

Federal employment standards must evolve, strategy expert says

October 3 2011, By Neil Schoenherr

President Barack Obama is calling for a more modernized and concentrated hiring process in the federal government as more of its workers retire. While the government attracts many excellent candidates, the recruitment process remains bureaucratic, cumbersome and complex, leading many talented workers to be turned away.

“The [federal government](#) is facing a war for talent and its competitors are winning,” says Jackson A. Nickerson, PhD, professor of strategy at Olin Business School at Washington University in St. Louis. Nickerson made the remarks Sept. 28 at a Brookings Institution panel on “Reforming the Federal [Hiring](#) Process and Promoting Public Service to America’s Youth.”

The discussion, held in Washington, D.C., was televised nationally on CSPAN.

“In many ways the federal government has a hiring system that fundamentally was designed in the 1970s,” says Nickerson, the Frahm Family Professor of Organization & Strategy, director of the Brookings-Olin Partnership and Brookings Nonresident Senior Fellow in Government Studies.

“Hiring largely is based on finding and matching specific skills to specific tasks and jobs,” he says. “Yet human capital needs have dramatically changed since the 1970s.”

“In the 21st century, the abilities to collaborate across divisions and agencies, adapt to new circumstances, rapidly learn new things, and lead others — what I refer to as agile abilities — are far more important and needed than specific skills for a specific job.”

Nickerson says he thinks many young people in America have a commitment to public service, but that Americans tend to view public service in the federal government negatively.

“Ultimately, the federal government is not offering enough of what America’s youth value for it to win the war for talent,” he says.

Nickerson proposes a new systemic approach to federal hiring in the 21st century.

“I propose that individuals are hired predominantly for their agile abilities instead of primarily for their knowledge and skills,” he says.

“Second, I propose hiring the vast majority of individuals into Government Rotational Training Programs, which could provide six months-to-two years of rotations across agencies, offer lots of development opportunities and provide frequent assessments,” he says.

Nickerson argues that doing so would allow people to be hired into programs and not into specific job, eliminating much of the delay and frustration associated with the current [hiring process](#).

Nickerson also recommends decentralizing advertising and interviewing for the rotational programs.

“The 21st century changed federal human capital needs, changed expectations of America’s youth, and ushered in a war for talent,” Nickerson says. “The federal government should not try ‘fix’ its

recruitment process, it should build a new recruitment system to fight and win the war for talent.”

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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