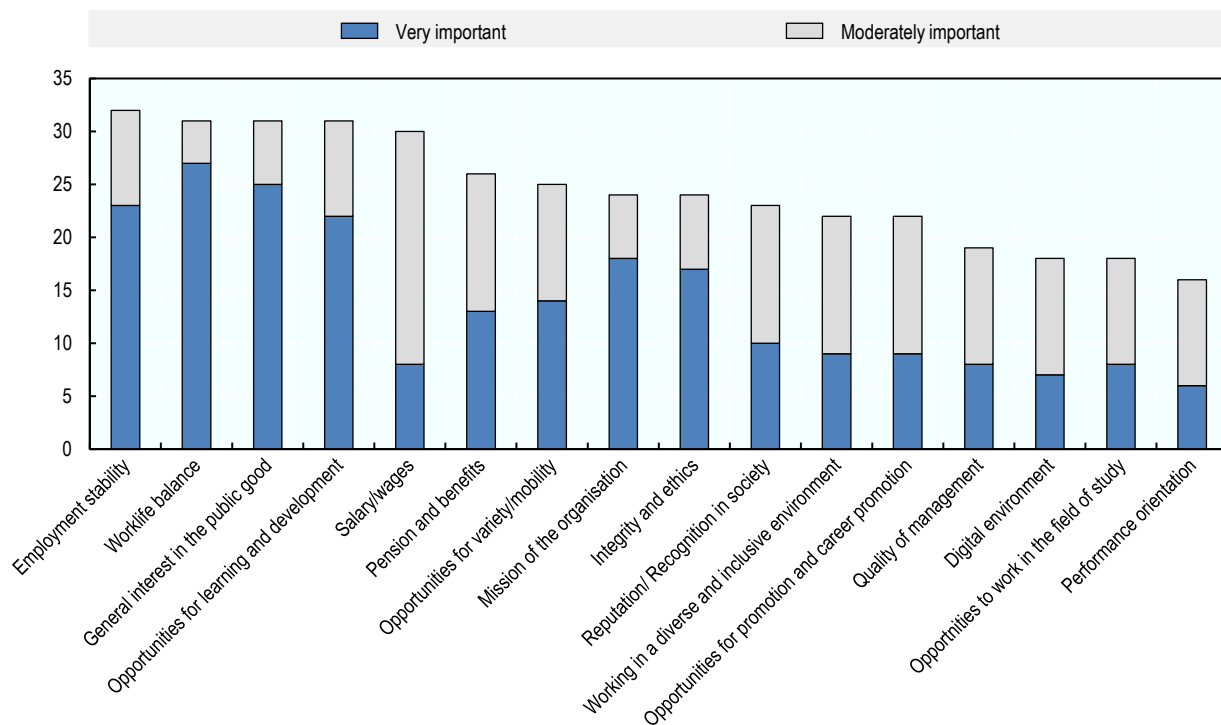
Number of OECD countries, n=33 (2020)

Note: N varies depending on the option, as some options were unknown by some OECD countries. Original survey question: "Based on the methods above, what are the main aspects that make the public service an attractive employer?" Respondents were asked to base this rating on available studies and data. Therefore the quality of the assessment will differ from country to country.
Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability, Module 2.

Data in Figure 4.4 add to the picture by identifying tangible aspects of employment in government and the degree to which they are seen to contribute to employer attractiveness. The figure shows how many countries rate each element as very important or moderately important. While salary is frequently cited as a barrier, data in Figure 4.4 show that work-life balance, general interest in the public good and the stability of employment are the three most important factors behind public sector employer attractiveness. 22 countries also indicated that learning and development opportunities were 'very important'.

Interestingly, only eight countries rate the quality of management as a 'very important' aspect of attractiveness and just seven rate a digital environment as 'very important'. This likely reflects the current situation in public services, and less an ideal state needed to attract top talent. Various studies have suggested that these two criteria are likely to resonate with younger candidates eager to work in technology-rich environments with managers who are able to coach and develop their skills, (see, e.g. (Gallup, 2016[8]).

Building on these aspects of attractiveness, there has been a growing recognition of employer branding strategies in the public services of OECD countries. In 2016, 14 member countries had no employer branding strategies or action plans in place, whereas just five countries in 2020 indicated that this was still the case (Figure 4.5). For the rest, employer branding is mostly left to individual organisations or is part of an administration-wide strategy.

Number of OECD countries, n=34 (2020)
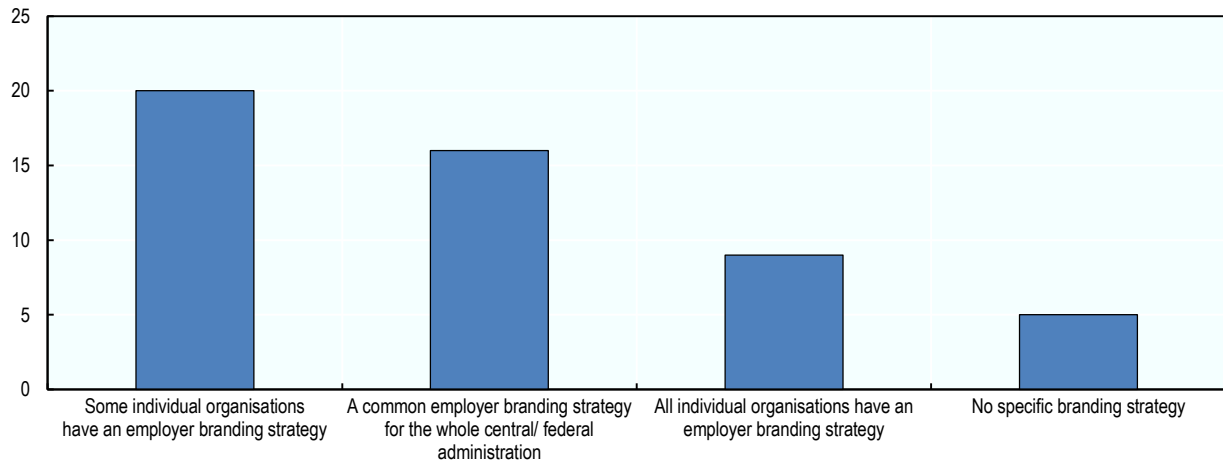
Note: Original survey question: "Which of the following employer branding strategies exist in the central/ federal administration?"
Source: OECD survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability, module 2, 2020.

A strong employer brand is an important part of convincing prospective candidates to apply. This may be particularly true when recruiting young candidates, who usually apply to many places at the same time. Coherent and well-used employer brands that promote public service values may also contribute to better fit between a person and an organisation by clearly signalling the values the job and organisation espouses and improving candidate self-selection (Kim, 2012[9]). So given the need to fill skills gaps, employer branding can help recruiters attract the people they need. Many public administrations provide communication and employer branding guides and tools to support line ministries in adapting messaging while still maintaining overall coherence.

A variety of channels available to communicate employer brands

A good employer brand is only as effective as its communication to prospective candidates a variety of communication channels are increasingly important to promote a coherent, attractive message. As indicated in Figure 4.6, OECD countries use a variety of channels to attract candidates. Almost all OECD countries have dedicated government websites where they post their job openings, and most are also present at career fairs and recruiting events. While government job portals are an essential tool to communicate job openings and an employer brand, they are not very proactive – government can use other tools, online or in-person, to convince prospective candidates to visit the website. Career fairs and recruitment events are one such tool for public employers, enabling them to meet relevant candidates, gain information about the employment market, and actively promote their career opportunities and employer brand.

Figure 4.6. Use of communication channels to attract candidates

Number of OECD countries, n=35 (2020)
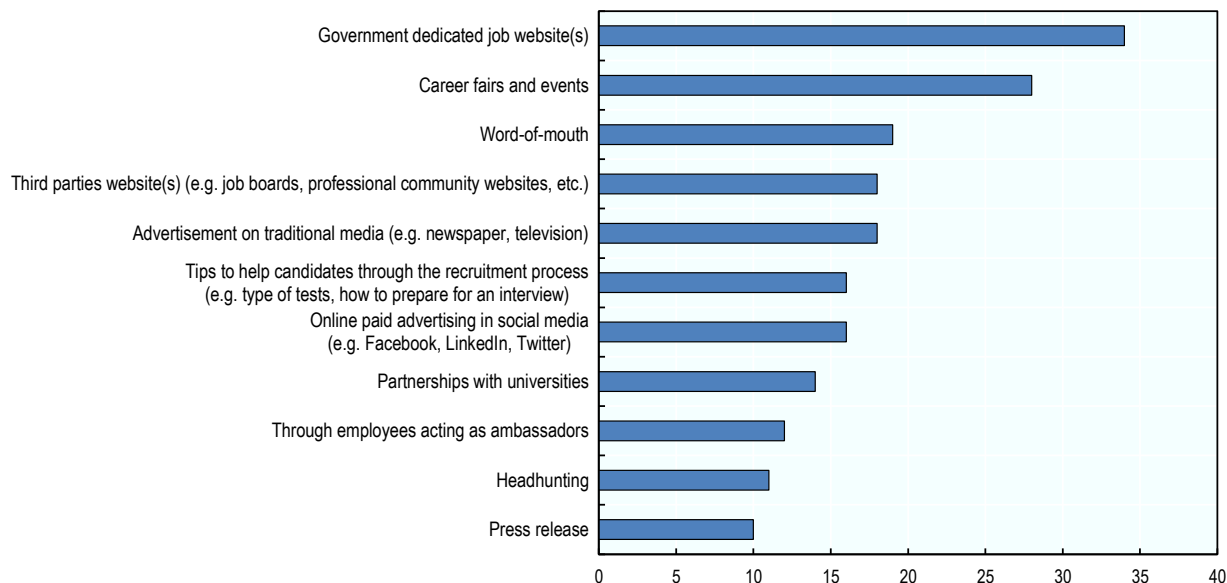
Note: Original survey question: "How does the central/ federal administration communicate about its recruitment campaigns and job openings?"
Source: OECD survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability, module 2, 2020.

However, the shift to online recruitment during the Covid pandemic has the potential to change the way governments think about candidates, communication and place-based recruitment events. If remote working and virtual teams become more common, governments may be able to expand their labour market across the country or even internationally. In these cases, recruiters have more work to do in using online tools to communicate to prospective candidates. Only about half of OECD countries report using third-party websites and social media to get the word out.

There is also the question of *who* recruits – in a forward-looking public service, employees and managers are themselves 'scouts' for talent and ambassadors of the employer brand. Only a third of OECD countries actively use employees as ambassadors. Moving online has the potential to bring more people into this process.

Finally, 16 OECD countries make use of special recruitment programmes targeted at in-demand skills. Programmes such as the United Kingdom's fast stream, are more than communications strategies – they provide special recruitment channels and development pathways aimed at specific skillsets the public service requires. Only six OECD countries report using short-term fellowship opportunities. Often framed as prestigious opportunities for high potential elites, short-term fellowship opportunities can be useful ways of bringing in needed skills from other sectors to work on high-impact projects for a specific period, without raising salaries.

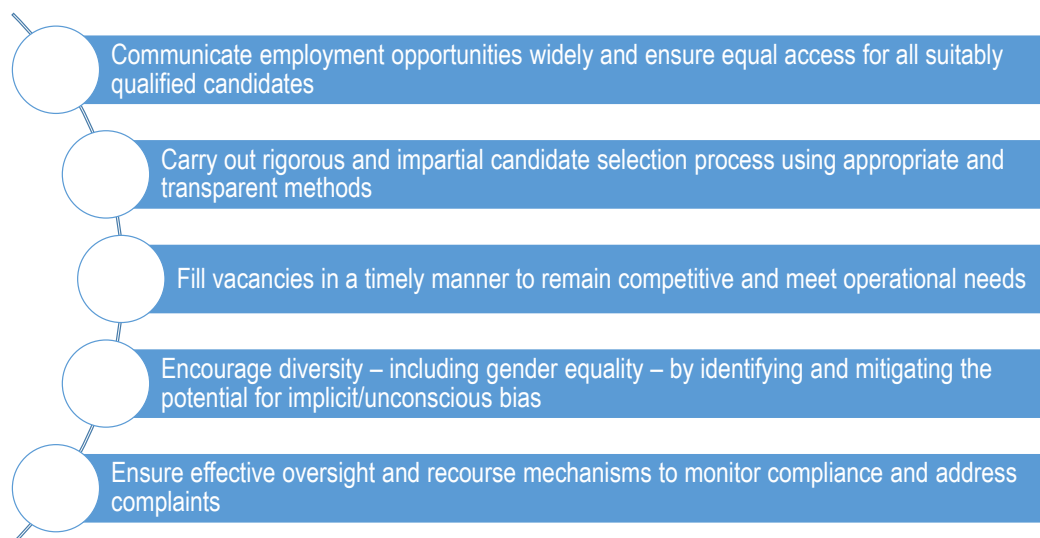## Public sector recruitment processes for the future

A merit-based public service is at the core of government effectiveness. Meritocratic recruitment processes ensure that professional and impartial civil servants occupy fundamental positions throughout the public service in order to provide reliable and competent service to citizens in all political contexts. A meritocratic civil service is a fundamental driver of trust in the public sector, since citizens will trust institutions run by people who are seen as competent, and not just close friends of political power. Finally, merit-based recruitment is a fundamental attractor of good talent, or put conversely, good talent will not apply to a process that is seen as politicised and less objective.

However, many of the merit-based recruitment systems used today were put in place by governments a long time ago and could be refreshed with new approaches. The goal of investing in employer attractiveness is to improve the quality and diversity of applicants, thereby helping to achieve better organisational outcomes. But what happens if recruitment systems are not able to test for relevant competencies, like the ability to problem-solve or develop innovative solutions to challenges? What if they are too slow and the best candidates drop out? The following points could be considered as a basis for merit-based recruitment for the future:

- The first step to ensuring merit is by having open processes that ensure equal access to all potential candidates. This suggests the need not only to communicate job opportunities broadly and proactively, as discussed above, but to also remove barriers to those who may be qualified, such as people with disabilities, or those living in remote areas of the country. It also means revising job requirements to focus as much as possible on competencies rather than historic indicators such as education, recognising that people can acquire competencies through a wide range of methods and trajectories, and educational opportunities may be more limited to certain elite profiles.

- One key question is how well recruitment systems can be adapted to assess specialised skills needed. The public sector often has recruitment systems and processes developed to ensure standardisation of testing/assessment rather than identification of specific specialist skills. 'One-size-fits-all' generalised recruitment methods will tend to result in generalist staff, when the future will likely require greater specialisation. Standardisation is sometimes done in the name of equality of treatment, which is an important principle that can be applied in a more nuanced way, job category by job category, to make methods more suitable to specific skills and competencies needed.

- A second key question is whether they are able to be adapted to meet candidate expectations around recruitment speed. Experience from some countries suggest that candidates – especially ones with in-demand skills – simply drop out of the recruitment process when competitors offer jobs more quickly.

- Recruitment systems also play a key role in improving diversity in the public service. As the filter for entry to the public service, controlling for bias at different stages of assessment is essential. Broadening the scope of assessment beyond education and theoretical knowledge can help identify candidates with much-needed competences from non-traditional backgrounds.

- As public sector recruiters look to adjust and trial new ways of recruiting candidates, a critical concern is to make sure that increased flexibility does not come at the expense of transparency and merit. Reinforcing ways for candidates to seek more information on the outcome of their recruitment process and challenge the results if they perceive unfairness is an important part of building trust in government.

As indicated in Figure 4.7, these concerns are recognised in the OECD Recommendation on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

## Figure 4.7. Principles relating to recruitment systems

Communicate employment opportunities widely and ensure equal access for all suitably qualified candidates

Carry out rigorous and impartial candidate selection process using appropriate and transparent methods

Fill vacancies in a timely manner to remain competitive and meet operational needs

Encourage diversity – including gender equality – by identifying and mitigating the potential for implicit/unconscious bias

Ensure effective oversight and recourse mechanisms to monitor compliance and address complaints

Source: OECD (2019[1]), *Recommendation of the Council on Public Service Leadership and Capability*, OECD/LEGAL/0445, OECD, Paris, https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0445.

Countries are testing for analytical and behavioural competencies – not just theoretical knowledge

Public sector recruitment systems have been around for a long time. In some countries they are regulated by law, meaning that substantial changes to how things are done can take time. They may also include types of recruitment not found in the private sector, such as civil service-wide exams or 'concours'. Treating candidates fairly and equally is at the core of public sector employment systems. As such, many are structured to assess factors such as educational experience and legal knowledge. Increasingly, however, some countries are re-thinking how they assess candidates and what they test them for. France and Spain, for example, are reviewing the content of their entrance examinations for elite public sector corps to make them more relevant for the future. As indicated in Figure 4.8, countries are putting emphasis into testing analytical and behavioural competences through a variety of means.

Figure 4.8. Testing for analytical and behavioural competences

Number of OECD countries, n=32 (2020)
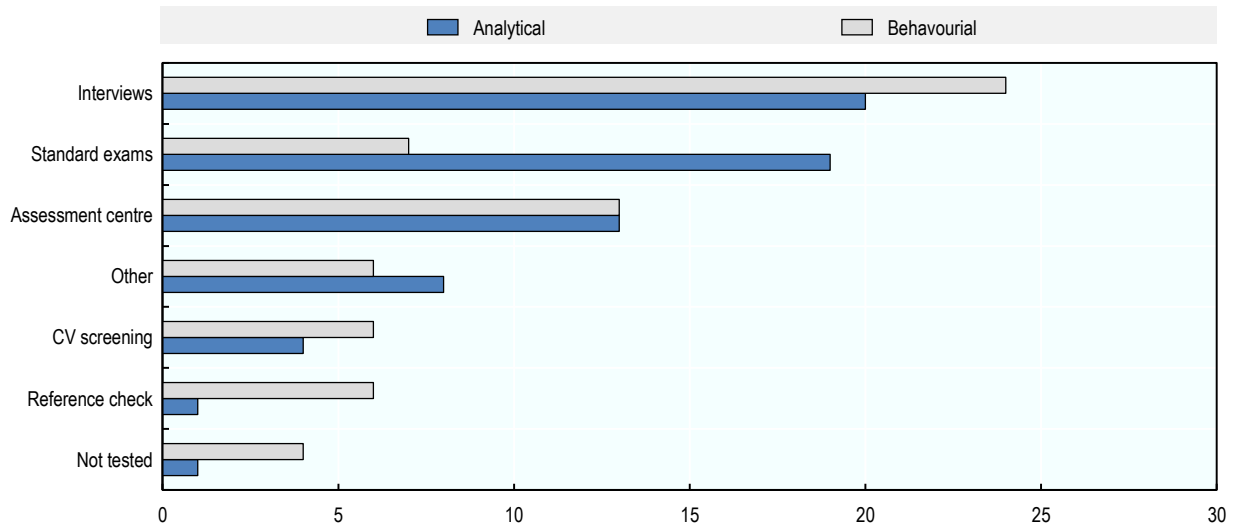
Note: Original survey question:"How are the following criteria tested for applicants to the civil service?"
Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability, Module 3.

Assessing analytical and behavioural competences is an encouraging sign. Static indicators of ability like educational qualifications are imperfect predictors of how candidates will perform in an uncertain future. Most countries test for analytical competences in interviews or through exams, and some in more in-depth assessment centres. Methods included under the 'other' category to assess analytical and behavioural competences include computer-based tests, psychological assessment and simulation games. Encouragingly, all but four OECD countries test for behavioural competences

It is important to emphasise, however, that assessing these types of competences is not as obvious as assessing theoretical knowledge and education. In most administrations, core competences are clearly established in competency frameworks. These frameworks list which competences are relevant for different functions and for different hierarchical levels. However, hiring managers may find it difficult to assess these competences in hypothetical situations like interviews. Recruitment in many cases in the public sector is carried out by line managers who are not highly trained in recruitment techniques. Moreover, framing questions and rating candidate responses uniformly to analytical and behavioural-type questions can prove complex. This points to the need for using more than one data source in assessing candidates, and for targeted support to line managers in assessing behavioural competences. This may be particularly relevant for high-impact or senior positions, where psychologists and trained recruiters can complement the insights of line managers. To address this issue, Poland has developed a guide to help managers and recruiters define and test candidates for 'soft skills' relevant to their roles.

Most governments still rank candidates and pick the highest

When well-designed, assessment and selection processes can tease out key predictors of performance in an appropriate and cost-effective manner (CIPD, 2015[10]). The assumption of many recruitment systems is that a sequential process of testing and elimination will enable recruiters to choose 'the' best candidate by revealing intrinsic attributes about each of the candidates. This is reflected in the data in Figure 4.9, which indicates that 17 countries rank candidates. Eleven countries give managers wide scope to choose based on 'best fit' among those who perform above a required high standard, and nine countries do an initial ranking following which managers can chose from among the top performers.

Figure 4.9. Candidate selection

Number of OECD countries, n=31 (2020)

Note: Original survey question: "Candidate selection: which of the following apply:"
Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability, Module 3.

In the field of recruitment in general, there is increasing emphasis placed on "hiring for organisational compatibility", as a complement to traditional recruitment models designed to assess knowledge, skills and ability (Morley, 2007[11]). The issue of how much leeway managers are allowed in their choice of hire matters for the integrity of the recruitment process (i.e. avoiding nepotism and bias) but also for ensuring a good fit with the organisation as a whole and team or unit in particular. The role of recruitment systems is to strike a balance between both.

Rankings may be in place to ensure a high degree of merit, however in practice they may be less objective than they appear. For example, what is the difference between a candidate ranked first and ranked third when there have been dozens of high-quality candidates? Individual selection tools are limited in their ability to provide recruiters and hiring managers with a complete, objective view of candidates. Introducing scope for hiring managers to have some decision-making discretion can work, as long as the process up until that point has been rigorous. Moreover, when managers are offered no official discretion, they may actually seek to distort the assessment phase itself – referring to the potential for "particular power and politics games that are likely to go on in selection decision meetings" to distort the results of the assessment process (Bolander and Sandberg, 2013[12]). Giving managers some discretion, within the right transparent frameworks, can help to ensure the integrity of the assessment process and ensure accountability for the final decisions taken.

However, it is also important to point out that 'fit' can be a problematic term if in practice it means 'people like me' to the exclusion of 'people who are not like me' – whether in terms of gender, academic background, professional experience or motivation. In other words, care must be taken to ensure that "good fit" is not just a way to express (conscious or unconscious bias). It is good practice to guarantee that hiring managers justify their choices on the public record, and that appropriate oversight and data is used to track hiring decisions and identify trends that point towards bias in the system.

There is scope to improve measurement of recruitment processes

Recruitment processes have the potential to generate a wealth of data that can be used to inform important insights about an organisations' attractiveness, the effectiveness of the recruitment processes and potential biases in the system. Data on employer attractiveness is important in order to adjust communication and recruitment strategies. It can also help build the business case for investing in new ways to secure talent. France's military, for example, has invested in data skills in order to analyse traffic to its website. This analysis feeds into algorithms which further personalises communication to candidates in order to increase the 'conversion' of website views into job applications.

However, Figure 4.10 illustrates that public administrations in the OECD do not collect very much data on attractiveness. Regarding salary, often cited as a barrier to hiring talent, salary benchmarking tends to be carried out at the central level in 20 OECD countries and is not carried out at all in 12 countries. Basic quantitative data are collected in some countries but there is scope for improvement to generate deeper insights, For example, 16 countries report collecting data on candidate volume centrally, but only ten of those collect data on the dropout rate in the recruitment process.

Figure 4.10. Indicators used to measure employer attractiveness
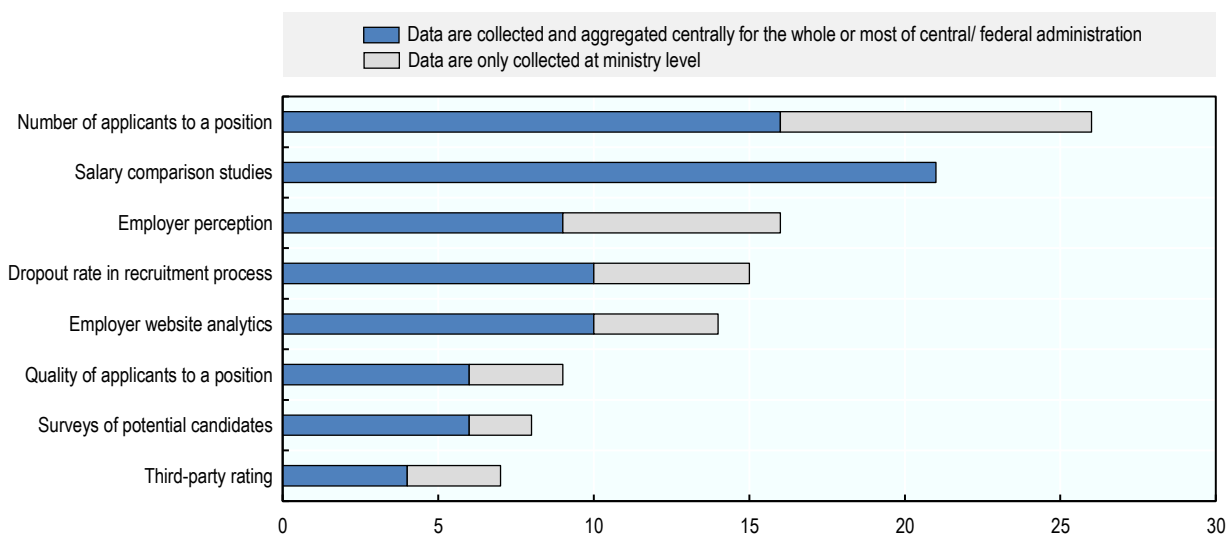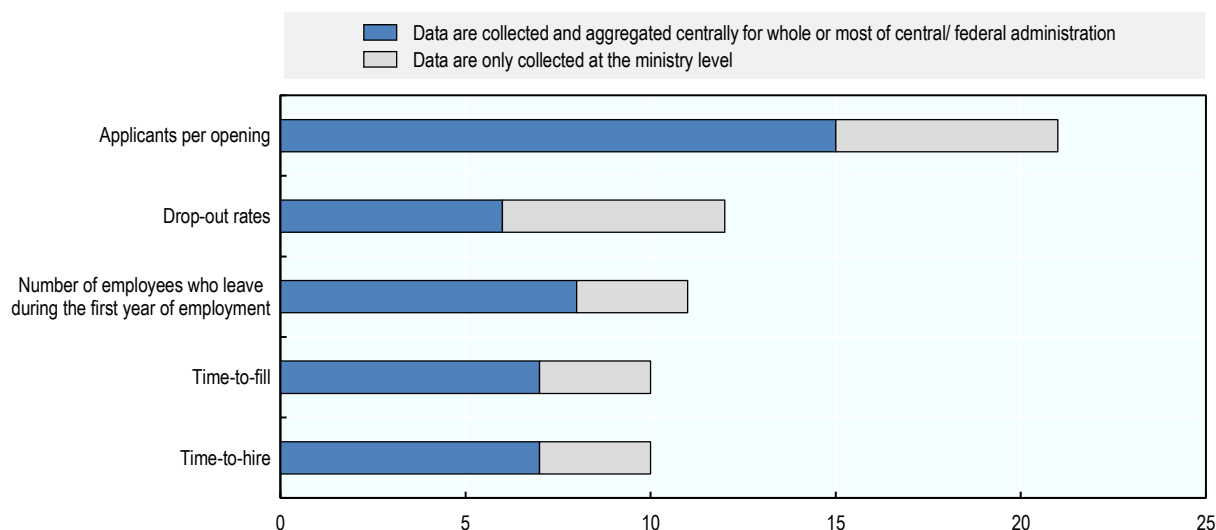
Number of OECD countries, n=35, 2020

Note: N varies depending on the option, as some options were unknown by some OECD countries. Original survey question: "How is employer attractiveness measured in the central/ federal administration?"
Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability, Module 2.

When it comes to the recruitment process, Figure 4.11 shows that the most-measured aspect is the number of applicants per opening. Measuring candidate volume can be a good first step in improving recruitment strategies and skills gaps, but there are other indicators of recruitment quality that could be tracked. Methodologies to assess time-to-fill (once a vacancy is created) and time-to-hire (once the candidate applies) can measure how quickly recruitment systems and actors (people involved) are able to meet a specific gap.

Figure 4.11. Metrics used in the assessment of recruitment processes

Number of OECD countries, n=34 (2020)

Note: N varies depending on the option, as some options were unknown by some OECD countries. Original survey question: "Do you assess the speed and quality of your recruitment process using the following metrics?"
Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability, Module 3.

Given the increased efforts to improve communication and candidate attraction, more substantial measurement of recruitment processes can also help identify parts of the recruitment process that could be improved. When disaggregated by demographic indicators, the same data can show biases in the system. For example, if candidates tend to drop out after a certain period of time, that can point to efforts to adjust or shorten the recruitment process or to improve communication and engagement with candidates during the process. Communication with candidates during the process is an important part of keeping them engaged with the recruitment process: candidates with a wide variety of employment options have little patience to wait months for government recruiters to update them on the status of their application.

Previous OECD work has highlighted that basic HR data is collected and aggregated centrally, but that there is scope to go deeper (OECD, 2017[13]). Two key issues may be skills and systems – or both. Data may be scattered across multiple parts of the public administration, fragmented across platforms with multiple corporate users (e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook) or there may be privacy concerns about sharing and analysing data. It may also be the case that public sector recruiters are simply not accustomed to tracking their system's performance, nor is there pressure to do so coming from managers and business units. The key takeaway for governments is that recruitment are essential and, as with any business process, require evidence and data to know what works, what doesn't, how it can be improved.

There is an increasing effort to build diversity through recruitment systems

Recruitment systems can help improve diversity in the public sector by tailoring strategies to attract applicants from under-represented groups and then assessing competencies in ways that avoid bias and ensure equal treatment. A majority of OECD countries (19) have developed specific outreach strategies to communicate opportunities to under-represented groups, aiming to increase their application. Japan, for example, targets communications to women and graduates from regional universities to improve the gender and regional representation of the public service. Nine OECD countries go further, with dedicated coaching or mentor programmes for under-represented groups, and 6 countries provide special training programmes for taking entry exams. For example, France provides special preparation courses for

candidates from disadvantaged social backgrounds who aim to take entrance examinations to the French School of National Administration (ENA).

Figure 4.12 highlights some of the measures that countries are using to increase the participation of underrepresented groups in recruitment processes. Most countries (22) are able to adjust recruitment processes to the needs of candidates with medical conditions or disabilities. Recruitment targets are used by 13 countries, and 13 countries also use quotas. Austria, for example, gives preferential treatment to female candidates when they possess the same qualifications as male candidates and the percentage of female employees in the organisation is lower than 50%. Ten OECD countries use special internship programmes. For example, Canada has established a dedicated internship programme for persons with disabilities (PwDs) which offers two-year internship opportunities in the federal public service as part of a goal to hire 5 000 PwDs by 2025. The programme includes support to both interns and hiring managers in the form of assessment advice, coaching and training. Only 7 countries have a specific preference for selection – also known as affirmative action.

Figure 4.12. Tools used to increase the participation of underrepresented groups in recruitment processes

Number of OECD countries, n=34 (2020)
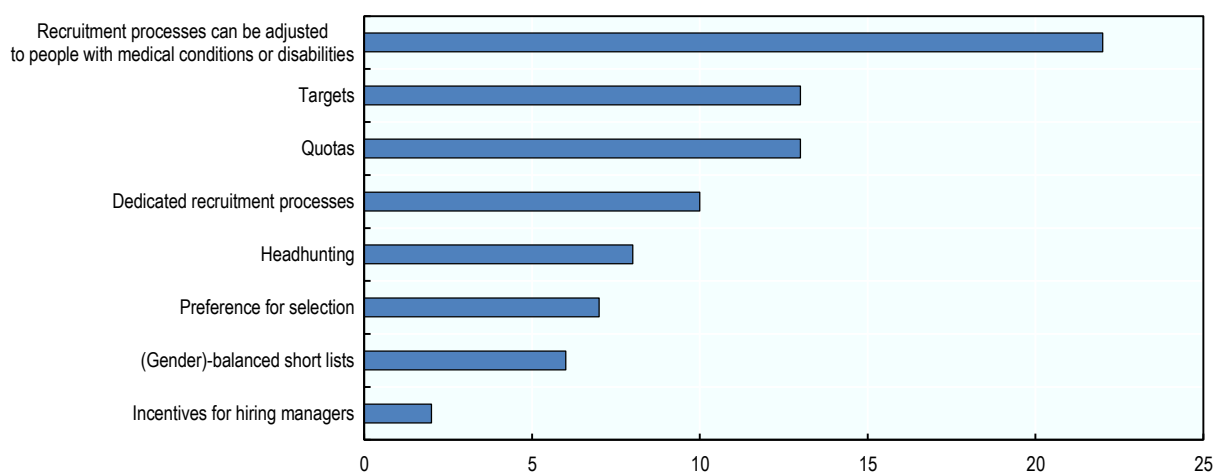
Note: Original survey question: "Which of the following are used to increase the participation of underrepresented groups in recruitment processes?"
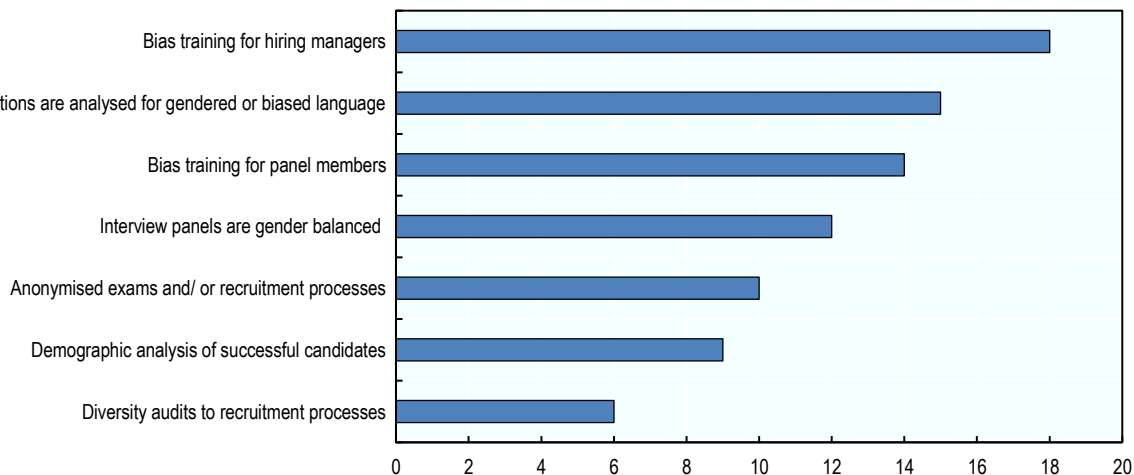Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability, Module 3.

Recruitment systems and candidate evaluation methodologies reflect the unconscious biases of those who designed them. This is why many public sector organisations invest in measures to mitigate the potential for unconscious bias to affect recruitment. Although widespread use of Artificial Intelligence for recruiting in the public sector may be some way off, measures to prevent algorithms replicating human biases are also important. As Figure 4.13 shows, most public sector organisations use training to make managers and recruiters aware of common unconscious biases. The question is whether this is effective: a recent paper by the UK Behavioural Insights Team found that while some types of unconscious bias training can produce short-term effects at the individual level, there is little evidence to suggest that such training changes behaviour or improves the representation of under-represented groups (Behavioural Insights Team, 2020[14]). An academic study from 2018, which concluded the same thing, suggests five reasons for why such training fails: short-term educational interventions have little impact; anti-bias training may actually activate stereotypes or make employees complacent about their own biases. There is the risk that some groups (predominantly whites) may feel marginalised, and finally, that people generally react

negatively to efforts to control them (Dobbin and Kalev, 2018[15]). The main message is that bias training may have a role within a larger strategy, but if it's the only tool being used, it runs the risk of not working.

Figure 4.13. Use of the tools to reduce bias in the recruitment process

Number of OECD countries, n=33 (2020)

Note: Original survey question: "Which of the following are used to detect and minimise bias throughout recruitment and selection processes?"
Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability, Module 3.

The data show that OECD public administrations use a mix of measures to mitigate bias, including training. Keeping long-term behaviour change in mind, evaluating the appropriate mix of tools will be key to improving diversity. Data are an essential element in identifying the impact of bias in the workplace. A smaller number of countries are using data and people analytics to assess their recruitment processes for potential bias in the context of diversity audits and demographic analysis of successful candidates. Analytics can help identify stages of recruitment where candidates may have particular difficulties compared to over-represented groups, or patterns in career development for some groups compared to others. This could include, for example, tracking the profiles of recent recruits and promotions in order to ensure that a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds are valued. Tracking these and other types of data can help assess the impact of bias mitigation measures.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that recruitment processes in many OECD countries are being updated and reformed, to compete in the war for talent. More and more countries are recognising the important place of employer attractiveness and branding within public sector recruitment strategies. Some public administrations are adapting their message to different types of audience, and are using a greater variety of communication channels and techniques to do so. Leading public administrations are then trying new tools to speed up and fine-tune their recruitment processes, so that they are better at testing for the skills and competencies that are needed, while maintaining a high standard of merit, objectivity and equality. While the direction of travel is encouraging, there is scope for greater investments in this area, including the testing of new structural tools (e.g. special development programmes, fellowships, streamline recruitment processes, competency testing), and increasing the collection and use of data to track performance and improve recruitment strategy design.

It is also important to recognise that good communication with candidates is not only for branding, but can have positive effects throughout a recruitment process, and particularly when it comes to on-boarding. Badly aligned recruitment efforts can have negative effects later on. A recent study notes that 43% of Federal employees hired between 2011 and 2017 left the US Federal workforce after less than one year, and 60% after less than two (Government Accountability Office, 2020[16]). This suggests that governments need to invest particular care in structuring recruitment systems so that there is a good fit between the candidate and the organisation, and that the organisation must be able to deliver a work experience that is fulfilling. This statistic also highlights the importance of effective candidate on-boarding, which in some countries takes the form of a structured programme and series of activities for new hires to meet their colleagues and learn more about the organisation. On-boarding is especially important for integrating employees who joined the public sector during the pandemic and may only have had a chance to meet their colleagues on Zoom.

One of the main points to emerge from these data is the evolving skill set required of public sector recruiters. For some of the skills that recruiters try to attract there are few established career fairs and little in the way of a 'traditional' candidate profile. As with niche sourcing and recruitment skills in the technology industry, public sector recruiters will in some cases need to build their own pool of talent using innovative search techniques and professional and personal networks to find candidates. They will need to be accomplished public speakers and have strong internal networks in order to understand the business needs. Assessing candidates from non-traditional backgrounds may require re-engineering of recruitment processes while still ensuring compliance with merit-based principles.

Returning to the question of a public service recruitment for the future, the OECD framework suggests that proactive recruitment will need to be:

- **Forward-looking**: Public service recruitment has to be guided by a vision of the skills and competencies it will need in the future, and not just those needed in the past. Candidates with the types of skills needed to address tomorrow's policy challenges do not expect to be assessed through yesterday's recruitment techniques. Public sector recruiters have an increasing variety of tools at their disposal to reach diverse audiences and communicate the value of a public sector career. Candidates are also thinking about the future, in particular about how jobs in the public sector can support their own long-term career development.

- **Flexible**: One-size-fits-all recruitment techniques are ill-suited to recruiting an increasingly specialised public sector workforce of the future. Proactive recruitment draws on a range of data points to adapt messaging to different audiences, and assess candidates using a range of techniques appropriate to the function and hierarchical level. It also requires flexibility to be able to ensure open access to an increasingly diverse range of applicants – to level the playing field regardless of location, socio-economic background, level of (dis)ability, etc.

- **Fulfilling**: The public service will have to compete for talent by offering fulfilling work, attracting people who are motivate by the mission of the public service. Proactive recruitment requires branding that can promote this message and organisations that can deliver a fulfilling work experience. The public sector has struggled in some countries to develop a reputation as an employer of choice, particularly for under-represented groups. In this context, proactive recruitment offers the tools to build a more diverse and fair public workforce.

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Note

[1] Case studies on leadership can be accessed here: https://www.oecd.org/gov/pem/public-sector-leadership-implementation/pem-leadership/