Culture, Communication, and Capabilities:
Preparing Federal Agencies to be AI Ready

Highlights from the June 8, 2021 Roundtable "Mapping the Federal Workforce to Support Emerging technology" hosted by ATARC in partnership with Zoom for Government

With global spending on AI expected to [reach $110 Billion by 2024](#) and capturing the imaginations of decision makers everywhere, Federal agencies have become keenly interested in understanding how to prepare their workforces for this new technology. In light of this, the Advanced Technology Academic Research Center (ATARC) and software vendor Zoom Video Communications put together a roundtable of experts in data, technology, and human resources from a series of Federal agencies to explore what needs to be done to get the federal workforce "Artificial Intelligence (AI) ready" and to share best practices.

In the wide-ranging discussion that followed, panelists made the case that preparing Federal agencies to capture the benefits of AI has more to do with personnel management than acquiring technology. New employees need to be onboarded, existing staff need to be upskilled, and cultural changes need to be made throughout the organization in order for the benefits of AI to be fully realized. The panelists also argued that AI is not a panacea, the technology has its shortcomings and steps must be taken to ensure accountability for actions taken on the counsel of algorithms.

Onboarding and Upskilling for Uncle Sam

Panelists were in agreement that recruiting and retaining talent with skills in software development, data science, and related fields would be key to the success of their agencies' AI strategies and shared practical insights on how to do so. One panelist explained how their agency found success focusing hiring and onboarding on teams with high upcoming retirement waves. The agency's focus on mentorship and personal interactions resulted in the successful hiring of a whopping 75% of their summer interns as full-time employees following graduation. Participants

also made the case that agencies should center their recruitment efforts on young people in their last year of undergraduate or graduate programs in relevant fields.

In a similar vein, panelists acknowledged the frequently challenging nature of recruiting in the public sector and emphasized the importance of a close partnership between HR and the business in ensuring successful outcomes. HR professionals play a key role in working with agency leadership to identify the skills their workforce is missing, creating recruitment plans to meet those needs, and crafting requisitions with the greatest degree of flexibility possible.

That final point in particular owes much to the increasing prevalence and acceptance of video conferencing solutions like Zoom in the public sector. Where many federal agencies were once limited to hiring in Washington, DC and its immediate environs, the shift to remote work has allowed them to dip into a wider pool of candidates with diverse backgrounds from across the country.

Successful Agency Strategies

❖ Pursuing talent with skills in software development, data science, and related fields
❖ Mentorship and personal interactions
❖ Recruitment from among summer interns and soon-to-be graduates
❖ Close collaboration between the HR and business units
❖ Widening the candidate pool to nationwide by leveraging video conferencing platforms

Participants also were clear that the solution to the skills gap in federal agencies could not be solved solely

by recruiting new talent. Cultural changes would need to be realized as well. One participant made the case that the distinction between IT and those carrying out the mission is already barely perceptible. Acknowledging this new reality requires a change in thinking.

Change we Can Believe In

Despite AI often being thought of as a technical matter better left in the realm of IT, participants were adamant that it was more of a topic for the business. This is because the primary consumers of AI-enabled insights are not developers or data scientists but rather business professionals leveraging AI to drive mission outcomes. An AI strategy won't be effective if business professionals either don't know how to leverage AI in the course of their duties, or are fearful of doing so.

True AI Potential Lies in Helping Drive Mission Outcomes

- ❖ AI can let professionals focus on "uniquely human work"
- ❖ Most exciting applications of AI help complete the most mundane and tedious work
- ❖ AI can help scale work that would otherwise be limited by human capacity
- ❖ AI needs to be deployed with clear lines of accountability

There is a common misperception among the public that AI will replace human workers and the federal workforce is not immune to these fears. During the panel, ATARC Founder & President Tom Suder compared these fears to the past concern among data center professionals that the emergence of cloud computing would put their jobs at risk. Yet nothing

could be further from the truth. In reality, AI promises not to remove jobs but rather to allow professionals in the public sector to focus on what one panel participant described as "uniquely human work." Panel participants noted that some of the most exciting applications of AI are also in some ways the most mundane, such as the tedious work of data labelling.

Once federal employees understand that AI is not about Big Brother looking over their shoulder but actually allows them to focus on more interesting work they tend to embrace it. AI can also help scale work that would otherwise be limited by human capacity, such as providing automated feedback on employee presentations and uncovering gaps in training and onboarding where new employees may need extra help. Yet this technology has clear limitations and agency leadership has an important role to play in ensuring that AI algorithms are deployed in an accountable, transparent, and fair way.

One area of particular concern for panel participants was hiring. At a time when AI-based tools are increasingly being used by large businesses to [screen candidates](#), there is concern among experts that these tools may inadvertently discriminate against women and underrepresented minorities. This and other issues explain why panelists were so adamant that AI needs to be deployed with clear lines of accountability. A person must ultimately be responsible for the decisions an algorithm makes.

How Zoom for Government Can Help

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