



Executive Search & Consulting in the Public Sector

Insights from The Barton Partnership's roundtable discussion
in London

Public Sector Executive Roundtable

On 17th September, The Barton Partnership hosted a roundtable to explore strategies for attracting and retaining talent in the public sector. The session, attended by public sector leaders and experts, highlighted challenges and shared best practices for improving talent acquisition and retention.

What follows is a summary of the key points discussed during the event:

#1 Reframing Public Sector careers

- Participants discussed the challenges of attracting digital and technology talent, particularly in areas like AI and cybersecurity, where competition with the private sector is fierce. However, they noted that the opportunity to work on meaningful public sector projects—such as national security and public safety—could be a key differentiator for attracting purpose-driven tech professionals.
- Rebranding public sector roles is crucial to overcoming outdated perceptions of bureaucracy and limited career advancement. Participants highlighted the need to emphasise the societal impact of these roles, particularly in areas like public safety, national security, and digital transformation.
- Demonstrating clear career pathways was seen as essential to challenging misconceptions about limited mobility. Participants discussed successful career development initiatives, such as secondments and internal rotations, which have helped employees move into leadership positions. These pathways can help change perceptions about the lack of progression and showcase the varied opportunities available.
- Balancing salary with other benefits was noted as a critical approach for retention. While public sector salaries often fall behind private sector pay, participants stressed that public sector roles offer valuable non-monetary benefits such as job security, work-life balance, and access to unique projects unavailable elsewhere. Highlighting these advantages can make public sector careers more appealing to candidates prioritising long-term stability and meaningful work.
- Participants discussed the importance of flexible career paths, noting that programs like apprenticeships and secondments help bring in a more diverse range of talent and provide avenues for long-term development. These initiatives offer a clear path for progression, helping the public sector remain competitive with the private sector.

#2 Streamlining bureaucratic processes:

- Participants agreed that bureaucracy remains a significant challenge for attracting and retaining talent. Simplifying internal processes is critical to making roles more accessible and reducing frustration among employees. The conversation highlighted that programs aimed at developing talent, such as apprenticeships and training schemes, help attract a more diverse workforce and offer clearer career pathways.
- Excessive red tape was identified as a critical issue that slowed decision-making and hindered operational efficiency. Participants discussed the importance of reviewing and reducing administrative barriers to allow for greater agility. The idea of partnering with external organisations for secondments was cited as a successful method for addressing resource gaps and improving operational capabilities.
- By reducing procedural hurdles, organisations can give employees more autonomy and ownership of their work. Participants discussed how reducing administrative tasks could help employees focus more on delivering impactful work, particularly in technical areas like digital transformation and national security.
- Participants emphasised the need to simplify procedures for promotions and internal transfers to enable smoother career progression. They also highlighted secondment programs to foster cross-department mobility, supporting career development and broader organisational goals.

#3 Flexible and diverse career paths:

- Offering flexible career paths was seen as crucial for attracting and retaining talent. Participants discussed the need for roles that allow for lateral movement across departments, providing varied experiences that help employees develop a broader skill set. These flexible, “squiggly” career trajectories reflect the reality that employees may not follow traditional, linear paths and could leave for private sector roles, only to return later to public service. Embracing this fluidity ensures the public sector remains competitive by offering long-term growth and diverse opportunities for professional development.
- Attendees highlighted secondment programs as effective ways to offer growth opportunities, allowing employees to gain new skills and experiences and fostering talent retention.
- The discussion emphasised the value of customising career progression plans to suit individual aspirations and strengths. Participants noted that creating tailored development paths can enhance job satisfaction and long-term commitment, ensuring employees feel supported and valued in their roles.
- Participants stressed the importance of continuous learning and upskilling to meet evolving job requirements. Frameworks that prioritise lifelong learning and skill development were seen as key strategies for maintaining employee engagement and adapting to modern workforce expectations.

#4 Salary disparities and pay progression

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#5 Fostering a collaborative and purpose-driven culture

- Participants stressed the importance of creating a work environment that encourages collaboration and makes employees feel connected to the societal impact of their work. This sense of purpose was seen as a key factor in improving engagement and motivation, helping employees remain committed to their roles.
- Offering structured mentorship and career guidance is crucial for professional growth and retention. Participants discussed how mentorship programs could provide employees with the support they need to navigate complex public sector roles and develop their careers within the organisation.
- Participants emphasised the role of flexible working arrangements in supporting employee well-being and reducing burnout. Creating a culture that prioritises work-life balance was seen as essential in maintaining morale and ensuring that employees remain satisfied and engaged in their roles.
- Regular recognition of employee contributions through formal and informal methods was identified as an important way to foster a positive work environment. Valuing employees’ efforts can enhance

The discussion highlighted the pressing need for the public sector to adopt more innovative and flexible approaches to talent acquisition and retention - including the in-demand skillsets (strategy, policy, transformation, risk, governance, digital and leadership).

Participants shared valuable insights on enhancing the appeal of public sector roles, from rebranding careers to showcasing the societal impact of public service, streamlining bureaucratic processes, promoting non-linear career paths and creating pilots etc. to boost and cement solid social mobility strategies, that truly guarantee equality and diversity.

Addressing salary disparities, focusing on non-financial rewards, and fostering a collaborative, purpose-driven culture were key strategies for improving employee engagement and retention. By implementing these approaches, public sector organisations can remain competitive against the private sector, in attracting this in-demand talent and ensuring long-term growth and development for their workforce.

Subsequently, we at The Barton Partnership maintain ongoing conversations and smaller focus groups; these are curated to help address the above strategies contributing to candidate attraction, hiring protocols, circular careers/returners, career development pathways, and true diversity in our Senior leadership positions and pathways. To partake in a future focus group, please contact Ben Glitherow.

Ben Glitherow - Director, Public Sector



Ben coordinates our Public Sector division, sourcing and mobilising the best private sector professionals with a consulting toolkit (Ex-MBB & Big 4) into the public sector to offer solutions, navigate complex challenges, and deliver on their strategic agendas.

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