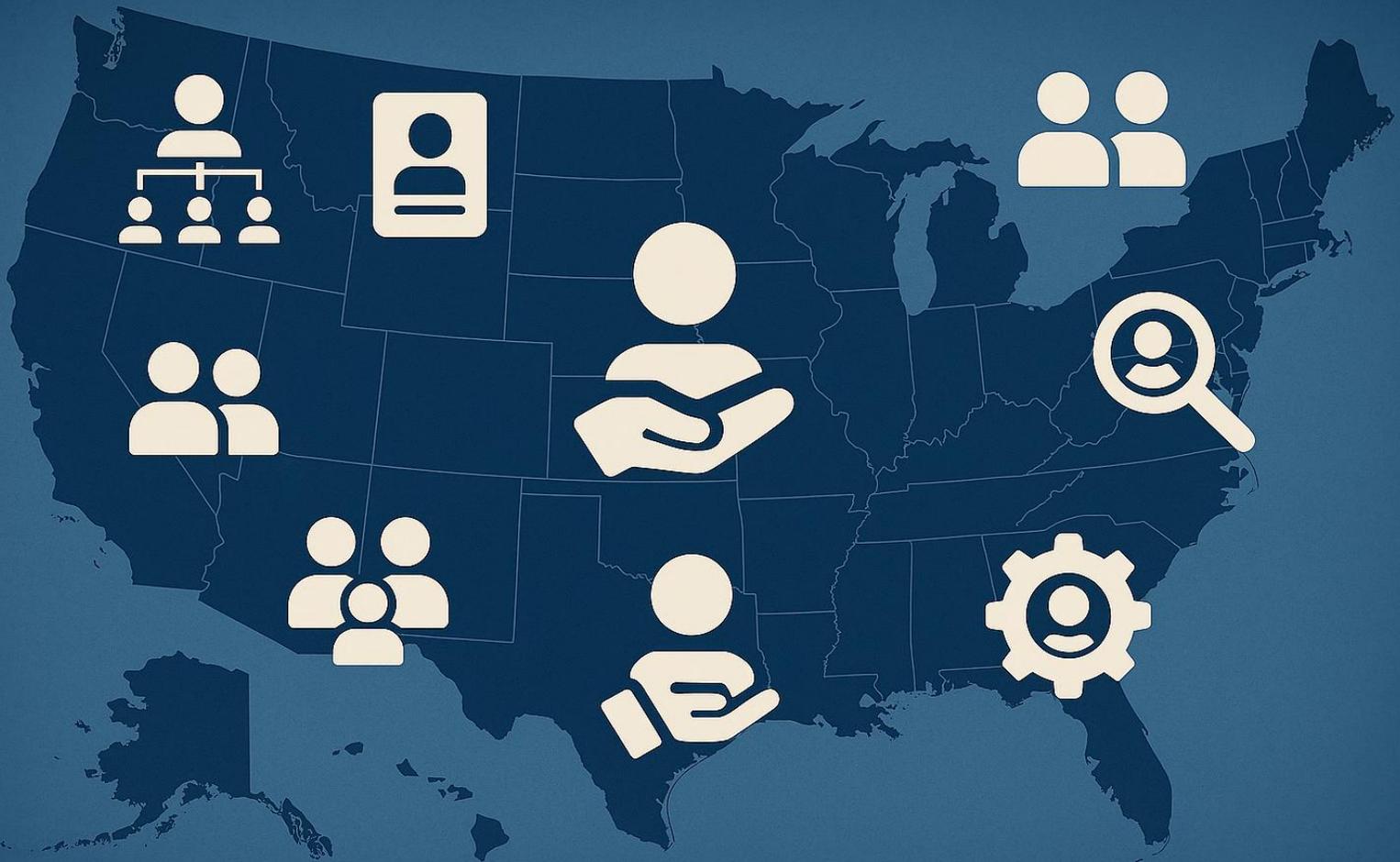


A Report by the

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

for the Niskanen Center

State Human Resources and Benchmarking Study



Niskanen
Center



February 2026

About the Academy



The National Academy of Public Administration is an independent, nonprofit, and nonpartisan organization established in 1967 and chartered by Congress in 1984. It provides expert advice to government leaders in building more effective, efficient, accountable, and transparent organizations. To carry out this mission, the Academy draws on the knowledge and experience of its over 1,000 Fellows—including former cabinet officers, Members of Congress, governors, mayors, and state legislators, as well as prominent scholars, career public administrators, and nonprofit and business executives. The Academy helps public institutions address their most critical governance and management challenges through in-depth studies and analyses, advisory services and technical assistance, congressional testimony, forums and conferences, and online stakeholder engagement. For more information on the National Academy of Public Administration, its Fellows, publications, and working groups, visit us at www.napawash.org.

About the Niskanen Center

**Niskanen
Center**

The Niskanen Center promotes policies that advance prosperity, opportunity, and human flourishing. We advocate for an effective government that fosters market competition, provides social insurance and essential public goods, and is guided by the principles of liberal democracy.

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February 2026

Printed in the United States of America

Academy Project Number: 22911

Niskanen Center

Message from the Sponsor

In the last few years, after roughly a quarter century of dormancy, interest in the scope, size, and quality of the public sector workforce in the United States has dramatically increased, reaching new heights in 2025 and into 2026.

Americans across the political spectrum have an overwhelming sense that their governments, at all levels, are struggling to carry out their missions effectively and efficiently. On the left, there is a pervasive view that the blue state struggles stemmed from a lack of tools to move quickly enough to matter—that the ambitions were sound, but the machinery of government couldn't keep up. On the right, we see the now-familiar accusation that entrenched bureaucratic interests prevent conservative leaders from remaking government to be responsive to popular will. And across the ideological spectrum, more narrowly focused issue advocates (like those in the nascent Abundance movement) have begun to turn their attention to the uncomfortable question of whether their elegant policy proposals for housing, transportation, healthcare, and education will actually work in implementation.

However, compared to all this renewed interest, there is relatively little scholarship on what a better system might look like. The public administration discipline is now mostly focused on narrow, slow-to-generalize research, squirreled away behind paywalls, as a result of academia's incentive system. The management policy space in Washington has long been dominated by government contractors. And it has been a number of years since either national party has devoted sustained attention to reform proposals beyond partisan signaling over wedge issues.

Nowhere is this truer than in state and local government. In the federal space, some work is underway to imagine a better future, but sub-nationally, there is even less attention paid to the capacity of state and local governments to govern. Membership organizations like the National Governors Association try, but resources are limited, and research capacity is in short supply. Most public employees in the country work in these "laboratories of democracy," yet nearly none of the policy establishment's intellectual energy is devoted to understanding how they hire, how they buy, how they implement IT, or any of the other operational questions that determine whether the government actually delivers on its promises.

In the past, when states or the federal government sought reform, they could look for promising examples among the states. Today, many state personnel officers don't know how the civil service systems work in the state next door, let alone what worked better or worse. "Best practices" dissemination is rarer and slower for unsung issues like human capital policy than it is for flashy "of the day" topics like artificial intelligence. Despite underlying all other policy areas, management professionals in states have tremendously difficult jobs and very little objective analysis to help them do better.

Better government won't spontaneously happen without better evidence and analysis. And better analysis won't happen unless someone invests in it.

In 2025, recognizing this gaping hole in the evidence base, the Niskanen Center, with support from the Recoding America Fund, launched a research partnership with the National Academy of Public Administration (the Academy) to make a first step towards answering some of these questions. We asked the Academy to work with us to inventory descriptive data about as many state personnel systems as possible, forming a factual basis for further study of state "state capacity."

The Academy was an obvious partner for this project. It has unparalleled convening power: access to its fellows across the country, other nonprofit organizations in the public administration space, and experts who could inform a project of this scope. As a side effect of fragmentation in the management policy space, the field of practitioners is also poorly organized, and without an institution like the Academy that has an extensive independent network, such a study would not be possible.

The outputs of this partnership, outlined in the pages that follow, include detailed, descriptive data on how over 40 states manage their state civil service systems. We are delighted to make them publicly available so that everyone—think tanks, academics, state personnel officials, and the public—can begin to wrap their heads around what has been going on in these "laboratories" and use this data in their own work.

We intend that publishing these findings is the beginning of a longer public conversation about how our governments at all levels work today and how they might work better to serve the needs of all Americans in the future. This paper attempts to lay out the facts on the ground in the hopes that others will apply their own analytical lenses, continue the descriptive research, and push the envelope for what reform is possible.

As a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to the belief that a capable state is essential for well-functioning markets, broad prosperity, and improving everyday life, the Niskanen Center has greatly appreciated the opportunity to work with the Academy on this project. We share a commitment to being nonpartisan, values-driven, and truth-seeking, focused on what works rather than what scores points on social media.

We are grateful for the constructive engagement of the many state personnel policy leaders who provided important input, context, and helped clarify the demand signal for this report. We also thank the outside subject matter experts who contributed to this research. And we are deeply appreciative of the work of the Academy Study Team for their contributions to this project, their valuable insight, and their persistence in trying to address a long-standing gap in the literature.

For those interested in continuing the conversation, we invite you to use our data to guide your own work, to conduct your own research, and to reach out to us to collaborate. We look forward to further evolutions of this work in the future.

Gabe Menchaca

Project Sponsor
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Foreword

State governments rely on dedicated public servants to carry out essential work, yet the systems that support these workforces vary widely and are often difficult to compare. This report provides a single, comprehensive source of information to help state leaders understand how their peers structure and manage public personnel systems.

This benchmarking study begins to fill a longstanding gap. Drawing on extensive policy review and participation from 44 states, the Study Team has assembled a unique resource that highlights state HR models, the trade-offs states navigate, and the promising practices emerging across the country.

The findings reinforce a widely held belief: there is no single "best" approach to managing a state workforce. Each state balances competing priorities in ways that reflect its respective history, statutory environment, labor market, and governance structure. At the same time, states are innovating in meaningful ways, from skills-based hiring and expanded work-based learning pathways to modern compensation structures and more data-driven performance management.

This report lays the foundation for a long-needed national repository of state HR data—an essential tool for comparing practices, understanding what works, and identifying areas for future research. By continuing to build this evidence base, we can help states strengthen their human resources systems and, ultimately, improve the effectiveness of government for the people it serves.

I am grateful to the Niskanen Center for its partnership, and to the state HR officials, professional associations, and subject-matter experts who contributed their time and insight to this effort. Their engagement ensures that this study is grounded in the real conditions facing today's public workforce systems. Additionally, I would like to extend my appreciation to the dedicated Study Team at the Academy.

James-Christian B. Blockwood

President and Chief Executive Officer
National Academy of Public Administration

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I. Overview

The National Academy of Public Administration (the Academy) has launched a new research partnership with the Niskanen Center to collect data and identify best practices within the public personnel systems of all 50 state governments. This research project aims to establish a centralized inventory of state-level Human Resources (HR) information for the public, state governments, the federal government, and other researchers to better understand state operations and identify practices across the country and those that may be generalizable across jurisdictions.

Research Highlights

Variation in HR Management Models: State HR management models range from highly centralized, where individual agencies do not maintain HR staff, to decentralized models where HR management authority is distributed to individual agencies in varying degrees.

Innovative Recruitment Strategies: States are actively working to improve the quality and speed of hiring through work-based learning, "pooled hiring" (sharing vetted candidate lists across multiple agencies), and initiatives like Hawaii's "Wikiwiki Hire" and Utah's "Return Utah" to expedite recruitment and attract qualified employees.

The Rise of "Skills-Based Hiring:" More than half of the interviewed states have issued executive orders or passed legislation to remove traditional degree requirements, prioritizing competencies and prior experience. While this approach broadens the candidate pool, state officials shared mixed perspectives on its effectiveness and impacts.

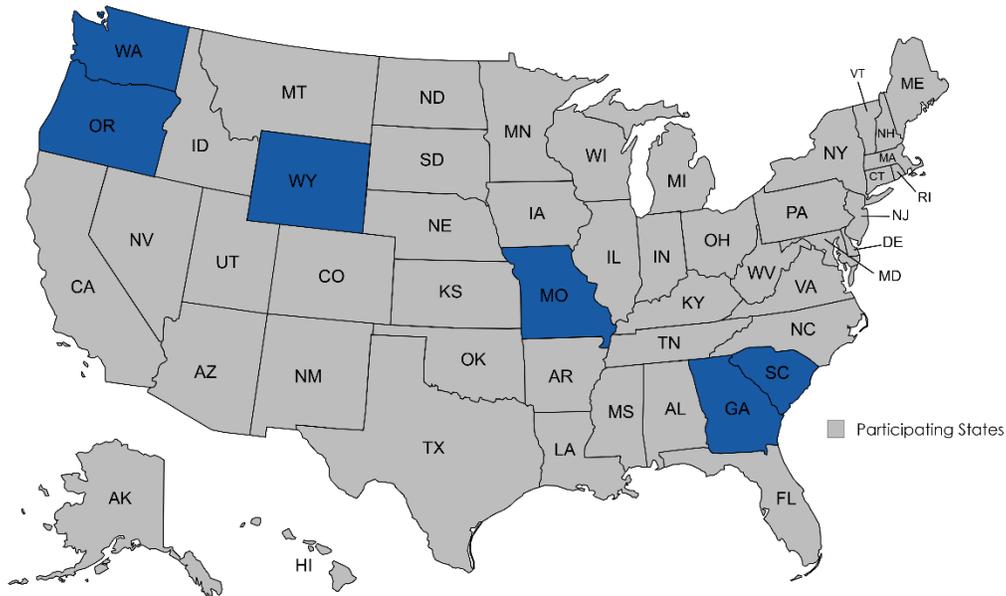
Modernizing Compensation and Classification Systems: States are increasingly adopting market-based salary plans and conducting regular benchmarking to remain competitive. Recognizing that many existing classification frameworks are outdated, several states are conducting comprehensive reviews to modernize these systems.

II. Scope and Methodology

Conducted from September 2025 through January 2026, this benchmarking study examines personnel management practices within state executive agencies. To guide this effort, the Study Team developed a comprehensive framework that focuses on key areas, including recruitment, compensation, performance management, labor relations, and grievance and appeal processes.

The Study Team conducted a thorough review of states' publicly available HR policy documents, laws, regulations, and reports. To better understand how these policies are implemented in practice, the Study Team reached out to HR officials in every state. Over a four-month period, 44 states participated in the study. The Study Team conducted interviews with HR officials from 41 states. These interviews verified data, addressed information gaps, and revealed best practices and lessons learned. Three states provided written responses.

Figure 1: Participating States



To facilitate this outreach, the Academy also engaged with several state HR associations, including the National Compensation Association of State Governments, the National Association of State Personnel Executives, Govern for America, and the Volcker Alliance.

The Study Team organized the resulting data into a standardized spreadsheet format and shared draft spreadsheets with interviewees for fact-checking. Appendix A provides a comprehensive list of the individuals interviewed.

This document summarizes the key themes and findings from the Study Team's research.

III. The National Personnel Management Landscape

Across the country, states organize and manage their workforce in different ways. There is no single best model. The diversity across states stems from unique local contexts and how states navigate the tension between legitimate, competing priorities. Some states operate within strict statutory frameworks or have strong union environments that limit the flexibility of public personnel systems. Other states grant their governors and central HR agencies broader authority to implement new programs or modify existing rules and policies without legislative action.

Governing Structures Vary Significantly

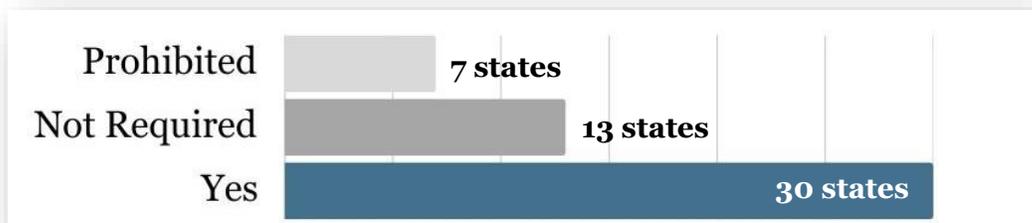
The organizational placement of central HR agencies varies across state governments. Of the 50 states, 12 have HR directors reporting directly to the governor, suggesting the role has relatively high visibility and strategic importance. In five states, state HR directors report to an independent commission. Thirty-two place the state HR agency within a cabinet-level department. Most civil service systems are established by state law; however, in a few states, such as Colorado, California, and Michigan, the systems are established by the state constitution.

While most states establish their civil service systems in state law, Colorado, California, Louisiana, Michigan, New Jersey, and New York have theirs established in their state constitutions.

Union Presence Shapes the Operating Environment

Union representation varies widely across states. Most states have established statutory requirements for collective bargaining, and employee representation rates range from 3 percent to 93 percent. Collective bargaining is not required in 13 states and is prohibited in 7. In most states, the central HR agency serves as the state’s chief negotiator. A few states, such as Michigan and New York, manage negotiations through separate offices. Union presence influences how quickly states can update personnel rules, revise job classifications, or change pay and benefits. It also affects how agencies implement reforms, manage disputes, and communicate expectations to employees.

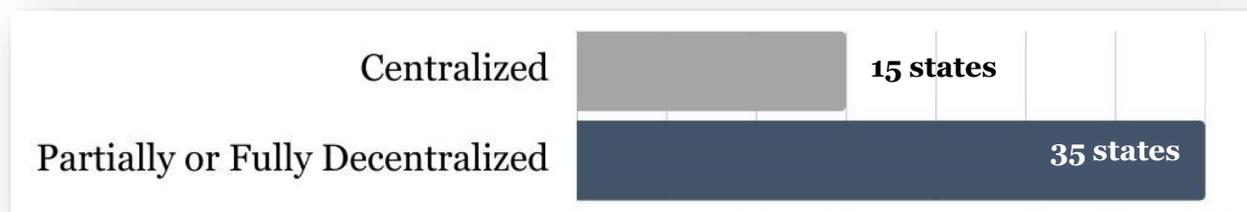
Figure 2: Do state agencies engage in collective bargaining?



Degrees of Centralization Vary Across States

State HR models also vary in their degree of centralization (Figure 3). Some states, such as Vermont and Utah, have adopted a highly centralized model. In these states, individual agencies do not maintain their own HR offices. Instead, the central HR agency provides direct services. Other states use a fully or partially decentralized model in which HR Management authority is distributed to individual agencies to varying degrees. Texas is unique in adopting a fully decentralized model. It lacks a central personnel agency, allowing individual state agencies to establish their own HR rules and administrative processes. Most states fall between these two extremes. They use partially centralized models in which the central HR agency sets statewide policies, establishes standards, and provides oversight. Individual agencies then manage daily HR operations. States continue to adjust their HR management models. Some are consolidating authority to increase consistency. Others are increasingly delegating responsibilities to improve responsiveness. Details on individual state HR management structures are available in the *State HR Benchmarking Spreadsheets*.

Figure 3: Does the State have a centralized or decentralized HR Management System?



State HR officials described clear advantages and limitations of both models. The most common concern about centralization is that it limits agencies' ability to meet mission-specific needs. Centralized systems create uniformity, but they can feel too rigid for agencies that must respond quickly to specialized workforce challenges. In decentralized environments, the primary concerns relate to standardization, consistency, and efficiency. Decentralized systems can create variations in practices that raise legal or operational risks.

States often work to balance these competing objectives. Many centralized systems embed HR staff in individual agencies or create dedicated teams to tailor services. States with decentralized systems usually establish some centralized components to strengthen oversight and accountability. Classification and compensation remain centralized in most states, including Texas.

There is no universal template for organizing a state HR system. States balance flexibility, consistency, speed, and administrative capacity in different ways. States do not choose their HR structures in a vacuum. Their choices reflect long-standing traditions, differing political environments, labor markets, legislative constraints, agency cultures, and available resources. The purpose of benchmarking is not to identify a single correct model but to help states

understand how their approaches compare to others and where promising practices may offer useful insights.

IV. Hiring and Recruitment

Hiring is one of the most visible and consequential functions of any state HR system. It determines who gets in the door, how fast agencies can fill critical roles, and ultimately whether state government can deliver for the public. Hiring in government is also wrapped in layers of statute, oversight, and history—none of which are uniform across states. That’s why hiring looks so different from one state to the next, and why a single model is unlikely to work for all 50.

Hiring and Recruitment Processes for Competitive Positions

Effective hiring requires a strategic balance between competing priorities: resources, speed, fairness, and quality. There is no universal "right" answer because states face different political pressures, budget realities, labor markets, and agency structures.

States take very different approaches to how tightly they control hiring. Some states, such as New York and Connecticut, have lengthy pre-recruitment approval processes (e.g., requiring approval from the state's budget office) before a job can even be posted. This slows hiring but may also add fiscal discipline.

Almost all states require agencies to post job openings on a centralized portal; most also mandate a minimum posting period, typically 3 to 21 days. These rules promote transparency and standardization, but they also add days or weeks to the process, creating a risk that candidates in competitive labor markets may not wait. Many states rely on the central HR office to review minimum qualifications and refer eligible candidates to hiring agencies. Only a few states (e.g., Alabama and Colorado) limit the number of referrals through a "Rule of X".

States are transitioning away from traditional civil service exams. For example, New York is replacing multiple-choice written tests with training-and-experience-based assessments, where the application itself serves as the examination. While most states lack a statewide requirement to prioritize internal candidates, individual agencies often establish internal rules to favor qualified current employees. Statutory caps on total FTEs constrain some states. Agencies in Rhode Island, Kentucky, Idaho, Oregon, and Virginia cannot simply hire more people or create new positions when the workload demands it; they must stay within legislatively imposed Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) ceilings.

Most state agencies conduct their own interviews and extend offers. The central HR office may provide training and advisory support during the process and conduct post-hire audits to ensure compliance with relevant rules and regulations. In only a few states, such as New York and New Jersey, agencies' hiring decisions are reviewed by the central HR agency before they are finalized. Additional details on states' hiring and recruitment processes are available in the *State HR Benchmarking Spreadsheets*.

Trends in Reform to Improve Hiring and Recruitment

The time-consuming hiring process remains a significant hurdle in government recruitment. Several states have launched initiatives to expedite hiring and recruit qualified employees more efficiently. Hawaii's "Wikiwiki Hire" program is an example. The state's central HR agency screens applications every two weeks and provides qualified candidates with contact information for agency recruiters, empowering them to inquire directly about interview slots rather than waiting for a referral. It is simple, but it trims weeks off the timeline.

Some interviewees pointed out that hiring speed is not always the top priority for governments, but maintaining fairness and transparency of the process is critical. Hiring must comply with statutory requirements, veterans' preferences, labor-management agreements, and procedural fairness. These constraints are essential safeguards, but they also mean government hiring reforms must operate within tighter boundaries than typical in the private sector.

Recruiting Branding and Outreach

State HR officials consistently described "active recruiting" as essential. States now treat recruitment as a marketing challenge as much as an administrative one. Job fairs, community events, and social media campaigns are common. A few states have built dedicated offices to help job seekers navigate the process, implicitly acknowledging that state hiring can feel bewildering from the outside. Some states, recognizing weaknesses in their recruitment brand, have brought in outside consultants to update messaging and refresh their public image as employers.

Building Talent Pipelines

States increasingly rely on internships, apprenticeships, and other work-based learning programs to develop a future workforce and attract high-quality candidates. Colorado has established a variety of work-based learning initiatives, including internships, fellowships, and apprenticeships. Its 'Pathways to Public Service' model is specifically designed to recruit high school graduates into state service. The Ohio State Government collaborates with technical education schools (vocational programs) to build talent pipelines for entry-level positions in state government. Interviewees highlight the program's success in recruiting for hard-to-fill positions. These programs create pipelines in markets where qualified applicants may be scarce.

Exploring Innovative Approaches

States are experimenting with ways to shorten hiring timelines, expand candidate access, or keep talent in the system. The diagram on the next page highlights some examples.

POOL HIRING

CA & MD

Shared certification lists allow multiple agencies to hire from the same vetted candidate pool. This strategy can be particularly effective for roles like IT or HR where needs span agencies.

RETURN TO WORK

UT

"Return Utah" helps individuals who have been out of the workforce transition into temporary state positions with an option for full-time hire.

EARLY REVIEW

CT

Hiring managers may start reviewing applications before receiving a complete certification list from HR.

TALENT MOBILITY

AZ

This strategic HR initiative treats the state government as a single enterprise, encouraging employees to move across state agencies to prevent job loss and fill critical needs.

TEMPORARY-TO-PERMANENT

NC

Agencies have the authority to convert temporary employees to full-time status without a competitive recruitment process, provided the individuals are fully qualified and have six months of state service.

Source: National Academy of Public Administration

Technology as a Force Multiplier

States are increasingly prioritizing HR technology to support hiring. New HR IT systems and dashboards help states identify bottlenecks and process breakdowns. Real-time data improves decision making and makes hiring more transparent, but adoption varies widely depending on budgets, IT maturity, and procurement cycles.

Hard-to-Fill Positions: The Universal Challenge

Every state faces hard-to-fill positions, such as correctional officer, healthcare worker, and IT specialist roles. Many states offer monetary incentives, such as recruitment bonuses, geographical differentials, and pay differentials for education and certification. However, some interviewees said that financial incentives alone rarely fix shortages. Some states relax classification criteria to allow hard-to-fill positions to be filled at a higher grade. States have also utilized special hiring authorities to support the recruitment of hard-to-fill positions, such as temporary hiring, emergency hiring, or non-competitive employment.

Skills-based Hiring

Skills-based hiring¹ is gaining traction, with over half of the states issuing executive orders or legislation to reduce or eliminate degree requirements. Many states have updated or are in the process of updating minimum qualifications to remove degree requirements.

However, skills-based hiring is not a simple switch. Interviewees reported mixed experiences. This approach can significantly broaden the candidate pool, but the additional applicants may not be qualified. The influx can create bottlenecks in the initial screening phase, as candidates lacking traditional credentials still need to be evaluated. Several interviewees noted that skills-based hiring tends to be beneficial in states with limited applicant pools, particularly in geographically isolated or rural areas or where degree-holding candidates are rare.

Some states, such as Utah, closely track outcomes, and the data show positive impacts (e.g., increased hiring) for certain positions. Arizona tracks the number of applications, conversion rates, and first-year turnover. Pre- and post-hiring surveys with managers gather qualitative feedback on the initiative.

Assessing candidate competency remains a challenge. Louisiana's competency-based State Civil Service Hiring Framework shows one direction states are moving: replacing rigid tests with structured interviews and/or scenario-based assessments to evaluate knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

A Competency-Based Shift

Louisiana created its state civil service hiring framework, a competency-based system that moves away from rigid testing to evaluate knowledge, skills, and behaviors through structured interviews and resume evaluations.

Performance Metrics

States want to understand whether hiring reforms are working, but measurement is inconsistent. While nearly all states track "time to hire," they define it differently, making comparisons difficult. For example, one state might calculate this metric from the moment a position is approved, while another begins the count when the job is posted. A few states track early turnover as a proxy for quality of hire. Others monitor the number of applications received or job offers declined.

Performance metrics matter because they help states understand not only how quickly they hire, but how well. Yet states' capacity to measure these outcomes varies dramatically, and data gaps are widespread. In decentralized states, central HR may not have legal authority to collect data from agencies. Even where data exists, interviewees noted that few states tie analytics to decision making because they lack clear benchmarks or targets.

¹ Skills-based hiring is a recruitment strategy that prioritizes a candidate's actual abilities and competencies over traditional credentials like college degrees.

V. Compensation and Classification

Most states still use traditional graded salary schedules. Some states, however, have tried broadband pay to create more room for discretion. "Broadband pay" is a compensation structure that replaces many narrow salary grades with fewer, broader pay bands. These broadbands give agencies greater flexibility to set salaries, reward performance, and adjust pay for specialized skills without moving employees through multiple traditional grades.

Many states customize their pay systems to their unique needs and priorities. Virginia, for example, uses a broadband pay structure but allows individual agencies to propose alternative frameworks; as a result, many agencies moved back toward internal grade-like structures within those broadbands to improve clarity and manageability. Colorado shifted from a merit pay regime back to a graded system to ensure pay equity and offer clearer paths for career progression.

Manager Flexibility and Market Alignment

Most state officials believe their current pay structures offer sufficient flexibility to recruit and retain high-quality employees. Generally, agencies have the discretion to set starting salaries within established pay ranges; many have developed specific rules (e.g., approval processes and limitations) for "above-the-minimum" offers. In practice, budget constraints are the chokepoint. Leaders said they often have the policy authority to make above minimum offers, but not the money to use it.

Tennessee Compensation Structure

Tennessee recently overhauled its compensation structure following a comprehensive salary study. Rather than enacting a one-time increase, this new initiative establishes a sustainable model for continuous market alignment. Proficiency drives salary decisions under the model, while annual increases are tied to performance through the state's pay-for-performance program. Interviewees suggested that the new compensation structure has reduced staff turnover and driven a significant surge in applications.

Many states maintain market-based salary plans and conduct regular market salary benchmarking studies to ensure competitive compensation. Interviewees emphasized that competitive compensation is critical to maintaining a strong workforce, and many states have reformed their compensation plans to improve recruitment and talent retention.

Classification

States run the gamut from lean catalogs (~100 classes) to highly granular systems (~4,000 classes). Several are now undertaking full reviews of their classification systems, reflecting a widespread recognition that many existing classification frameworks are outdated and require modernization (for more information, please review the *State HR Benchmarking Spreadsheets*).

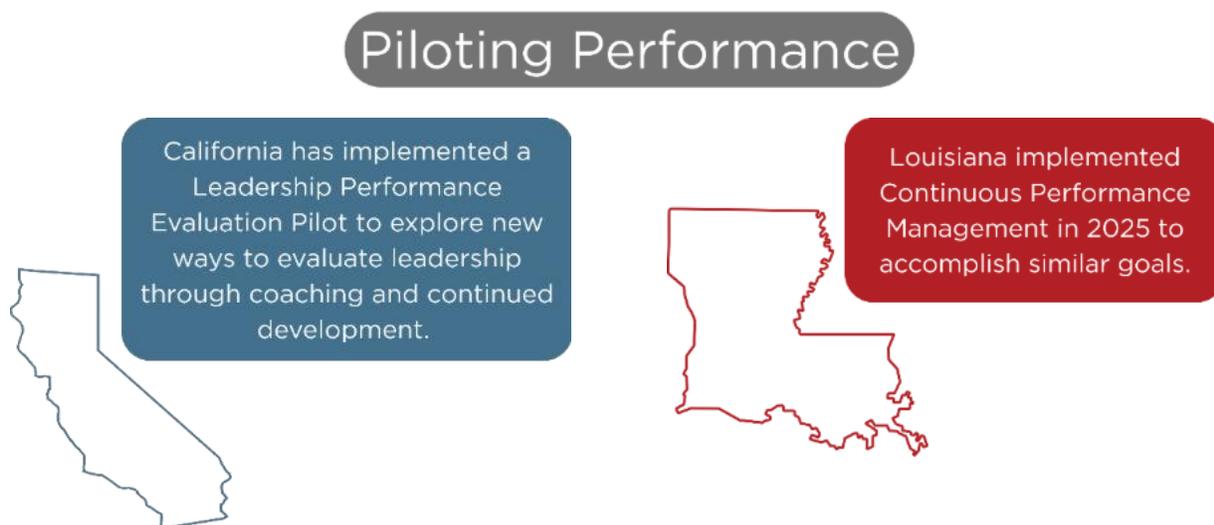
VI. Performance Evaluation

Performance evaluation is one of the most underleveraged tools in state government. When it works, it gives employees clarity, strengthens accountability, and helps agencies retain the people they can't afford to lose. When it doesn't, it becomes a check-the-box exercise that frustrates supervisors and leaves high performers invisible. All states wrestle with the core challenge of evaluating performance fairly and consistently in systems built for stability rather than agility.

How States Structure Evaluations

Annual evaluations are the standard in most states, though some require semiannual or quarterly reviews or performance discussions. Where collective bargaining agreements apply, states may have limited flexibility to change evaluation formats or schedules.

Many states encourage continuous engagement—regular check-ins, coaching conversations, and feedback loops, rather than reserving all feedback for the annual cycle. For example, California has implemented a Leadership Performance Evaluation Pilot to shift the process toward coaching and ongoing development. Louisiana launched Continuous Performance Management in 2025, emphasizing year-round conversations instead of one-time reviews.



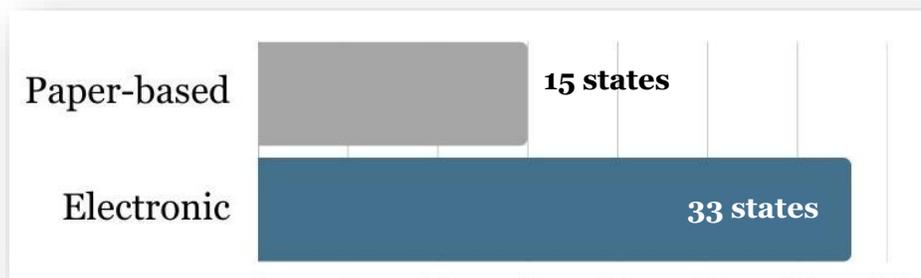
Several state HR officials shared strategies for enhancing the performance evaluation process, including hiring external coaches and providing comprehensive training programs for both supervisors and employees. Supervisors and managers are generally required to complete

performance management training. In many states, central HR agencies track completion rates for performance evaluations and conduct regular audits of performance appraisals to ensure compliance with relevant rules; agency heads or central HR agencies specifically review evaluations with the highest and lowest ratings.

Technology is Changing the Game

Thirty-three states have transitioned their performance evaluation processes from paper-based to online, cloud-based systems (Figure 4). These systems enable agencies to standardize performance evaluations, streamline workflows, improve efficiency, track compliance, and make data-driven decisions. Some states have dedicated resources to provide targeted technical support/training to agencies that require extra assistance.

Figure 4: Does the state have a paper-based or electronic performance evaluation process?



Pay for Performance

Currently, 31 states have established pay-for-performance programs that tie salary increases or bonuses to evaluation results. While many interviewees recognize the value of these programs and wish to expand them, there is a lack of data demonstrating their effectiveness. Many roles lack objective metrics, leading to a heavy reliance on supervisory judgment. Employees are often dissatisfied with performance-based raises, as they perceive the underlying ratings as unfair. Managers tend to cluster ratings at the high end, especially in states without cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs), where performance-based increases are the only mechanism to prevent real wage erosion. Budget constraints can limit the size or frequency of awards. Agencies with larger budgets often provide higher performance-based raises or bonuses than those with smaller budgets, leading to significant pay disparities among employees holding the same titles and classifications across the state.

VII. At-will Employment

At-will employment is one of the most controversial features of state personnel systems. Many states have established at-will employment within their state governments. The scope of at-will employment differs significantly: in states such as Texas and Arkansas, the entire workforce is at will, whereas in others, at-will status applies only to a small fraction of the workforce. For example, only about 0.3 percent of Michigan employees are at-will. West Virginia and Oklahoma, among other states, recently transitioned toward an at-will employment model. Additional details are available in the *State HR Benchmarking Spreadsheets*.

States use multiple labels for these positions, such as "at-will," "unclassified," "exempt," and "non-competitive." The common thread is that at-will positions are not bound by the same guardrails as traditional civil service roles, allowing agencies greater autonomy in hiring, setting qualifications, and determining compensation. At-will positions are sometimes integrated into a state's formal classification system (i.e., they are classified positions). States often designate specific groups—such as executive and management roles—as at-will. While some of these positions are elected or appointed and thus exempt from competitive hiring, many states still follow standard competitive processes for other at-will roles to ensure consistency.

At-will employees serve at the pleasure of the appointing authority and do not have a formal termination process or traditional due process rights. However, as states repeatedly emphasized in this study, "at-will" in government is not the free-for-all it appears to be in the private sector. Different legal frameworks, risk tolerances, political histories, and workforce cultures mean the real-world version varies across states.

Many states extend internal safeguards to at-will employees, such as pre-termination reviews, documentation requirements, or internal grievance options. These checks exist to ensure actions are supported, consistent, and defensible. A clear example is Arizona, where most of the workforce is at-will, yet dismissals must be justified and reviewed by the central HR office before taking effect. Employees can still go to court. At-will status reduces guaranteed due-process steps, but it does not eliminate employees' rights to challenge a dismissal.

There is no consensus on the outcomes and impacts of at-will employment. While some scholars express concern that at-will employment may increase turnover and hinder recruitment due to perceived job insecurity, empirical evidence remains scarce. In addition, critics emphasize the importance of shielding state employees from political influence, noting that the psychological effect of at-will status on employees' decision making is hard to measure. Conversely, several state HR officials interviewed for this study reported no significant changes in employee behavior, turnover rates, or organizational performance. These interviewees maintained that managers should treat all employees consistently, regardless of their employment status. As discussed earlier in this section, while at-will employees typically lack formal termination, grievance, or appeal rights, many states allow agencies to establish internal pre-termination or grievance processes.

VIII. Grievance and Appeal Process

Grievance and appeal processes are essential components of state civil service systems. They protect employees from arbitrary actions and provide a structured pathway for resolving disputes. These processes also reinforce the credibility of state HR systems by ensuring that employment decisions can withstand internal and external scrutiny.

While specific rules vary by state, most follow a standardized, multi-step progression. Details regarding state grievance and appeal processes are provided in the *State HR Benchmarking Spreadsheets*.

How States Structure Grievance and Appeal Process Procedures

Every state offers employees a formal route to challenge personnel decisions. In many states, the process begins with an informal conversation between the employee and their supervisor. States encourage this step because it can resolve misunderstandings quickly and reduce the need for a formal filing. For example, Colorado added an informal resolution meeting to its process and experienced fewer partnership agreement (union contract) disputes as a result. Some states, such as Oklahoma, require mediation before a grievance can proceed, emphasizing early, collaborative resolution.

If an issue cannot be resolved informally, employees can file a formal grievance within their agency. Unresolved cases are forwarded to the central HR authority. The final stage typically involves an independent board or commission, or binding arbitration for union-represented employees.

Common Challenges Identified by States

States consistently identified the time required to complete grievance and appeal processes as a key concern. Multi-step procedures protect employees' rights, but they can prolong resolution if steps are not well coordinated. To improve timeliness, many states have consolidated stages, clarified submission requirements, and adopted rules limiting the types of issues eligible for appeal. Interviewees noted that while states generally meet their required timelines, complex cases still take considerable time to resolve.

Training is another area of focus. Supervisors often manage the first stages of the process but may not be equipped to handle disputes consistently. Several states offer targeted training in labor relations, mediation, and documentation to improve supervisors' capability and strengthen the overall quality of the grievance system.

IX. Concluding Thoughts

This benchmarking study provides a detailed picture of how states are managing their workforces today. It identifies the tools and structures states rely on, the constraints they face, and the innovations they are testing. Understanding these baseline practices is essential, but it is only the starting point. The next step is to assess which approaches lead to better outcomes and in what contexts they work best.

States confront many of the same challenges: slow hiring processes, outdated classification structures, limited pay flexibility, uneven performance management systems, and gaps in data availability. States respond differently because their conditions differ. Legal frameworks, labor markets, union environments, administrative capacity, and political expectations all shape how state HR systems develop. Strategies that succeed in one state may be less effective in another.

The study raises several questions that warrant further investigation. These are areas where states need reliable guidance: Which performance metrics best capture HR management effectiveness and efficiency? How can states strike a balance between centralized oversight and agency-level flexibility? Do pay-for-performance models meaningfully influence employee behaviors or performance outcomes in the public sector? How does at-will employment affect the capacity of governments to manage their workforce?

Across interviews, HR officials emphasized the value of having access to reliable comparative information. Many reported a lack of clarity about how other states structure their systems or about what reforms have produced tangible improvements. This study helps fill that gap and create opportunities to spread innovation by providing a foundation for future data collection, comparison, and analysis.

Maintaining this foundation will allow states to understand how their systems compare and identify the levers that matter most for improving workforce outcomes. As more data becomes available over time, states will be better positioned to test assumptions, quantify the impact of reforms, and evaluate which approaches meaningfully support recruitment, retention, and performance. Ultimately, this ongoing effort will help state governments modernize their personnel systems to reinforce fairness, strengthen accountability, and enhance their ability to deliver high-quality services to the public.

Public workforce systems are evolving in response to labor market pressures, fiscal constraints, technological change, and shifting expectations about work. This study creates a shared platform for navigating that evolution—one that helps states see emerging innovations sooner, understand persistent structural barriers more clearly, and apply evidence to improve program design and service delivery. By continuing to build and refine this data resource, states can move from isolated experimentation to collective learning. In doing so, they will strengthen their own human resources systems and also the capacity and resilience of state governments nationwide.

Appendices

Appendix A: List of Interviewees

State HR Interviews

- Mary Babcock, HR Director, Texas Department of Criminal Justice
- Mary Elizabeth Bailey, Secretary, Kentucky Personnel Cabinet
- Donna Bente, Administrator, the State of Wisconsin Division of Personnel
- Mike Bonds, Statewide Personnel Assistant Administrator, Arkansas
- Connie Brock, Chief of State Workforce Design and Compensation, Division of State Human Resource Management, Florida
- Andrea Clinkscales, Nancy Astrike, Mary Kelley, and Kristin Siemek, Office of State Human Resources, North Carolina
- James Cowdell and Melissa Pullin, Massachusetts Human Resources Division
- Sean Davis, Director of State Personnel, Nebraska
- Byron Decoteau, Director, Louisiana State Civil Service
- Neal Desai, Chief HR Officer, Maryland
- Aimee Devaris, Personnel Director, Department of Administration, Alaska
- Michael J. Dunn, Acting HR Officer, Maine
- Amanda Elliott, Assistant Deputy Governor; Sarah Kerley, Chief Administrative Officer, Illinois Department of Central Management Services
- Monica Erickson, Acting Director and Chief Deputy Director, California Department of Human Resources
- Lesley Farmer, Deputy Commissioner, Tennessee
- Beth Fastiggi, Commissioner, Department of Human Resources, Vermont
- Shelly Forte, Rebecca Kuchinski, Jordan Rummel, Office of Administration, Pennsylvania
- Kelly Glenn, Chief Executive Director, New Jersey Civil Service Commission
- John Gnodtke, State Personnel Director, Michigan
- Greg Hargis, Assistant Director, Division of Human Resource Management, Utah
- Danelle Harsin, Deputy Director, Compensation, Kansas
- Lynn Hart, Total Rewards Manager, Human Resource Management Services, North Dakota
- Brenna Hashimoto, Director, Hawaii Department of Human Resources Development
- Nick Hermes, Chief HR Officer, Connecticut
- Timothy Hogues, Rebecca Corso, Jessica Rowe, and Abner Jean Pierre, New York State Department of Civil Service
- Laura Koeneman, Chief Human Resources Officer, Colorado
- Janet Lawson, Director, Department of Human Resource Management, Virginia
- Shayne Martin, Public Information Officer, Missouri
- Matthew Mavrogeorge, Director of Personnel, New Hampshire
- Wendy Mays, Division of Personnel, West Virginia

- Larry Morgan, Director, State of Alabama Personnel Department
- Terressa Pivec, Enterprise Director HRM, Minnesota
- Marci Rautio, Deputy Director, Field Operations, Indiana State Personnel Department
- Erin Reinders, Chief Operating Officer, Human Resources Enterprise, Iowa
- Natasha (Tasha) K. Riley, Director of Talent Management, Human Capital Management, Oklahoma
- Christopher Schafer, Kitty Hollingshead Mancil, and Jeffrey Hazeltown, Department of Administrative Services, Ohio
- Darin Seeley, Commissioner, Bureau of Human Resources and Administration, South Dakota
- Sarah Unsworth, Director of Policy, Classification and Compensation and Jared Garland, Director of Workforce Performance and Placement, Massachusetts
- Eric Vaughn, Classification and Compensation Manager, Arizona
- Valdese West, Delaware Department of Human Resources
- Janelle White, Administrator, Division of Human Resources, Idaho
- Jonathan Womer, Troy Bailey, Brenna McCabe, Georgina Weeks, Department of Administration, Rhode Island

State HR Written Response

- Mississippi
- New Mexico
- Nevada

SME Interviews/Meetings

- Octavia Abell, Govern for America
- Katherine Barrett*, Barrett and Greene, Inc.
- Ed Kellough*, Professor, University of Georgia
- Robert Lavigna*, Senior Fellow, Public Sector, UKG
- Peter Morrissey, Volcker Alliance
- National Compensation Association of State Governments
- Leslie Scott Parker, Executive Director, NASPE

*Academy Fellow

Appendix B: Study Team Biographies

Study Team

Brenna Isman, Senior Director for Research and Government Solutions. Ms. Isman has worked at the Academy since 2008 and oversees all programmatic activities, providing strategic leadership, project oversight, and subject-matter expertise to project teams. Prior to this, Ms. Isman was a Project Director managing projects focused on organizational governance and management, strategic planning, and change management. Her research engagements have included working with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Social Security Administration, the Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as multiple regulatory and Inspector General offices. She is an experienced facilitator and her expertise focuses on the development of communication and business strategy frameworks, analysis of ongoing transformation initiatives, and strengthening stakeholder engagement. Ms. Isman holds a Master of Business Administration from American University and a Bachelor of Science in Human Resource Management from the University of Delaware.

Dr. Nancy Augustine, Director, Center for Intergovernmental Partnerships. Dr. Augustine joined the Academy in January 2019 and was named Director of the Center for Intergovernmental Partnerships in July 2021. Dr. Augustine has led studies for numerous federal agencies, including work for the Legislative Branch, the Department of Commerce Office of Inspector General, and the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (DOT). She specializes in intergovernmental relations, public management, policy assessment, environmental and cultural resources protection, comprehensive and strategic planning, state and local fiscal issues, and planning for investments in facilities and infrastructure. In previous roles, she conducted research for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Labor, the District of Columbia Auditor, and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Topics include affordable housing, housing finance policy, housing market trends, and state-level social support programs. She also worked in local government for ten years, in long-range planning and policy development. Dr. Augustine has a Ph.D. in Public Policy and Public Administration from the George Washington University and has taught at the Trachtenberg School (George Washington University) since 2006. She also has an M.A. in Economics from Georgetown University and a Master of Urban and Environmental Planning from the University of Virginia.

Chloe Yang, Project Director: Since joining the Academy in 2009, Ms. Yang has worked on projects with a range of federal and state agencies, including the Office of Personnel Management, the Federal Aviation Administration, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the State Chamber of Oklahoma, and the Bureau of Transportation Statistics. Ms. Yang graduated from George Mason University with a Master's in Public Administration. She also holds a bachelor's degree in Financial Management from the Renmin University of China.

Miles Murphy, Senior Program Analyst: Mr. Murphy has worked on studies for numerous organizations, including the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Center for Accountability, Modernization, and Innovation, and the National Association of Counties. Miles' focus areas include governance, intergovernmental systems, resilience, strategic planning, and workforce. Miles previously worked in local government as a senior community and environmental planner. He earned a

Masters in Coastal and Ocean Policy (a blend of Environmental Science and Public Administration) from the University of North Carolina, Wilmington.

Erika Cintron, Senior Program Associate: Ms. Cintron joined the Academy in 2023 as a Research Associate. She has served on studies for the Federal Aviation Agency and the National Science Foundation. Ms. Cintron graduated from the University of Florida with a Master's in Latin American Studies and B.A. in Political Science and International Studies

Kate Kellen, Senior Program Associate: Ms. Kellen joined the Academy in 2023. Before joining the Academy, Ms. Kellen earned a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, International Relations, and Spanish from Gonzaga University. During her undergraduate education, she interned at the Academy and helped conduct research interviews on Agile Government and the Academy's Grand Challenges.

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