



Anticipating future challenges for the workforce through the re-skilling toolkit of the US Office of Personnel Management

This case study was prepared in the context of OECD research on the Future of Work in 2020-2021. The case study focusses on building a forward-looking public sector in the US through the use of a re-skilling and up-skilling toolkit. Developed by the US Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the toolkit helps Federal agencies meet their objective of strategic workforce management and skills development in line with the President's Management Agenda.



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Introduction

The US Federal workforce is, like many workforces across the OECD, affected by digitalisation, globalisation and ageing workforces. In particular, the impact of major workforce changes such as automation is already being felt in a number of areas of the Federal workforce. Against this background, the US Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has developed a re-skilling toolkit to help Federal agencies meet their objective of strategic workforce management and skills development in line with the President's Management Agenda (Office of Personnel Management, 2019^[1]).

The toolkit is a compendium of information, guidance and other resources for managers to use in designing ways to help employees affected by the automation of parts of their jobs to improve their skills or develop new ones. The toolkit is also designed to be used by employees, and helps bridge the gap between widespread recognition of broad changes and concrete tools to help workforce managers plan and adapt. The development of the toolkit was strongly driven by the recognition that:

[w]hen employees' duties are modified through reassignment, relocation, or increased workloads, it is imperative that they receive the proper training and development to address new and augmented assignments and acclimate to new environments and modes of operation (Office of Personnel Management, 2019^[11]).

Background

The Partnership for Public Service, a think-tank, suggests that more than 80 different federal occupations are likely to be affected by automation (Partnership for Public Service, 2019^[2]). With a recent study suggesting that 60% of all new hires leave the US Federal workforce after less than two years, preventing skills gaps is a key priority for Federal employers. Up-skilling and re-skilling is one way to do this (Government Accountability Office, 2020^[3]). While the Federal workforce can be expected to see some jobs disappear entirely, the big change is the alteration to existing roles as technology replaces and alters discrete functions. This places a premium on the ability of Federal workforce managers to conceptualise how change will affect their mission and teams. It means they must provide opportunities to up-skill and re-skill their staff – but this is easier said than done.

- **Reskilling:** training for employees who have shown they have the aptitude to learn a completely new occupation. For example, an office clerk whose job has become obsolete might be reskilled to learn web development.
- **Upskilling:** training employees in a particular occupation with new skills to improve how they perform their jobs. For instance, employees who use the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet program in the grant administration process might be upskilled to use robotic process automation instead (Partnership for Public Service, 2019^[2]).

In 2018, OPM identified four major trends shaping the Federal workforce: (i) the evolving role of workers in the context of automation, (ii) the impact of digital technologies, (iii) employee health and wellbeing, and (iv) shifting demographics (Office of Personnel Management, 2019^[11]). As technology continues to advance, digitalisation and automation is expected to eliminate or lead to changes of work roles or tasks within positions. Some of the top labour-intensive Federal activities with automation potential are roles related to:

- a. Retrieving and synthesising data



- b. Providing some customer service activities
- c. Performing some administrative activities

Many public services across the OECD face similar challenges, and the OECD Recommendation on Public Service Leadership and Capability (PSLC) urges adherents to:

- Continuously identify skills and competencies needed to transform political vision into services which deliver value to society
- Develop the necessary skills and competencies by creating a learning culture and environment in the public service
- Develop a long-term, strategic and systematic approach to people management based on evidence and inclusive planning (OECD, 2019^[4]).

Getting the project off the ground

The toolkit was developed by OPM in collaboration with agency partners, the National Science Foundation and the Department of Homeland and Urban Development (HUD). From the beginning, OPM engaged with the Chief Human Capital Officers across agencies to build engagement. An important starting point was recognition of the need to update multiple paper-based processes across government. For example, the IRS has been closing down a number of their facilities that processed tax returns manually – but this means the need to find new work and new types of work for staff in these centres (who are mainly clerical officers) (Box 1).

Box 1. Internal Revenue Service Re-skilling Academy

The IRS has been closing down a number of their facilities that did manual processing of tax returns and finding these clerical staff new work in areas that are less prone to automation.

The Reskilling Academy is designed to assist IRS Submission Processing employees in Fresno, CA, in transitioning to a new career path within the Service. The primary goal is to support these employees in developing the skills necessary to qualify for higher grade opportunities in the customer service and tax examining fields. To achieve this, these employees will choose a path based on their interests and skills, participate in and complete multiple phases of structured training and assessments, and emerge fully certified and qualified to enter into a continuing position in a new area of expertise.

Source: <https://www.usajobs.gov/GetJob/ViewDetails/576228400>

One of the tools used in the development of the toolkit was the *Competency Exploration for Developments and Readiness* (CEDAR) tool.¹ This is an online competency assessment tool that can be used by employees and at organisation-wide level to better understand where there are specific competency strengths and gaps. CEDAR provides employee-specific results of a comprehensive assessment based on supervisor and employee input. Agencies can use the aggregated results of their assessments to support their competency

¹ <https://www.opm.gov/information-management/privacy-policy/privacy-policy/cedar.pdf>

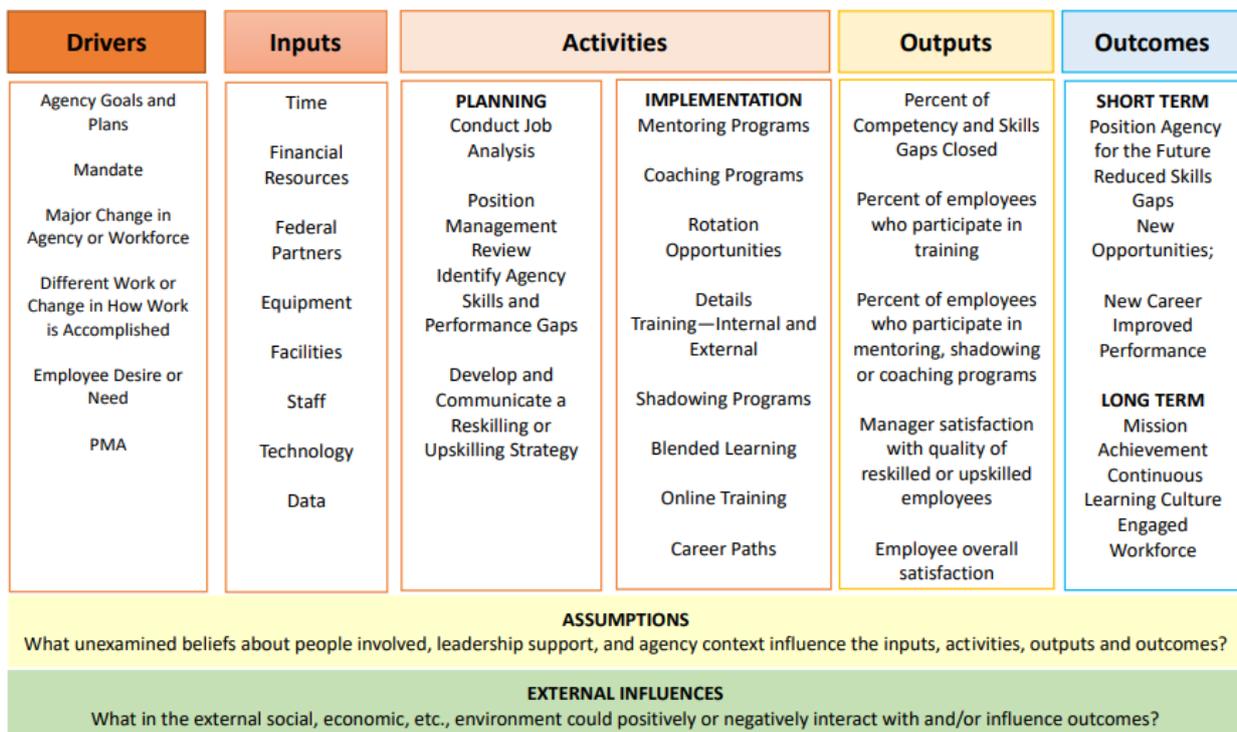


gap analyses, personnel training and development efforts, and to identify the employee competency strengths in an organization.

Use of the CEDAR tool at organisation and agency level provided a clear indication of areas of the Federal workforce that could benefit from using OPM’s re-skilling toolkit. The development of the toolkit and its initial use in practice built on quantifiable data gathered through the CEDAR tool. In other words, while the starting point for an up-skilling or re-skilling intervention might be based on observable trends – e.g. ‘jobs involving a lot of paper-based processes will probably change substantially’ – the CEDAR tool allows managers to calculate the degree to which such hypotheses applies to their workforces.

The toolkit is divided into four sections: the first explains the concepts of re-skilling and up-skilling and provides guidance to identify key stakeholders involved. The next section develops a logic model (Figure 1) before focussing on implementation and subsequently evaluation of reskilling models.

Figure 1. Reskilling and upskilling logic model example



Source: <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/workforce-restructuring/reshaping/accelerating-the-gears-of-transformation/reskilling-toolkit.pdf>

Results

Initial use of the tool has shown positive results, though data are still being gathered. One of the most encouraging and high-profile examples has been the development of the Cyber Reskilling Academy (Box 2). The Government Accountability Office (GAO) – often referred to as the ‘Congressional watchdog’ – is preparing a study that will use data gathered through various projects where the upskilling toolkit has been used.



Box 2. Re-skilling in action: the Cyber Reskilling Academy

In November 2018, as part of the president’s management agenda, the CIO Council announced the government-wide Federal Cyber Reskilling Academy to address the shortage of cybersecurity talent in the federal government. The programme, run by the council’s workforce committee and the Department of Education, aims to develop new IT and cyber talent to fill open cybersecurity positions in government. The Academy was designed to fill a gap by targeting existing Federal employees eager to move into new roles but lacking structured opportunities to do so.

Interest in the programme was primarily from federal employees who wanted an opportunity to expand how they might work for the government. The academy attracted more than 1,500 applicants from across government to fill 30 spots in its inaugural class. The finalists who completed the three month training programme in July 2019 received two Global Information Assurance Certification credentials in cybersecurity and are hoping to either transition into new cybersecurity roles or apply their new skills to fill existing gaps at their current agencies. While the first cohort was restricted to current employees who did not work in the IT field, the second cohort was expanded to admit federal employees with IT backgrounds.

Source: <https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Reskilling.pdf>

Early observations suggest that not everyone wants to take advantage of opportunities for re- or upskilling. Taking the psychological state of employees on board is important – many employees who have worked for long periods in particular agencies or teams may feel scared by the prospect of change and unwilling to leave long-established relationships – even identities – behind. Taking this as a starting point, OPM has built in ways to engage employees and help them understand that upskilling is not about forced change but about finding “something they can see themselves doing” in the long term.

Building on research on the future of work, OPM also observed that it is rare for entire roles to simply be replaced by automation. In the majority of cases, certain tasks will change but not the whole role. In these cases, it can be tricky to make the case to managers and staff for the need to upskill or reskill. In professions that are going to disappear entirely – such as the IRS example in Box 1– upskilling and reskilling is an easier ‘sell’.

Use of the toolkit also served to highlight gaps in learning and development: sometimes the type of training that staff need is not easily available in ‘off-the-shelf’ modules, and learning and development journeys need to be created from scratch. The ability of agencies to meet these learning needs differs across government, indicating the usefulness of some centralised support from OPM.

Finally, upskilling and reskilling are frequently referred to as the natural consequence of displacement of labour, but that is not always the case. When labour is displaced, OPM encourages managers to think in terms of four broad ways to address skills gaps, of which upskilling/reskilling is just one option. The other three are contracting a service provider (for example for some IT needs), finding an employee from another government department or agency (like through a secondment or short-term placement), or hiring a new government employee. All options are valid and should be considered alongside upskilling and reskilling.



Success factors

- The Toolkit identifies several pre-conditions to successful re-skilling, such as leadership support, appropriate resources, and the existence of workforce plans and policies to support reskilling and upskilling.
- The Toolkit notes that agency policies, including collective bargaining agreements, can also affect success.
- Feedback from OPM also centred on the presentation of the Toolkit and how it is framed for agencies. It is important to show how it is different from previous reskilling and upskilling effort, as well as to support management implement a change management process. This may include a focus on the psychological aspects of change and supporting employee wellbeing.
- Because the Toolkit consolidates many types of resources, OPM sought to avoid ‘content-dumping’ and instead developed a narrative and structure for how the Toolkit should be used. This is a key success factor – curating the information and making it accessible and digestible.
- Re-skilling is perceived differently to up-skilling: initial use of the Toolkit suggests staff may perceive up-skilling negatively if they feel that their new skills will simply add more tasks to their to-do lists. On the other hand, the sentiment around re-skilling was more clear-cut: employees felt that they were making a career change due either to push factors (their old job will soon cease to exist) or pull factors (chance to find meaning in a new professional field while continuing to serve the public interest).
- Begin with jobs where there is clear evidence that job is disappearing or changing substantially

Conclusions

At the time of writing, the tool was still in an experimental phase, meaning it is hard to draw concrete conclusions. OPM acknowledge the need to keep measuring progress and gathering more data. OPM also framed the Toolkit as just one element of a successful ‘playbook’, or situational checklist that managers can draw on to identify when up- and re-skilling is the best option – and when it is perhaps more appropriate to recruit or ‘borrow’ talent.



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