

Attitudes toward workers of different career stages

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ATTITUDES TOWARD WORKERS OF DIFFERENT CAREER STAGES

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This Issue Brief is one of the resources prepared for managers and supervisors as part of the States as Employers-of-Choice project. Questions about this Issue Brief or the overall project can be directed to either Tay McNamara at Boston College (mcnamatd@bc.edu) or Bob Davis at the Twiga Foundation, Inc. (davismcs@msn.com).

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We would also like to express our appreciation to the representatives of 222 agencies from 22 states who took the time to respond to the survey questions.

States as Employers-of-Choice

A Collaborative Project of the Twiga Foundation, Inc., and the Sloan Center on Aging & Work

Report prepared by Elyssa Besen & Tay McNamara, PhD.

INTRODUCTION

This is the third in a series of Issue Briefs highlighting the findings from the States as Employers-of-Choice Survey. It focuses on perceptions of workers at different career stages. The States as Employers-of-Choice Survey was conducted in order to assess state agencies' level of awareness and understanding of demographic changes, help them assess their response to the aging workforce, and contribute to planning for possible action steps.

In recent years, there have been concerns about how the aging of the United States population will impact workers of all ages. In the next decade, the number of workers aged 55 and older is expected to grow five times as quickly as the overall labor force. At the same time, the number of workers aged 16 to 24 is expected to decrease by 0.7%.¹ This trend is particularly pronounced in the state government workforce. As the Baby Boomers in the state government workforce reach retirement age, some states expect to face a loss of up to 40% of their workforce.²

As the workforce ages, it will become increasingly important to the multigenerational workforce to understand stereotypes of workers at different ages and career stages. Studies focusing on private-sector organizations have found that older workers are often thought to be less productive, less physically able, less ambitious, and less adaptable than younger workers.^{3,4,5} However, they are also believed to be more reliable, have a stronger work ethic, and have greater organizational commitment.^{3,6} Much less is known about public-sector organizations' perceptions of workers of different ages. This Issue Brief attempts to address that gap, outlining the ways in which views of older workers differ in the public versus the private sector.

This Issue Brief identifies state agencies' perceptions of workers at different career stages and how those perceptions differ between the career stages. It also discusses how public- and private-sector organizations' perceptions of workers at different career stages differ and highlights some of the strengths and weaknesses of public sector perceptions of workers as compared to those of the private sector.



HOW DO STATE AGENCIES PERCEIVE WORKERS OF DIFFERENT CAREER STAGES?

How do human resource managers within state agencies perceive early-career, mid-career, and late-career employees? To address this question, state agency representatives were asked whether 20 statements were true for their employees at different career stages. Half of the statements reflected positive attributes, such as:

- Want to lead and supervise others,
- Have low turnover rates,
- Have a strong work ethic,
- Have high levels of skills relative to what is needed for their jobs,
- Have established networks of professional colleagues,
- Are reliable,
- Are productive,
- Are loyal to the agency,
- Are creative, and
- Take initiative.

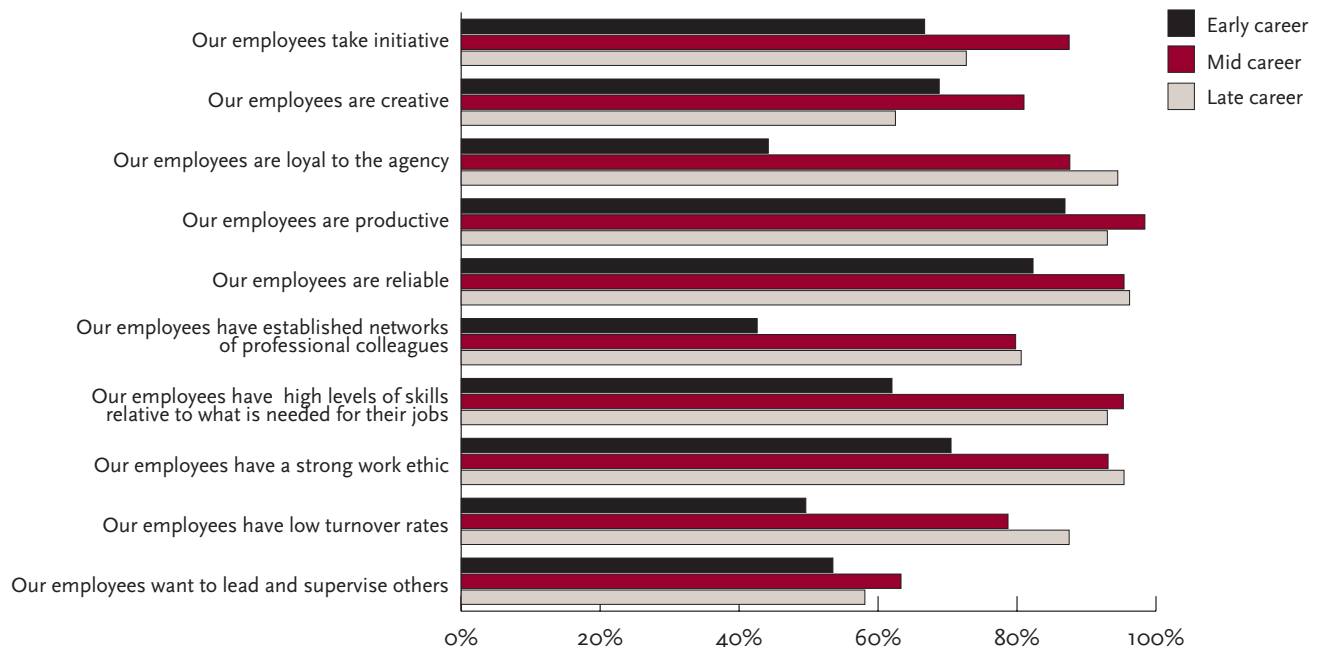
Half of the statements were negative attributes, such as:

- Resistant to change,
- Often look outside the company/organization for new career opportunities,
- Are reluctant to travel,
- Do not work well with supervisors of other generations,
- Do not work well with coworkers of other generations,
- Want to take a lot of time from work to deal with personal or family issues, such as child care or elder care,
- Have high rates of absenteeism due to illness,
- Are reluctant to try new technologies,
- Are burned out, and
- Are difficult to train.

Respondents within state agencies viewed employees of all career stages as having specific strengths. Late-career employees were perceived most positively by state agencies with regard to having low turnover rates, having a strong work ethic, being reliable, and being loyal to the agency in comparison to the early- and mid-career employees. Mid-career employees were considered most likely to want to lead and supervise others, to be productive, to be creative, and to take initiative in comparison to the early- and late-career employees. Early-career employees were perceived the least positively in comparison to the other career stages for all ten of the positive attributes.

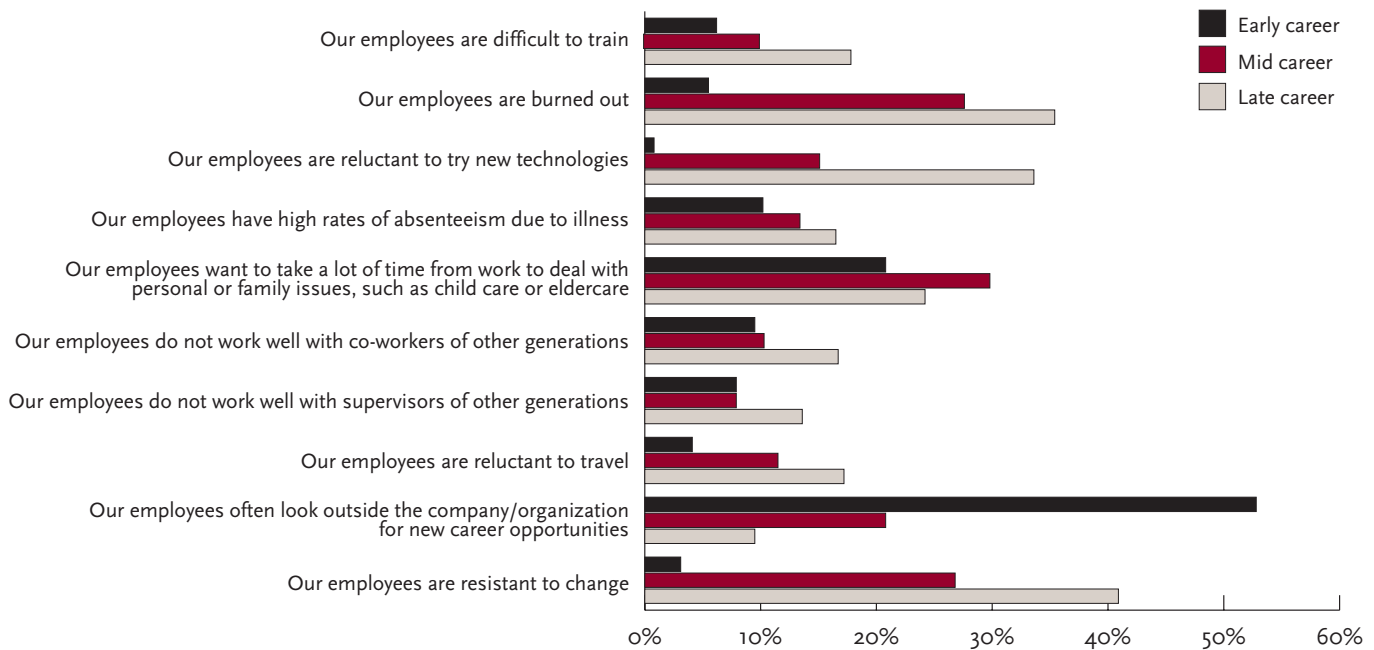
Figure 1: State Agencies' Perceptions of Positive Attributes of Employees by Career Stage

% of state agencies who felt that this attribute was true
for many or most of their employees



However, when looking at the state agencies' perceptions of negative attributes of employees, late-career employees were perceived to be the most resistant to change, reluctant to travel, reluctant to try new technologies, burned out, and difficult to train. Mid-career employees were perceived to take a lot of time from work to deal with personal or family issues, and early-career employees were perceived to often look outside the agency for new career opportunities. While the early-career employees were perceived lowest on all of the positive attributes, they were also perceived to be the lowest on four of the negative attributes and highest on only one of the negative attributes.

Figure 2: State Agencies' Perceptions of Negative Attributes of Employees by Career Stage
% of state agencies who felt that this attribute was true for many or most of their employees



Employees of different career stages are thought to have strengths and weaknesses in different areas.^{7,8}

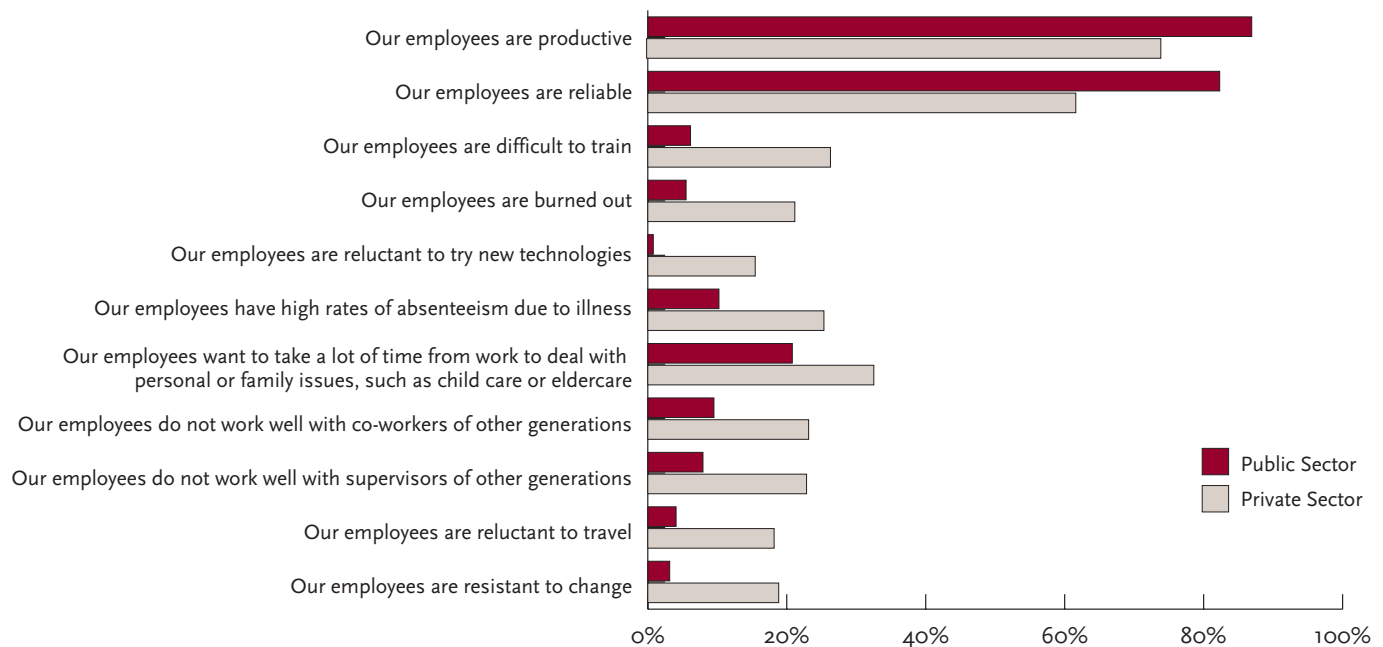


HOW DO PUBLIC- AND PRIVATE-SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS' PERCEPTIONS OF WORKERS AT DIFFERENT CAREER STAGES DIFFER?

When looking at perceptions of the attributes of early-career employees, a greater percentage of public-sector organizations report positive attributes and a smaller percentage report negative attributes in comparison to private-sector organizations.⁹ For example, a larger percentage of public-sector organizations report that it is true for many or most of their early-career employees that they are reliable and productive. In contrast, a larger percentage of private-sector organizations report that it is true for many or most of their early-career employees that they are burned out and difficult to train.

Figure 3: Organizations' Perceptions of Attributes of Early-Career Employees by Sector¹⁰

% of organizations who felt that this attribute was true
for many or most of their employees

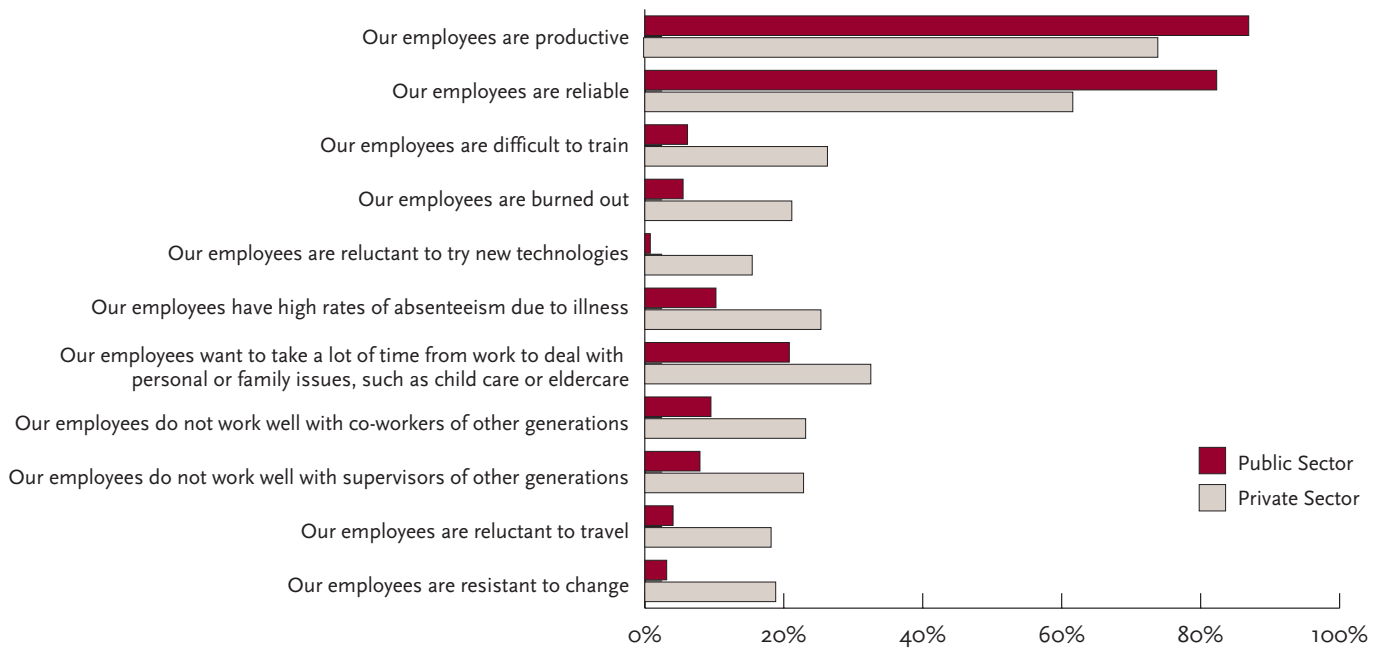


Note: Items that are not statistically significant are omitted from the figure.

A similar pattern emerged when looking at perceptions of the attributes of mid-career employees. Again, in general, there were a greater percentage of public-sector organizations reporting positive attributes and a smaller percentage reporting negative attributes than in private-sector organizations. However, a larger percentage of private-sector organizations reported that it was true for many or most of their mid-career employees that they want to lead and supervise others in comparison to public-sector organizations.

Figure 4: Organizations' Perceptions of Attributes of Mid-Career Employees by Sector ¹¹

% of organizations who felt that this attribute was true
for many or most of their employees



Note: Items that are not statistically significant are omitted from the figure.

When looking at perceptions of the attributes of late-career employees, a larger percentage of public-sector organizations reported positive attributes and a smaller percentage reported negative attributes than in the private-sector organizations. As with perceptions of mid-career employees, a larger percentage of private-sector organizations reported that many or most of their late-career employees want to lead and supervise.

Figure 5: Organizations' Perceptions of Attributes of Late-Career Employees by Sector ¹¹

% of organizations who felt that this attribute was true
for many or most of their employees



Note: Items that are not statistically significant are omitted from the figure.

These findings suggest that public-sector organizations perceive more positive and fewer negative attributes of employees of all career stages. When looking at all of the attributes together ⁸, public-sector organizations had significantly more positive perceptions of early-career, mid-career, and late-career employees than did the private-sector organizations.¹¹ Interestingly, following the trend seen with the public sector separately, in the private sector, the organizations' most positive perceptions were of the mid-career employees, followed by the late-career employees, and the most negative perceptions were of the early-career employees.

CONCLUSION

Overall, there seem to be some notable differences in the attitudes toward workers of different career stages held by state agencies and private-sector organizations. One area of strength for state agencies is that they perceive their workers of all career stages to be more productive than does the private sector.

- ▶ State agencies have more positive attitudes toward workers of all career stages. This may be an important advantage for recruiting and retaining employees of diverse ages.
- ▶ While employment in state agencies may be less attractive than in the private sector because of inadequate monetary rewards, the positive organizational climate may be a competitive advantage for state agencies.

However, there is still room for improvement.

- ▶ For instance, state agencies perceived late- and mid-career workers to want to lead and supervise others less than did private-sector workers. Why might this be? One possibility is that state agency workers see little reward for increases their supervisory roles.
- ▶ In general, although state agencies' attitudes are more positive than in the private sector, there still seem to be some differences in the individual attitudes towards workers of different career stages. Mid-career and late-career employees were perceived more positively than early-career employees in both the private and the public sector.

As the state agency workforce continues to age and large numbers of older workers exit the workforce, it will be important to consider the effects of organizational attitudes toward workers.

At a Glance: The States as Employers-of-Choice Study

The States as Employers-of-Choice Project is a collaborative initiative being implemented by the Twiga Foundation, Inc., and the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College. This project is supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The 2-year project provides resources to HR managers at state agencies so that they can respond to shifts in the age demographics of the workforce.

The States as Employers-of-Choice Study is one component of the overall project. Data collection began in spring 2008 and was concluded in fall 2008.

A total of 222 agencies from 22 states responded to the online survey used to gather information.

References

- 1 Toossi, M. (2007). Labor force projections to 2016: More workers in their golden years. *Monthly Labor Review*, 130, 33-52.
- 2 Carroll, J. B., & Moss, D. A. (2002). *State employee worker shortage: The impending crisis*. Lexington, KY: The Council of State Governments.
- 3 Hassell, B. L., & Perrewé, P. L. (1995). An examination of beliefs about older workers: Do stereotypes still exist? *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 16, 457-468.
- 4 Ng, T. W. H., & Feldman, D. C. (2008). The relationship of age to ten dimensions of job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93, 392-423.
- 5 Rosen, B., & Jerdee, T. H. (1976). The nature of job-related age stereotypes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 61, 180-183.
- 7 A composite score of perceived attributes of employees of different career stages was created. Negative attributes were reverse scored. Higher scores indicate more positive attributes.
- 8 One-way ANOVA was conducted to test for significant differences across the career stages on the composite score of perceived attributes of employees of different career stages. Findings were not significant ($p > .05$).
- 9 Analyses of private-sector organizations utilized data from the National Study of Business Strategy and Workforce Development. See http://agingandwork.bc.edu/documents/RHO4_NationalStudy_03-07_004.pdf.
- 10 All differences are statistically significant ($p < .05$).
- 11 Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to test for significant differences between public- and private-sector organizations on the composite score of perceived attributes of employees of different career stages. Findings were significant ($p < .05$). Private sector: early-career mean = 2.92, mid-career mean = 3.12, late-career mean = 3.09; public sector: early-career mean = 3.07, mid-career mean = 3.18, late-career mean = 3.15.

Additional Publications from the *States as Employers-of-Choice* Project Include:

State Research Highlight:

- States as Employers-of-Choice (March 2009)

State Issue Briefs:

- Flexible Work Options in State Agencies (June 2009)
- Comparing the Priorities of State Agencies and the Private Sector (June 2009)
- Attitudes toward Workers of Different Career Stages (July 2009)

State Fact Sheets:

- State Population Aged 55+ with College Degree (March 2009)
- State Unemployment Rates for Persons Aged 55+ (January 2009)
- State Unemployment Rates_by Age Group (June 2008)
- State Government Workforce_by Age Group (June 2008)