



CASE STUDY

Free Agents and GC Talent Cloud – Canada

The Government of Canada (GC) has been testing several models for recruiting and mobilising talent in the Public Service in the digital age. The most ambitious of the projects is the GC Talent Cloud, which aims to become a validated, searchable repository of cross-sector talent. It envisions a digital marketplace where workers have access to rights, benefits and union representation, while retaining the flexibility to choose work inside and outside government, as offered. It represents a departure from the permanent hiring model in the Public Service, organising talent and skills for project-based work. Still at the visionary stage, it has produced several spin-off projects that are becoming successful in their own right. One of these is the Free Agent model, which was originally created as a pre-GC Talent Cloud test of its core design elements. While the Free Agents Model has become a scalable programme, GC Talent Cloud is still getting up to speed and is currently in the design phase. This study looks to Canada to see if governments can lead paradigmatic shifts in a digital age or only innovate in incremental ways.¹⁰³

103. Canada's Free Agents and GC Talent Cloud are also featured in the 2018 World Government Summit's *Edge of Government* exhibit. See <https://edge.worldgovernmentssummit.org>.

Trend 2: Systems approaches and enablers

THE PROBLEM

In the face of increasingly complex and rapidly evolving challenges, policy makers have to work across silos, bring in new skills and capabilities, and adopt a more horizontal, fast-paced working style. Managers have to mobilise diverse skill sets rapidly to meet shorter project timelines. In parallel, the digital transformation is calling for much flatter organisations, with significant numbers of jobs in the knowledge and service sector likely to be made redundant in the coming decade due to machine-to-machine learning and AI. In the face of this new reality, OECD has identified a need for new leadership styles, working methods and innovation skills in the Public Service (OECD, 2017d, 2017i). However, most governments still rely on workforce models built for a different era.

In Canada, this scenario centres on indeterminate hiring¹⁰⁴ with a temporary workforce complement, which is poorly suited to deliver on the aforementioned challenges. Such employer-driven hiring models result in inefficiency: recruiters have to contend with high application rates to process, high levels of duplication, low visibility for employee skills, low levels of autonomy in choosing work and low retention rates for top talent. All of this is cost and time intensive, with mixed results in terms of “best fit” hiring, particularly for evolving jobs. It currently takes between 90 working days and one year to hire new people.¹⁰⁵ This timescale is inadequate for project-based work, an area of increasing demand in a rapidly evolving digital world.

A hierarchal culture and outdated work systems compromise the Public Service’s ability to recruit top talent, and contribute to the loss of public sector “innovators” to the private sector. The Public Service must become faster at bringing in new talent and better at maximising existing

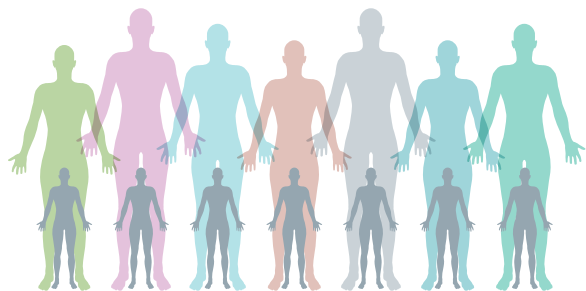
talent and accessing new skills. However, it is not enough to invest in piecemeal solutions and streamline existing systems to peak efficiency, as such approaches address only a fraction of real needs.

AN INNOVATIVE SOLUTION

Inspired by the 2012 Deloitte GovCloud concept (Tierney, Cottle and Jorgensen, 2012), the Government of Canada proposed to restructure government workforces to meet the changing needs of citizens in complex environments. In this context, Natural Resources Canada (NRCAN) set out to test a new form of workforce planning – the GC Talent Cloud. The central idea was that the GC Talent Cloud would become a new digital platform of pre-qualified talent with a competency validation process and easy searchability. Free Agents was one of its earliest pilots to test out the feasibility (including market viability, efficiency savings, psychological stress on workers in the gig economy, competency modelling and screening design) of a new type of workforce (see Boxes 20 and 21). The objectives of the pilot were threefold:

1. Demonstrate the benefits of the cloud-based free agency model for human resources.
2. Support, develop and retain talented public servants.
3. Increase the capacity of the Public Service to innovate and solve problems.

As many different types of work could benefit from the model, NRCAN’s Innovation Hub chose to forego the choice of a specific background or skill-set for Free Agents. Instead, the Innovation Hub developed a set of attributes and behaviours that the Public Service innovation community considered valuable for innovation and problem-solving in their organisations. These attributes formed the basis for the pilot’s screening process. Candidates who successfully



**Ask NOT “What types of work are being done?”
BUT “What is your talent force capable of?”**

GC Talent Cloud project proposal

Box 20: WHAT ARE FREE AGENTS?

“Free Agents” are individuals who possess successful innovation and problem-solving attributes and wish to work in a project-based manner. They are able to choose their work and undertake project-based opportunities across the Public Service. They have the freedom to select work that matches their skills and interests, which allows them to make a contribution that they find meaningful.

Source: Government of Canada

104. Hiring people within certain specific brackets of skills and competences.

105. Information drawn from the Talent Cloud Proposal (2017).

Box 21: TALENT CLOUD AND FREE AGENTS MODELS

The GC Talent Cloud model

This model represents a vision of a digital repository of pre-qualified talent, where the curation and distribution of talent is optimised for fast placement for project-based work.

Talent is pulled from the repository using a term hiring mechanism, ensuring the protection of workers’ rights.

The credentials of those in the GC Talent Cloud are validated and preserved in a way that reduces duplication, increases credential integrity and vastly heightens the scope of talent available to hiring managers.

Source: GC Talent Cloud project proposal from Government of Canada

Free Agents GovCloud model

This programme screens and selects public servants for their attributes and behaviours rather than their traditional educational credentials.

It functions as a pilot test to assess whether these attributes will be valuable for project-based work and will have an impact on problem solving and innovation in the Public Service.

The speed and convenience of the model provides a unique opportunity for managers to rapidly staff their projects with little risk.

Source: Free Agent case description.

demonstrate these core attributes are offered lateral deployments to positions in a special unit of the NRCan Innovation Hub. Because of the lateral deployment model, there is flexibility in the selection process and assessment methodology. Deployments do not need to have clear priorities or undergo a competitive process for appointment.

The Free Agent pilot tracks performance, project outcomes, costs, risks and benefits in order to make broad, data-driven recommendations about the long-term viability of the potential full-scale GC Talent Cloud model (see Figure 43). Work is underway to develop a profile of skills and competencies useful for innovation in the Public Service. Once developed, this profile will provide the framework for

Figure 43: Benefits of the Talent Cloud model



Source: GC Talent Cloud project proposal from Government of Canada.

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Free Agents to pursue training and learning opportunities. This profile will draw from existing research undertaken by groups such as the OPSI (OECD, 2017i) and Nesta.¹⁰⁶

NOVELTY

While Deloitte's GovCloud paper created significant enthusiasm, globally the closest any government has gotten to testing the idea in practice is the NRCan Free Agents model. Other pre-GC Talent Cloud tests in Canada include the micro-missions platform, open badges (verifiable digital micro-credentials), learning pathways and upward feedback.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

The Free Agents programme has now outgrown the single department in NRCan and is scaling, having identified a partner department to hire the next 30 Free Agents.

The pilot is currently undertaking a formative evaluation, but initial feedback surveys show that both the Free Agents and hiring managers have benefitted greatly from the programme's activities. In the first year of the pilot, the programme staffed 42 projects in 20 departments. The projects spanned a broad range of business lines including policy development, communications, science and research, and computer programming. Projects ranged between 2 to 18 months in length; however, the majority (76%) were between 6 and 12 months.

Before candidates enter the programme, many have acted temporarily in positions above their substantive level for long periods. They are frequently encouraged to be innovative; however, during competitive processes many feel they cannot demonstrate their innovation capacity and believe that doing so actually reduces their chances of career advancement. Once in the programme, job satisfaction and enjoyment are considerably higher for Free Agents compared to the rest of the Public Service. Furthermore, the vast majority of Free Agents report new opportunities to apply existing skills and develop new skills, greater access to the innovation community and a higher likelihood of remaining in the Public Service.

Though still higher than the general Public Service, Free Agents reported relatively low levels of agreement with questions of diversity, balancing work and personal life, and mental health. Data from monthly surveys and

journals showed that Free Agents felt some pressure to perform at a consistently high level and ensure that there was no downtime between assignments. The pilot will use the discussions and insights from these workshops to inform the programme's approach to diversity, inclusion, and workplace wellness and mental health. It will also investigate how best to address the unique characteristics and stressors of free agency and put in place safeguards to minimise the potential to overburden the Free Agents.

USER PERSPECTIVE

User perspectives are gathered through surveys both of hiring managers and Free Agents. Based on the results from a survey of hiring managers, the speed and convenience of hiring a Free Agent represent the greatest value provided by the programme. Overall satisfaction among managers with the pilot was very high (90%) and the vast majority would hire a Free Agent again (84%).

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

In the beginning, senior management support was crucial to start experimenting with the Talent Cloud model and piloting the Free Agent test in NRCan. For the Free Agent programme, leadership coverage has become less important since it has demonstrated significant results and the model is scaling. Going forward, the model's success will depend upon staying true to the user-centred, iterative design process that is responsive to changing developments.

Nevertheless, building a paradigm shift in talent management systems takes time, especially in government. There are many legacy systems in hiring, job classification and advancement that require attention. Thus, the more radical GC Talent Cloud initiative is still getting off the ground. The team behind the initiative has left NRCan to go to the Treasury Board Secretariat,¹⁰⁷ where they should be better placed to run the more far-reaching, cross-sectoral experiment. They have laid out a comprehensive, iterative project proposal to build the experimental platform and simultaneously work on the main issues of the gig-economy (including workers' rights, labour relations, rights and benefits, stress on mental health and financial support). However, it remains a grassroots project that will need to rapidly show results to continue to attract funding and support for its mandate.

106. See www.nesta.org.uk/blog/what-are-skills-and-attitudes-successful-public-problem-solving.

107. See www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat.html. The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat provides advice and makes recommendations to the Treasury Board Committee of Ministers on how the government spends money on programmes and services, and how they are regulated and managed. The Secretariat helps ensure tax dollars are spent wisely and effectively for Canadians.