



SURVEY FINDINGS

State and Local Government Workforce: 2020 Survey

April 2020

State and Local Government Workforce: 2020 Survey

The Center for State and Local Government Excellence (SLGE), in partnership with the International Public Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-HR) and the National Association of State Personnel Executives (NASPE), has been surveying human resources directors in state and local governments since 2009. This year's survey continues many of the questions from that original survey, with additional detail around emerging issues such as flexible workplace policies, positions that are difficult to fill, and the reasons for separation as discussed in exit interviews.

This year's survey was conducted from February 27 to April 7, 2020, with a total of 222 respondents. The growing scale of the COVID-19 pandemic during this time meant that a number of jurisdictions were dealing with changed working conditions, from office closures to additional time spent on continuity of operations decisions around essential services. Responses to the survey generally reflect activity in the organization over the past year, though several jurisdictions cited very recent actions to institute furloughs, hiring freezes, or telecommuting in response to the virus. While the primary impact on government revenues, services, and personnel will be in 2020 and beyond,¹ a handful of respondents referenced COVID-19 in the context of recent cutbacks or changes in telework policies.

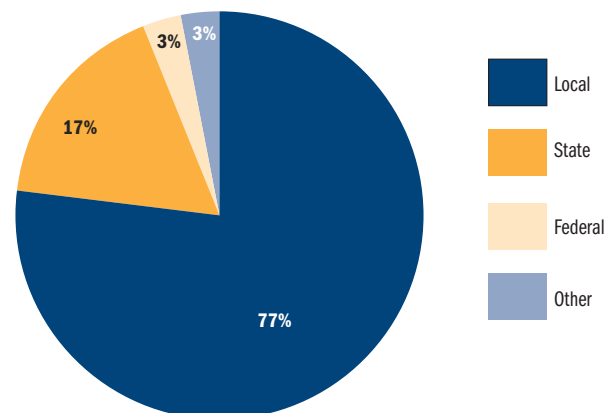
Of the survey respondents, 77 percent were from local governments and 17 percent were from state governments (Figure 1). The remaining six percent of responses, from federal governments or another sector, were excluded from the balance of the report.

Overall, the data show a continuation of recent trends, with a majority of governments hiring employees (77 percent) and very few instituting layoffs or furloughs (5 and 3 percent, respectively); see Figure 3. Regarding recruitment, six positions were identified as hard to fill by more than 20 percent of respondents, with engineers, information technology employees, police officers and registered nurses reported by more than half of respondents as having fewer qualified applicants than positions available (see Figures 12 and 13). And while most retirement and health plans did not undergo changes in the past year, there continue to be adjustments, primarily to the cost shares borne by employers, employees, or retirees.

SLGE will continue to track these and related issues, both as part of this survey series and related polling of state and local government employees being undertaken in collaboration with ICMA-RC. SLGE gratefully acknowledges the participation of IPMA-HR and NASPE in such research, as well as the dedication of state and local government employees during these extraordinary circumstances.

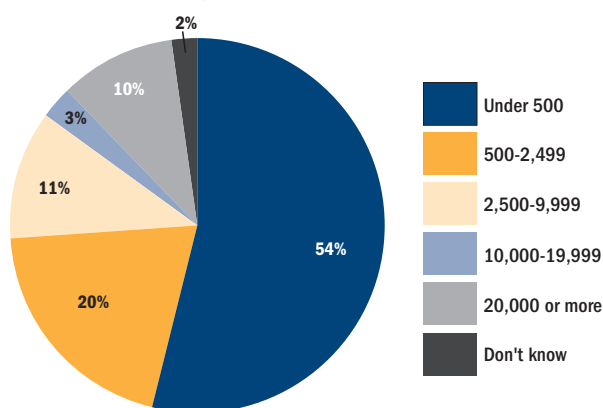
Organization Type

1) You work for... (n = 222)



The breakdown of respondents by number of full-time equivalent employees reflects the fact that most of the respondents were local governments, which include both large cities and counties, but also many smaller communities.

2) What is the government's total number of full-time equivalent employees? (n = 192)



Workforce Changes

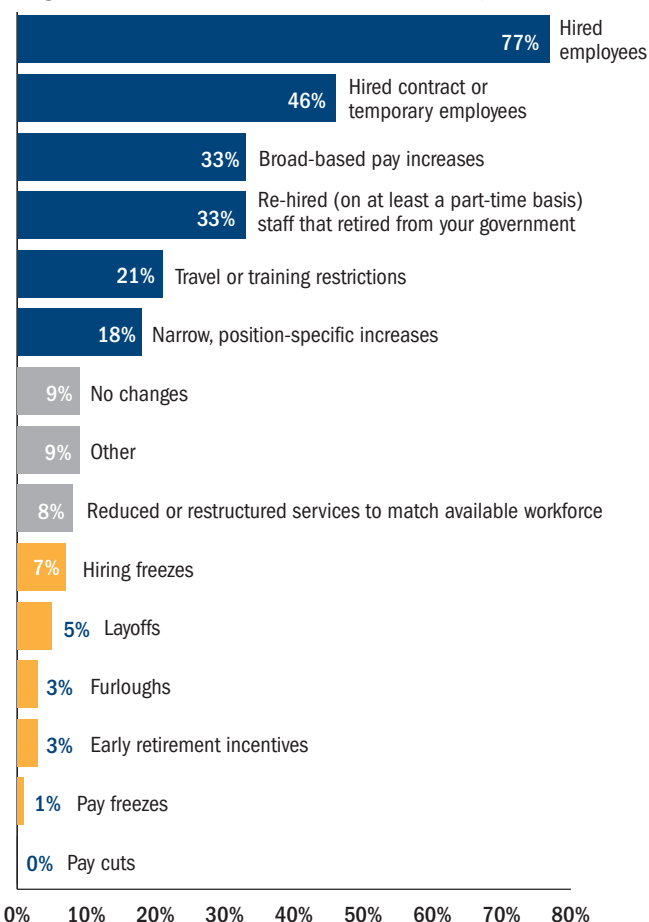
The data in Figure 3 is color coded with positive employment actions (e.g., hirings, pay increases) in blue, negative actions (e.g., hiring freezes, layoffs) in orange, and other responses (e.g., no change, other) in gray. Of those that are shown in gray, one new category this year shows 8 percent indicating that they had reduced or restructured services to match the available workforce.

Beyond a large share hiring new staff (77 percent), another common strategy to fill vacancies was to re-hire retired staff (33 percent).²

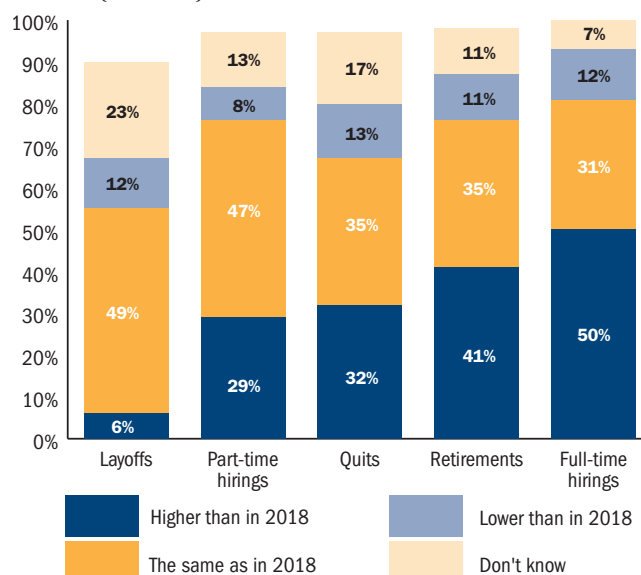
A few of these categories have changed significantly since 2015, with hiring freezes decreasing from 11 to 6 percent, and pay freezes from 8 to 2 percent. Of all the categories of position or funding cuts, the most stable category is layoffs, which have been reported by between 7 and 8 percent of governments since 2015 and were reported by 5 percent this year.

To see how that activity compares year-to-year, it is instructive to view Figure 4 as well. For example, while 5 percent of organizations reported layoffs in the past year, only 6 percent reported that the number of layoffs in 2019 was higher than in 2018.

3) Which of the following workforce changes has your government implemented over the past year? (n = 202)



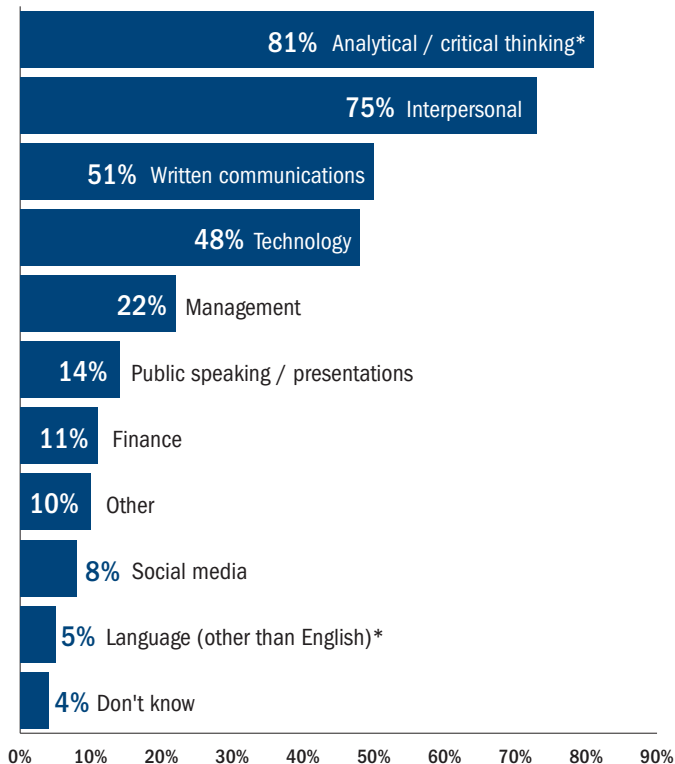
4) Changes in the size of your government's workforce in 2019 (n = 204)



Skill Sets

Sought-after skills have been a survey topic since 2015, with interpersonal skills topping that list every year. This year, with the addition of two new categories (shown with an asterisk in Figure 5), the most sought-after skill is analytical/critical thinking (81 percent).

5) Looking broadly at your workforce, what generalizable skill sets are most needed in new hires?

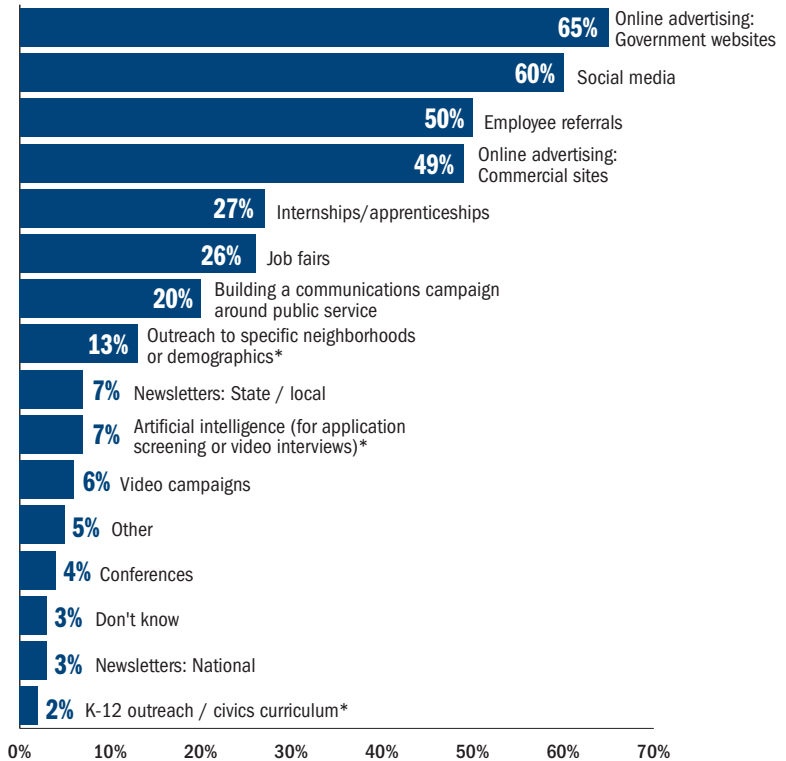


* Items shown with an asterisk were new to the survey in 2020.

Recruitment

Methods of reaching prospective employees have evolved over the past few years, with social media soaring as a preferred method, from 29 percent in 2015 to 60 percent in 2020 (Figure 6). Also increasing in prevalence are job fairs (up from 8 to 26 percent), while state and local newsletter advertising has decreased (from 16 to 7 percent). A new category in the survey this year – the use of artificial intelligence for screening or online interviewing – was cited by 7 percent of respondents.³

6) What recruitment practices are most successful in reaching qualified candidates?



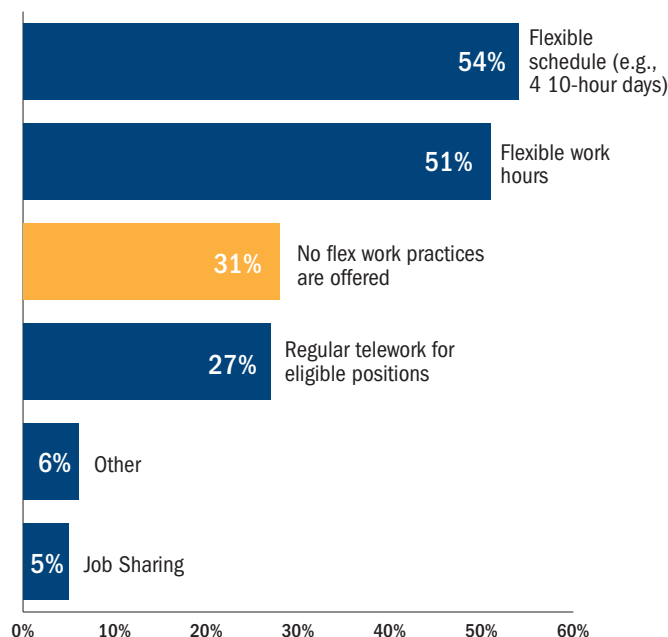
* Items shown with an asterisk were new to the survey in 2020.

Flexible Work Practices

The most common type of flexible work practice, as shown in Figure 7, is the adoption of a flexible schedule (54 percent), such as four 10-hour days – an arrangement that offers employees time to take care of personal priorities on a day that they would otherwise be at work. This is typically promoted to the public as a win-win, in that it extends office hours on the remaining days of the week to enable government business to be conducted earlier in the morning or later in the evening.

The percentage reporting regular telework for eligible positions (27 percent) is the highest share reported since this question was added in 2016, with the practice more common in state agencies than local ones (64 percent vs. 19 percent). This increase may relate to the initial response to COVID-19, which overlapped with the conduct of this survey.

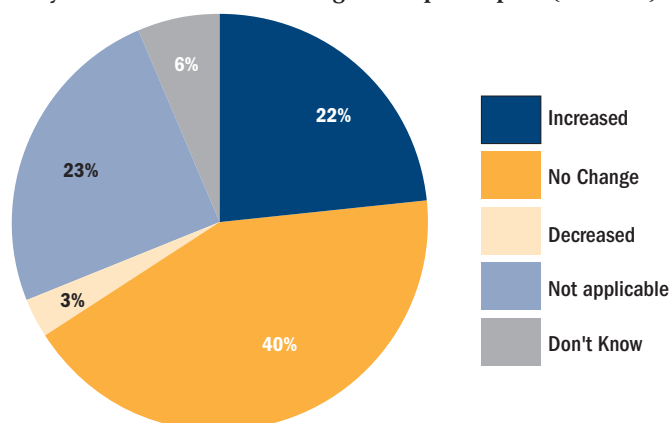
7) What flexible work practices does your organization offer? (n = 199)



Regarding changes to flexible workplace policies, only 2-3 percent have decreased the scope of those policies over the past year, with at least 20 percent having increased their applicability, either to more employees or to additional forms of flexible arrangements (see Figures 8 and 9).

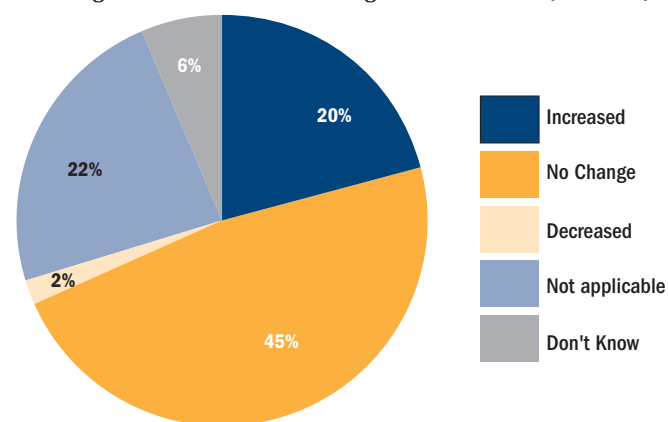
Larger organizations appear more likely to offer certain programs, such as regular telework for eligible positions (56 percent of governments over 10,000 employees compared to 15 percent of those with fewer than 500 employees), but other

8) Changes to flexible workplace practices in the past year: Number of those eligible to participate (n = 199)

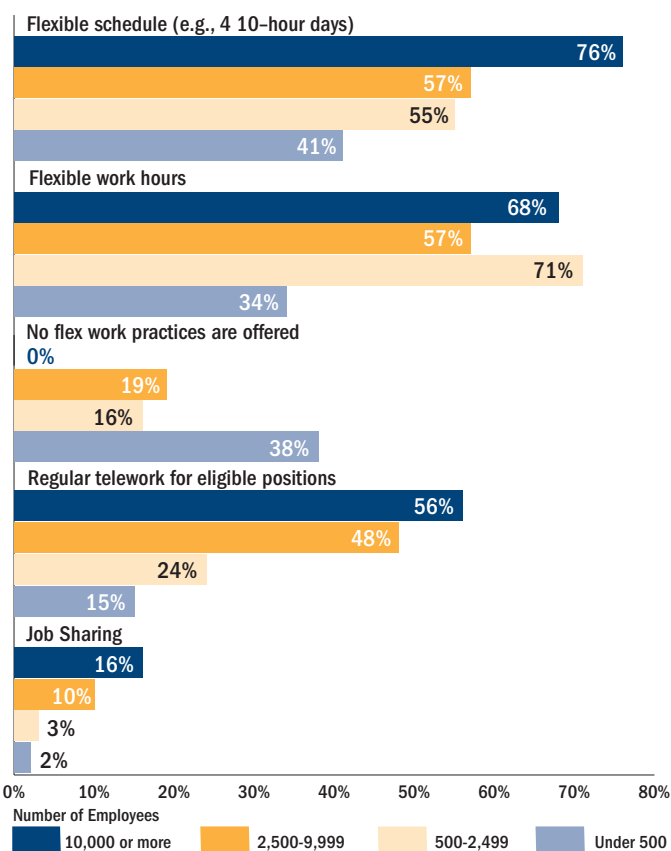


offerings like flexible work hours and flexible scheduling appear more widespread (see Figure 10). All organizations with more than 10,000 full time employees report offering at least some flex practices.

9) Changes to flexible workplace practices in the past year: Range of flexible work arrangements offered (n = 199)



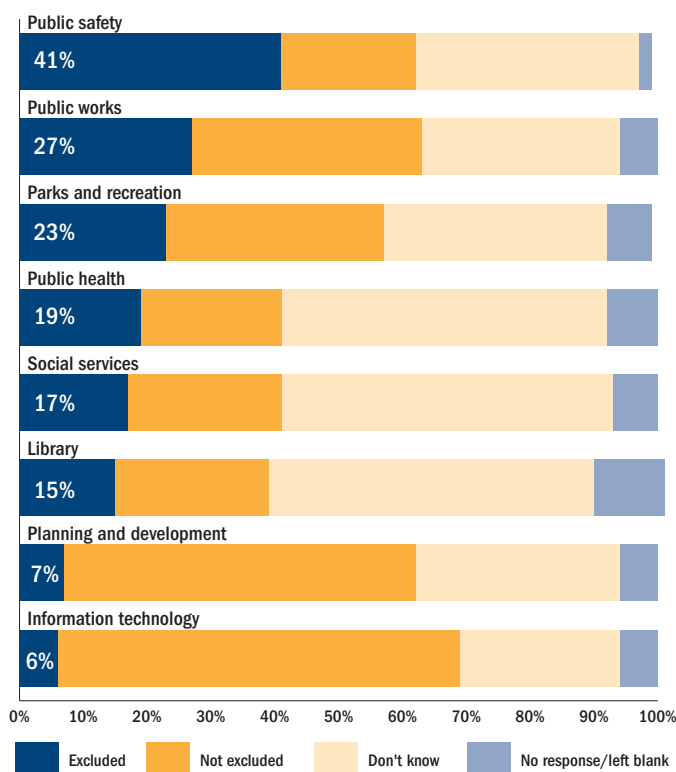
10) What flexible work practices does your organization offer (by number of FTEs)? (n = 199)



While some organizations eschew flexible workplace policies out of a preference for managing their staff face-to-face, another significant factor is the nature of the work being performed. Some functions, like public safety, do not lend themselves to work-from-home arrangements, or they have such customized 24-hour shift schedules that a 4 10-hour days or a 9-80 biweekly arrangement would be impractical. Still, COVID-19 is leading to greater experimentation. The police department in Charlottesville, Virginia, for example, is now running its investigative division from home, and officer roll calls are being conducted virtually.⁴

A summary of excluded functions is presented in Figure 11. As governments adapt to economic conditions and service changes in response to COVID-19, each of these questions will continue to be tracked.

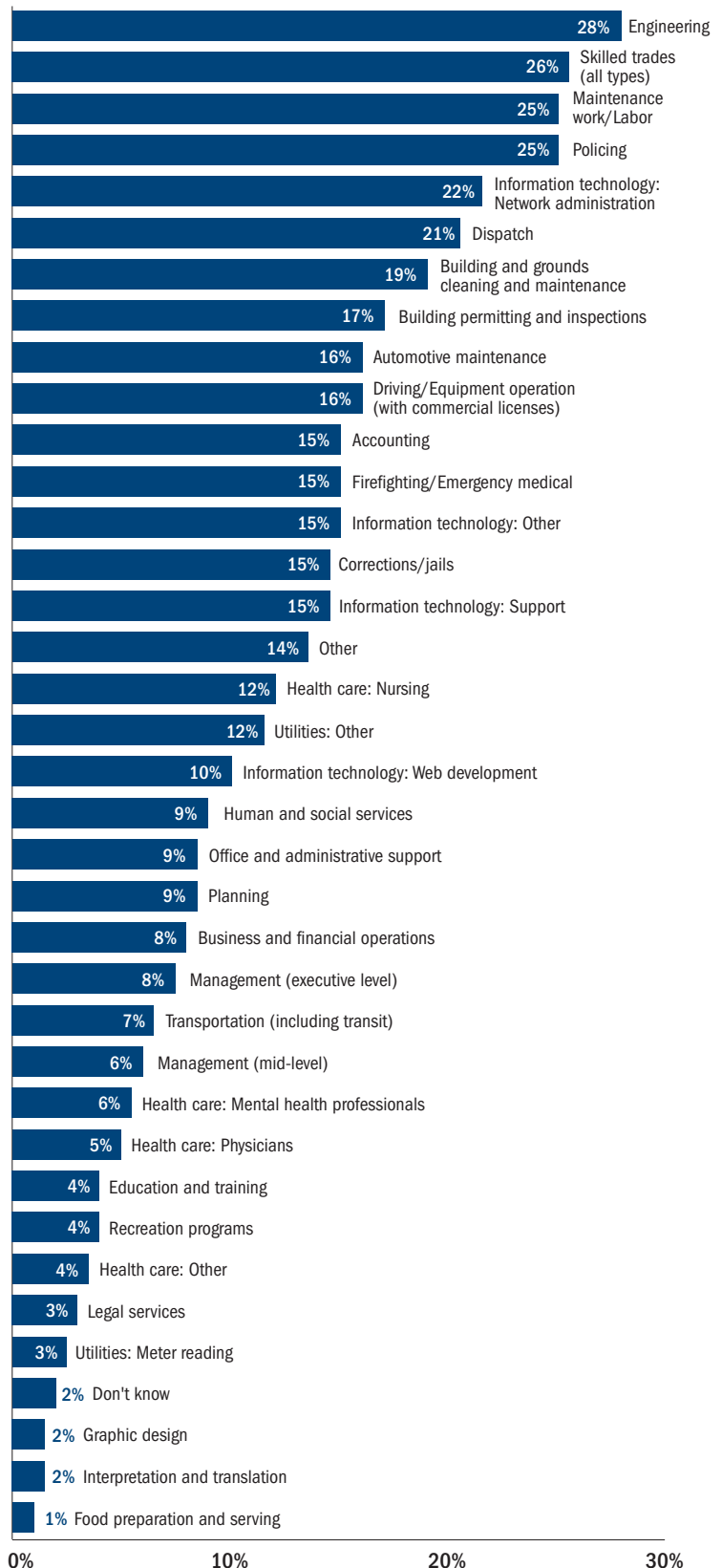
11) What if any job classifications or departments are excluded from flexible workplace policies? (n = 199)



Hard to Fill Positions

Figure 12 shows that many jurisdictions continued to struggle to fill a variety of positions over the past year. This was most commonly the case for positions in engineering, skilled trades, maintenance work, information technology and

12) Over the past year, what positions, if any, has the organization had a hard time filling? (n = 199)

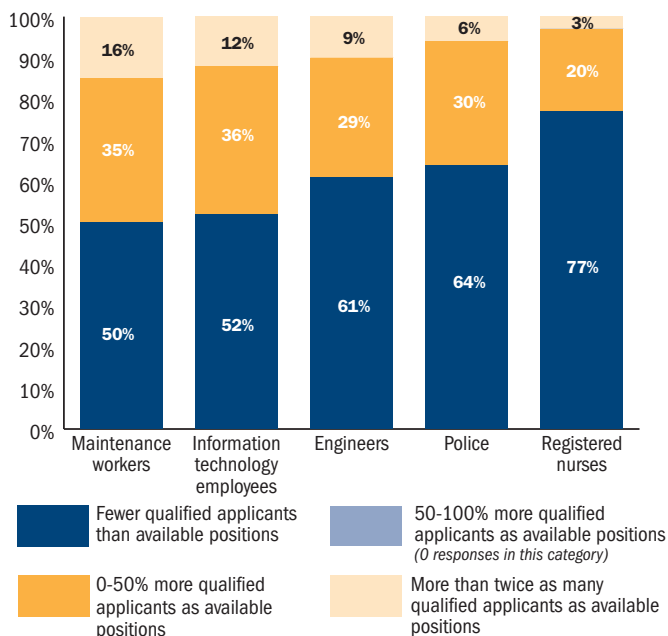


custodial work (building and grounds maintenance) – all positions where there is direct competition with private sector employment – as well as positions in policing and dispatch, which for the third year in a row, more than 20 percent of respondents indicated were difficult positions to fill.

Beyond the basic question about hard-to-fill positions, this year's survey also included a more detailed inquiry about the number of qualified applicants for each of certain positions identified as hard-to-fill in prior surveys. For example, 61 percent reported that there were fewer qualified engineers applying compared to the number of positions available to be filled.

Each of the questions in Figure 13 shows data only for those jurisdictions that did not indicate "Not applicable." This distinction is most significant in the case of registered nurses – while the overall percentage of jurisdictions indicating that nursing positions (generally) are hard to fill was just 12 percent, among those that actually conducted RN recruitments in the past year, 77 percent indicated that they received fewer qualified applicants than available positions. In contrast, only 3 percent indicated that they received more than twice the number of qualified applicants as available RN positions.

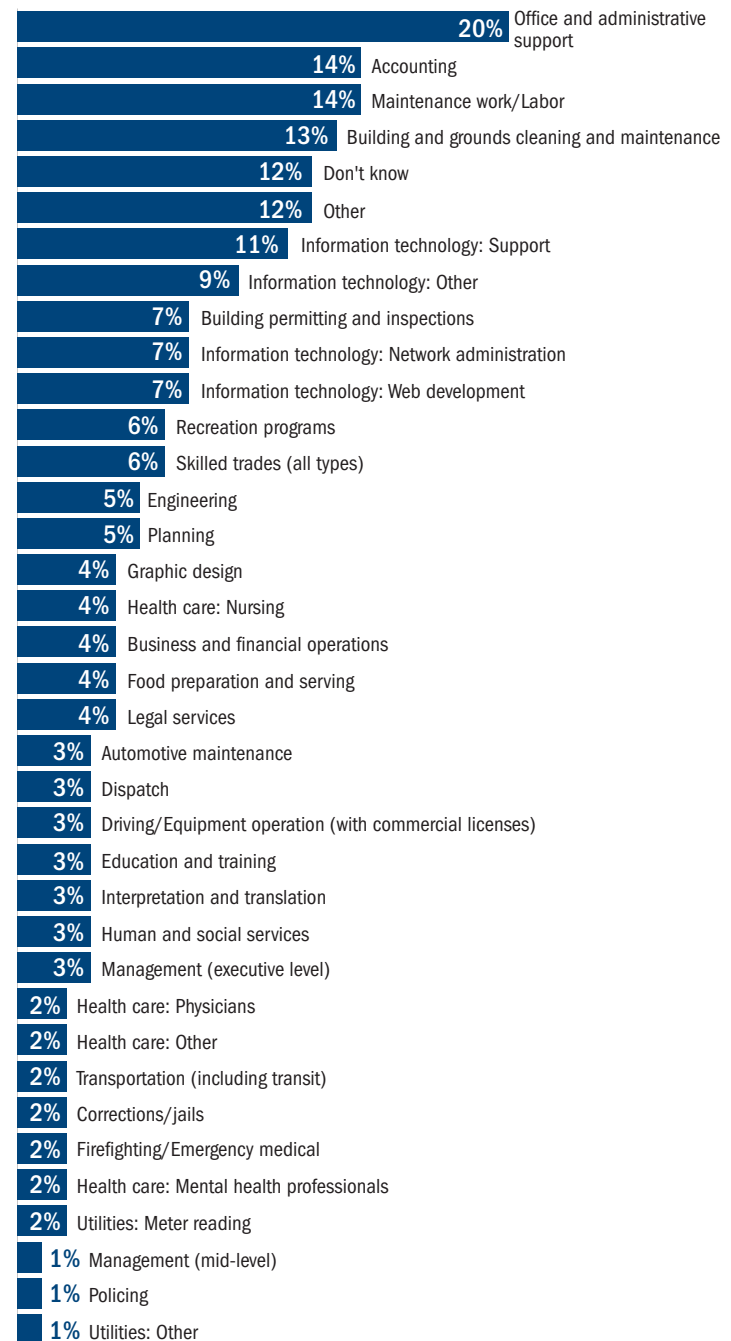
13) Compare the number of qualified applications received to the number of positions to be filled
(n = 197)



Gig Economy

Rather than recruit full-time staff for all workforce needs, some governments opt to retain talent as needed via the gig economy. For purposes of this survey, gig economy hiring is limited to those positions that may be filled on a contractual or temporary

14) Over the past year, for which services has the organization filled staffing needs via temporary staff or short-term "gig economy" contractual arrangements? (n = 199)



0%

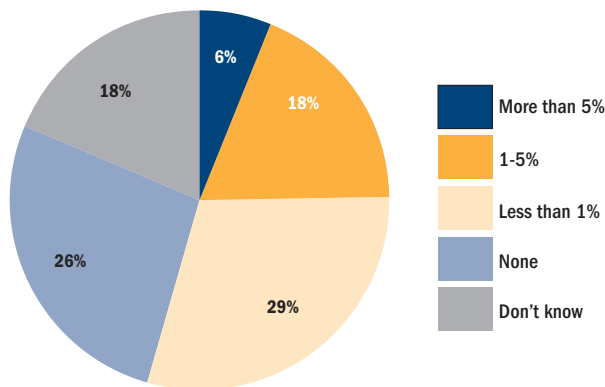
10%

20%

30%

basis for less than a full year. The data in Figure 14 shows the percentage of governments obtaining at least some portion of this needed work via the gig economy. The position most commonly filled through the gig economy is office and administrative support (20 percent). Figure 15 shows the percentage that such hiring represents as part of the overall organization, with 6 percent of governments saying that such temporary employees perform more than 5 percent of the workload.

15) What portion of your organization's workload would you estimate is being met via the gig economy?
(n = 202)



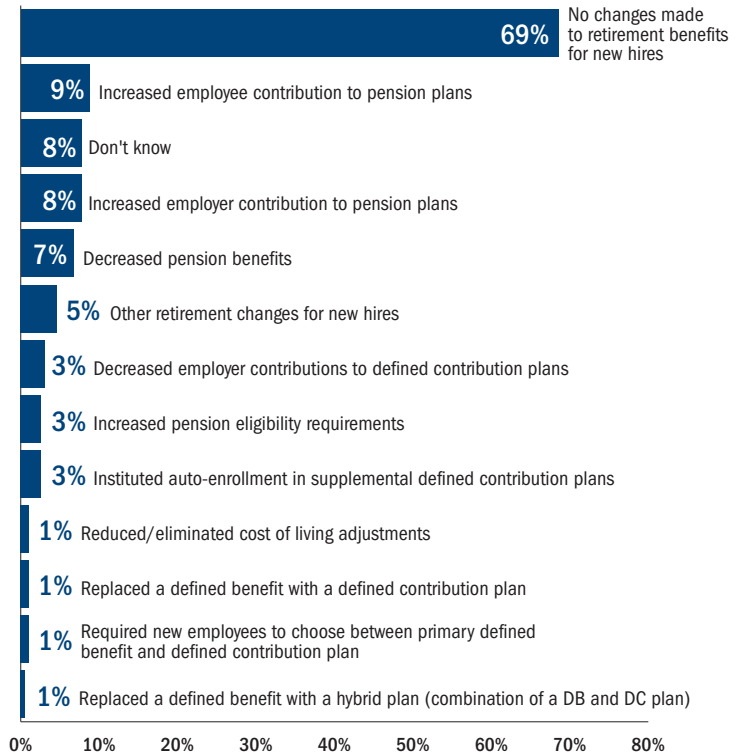
Retirement Plan Changes

As a means of both contributing to long-term retirement plan funding and engaging employees in financial planning decisions and risk participation, many state and local governments have adopted a range of plan changes. This survey does not track the cumulative impact of those changes, but does show what changes have been made in the past year.

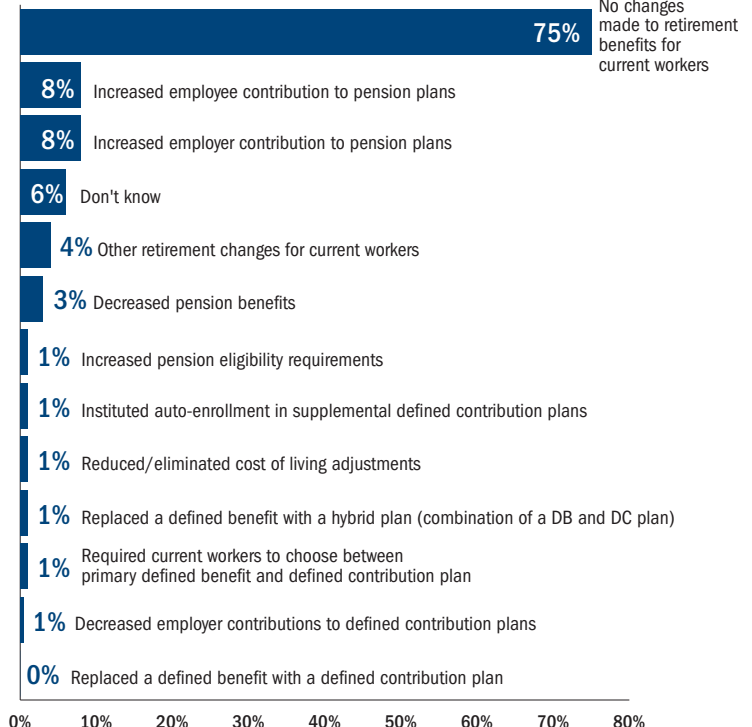
The most common response - both regarding new employees and current employees - is that there were no changes made to the retirement plan in the past year (see Figures 16 and 17). Beyond that, the most common changes were increases to either the employee or employer contribution, rather than structural changes to the plan itself.

For further discussion on long-term trends, see also [Have Localities Shifted Away from Traditional Defined Benefit Plans?](#) and [Proactive Pension Management: An Elected Official's Guide to Variable Benefit and Contribution Arrangements](#).

16) Over the past year, what changes, if any, has your government made to the retirement benefits for new hires? (n = 194)



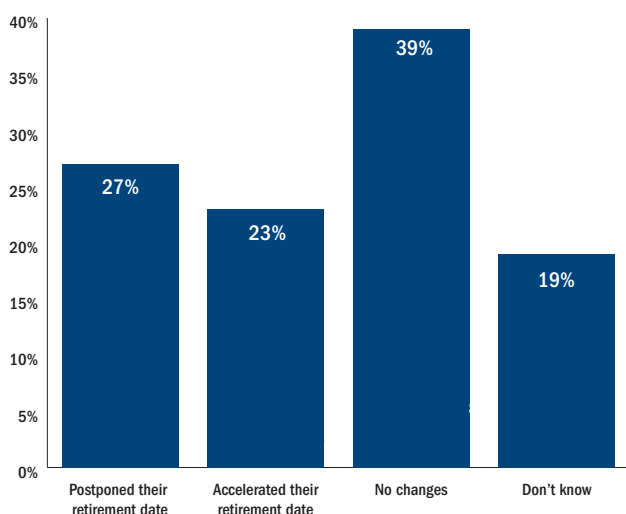
17) Over the past year, what changes, if any, has your government made to the retirement benefits for current employees? (n = 193)



Retirement-Eligible Employees

In assessing the impact of retirement plan changes, one of the key factors is the behavior of those who are eligible to retire. Will they take advantage of early-retirement incentives? Are they postponing retirement to meet short-term financial goals? When this survey was first fielded in 2009, 44 percent of governments indicated that their retirement-eligible employees were postponing retirement. Now, reflecting on activity over the past year, 27 percent report employees postponing retirement, with 23 percent indicating that employees are accelerating those plans (see Figure 18).

18) Over the past year, what changes, if any, have your retirement-eligible employees made regarding their plans for retirement? (n = 195)

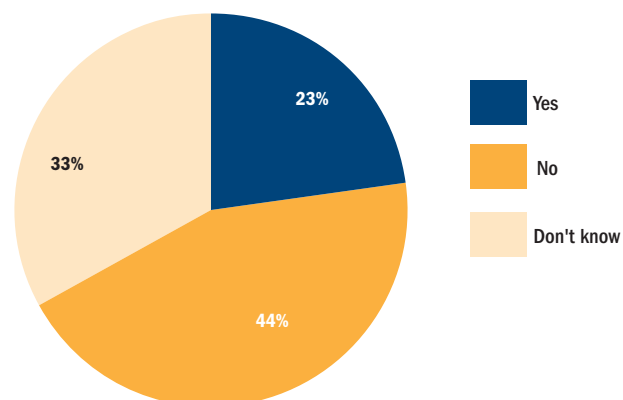


Note: Total exceeds 100 percent, since some governments reporting some employees postponing retirement plans while others were accelerating retirement plans.

Retirement Preparedness

For those who are postponing their retirement, one reason may be their sense of financial preparedness. Only 23 percent of respondents feel their employees are financially prepared for retirement (see Figure 19). With one core element of preparedness being financial literacy, see also: [A Focus on Public Sector Financial Wellness Programs: Employee Needs and Preferences](#).

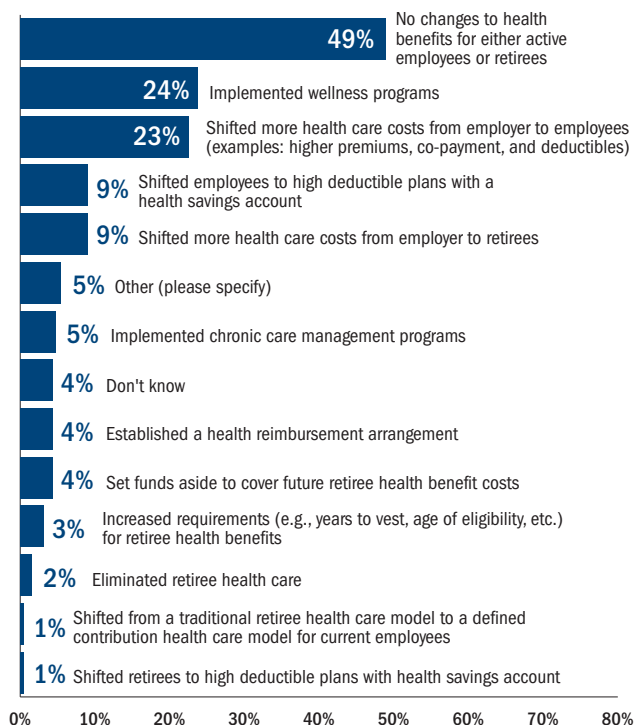
19) Do you feel your employees are prepared financially for their retirement? (n = 195)



Health Care Plan Changes

As with retirement plans, the predominant response on health plans is that there were no changes implemented in the past year. Beyond that, the most common responses related to wellness programs, cost shifts to employees or retirees, or adoption of high-deductible plans with health savings accounts (see Figure 20).

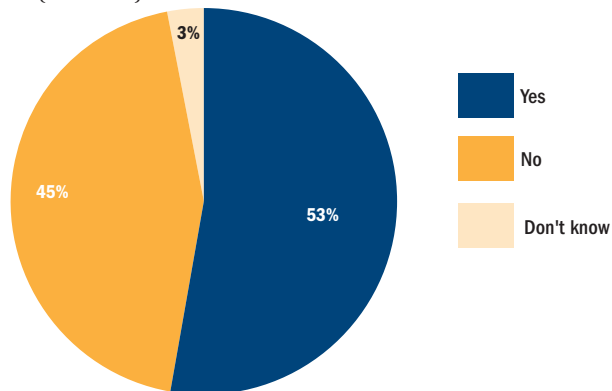
20) Over the past year, what changes, if any, has your government made to the health benefits provided to employees or retirees? (n = 195)



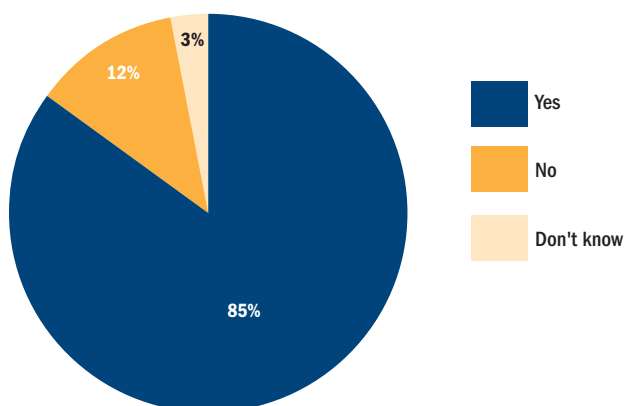
Wage and Benefit Competitiveness

As governments attempt to compete with private sector employers, they are often constrained by their existing salary structures and the budget processes or other approvals that would be required to effect changes. The share who feel their wage compensation is competitive with the labor market is just 53 percent. By comparison, with pensions still much more prevalent among public agencies than private, 85 percent rate their benefits offerings as being competitive (see Figures 21 and 22).

21) Do you feel the wage compensation you offer your employees is competitive with the labor market?
(n = 196)



22) : Do you feel the benefits compensation you offer your employees is competitive with the labor market?
(n = 196)

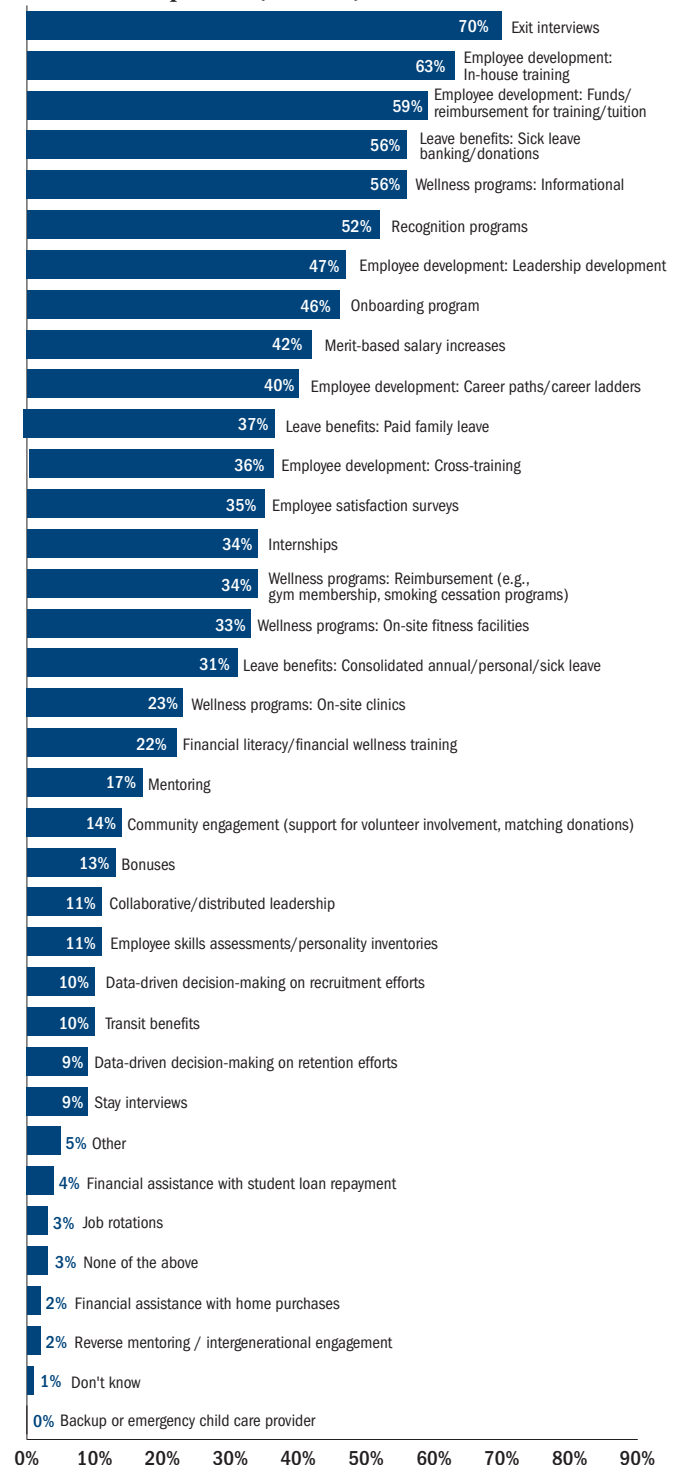


Employee Retention and Development

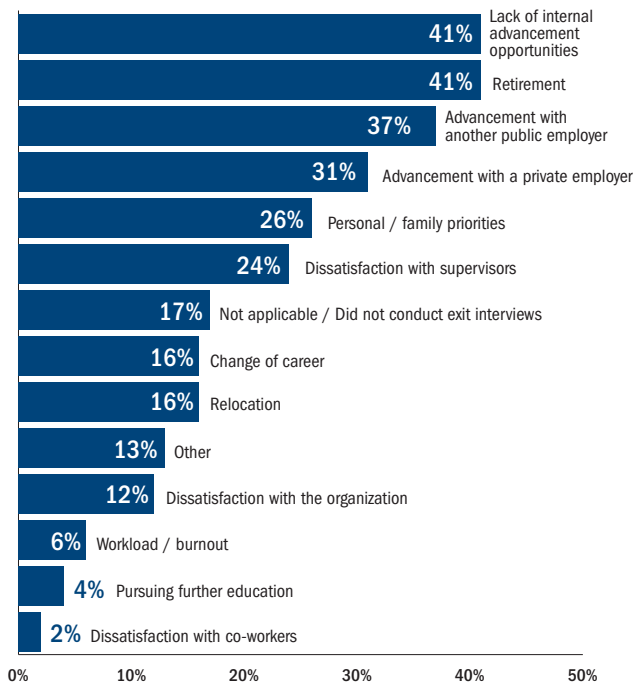
As important as compensation is to retention, many of the programs offered by the respondents to encourage employee

retention relate to employee development, such as in-house training, tuition reimbursement, leadership development, or structuring of career paths (see Figure 23).

23) Which of the following programs does your organization currently use to encourage employee retention and development? (n = 188)



24) If your jurisdiction conducts exit interviews with departing employees, which of the following reasons have been cited among the top three reasons for leaving? (n = 185)



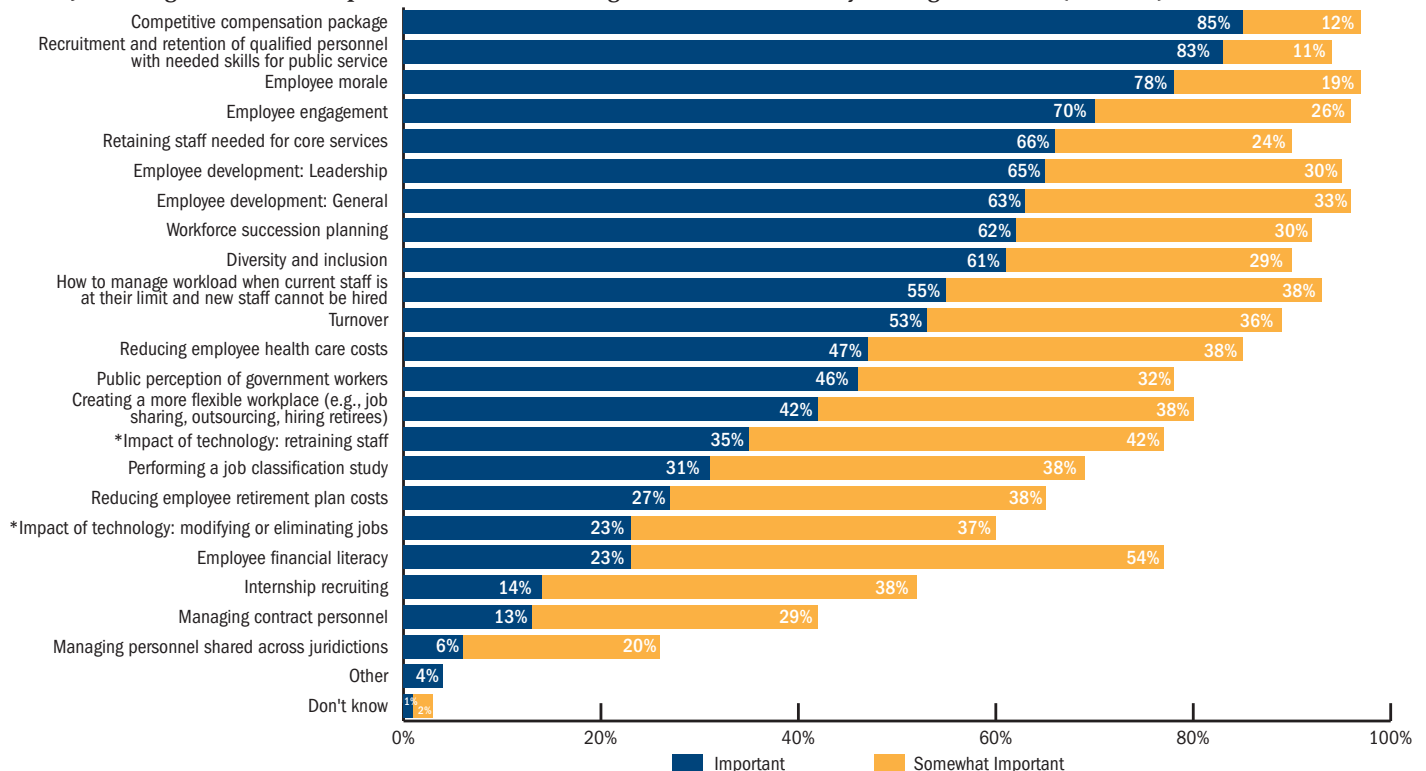
Exit interviews were the most cited retention strategy, and the feedback gleaned from those interviews identifies advancement as the prime motivating factor for departing employees (see Figure 24).

Future Priorities

For governments looking ahead, offering a competitive compensation package is most often ranked as their highest priority (85 percent rank it as important – up from just 52 percent in 2012), with an additional 31 percent indicating an intent to perform a job classification study (see Figure 25). Recruitment and retention also continue to be among the top priorities (83 percent important). For two new but related categories added to the survey this year, the share of those that see technology as a reason to increase staff training (78 percent ranking as important or somewhat important) exceeds the share that look at technology as an issue for the modification or elimination of jobs (60 percent).

There was also significant growth in those viewing the creation of a more flexible workplace as a priority – increasing from 25 percent in 2015 to 42 percent this year.

25) Looking ahead, how important are the following workforce issues to your organization? (n = 192)



* Items shown with an asterisk were new to the survey in 2020.

As this survey series now has data available from the Great Recession to early 2020, SLGE's next steps will be to assess the impacts on state and local governments, employees, retirees, and retirement plans as each adjust to the COVID-19 environment. For additional research, please visit slge.org.

Related Resources

[A Focus on Public Sector Financial Wellness Programs: Employee Needs and Preferences](#)

[Balancing Objectives in Public Employee Post-Retirement Employment](#)

[Have Localities Shifted Away from Traditional Defined Benefit Plans?](#)

[Innovations in the Health and Human Services Workforce](#)

[K-12 Public Workforce Profile](#)

[Proactive Pension Management: An Elected Official's Guide to Variable Benefit and Contribution Arrangements](#)

[Public Workforce 2030 Summit: Key Takeaways](#)

[Shared Staffing in Public Health: Collected Resources](#)

References

1 <https://www.nlc.org/sites/default/files/NLC%20USCM%20Survey%20Results.pdf>

2 The ability to re-hire retired staff is often regulated by state law or pension plan policies. For a more complete discussion, see <https://www.slge.org/resources/balancing-objectives-in-public-employee-post-retirement-employment>.

3 For a discussion on the use of artificial intelligence in recruiting, as well as other workforce topics, see also: [Public Workforce 2030 Summit: Key Takeaways](#).

4 Vera Institute webinar recording: [COVID-19 and Policing: Reducing Arrests and Supporting the Health of Communities and Officers](#), April 14, 2020.



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SLGE gratefully acknowledges the financial support from [ICMA-RC](#) to undertake this research project.



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The Center for State and Local Government Excellence (SLGE) helps local and state governments become knowledgeable and competitive employers so they can attract and retain a talented and committed workforce. SLGE identifies leading practices and conducts research on public retirement plans, health and wellness benefits, workforce demographics and skill set needs, and labor force development. SLGE brings state and local leaders together with respected researchers. Access all SLGE publications and sign up for its newsletter at slge.org and follow @4govtexcellence on Twitter.