NEOGOV

JOB SEEKER REPORT

2021

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OVERVIEW

THE US LABOR MARKET HAS HAD A TUMULTUOUS YEAR, TO SAY THE LEAST.

With increasing unemployment rates in 2020 that surged **as high as 13%** in the second quarter, uncertainty was at an all time high. Although the unemployment rate eased to 6.7% in the fourth quarter of 2020 and has continued to level out in 2021, the effects of the pandemic have altered the way employees and job seekers view their careers and the way they work.

The usual methods of attracting job seekers and filling open positions are no longer applicable in today's job market. Plus, employees are expecting more in order to stay at their jobs — and they aren't afraid to leave for better opportunities.

- What are the top motivators for public sector job seekers?

- How do these factors vary depending on applicant demographics?

- Which methods are candidates using to seek out new jobs, and what makes them more inclined to stay at their current place of employment?

Keep reading for answers to these vital questions in NEOGOV's 2021 Job Seeker report.

1

THE GAP BETWEEN JOBS & APPLICATIONS
CONTINUES TO WIDEN IN 2021

Although applications per job had their highs and lows in 2020, application rates slowly began to rebound in the summer months of 2020. However, the opposite is true for 2021 with the gap between jobs and applications to jobs continuing to increase, hovering at **an average of only 3.5 applications per job** in week 38 – compared to 6 applications per job in week 38 of 2020.

This speaks to the ongoing concerns that agencies across the country are facing from a lack of interested candidates applying to their job postings. As the pandemic continues to affect daily life and hiring processes, **agencies must address how they can improve their job postings, the candidate experience, and ultimately, their offerings** in order to compete in a market where job seekers have never been more selective.

Figure 1
Applications per Job by Week, 2020 vs 2021

2020　　2021
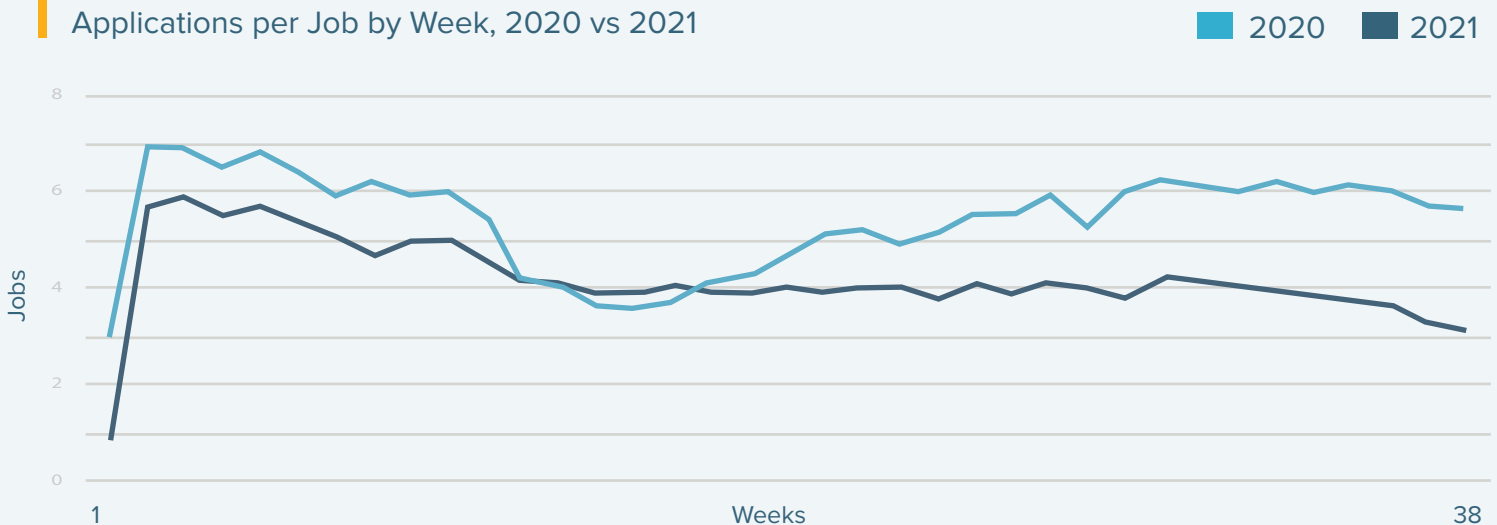
In only 6 years, the number of applications per job has dropped 21% – and the current climate can safely be called a "job seeker's market."

As the gap between job openings and job applications continues to grow, government organizations must consider how this could affect the overall quality of the services their organizations provide. In order to make public sector jobs more attractive to applicants, it is key that government agencies develop a better understanding of the top factors that motivate prospective candidates to apply.

Figure 2
Applications per Job, 2015 vs 2020

2
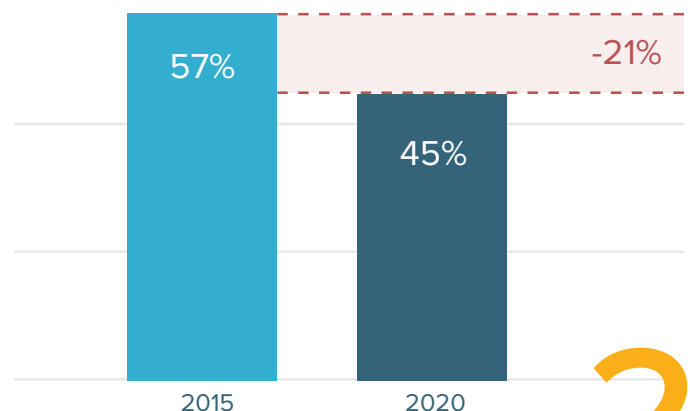
FROM 2019 TO 2020 APPLICATIONS PER JOB
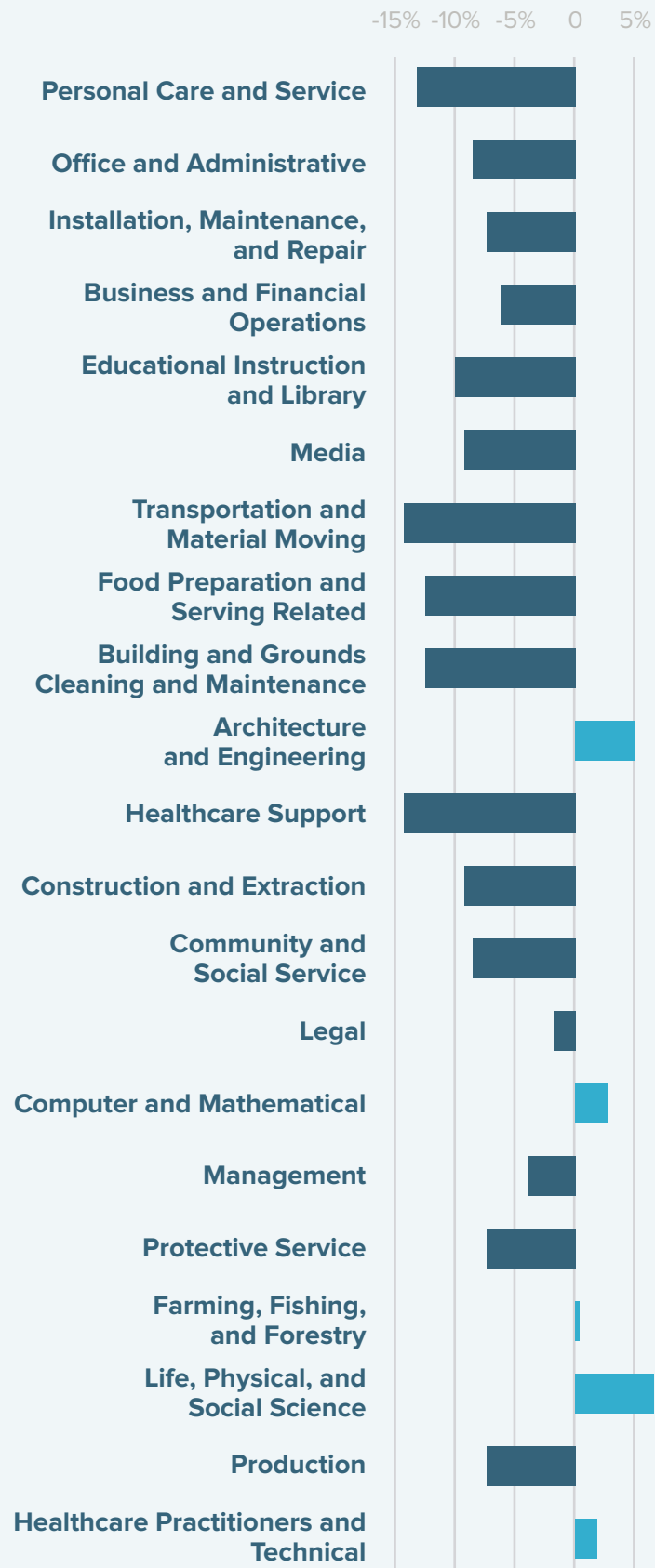# DECREASED IN MOST CATEGORIES

The number of applications submitted per job opening are down significantly year-over-year for many roles in the public sector, with applications per job decreasing across most categories.

The three fields with the biggest decline in year-over-year applications per job opening are **Healthcare Support** (-14%), **Transportation and Material Moving** (-14%), and **Personal Care and Service** (-13%). Following closely behind are Food Preparation and Serving and Building and Grounds Cleaning/Maintenance, each at -12%. These findings are in line with what the nation as a whole has experienced throughout the pandemic, with employers struggling to fill an influx of service job openings.

Conversely, the top growth areas receiving more applications per job than the previous year were from fields relating to **Life, Physical, and Social Sciences** (7%), **Architecture and Engineering** (5%), and **Computer and Mathematical Occupation**s (3%).

The field with the least variation year-over-year is Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations, with 2% growth in applications per job and decreases of 5% and 3% for jobs and applications, respectively. Given that the overall year-over-year jobs and applications were down 20% and 26% respectively, the field's relatively unaffected numbers coincide with the need for nurses, doctors, and specialized healthcare professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2019 vs 2020 Year-Over-Year Applications per Job

Categories (top to bottom): Personal Care and Service; Office and Administrative; Installation, Maintenance, and Repair; Business and Financial Operations; Educational Instruction and Library; Media; Transportation and Material Moving; Food Preparation and Serving Related; Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance; Architecture and Engineering; Healthcare Support; Construction and Extraction; Community and Social Service; Legal; Computer and Mathematical; Management; Protective Service; Farming, Fishing, and Forestry; Life, Physical, and Social Science; Production; Healthcare Practitioners and Technical
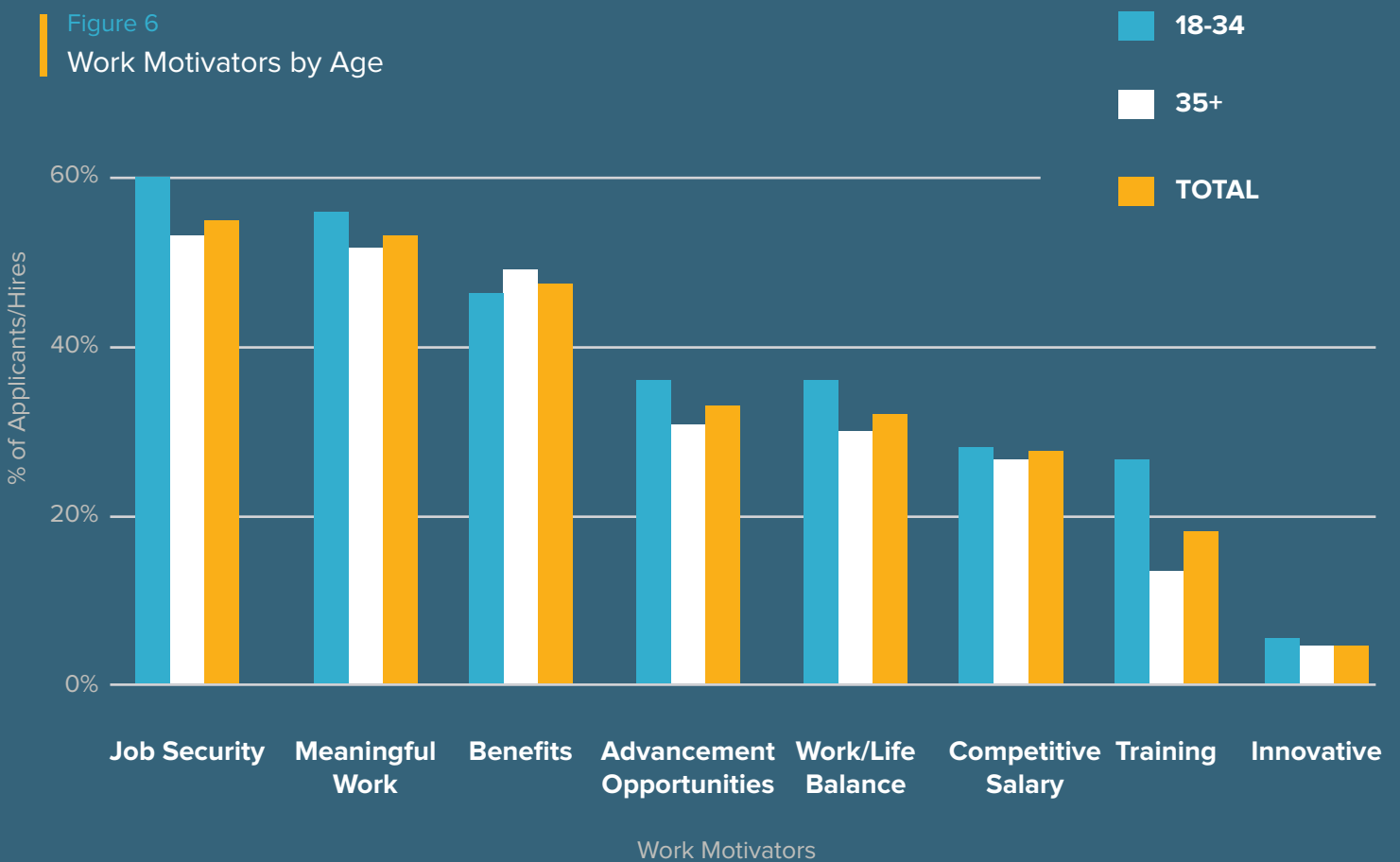
Axis: -15% -10% -5% 0 5%

3

THE BIGGEST MOTIVATORS
IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Across age groups, job security, the opportunity to do meaningful work, and attractive benefits packages remain the three biggest motivators for working in the public sector.

However, it's important to note that the 18-34 group places a stronger emphasis on the availability of advancement opportunities (37% vs. 31%) and the opportunity to receive training in their professional area (26% vs. 14%) compared to the 35+ age group. Given that this group is newer to their careers, agencies that make it a priority to offer training and development opportunities can attract young professionals who are eager to learn.

The 18-34 demographic is also more concerned than those 35+ with finding work life balance at 37% vs. 30%

Figure 6
Work Motivators by Age

Legend: 18-34, 35+, TOTAL

Y-axis: % of Applicants/Hires (0%, 20%, 40%, 60%)

X-axis (Work Motivators): Job Security, Meaningful Work, Benefits, Advancement Opportunities, Work/Life Balance, Competitive Salary, Training, Innovative
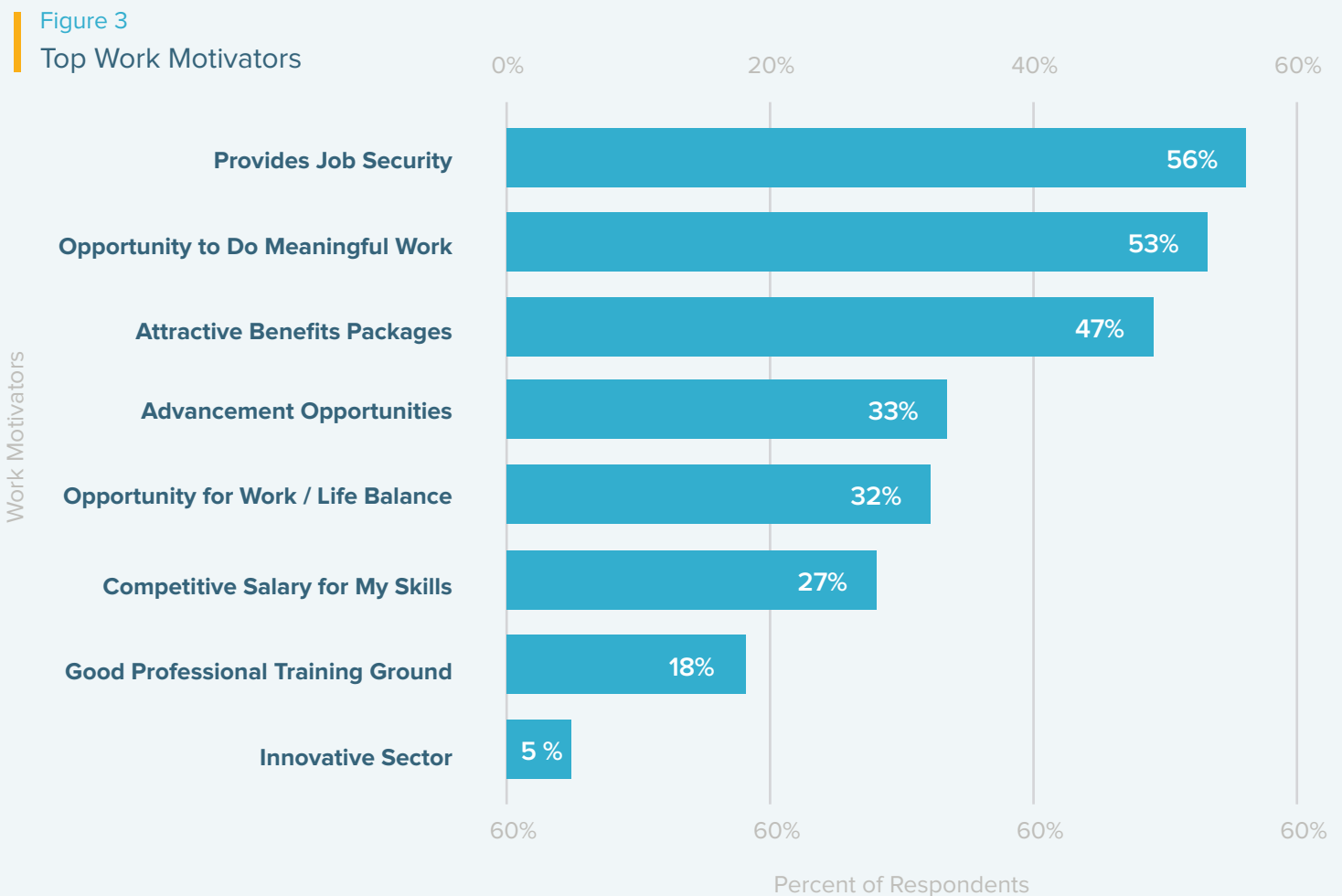
4

DRAW JOB SEEKERS TO THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Survey findings from NEOGOV's Job Seeker Report show that job motivations differ by applicant demographics. By having a solid grasp of these motivators, employers can then form strategies to successfully attract candidates in today's job market — and learn what it takes to retain their top talent too.

Respondents were instructed to select all that apply, with results from the survey showing that the **overall top public sector job motivators are job security (56%), the opportunity to do meaningful work (53%), and offering attractive benefits packages (47%).**

Figure 3

Top Work Motivators

Work Motivators

	0%	20%	40%	60%

Provides Job Security — 56%

Opportunity to Do Meaningful Work — 53%

Attractive Benefits Packages — 47%

Advancement Opportunities — 33%

Opportunity for Work / Life Balance — 32%

Competitive Salary for My Skills — 27%

Good Professional Training Ground — 18%

Innovative Sector — 5 %

60% 60% 60% 60%

Percent of Respondents

Organizations that can offer and highlight these factors can better appeal to applicants by emphasizing them in their job descriptions and interview processes.

5

WORK-LIFE BALANCE IS ESPECIALLY APPEALING FOR
HIGHLY SPECIALIZED ROLES

Job security and the opportunity to do meaningful work are among the most important motivators for the majority of career fields.

Unlike many highly specialized job seekers in the private sector, job seekers in the same roles in the public sector value the ability to obtain a healthy work-life balance. Findings showed that being motivated by work-life balance was the highest among those in Media Occupations (38%), Computer and Mathematical Occupations (39%), Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations (38%) and Legal Occupations (37%). **Appealing to this desire may be a useful strategy for agencies who are looking for highly qualified candidates in technical fields such as these.**
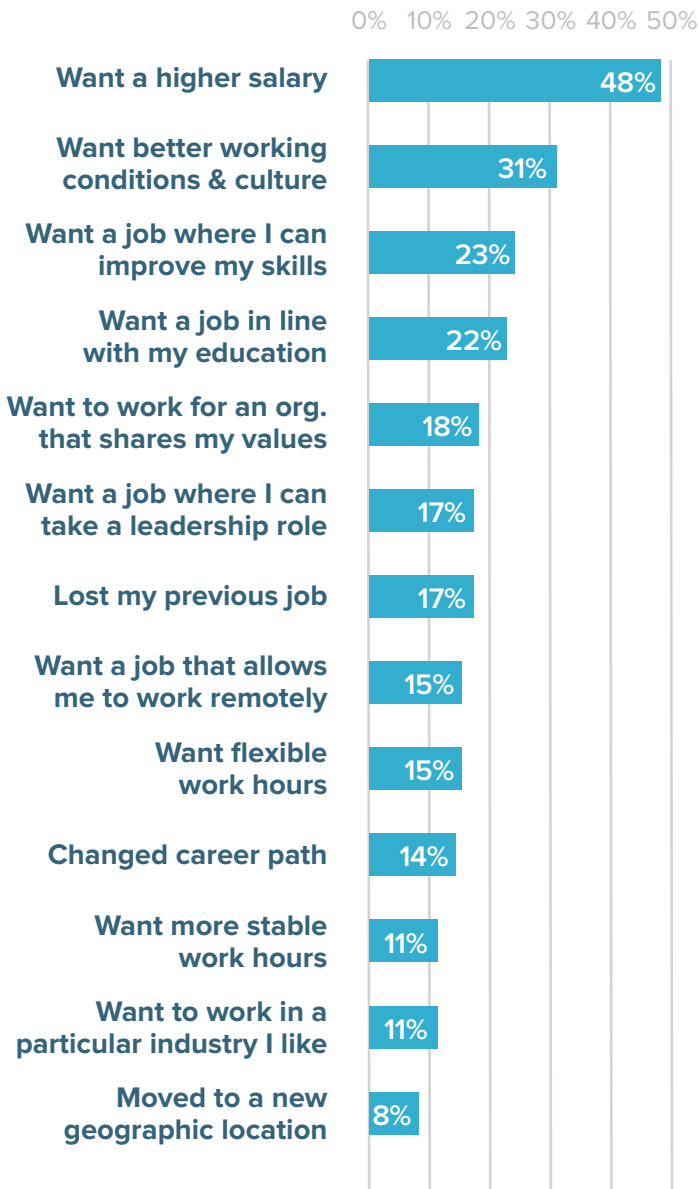
Figure 4
Work Motivators by Title

	Job Security	Meaningful Work	Benefits	Advancement Opportunities	Work/Life Balance	Competitive Salary	Training	Innovation
Architecture & Engineering	**65%**	57%	53%	37%	33%	39%	25%	2%
Media	**54%**	46%	50%	33%	38%	38%	17%	6%
Business & Financial Operation	**57%**	53%	50%	30%	31%	22%	14%	4%
Community & Social Service	**59%**	55%	50%	33%	25%	28%	19%	6%
Computer & Mathematical	**63%**	45%	56%	30%	39%	28%	15%	7%
Healthcare Practitioners	53%	**56%**	53%	29%	38%	34%	16%	2%
Legal	38%	**60%**	40%	21%	37%	27%	16%	6%
Life, Physical, & Social Sciences	57%	**63%**	40%	29%	34%	35%	33%	8%
Management	**59%**	**59%**	50%	30%	32%	27%	14%	4%
Office & Administrative Support	**56%**	53%	46%	37%	35%	25%	17%	5%

6

APPLICANTS PURSUE NEW JOBS DUE TO

SALARY & CULTURE

Higher salary (48%) is the top reason for pursuing a new job, with wanting better working conditions & culture (31%) and wanting a job that allows for skill improvement (23%) following Maybe

Figure 13

Reasons for Pursuing a New Job (Top 3)

	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%
Want a higher salary					48%	
Want better working conditions & culture			31%			
Want a job where I can improve my skills		23%				
Want a job in line with my education		22%				
Want to work for an org. that shares my values	18%					
Want a job where I can take a leadership role	17%					
Lost my previous job	17%					
Want a job that allows me to work remotely	15%					
Want flexible work hours	15%					
Changed career path	14%					
Want more stable work hours	11%					
Want to work in a particular industry I like	11%					
Moved to a new geographic location	8%					

TOP MOTIVATORS FOR EMPLOYEE RETENTION ARE SALARY & WORK ENVIRONMENT

The top motivator for employees to stay at a job is a competitive salary and benefits plan (54%), followed by a pleasing work environment and supportive work culture (40%), and the ability to do challenging, rewarding work (31%).
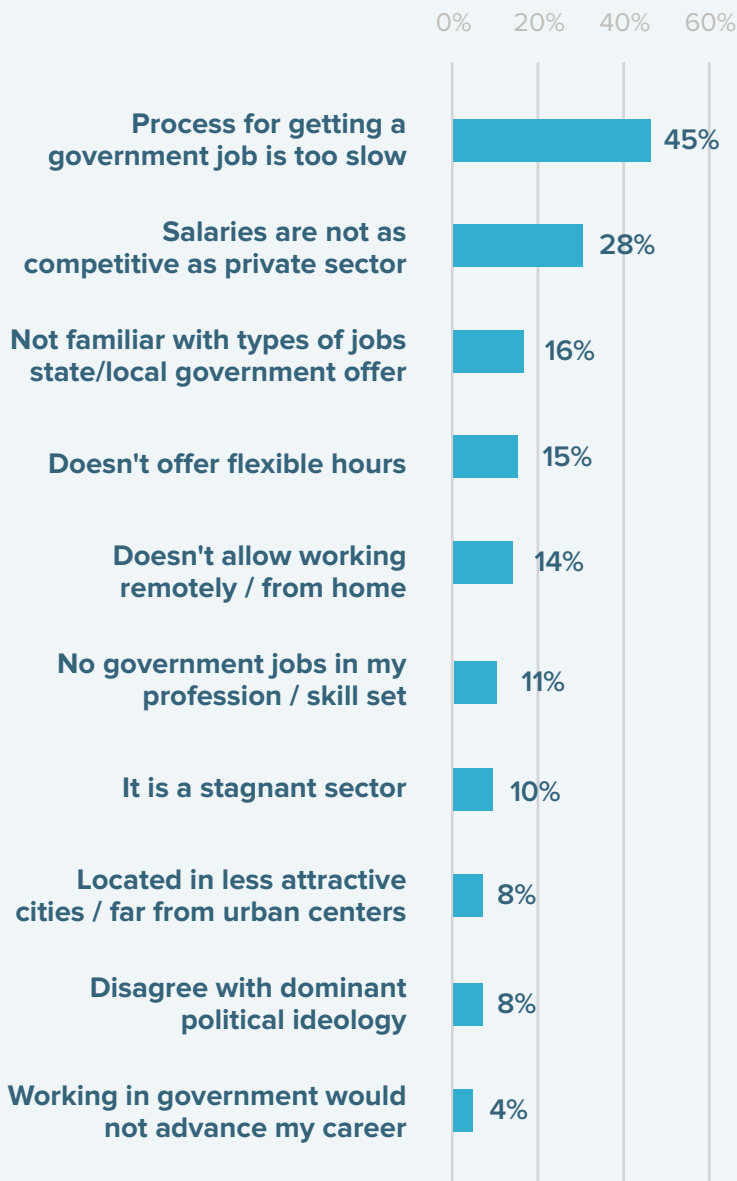
Figure 14
Motivators to Stay at a Job (Top 3)

	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%
Competitive salary / benefits						54%
Pleasant work environment / culture					40%	
Challenging, rewarding work				31%		
Ability to fully utilize my skills				28%		
Flexible work schedule			26%			
Reasonable commute			23%			
Continuous training as I progress in my career		18%				
Opportunity to get "on the job experience"		17%				
Ability to work remotely		15%				
Flexible career path with innovative elements	11%					
Personalized career plan	9%					
Personalized benefits	7%					
Formal training opportunities	5%					
Digital enablement/ not using outdated tech	3%					

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SOURCE OF FRUSTRATION

Figure 7
What Drives Applicants Away from Jobs in the Public Sector

Process for getting a government job is too slow	45%
Salaries are not as competitive as private sector	28%
Not familiar with types of jobs state/local government offer	16%
Doesn't offer flexible hours	15%
Doesn't allow working remotely / from home	14%
No government jobs in my profession / skill set	11%
It is a stagnant sector	10%
Located in less attractive cities / far from urban centers	8%
Disagree with dominant political ideology	8%
Working in government would not advance my career	4%

When asked to select all that apply, the biggest factors deterring applicants from applying to public sector jobs were the perception that the process for getting a government job is too cumbersome and slow (45%) and that salaries are not as competitive as the private sector (28%).

This is in line with NEOGOV's 2020 Public Sector Time-to-Hire Report, which found that **the average public sector time-to-hire was 119 days in 2019, more than three times the average in the private sector at 36 days**. Applicants aren't wrong in feeling that getting a government job is a long, arduous process – especially since the average time to hire in the public sector increased to 122 days in 2020.

Given that the private sector boasts faster hiring times and higher salaries, agencies may risk deterring or losing out on qualified applicants if they aren't equipped with the right tools to speed up the hiring process. While hiring times in the public sector will probably always lag behind the private sector, it's still possible to reduce time-to-hire significantly by leveraging technology such as applicant tracking systems that help automate processes.

While public sector jobs may always lack the ability to compete on salary, government agencies can outdo the private sector by spotlighting their most desirable factors: providing job security, the ability to do meaningful work, and offering attractive benefits packages

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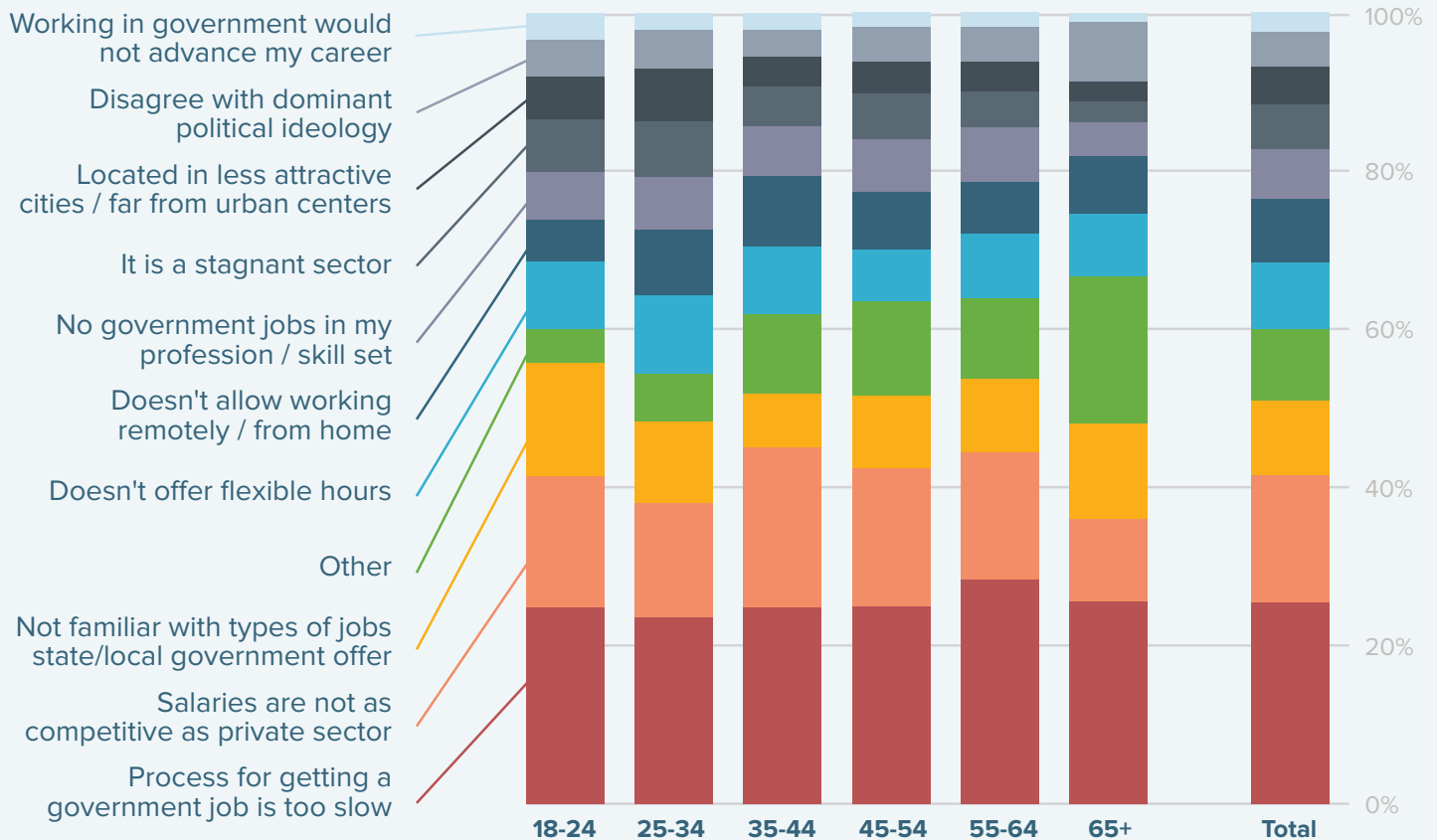# CUMBERSOME HIRING PROCESSES ARE DRIVING TALENT AWAY

By and large, across all age groups, the single biggest deterrent for applying to public sector jobs is that job seekers believe the process of getting a government job is too cumbersome and slow. **For agencies struggling with landing qualified hires, moving away from manual or paper-based processes toward more seamless hiring and recruitment procedures could be the game changer they need to attract more applicants.**

Prospective candidates in the 18-24 (26%) and 25-34 (20%) age groups ranked the highest for not being familiar with the types of jobs that the public sector has to offer, showing that there isn't as much knowledge around the public sector among younger applicants when compared to those in older age groups.

Taking the time to educate and advertise to these younger cohorts may be a helpful tactic to gain their attention and interest, especially as Baby Boomers hurtle toward retirement age.

Figure 8

What Drives Applicants Away by Age

Working in government would not advance my career

Disagree with dominant political ideology

Located in less attractive cities / far from urban centers

It is a stagnant sector

No government jobs in my profession / skill set

Doesn't allow working remotely / from home

Doesn't offer flexible hours

Other

Not familiar with types of jobs state/local government offer

Salaries are not as competitive as private sector

Process for getting a government job is too slow

18-24   25-34   35-44   45-54   55-64   65+   Total

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JOB SEEKERS BELIEVE THE
CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE IS LACKING

For today's public sector job seekers, the candidate experience is falling short.

Improving the job application experience is critical for public sector organizations to remain competitive in today's job market. **Almost a quarter (24%) of survey respondents said that they had a less positive experience, compared to acceptable (47%) and positive (29%).**

Applicants ages 35+ were more likely to have had a less positive experience (25%) compared to the 18-34 age group (21%), while they had similar ratings in the acceptable and positive categories.

Figure 10
Candidate Experience by Age
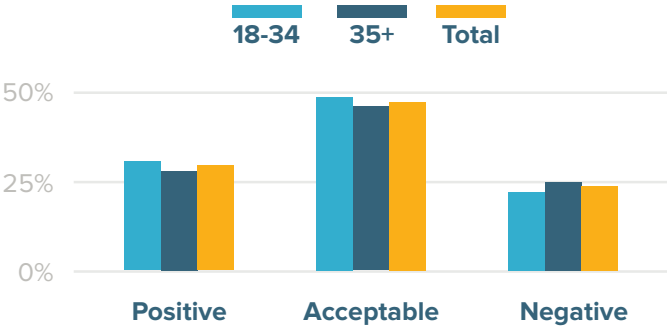
The interview process and communication between candidates and employers could also use substantial room for improvement. Survey respondents were asked to rate interview communication from a scale of 1 (very low) to 5 (very high) — with the average score coming out to only 1.8, meaning that **55% of respondents gave interview communication the lowest possible rating of 1 (very low).**

Figure 9
Candidate Experience Overall Ratings

NEGATIVE 24%
POSITIVE 29%
ACCEPTABLE 47%

11
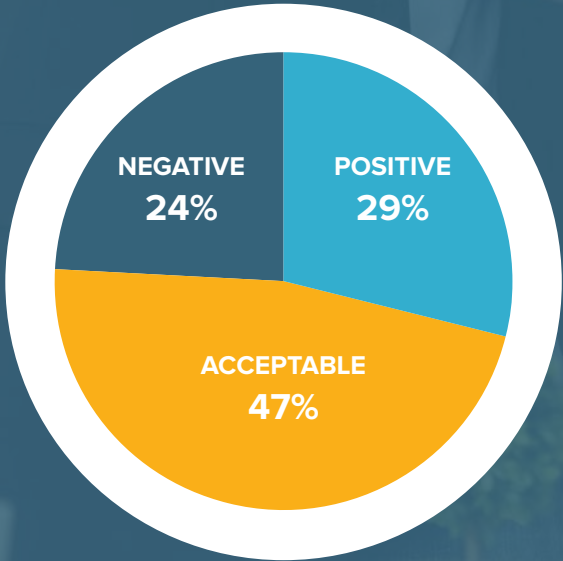
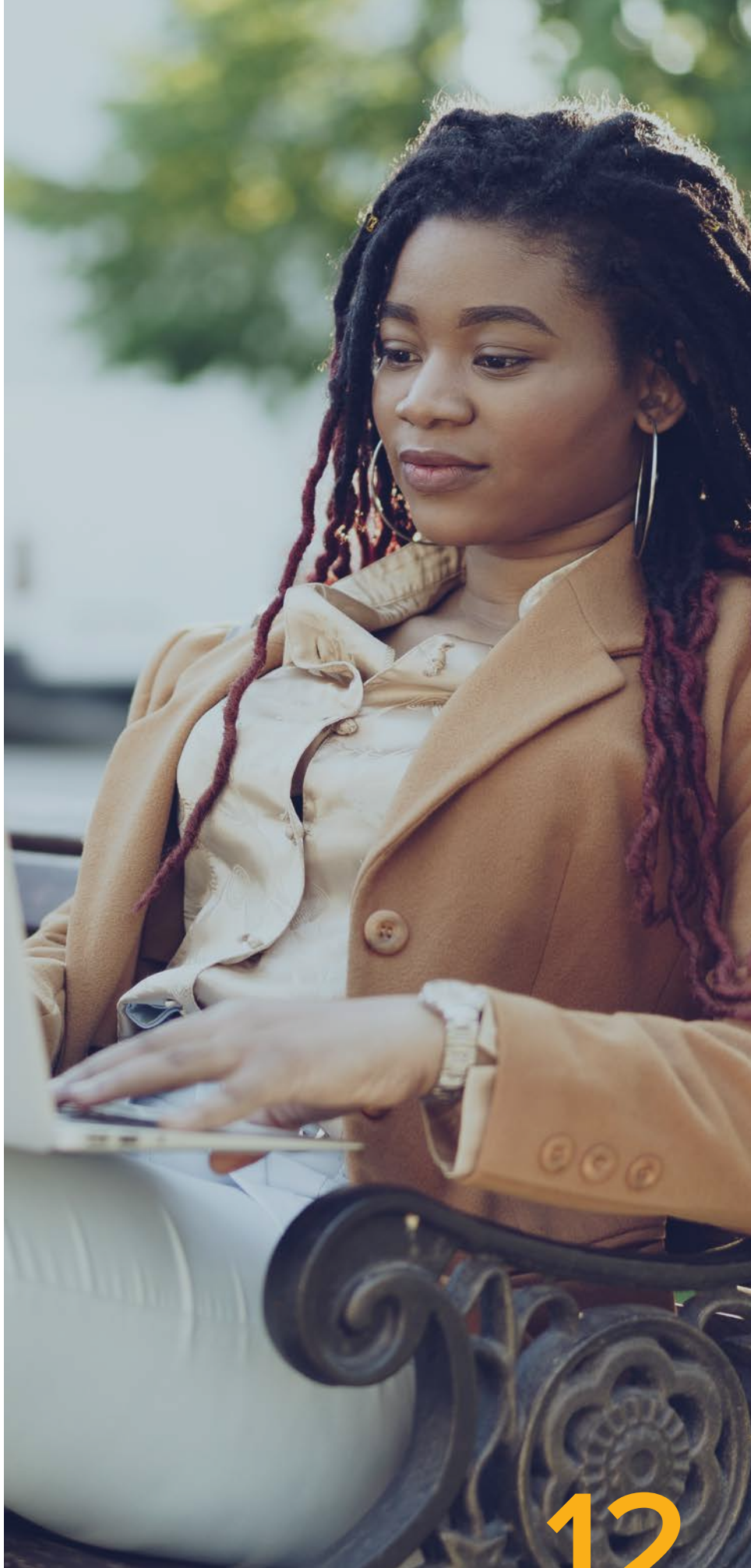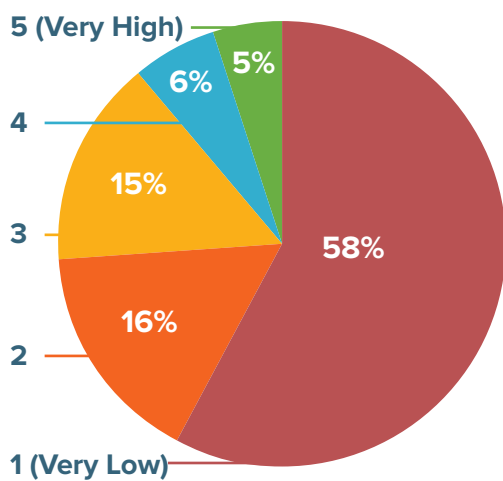# AREN'T RECEIVING HONEST FEEDBACK

The majority of public sector job seekers also don't believe they've received honest feedback on why they weren't selected for the position, with 58% rating honest feedback at 1 (very low) for a weighted average of 1.83.

Figure 11
Job Seeker Feedback Rating

- 5 (Very High) — 5%
- 4 — 6%
- 3 — 15%
- 2 — 16%
- 1 (Very Low) — 58%

THE MOST POPULAR CHOICE WHEN APPLYING TO JOBS
ARE ONLINE METHODS

Online job boards (82%) and government agency online job portals (65%) are the most frequented job search channels among public sector job seekers, with websites from specific companies following not too far behind (49%).

Figure 12

Job Search Channels & Devices
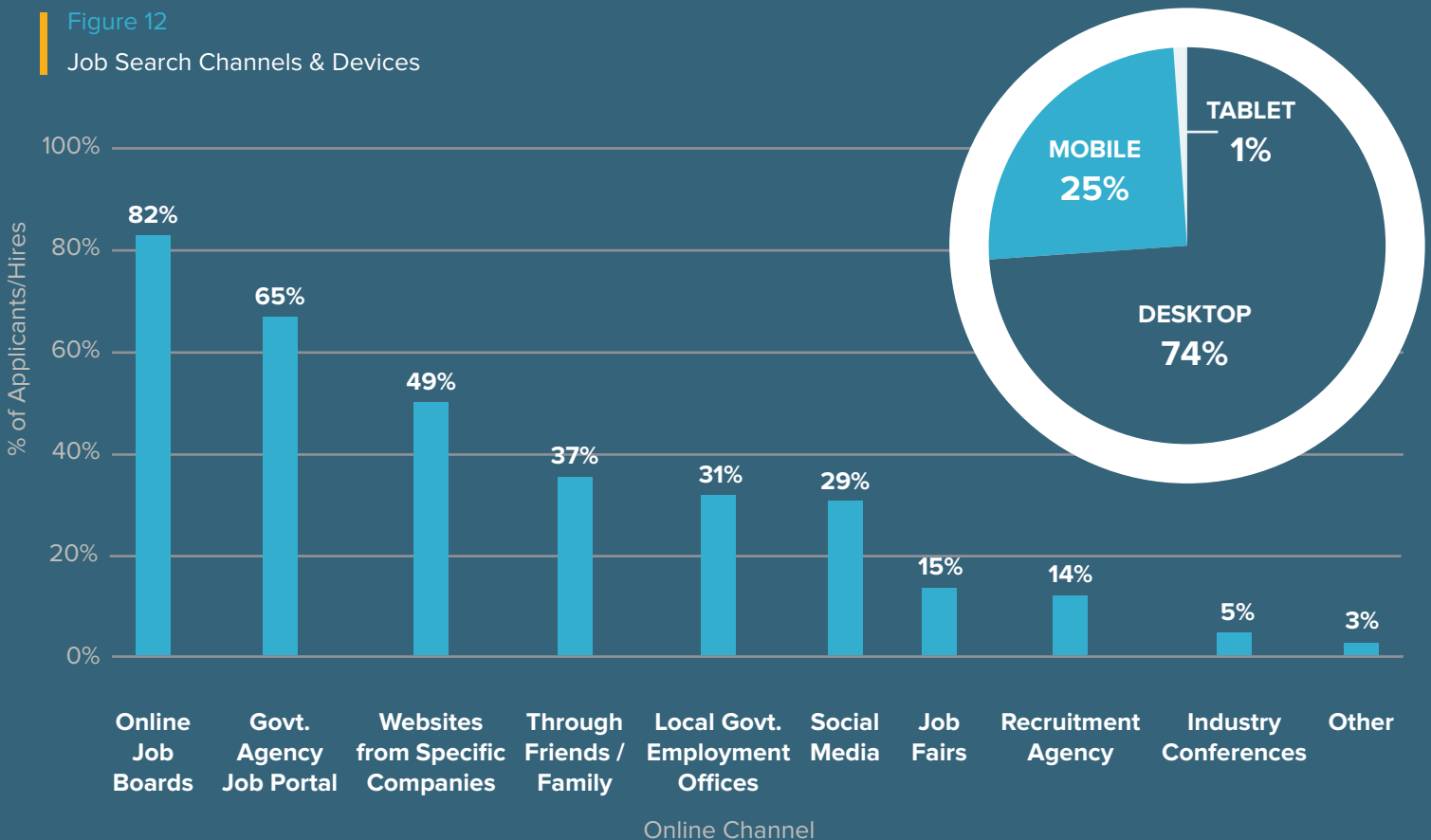
While applying to job postings on desktop devices remains the most popular method at 74%, mobile applications have more than doubled compared to NEOGOV's 2019 Job Seeker Report data – from 10% in 2019 to 25% in 2021. Bearing this in mind, agencies that can adapt their process by optimizing their career pages for mobile devices will have a leg up on the competition.

Contrarily, tablet use for applying to jobs has decreased from 10% in 2019 to only 1% in 2021.
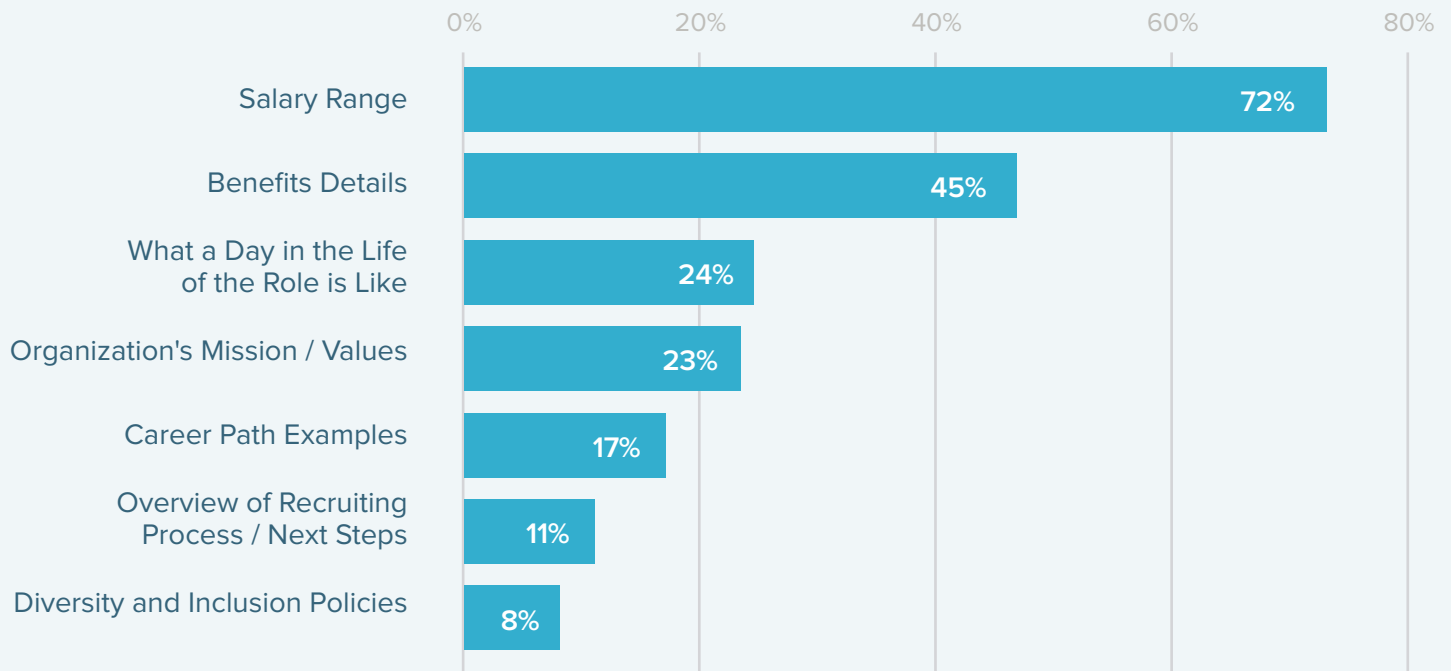
With three-fourths of job seekers applying via desktop and one-fourth applying on their mobile devices, these findings reinforce the need for agencies to ensure a more seamless user experience for applicants on the go. First and foremost, agencies should have a website with responsive design (fit to scale on smaller screens) or a separate mobile site.

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WHAT JOB SEEKERS WANT TO SEE IN
JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Aside from a job description listing duties, skills, and requirements of a position, **applicants are most likely to apply to a job if the job posting includes a job's salary range (73%),** benefits details (45%), what a day in the life of the role is like (24%), and the organization's mission and values (23%).

What Information Besides the Job Description is Most Likely to Influence Your Decision to Apply to an Agency?

Salary Range	72%
Benefits Details	45%
What a Day in the Life of the Role is Like	24%
Organization's Mission / Values	23%
Career Path Examples	17%
Overview of Recruiting Process / Next Steps	11%
Diversity and Inclusion Policies	8%

IMPROVE THE CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE?

When asked an open-ended question about how employers could improve the job application process, survey respondents overwhelmingly voiced their concerns regarding honest feedback, salary details, fairness, communication, and the overall candidate experience. **Below are several anonymous responses to get a glimpse into the frustrations that many public sector applicants often experience.**

Provide Honest Feedback

"Give honest, detailed feedback about why I wasn't selected, rather than 'others more closely matched the job specifications.' Tell me HOW, and how my skills didn't fit the job."

"Be honest and open about what they are REALLY looking for – my experience, education, and expertise checks all the boxes for my resume… but what is truly needed and wanted up front in the job description and recruitment posting?"

"Tell me why I didn't get the job and why. Don't wait six months to send me a rejection letter. Be clearer about requirements."

List Salary Details

"Provide basic information like the salary, how many openings there are, if they received an application, and why candidates aren't chosen for an interview. It seems that oftentimes an internal candidate is chosen, which makes it feel like there's no chance of an outsider getting picked – it's like I filled out the application for nothing."

"Be open and honest about the pay rate. Nothing turns me off more as a job seeker than a posting that doesn't tell me how much I am going to get paid. How am I to know if it is worth my time to move positions without knowing if my pay rate is going to be comparable?"

"Salary range is a big one, along with making the application process less troublesome. I already submitted my resume, why do I need to fill out my whole work experience again? Being required to input the phone number and address of previous employers is also a pain."
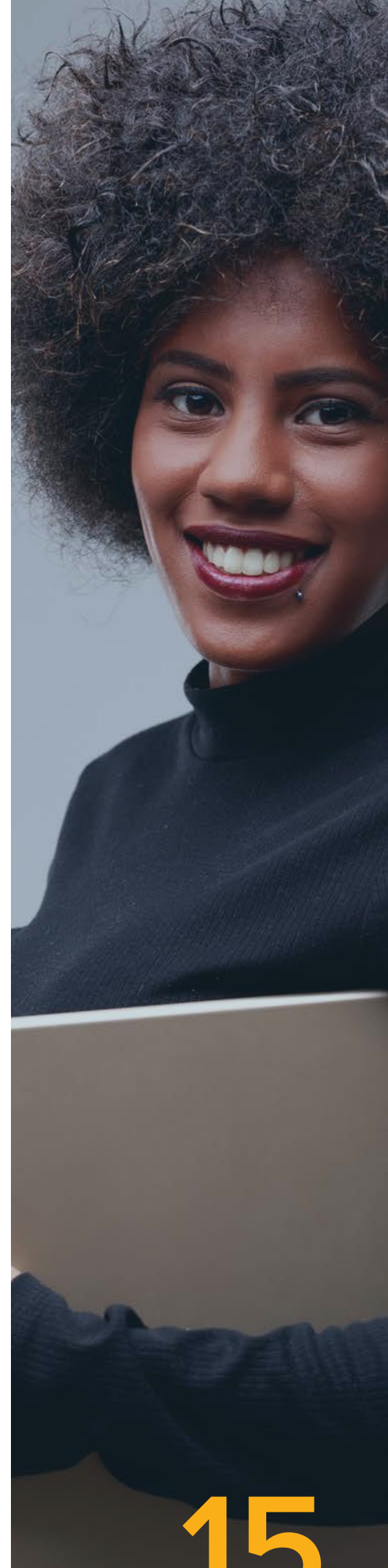
Level the playing field for entry level, non-traditional, and diverse candidates

"Do not list jobs needing high levels of experience as 'entry level' jobs."

"Relax some of the educational standards. You may have the experience, but because you don't have every qualification they are asking for does not mean you are not capable of learning and excelling at the job. Hiring teams overlook people like that."

"Open up the aperture of the applicant pool to attract more diversified and non-traditional applicants."

Improve communication processes

"Make it easier to apply and make the process faster. Waiting months to hear anything is disheartening, and so is not knowing why you weren't chosen."

"COMMUNICATION! Communicate expectations, processes, updates, outcomes, and provide feedback."

"Stronger, more efficient communication. The application status for several jobs I applied for in 2020 is still listed as 'Currently in Review.' I hesitate to believe that this is true."

Streamline the application process and overall candidate experience

"Provide clear details about hiring priorities and timelines (and stick to them)."

"A better website would be nice. It sometimes is very cumbersome to apply."

"Make the job description readable. Sometimes it's a bunch of words crammed into one paragraph."

"Including more descriptions about the work environment, the feel of the office, and the flow of the day to get a glimpse of in the job description. Too often all we know are the tasks and expectations are, versus what the job actually 'looks and feels' like."

"Have information regarding the position from personnel who actually perform the job duties. HR does not always understand the job duties and functions especially for specialists and technical positions."

16

LOOKING AHEAD TO THE FUTURE OF WORK TRENDS

The Need for Flexibility

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the already growing remote work trend, forcing many organizations to move a large portion of their workforce to remote work.

As a result of working from home during the pandemic, many employees now want to work remotely permanently, or at least have the flexibility to work from home on a regular basis.

Gartner Research estimates that 48% of employees at large enterprises will work remotely at least some of the time after the pandemic – a significant increase from the 30% of employees who worked remotely at least some of the time prior to the pandemic.

Figure 16

Percentage of Employees Working Remotely, Pre- and Post-Pandemic

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

PRE-PANDEMIC

10%

20%

70%

30%

POST-PANDEMIC

19%

29%

52%

48%

17
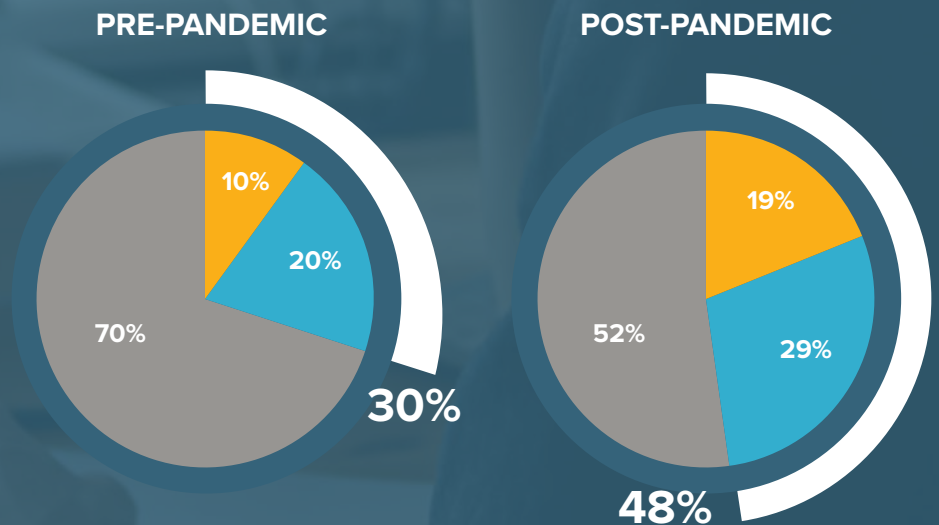
A Strong Desire for Learning and Development

Wanting a job that allows for skill improvement is the third biggest motivator for candidates pursuing a new job (23%) — with younger applicants (ages 18-34) placing an especially strong emphasis on the availability of advancement opportunities (37% vs. 31%) and the opportunity to receive training in their professional area (26% vs. 14%) compared to the 35+ age group.

As candidates demonstrate a strong appetite for learning and development, companies across the globe have begun implementing practices to align with these trends. **For instance, over half (58%) of respondents from a recent global survey from McKinsey & Company said that closing skill gaps has become a greater priority since the pandemic began, and 69% said their companies engage in more skill building than they did before the crisis.**

Of their findings, the most in-demand skills are leadership and managing others, critical thinking and decision making, and project management — which points toward a more employee-centric model as the world heads into the post-pandemic future of work.

Agencies that make it a point to invest in the learning and development of their employees will not only reap the benefits of a more skilled workforce, but they can also boost morale by nurturing an employee-first culture.

Employee Engagement and Workplace Culture

Employee engagement matters more than ever, and high-engagement organizations have been shown to achieve their strategic goals, enjoy higher levels of productivity, deliver more responsive customer service, and have lower turnover. **According to Gallup, high-engagement organizations have a 43% lower turnover rate compared to low-engagement organizations.**

Since many public sector workers are initially attracted to public sector work because they believe in an organization's mission, it comes as no surprise that engaged employees working at government agencies are three times more likely than disengaged employees to believe their organization is achieving its mission. Agencies should spend time crafting an employer brand that speaks to these goals and paints the organization's culture in a good light.

Along with employee engagement and culture is the topic of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Since the pandemic has without a doubt magnified social justice issues and the importance of paving a better path forward, the way organizations react and commit to DEI initiatives will likely continue to play a key role in how employees view the workplace and their likelihood of staying there.

18

Retaining Employees and Minimizing Turnover Rates

Compared to the private sector, the public sector often takes a considerable amount of time to select new employees. That being said, historically government agencies may have failed to overlook the importance of investing in employee onboarding and retention because there was less turnover. However, in today's job market when swaths of government employees are planning to exit their current place of employment, it's time for agencies to invest in workforce retention strategies.

Replacing a government employee can cost up to 150% of the employee's annual salary – making it increasingly important to meet employees in the middle by accommodating their workplace preferences.

Agencies can collect turnover data, employee surveys, and conduct exit interviews to gain a better understanding of why employees leave their organization. By doing so, organizations can look for patterns to see if there are specific reasons employees decide to leave.

This can help answer questions such as:

- Are employees with specific job titles or from specific departments leaving at high rates?

- Are turnover rates higher for employees of underrepresented groups, signaling a need for improved DEI commitments?

- Is senior management making up a large portion of employee exits?

- Is the organization having difficulty onboarding and retaining new hires?

- Are top performers leaving the organization after securing work elsewhere, and if so, which reasons are motivating them to leave?

Ultimately, after all that has changed in the last year, there's no doubt that today's employees and job seekers are reimagining the world of work – it's now up to employers to step up to the challenge if they want to remain in the game.

19
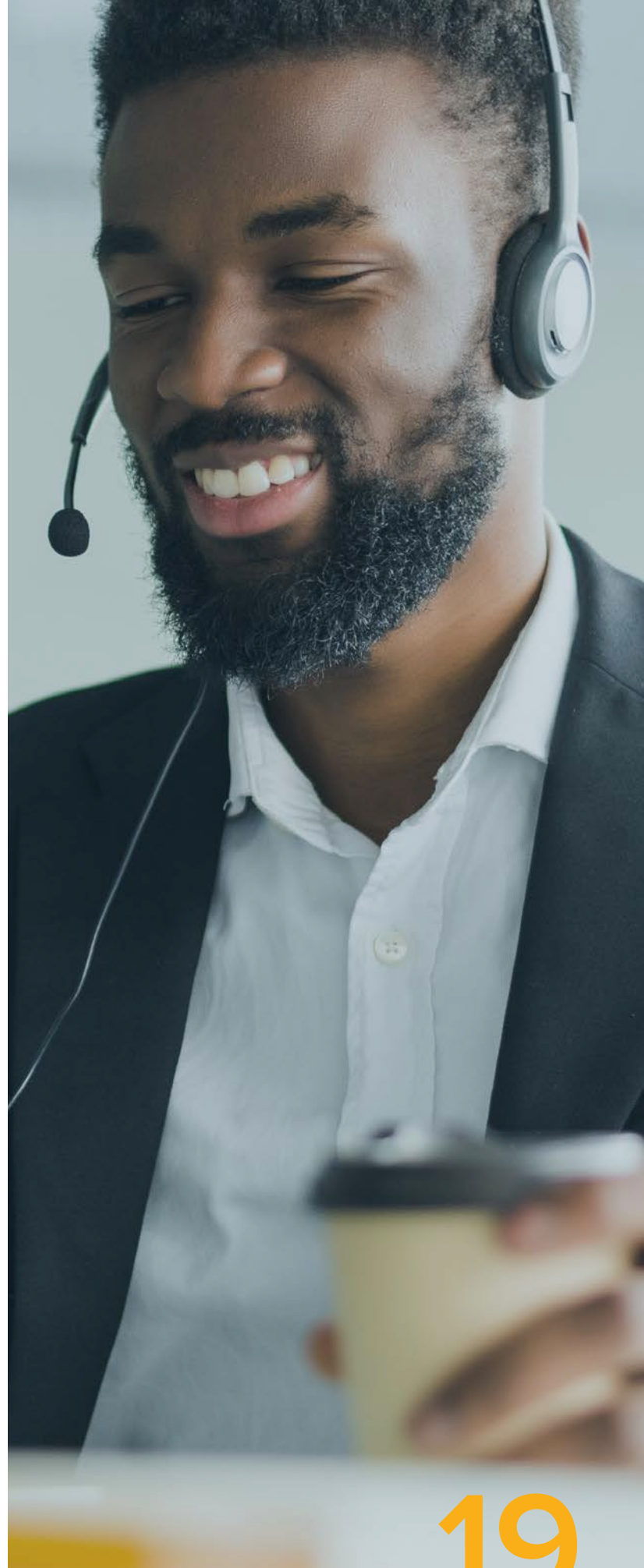
METHODOLOGY & REFERENCES

NEOGOV's 2021 Job Seeker Report included 3,962 responses from the GovernmentJobs.com job applicant database. The 10-minute online survey was completed by 3,956 respondents from June 15, 2021 to August 7, 2021.

[1] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021, June). Unemployment rises in 2020, as the country battles the COVID-19 pandemic. Retrieved from https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2021/article/unemployment-rises-in-2020-as-the-country-battles-the-covid-19-pandemic.htm
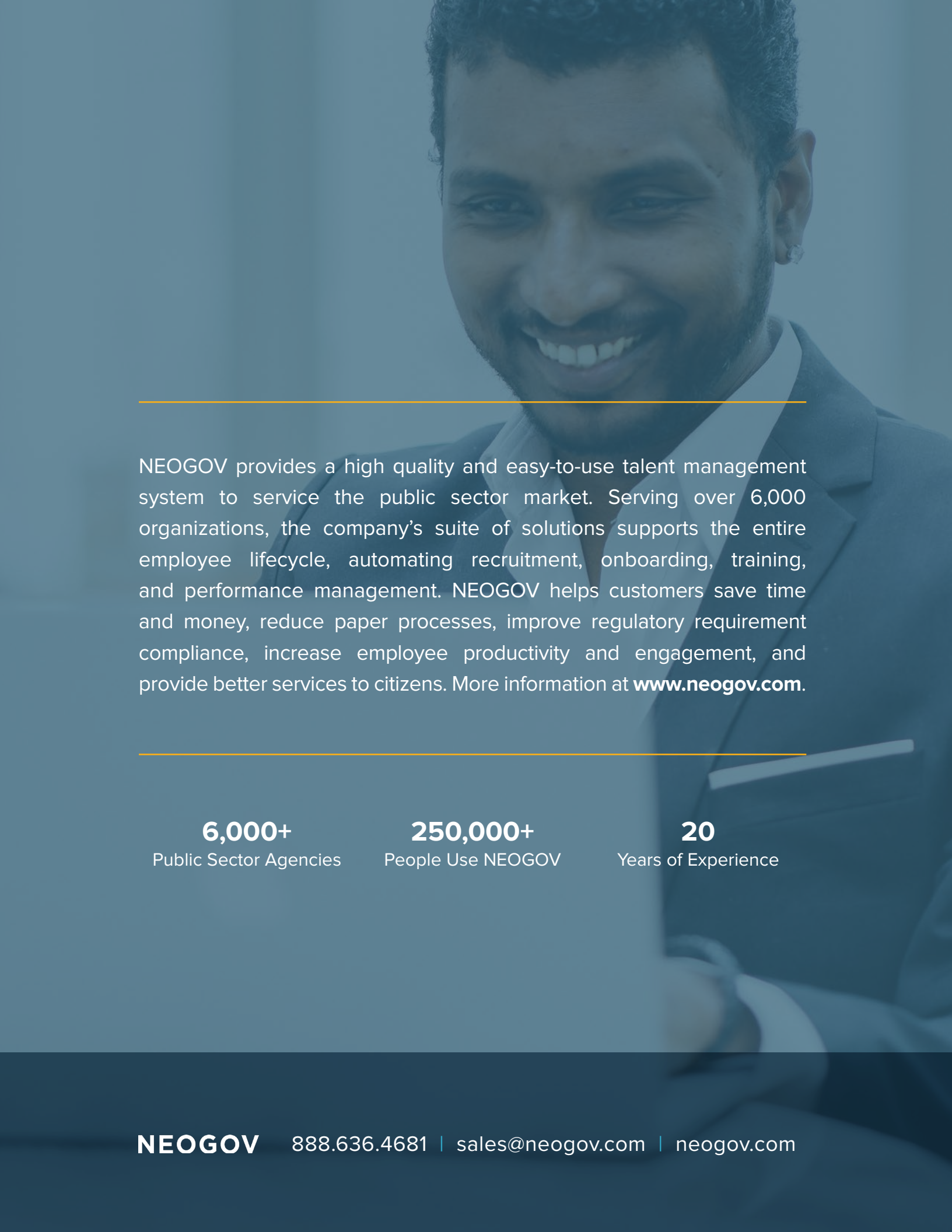
[2] NEOGOV Job Seeker Report Survey. June 15, 2021 to August 7, 2021.

[3] NEOGOV (2020, August, 19). The Public Sector's Average Time-to-Hire is Three Times as Long as the Private Sector. Retrieved from https://blog.neogov.com/press/neogov-releases-time-to-hire-report-2020

[4] Gartner Research, Human Resources Research Team. (2020, May 14). 9 Predictions for the Post-COVID Future of Work.

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