

SPOTLIGHT ON YOUNG PROFESSIONALS

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Looking Younger

The City of Tempe finds success in recruiting younger workers to help fill the void being left by a stream of early retirements.

By Ken Wysocky

Jessica Williams considers herself a typical college student. A senior at Arizona State University who hails from nearby Glendale, she enjoys attending Sun Devils football and basketball games, taking part in student government and listening to music.

In one respect, however, she's relatively unusual: She's firmly committed to working in the public sector. "I always pictured myself becoming an attorney and working at a private law firm," explains Williams, who has been an intern for two years in the Public Works Department in Tempe. "But after I started working here, I realized I still wanted to be an attorney—not at a private firm, but for the City of Tempe.

"The benefits are great, and the City does a lot of things to recognize employees and make them feel at home. They recruit internally to fill job openings before they look outside, which is a big plus. And training programs are available that can prepare you for a lot of different jobs. It's an environment I definitely want to remain a part of."

Attracting the young

Williams' about-face represents a success story for a Public Works Department initiative aimed at attracting and retaining younger employees. It also offers a valuable lesson to municipal governments nationwide that, like Tempe, are challenged to fill the void being left by longtime employees taking enticing early-retirement packages.

An estimated 40 percent of the more than 12 million state and local government employees nationwide will be eligible for retirement through 2015, according to the Nationwide Retirement Education Institute. Tempe is a microcosm, notes Jennifer Adams, Deputy Public Works Manager and an 18-year City employee.

"We're facing an enormous amount of retirements," says Adams, who helped spearhead a recruitment outreach committee that developed Tempe's program, a joint effort with the police and fire departments.

"About 30 percent of our roughly 1,750 City employees are eligible to retire in the next five years," she points out. "We decided to be proactive and plan for the situation."

One of the biggest challenges is attracting today's younger workers, who don't necessarily view the public sector as an attractive career opportunity.

Moreover, the U.S. Bureau of Labor predicts that on average, a 22-year-old employee will likely hold 10 different jobs during their career, with an average tenure of only four years per job. "If the job isn't something they like, they leave," Adams observes. A shrinking labor pool and plentiful jobs make younger people an even more valuable commodity, and that encourages more job-hopping.

Personal touch

So what does Tempe's Public Works Department do to woo the younger generation? It all starts with a drastic shift in recruiting methods. "It used to be we didn't recruit at all," Adams says. "We'd run a newspaper ad and get more than enough applications to fill a position."

About three years ago, city officials noticed that fewer and fewer people were applying. Agreeing that a newspaper ad was no longer sufficient, the outreach committee decided the Internet was a way to reach out to the younger set.

"Now we advertise jobs on more than 50 Web sites—everything from craigslist to the Maricopa County Community College District, to the American Society of Civil Engineers, to www.jobing.com," Adams says.

"I know it's working because we recently had an opening for a fleet director. Typically, we'd get about 10 or 12 applications, but we got 70 this time. The big difference was that the applicants live all over the country and were a very diverse group. It was very rewarding to see."

Increased visibility

The committee also decided the city needed a higher profile among young people. So the Public Works Department hired two ASU students—including Williams—and made job recruiting one of their primary responsibilities. "They know what's important to that age group," Adams says. "They go out to the universities and community colleges and talk about their experience and how much they love it."

The interns staff a booth at job fairs and attend a wide variety of local events, from ASU homecoming festivities to local bike races and fun runs. "We try to think out of the box," Adams says. "Tempe holds more events than any other city in the valley, so we try to partner with as many of them as possible."

When someone stops at the department's booth for information, the interns take down basic contact information and follow up right away. "Immediate follow-up is important," says explains. "If you don't, they'll just move along to another opportunity. This generation is used to an immediate response, so the first thing we do is send them an e-mail—use their language, if you will."

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The outreach program even extends to elementary schools. The department sponsors field trips with a municipal bent, such as showing students a new light-rail system under construction in nearby Phoenix. "We want to get them interested in public works at a young age," Adams says. "We also plan to partner with junior high schools and high schools. We'll do things like bring in heavy equipment, which they love to see."

Emphasis on benefits

During job interviews, officials stress the City's generous employee benefits, as well as intangibles such as a family atmosphere and the rewards of public service. "If someone is just looking at money, the private sector definitely pays more," Adams observes. "We have to get them to look past the money—look at the benefits, the job security, and the workplace environment. We point out that it's not as cutthroat as private-sector jobs. Everyone works together.

"We also emphasize that we're public servants. Members of this younger generation feel it's important to make a difference, and make their community a better place to live."

The city's benefits include 14 to 24 vacation days (depending on length of service); 12 paid sick days; 12 paid holidays; health, dental, vision and life insurance; a pension plan; employee training and development programs; and tuition reimbursement.

The department also works to make employees feel welcome. It holds an annual Public Works breakfast where employees can mingle with coworkers as well as the mayor and city council members. "We have seven divisions, so we're pretty spread out," Adams says. "The breakfast gives employees a chance to meet in person people they might normally only talk to over a radio."

In addition, each division meets monthly to discuss whatever is on employees' minds. "We like to see how things are going," Adams explains. "We don't talk much. We let them do the talking. It's not us versus them; it's all part of a team. We want people to feel they can approach us, and they do."

The department also sponsors fun events, such as a pumpkin-carving contest at Halloween. "We create a family atmosphere in Public Works," Adams says. "I have young engineers who get job offers and stay because they have such good friends at work, and Public Works just becomes a part of who they are. It's really important to us that people like their jobs."

Continuing education

The City also helps employees advance their educations through a tuition reimbursement program, which offers \$5,000 a year for anyone who takes classes at ASU. Better yet, the professors teach the courses onsite during work hours.

Another perk is a certified public management course. "After you complete the course, you should be able to manage any

department in the city," Adams says. The course includes mock city council meetings to give attendees a taste of local politics.

Employees do not have to use vacation days to attend school—they get paid while they get educated. "That tells employees that our organization cares about you and your career development," Adams notes. "It says we're willing to put time and money into making it happen. If an employee wants to get ahead, there are lots of opportunities. There's no guarantee that anyone will get promoted, but the opportunities to learn are there.

"I know it's successful because out of the nearly 160 employees who have graduated from either the public management course or ASU, only one has left a city job after getting a degree. People feel loyal to the city."

The department also offers cross-training, which exposes employees to different career opportunities and teaches them new skills. In addition, a mentoring program lets employees benefit from a veteran manager's knowledge and expertise, Adams adds.

Getting the word out

Williams says many students don't know about the careers available in the public sector. "It was a real eye-opener for me," she recalls. "I didn't realize how many opportunities existed."

Moreover, misconceptions about municipal jobs abound. "I have friends who are engineers who didn't know that the Public Works Department has an engineering division," Williams observes. "They thought the city contracted out that work to private-sector companies. Other people think you can only get into a city job if you know someone. But I tell everyone I know about the opportunities that are available."

Meanwhile, the Public Works recruitment outreach initiative has expanded to include all city departments. Solid support from the mayor and the city council has been critical. "I think we're staying ahead of the curve," Adams says.

In turn, that is giving younger people plenty to consider when eyeing careers in the Valley of the Sun.

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