



2022 FEDERAL STUDY

# Improving early career recruitment to federal jobs

More than half of recent graduates  
and students will not consider a  
job in federal government



# Table of Contents

## **01 Executive summary**

- + *Survey overview*
- + *Key findings*
- + *Key recommendations*

## **02 What we heard: Students and graduates are not considering government jobs**

- + *Student perception varies by degree program*
- + *Students feel underqualified for federal jobs*
- + *Graduates encounter barriers to federal jobs*
- + *Minority graduates are less likely to consider government jobs*
- + *Early-career job seekers are looking for work-life balance*
- + *Work location matters*

## **03 Insight & action: Final recommendations from our experts**

## **04 Improve recruitment metrics with experience management**

SECTION 1

# Executive summary

## Executive summary

The long-anticipated “tsunami” of public sector employees departing the government appears to be here, with attrition increasing 10 percentage points in 2021 over 2020.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, more than half of recent graduates and students reported in a recent Qualtrics survey that they will not consider a job in the federal government, putting the very strength of our democratic institutions at risk.

While the world of work is changing rapidly across all sectors, the public sector faces unique challenges in attracting and hiring top talent to federal agencies. For example, the average time-to-hire for federal employees is 98 days<sup>2</sup>, making it difficult to compete with private sector companies that have streamlined recruiting practices and technologies.

To better understand what effect “The Great Reassessment”<sup>3</sup> is having on candidates for federal jobs, in April 2022 Qualtrics surveyed 1,129 Americans aged 18+ who are currently or were recently (within 3 years) enrolled in a post-secondary education degree or certification program.

Anyone concerned about our government’s ability to achieve its mission should read this report with concern – and commit to take the actions needed for early career employees to choose public service as a rewarding and fulfilling profession.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/jolts.t04.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2021/02/federal-agencies-are-increasingly-avoiding-normal-hiring-procedures-bring-new-staff-quickly/171922/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.civicpulse.org/post/what-effect-is-the-great-resignation-having-on-local-government>

## Study overview

In April of 2022, Qualtrics surveyed more than 1,000 students and recent graduates of post-secondary education programs. Respondents are from a mix of institutions, including certification programs, vocational and technical schools, bachelors and associates institutions, and professional and doctorate degrees.

Student sample (n=584): To be included in the sample, students had to be aged 18+ and currently enrolled in vocational or technical programs or an associate's, bachelor's, masters' or professional/doctorate degree program in the United States.

Graduate sample (n=545): Graduates had to be recently (within the last 3 years) enrolled in vocational or technical programs or an associate's, bachelor's, masters' or professional/doctorate degree program in the United States.

Responses were reviewed for quality and low quality responses were removed from the sample.



## Key findings

We surveyed more than 1,000 current students and recent graduates of post-secondary education programs in the United States to understand their perspectives on a career in the federal government. In this report, we highlight three key findings that federal agencies should consider in recruiting [engaged and diverse talent](#) to the federal workforce.



**Students and graduates feel under-qualified.** 36% of recent graduates and 38% of students – and even higher percentages of those in certification or vocational training programs – say they have not considered a federal job because they feel under-qualified. Across both cohorts, the required number of years of experience and degree requirements were ranked as top barriers.



**The pursuit of work-life balance is a key driver.** The biggest appeal to both students and graduates entering the labor force is [maintaining the quality of life](#) that comes with work-life flexibilities. Compared to other attributes such as job security, benefits, and office location, work-life balance and remote work flexibilities had the largest impact on graduate and student decisions on whether to pursue a job in government.



**Large experience gaps deter minority graduate candidates.** Nearly one fifth (17%) of graduates said having a diverse leadership team was one of the top three attributes they look for in a job, yet 60% of minority graduates surveyed said they would not apply to a federal job. Addressing students' barriers to entry is crucial to promoting [diversity, equity and inclusion](#) in government.

## Key recommendations

- 01 Design career ladder positions that capture potential and enable learning on the job.** The demand for highly experienced workers to meet complex and ever-evolving missions is understood. However, when replacing departing talent with equally experienced people becomes the default practice for managers, vacancies go unfilled and those with potential are left behind - particularly students and recent graduates. Creating career ladder positions that focus on individuals' potential, and building strong [workforce development programs](#) around them, can help close immediate skills gaps and build a pipeline for future experienced talent.
- 02 Advertise jobs by skills, not degrees or years of experience.** While up to 70% of public sector job qualifications standards do not require a degree<sup>4</sup>, job opportunity announcements (JOAs) continue to express requirements in terms of degree levels and "experience equivalent to the next lower grade for this position." This causes confusion for candidates, who eliminate themselves from the competition when they believe they are underqualified. After all, they may not hold the specific degree identified, and they may not have already worked in a lower level version of the position being advertised.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.federaltimes.com/management/hr/2020/09/28/more-than-a-quarter-of-federal-jobs-require-a-degree/>

- 03 **Meet potential applicants and employees where they are in their life and career.** When we design career opportunities with the human in mind, we can create a more [inclusive environment](#) - one that readily attracts people who would not otherwise consider joining the Federal government. Students and recent graduates alike said that maintaining their quality of life, including where and how work is performed, has the biggest appeal to them in seeking employment. Not every potential employee will want or need these workplace flexibilities like hybrid or remote work, nor will every job be able to support remote work. But when agencies are inflexible in their overarching workplace policies, they hamper their ability to attract and retain the talent they need.
- 04 **Help people see themselves reflected in the diversity of the Federal government.** It is well established that when people see themselves reflected in an organization they are more inclined to want to be a part of that organization. Having a visibly [diverse workforce](#), including in the leadership and recruiting teams, is one way to show talent that they can see themselves in that organization, including the potential for advancement. Creating an [inclusive environment](#), one where current employees would recommend their agency/organization as a great place to work, is another way to help minorities and others who are systematically disadvantaged be recruited by people they know and trust.



SECTION 2

**What we heard: Students and graduates  
are not considering government jobs**

## Student perception gaps vary by degree program

### Finding

We asked current post-secondary school students about their attitudes toward working in the federal government, and the most important drivers and detractors in considering a career in government. Our findings show differences in students' willingness to pursue public sector jobs, based on the type of educational institution they are in or from.

Among survey respondents, students enrolled in certificate and technical programs are far less likely to consider federal jobs than those enrolled in more advanced degrees, such as masters, doctorate, and professional degree programs.<sup>5</sup>

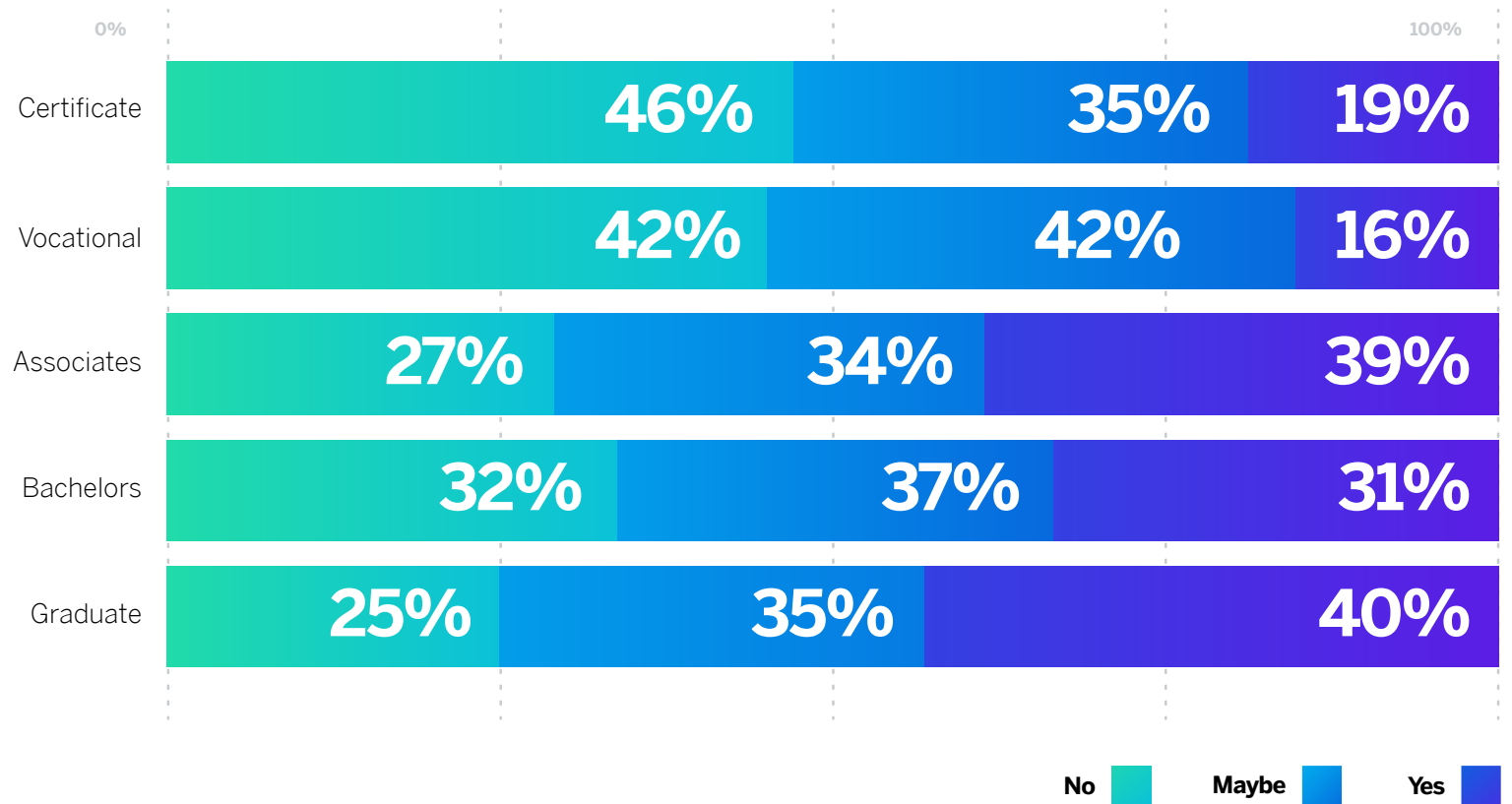
# 46%

**Nearly half (46%) of students enrolled in certificate programs and vocational colleges (42%) said they would not consider a job in the federal government.**

We observe the largest gap - 24 percentage points - between those enrolled in graduate degrees and those enrolled in vocational training.

<sup>5</sup> We categorize students enrolled in post-bachelor's' degrees (e.g., masters', doctorate, and other professional degrees) as "graduates."

### Students considering federal jobs



## Implications and recommendations

This finding has important implications for the diversity of talent considering a career in government. The demographic profile of students in technical, certificate and associates programs is more diverse than those in four-year degree or graduate schools.<sup>6</sup>

Given renewed attention to creating a *diverse, equitable and inclusive* workforce that reflects the American people, government recruitment strategies should consider targeting students from certification, technical and associates degree programs. This makes sense for closing critical skills gaps given that credentials are emerging as a more powerful currency in the labor market than traditional university degrees, which don't clearly communicate what people know and what they are capable of learning.

**The federal government should target students engaging in post-secondary programs that develop the skills public sector organizations need to perform their mission.**



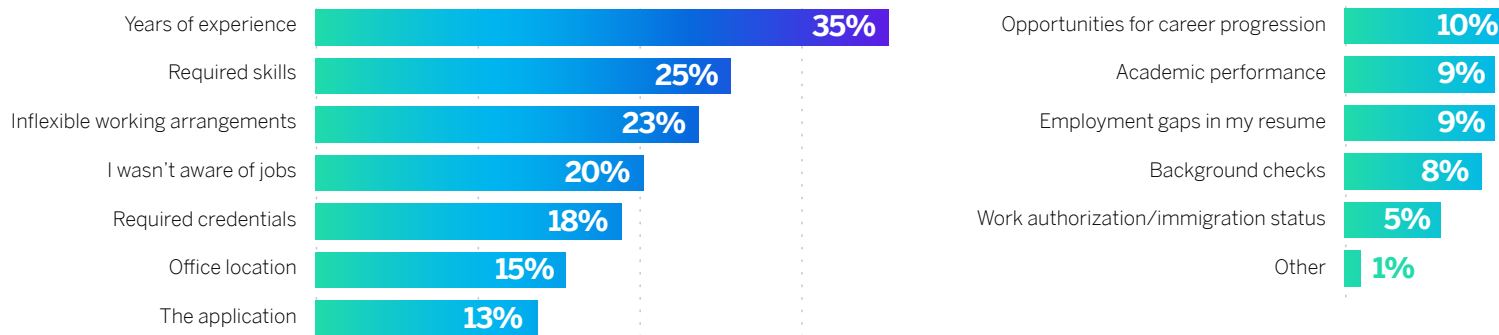
<sup>6</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/csb/postsecondary-students#suggested-citation>

# Student perception gaps vary by degree program

## Finding

Among students who say they will not consider a job in government, many respondents cited reasons relating to a perceived lack of qualification. When asked to rank the top reasons preventing them from applying, students listed years of experience, required skills, and required credentials as some of the top barriers. Inflexible working arrangements and not being aware of federal jobs were also key blockers.

## Reasons preventing students from applying to federal jobs



## Implications and recommendations

Given that nearly 70%<sup>7</sup> of federal jobs do not require a degree, recruitment efforts and job opportunity announcements should clarify the skills being sought rather than credentials. Creating skills-based job opportunity announcements and career ladder positions can enable students – particularly those in vocational and technical programs – to better identify role fit.

As a growing number of federal jobs, such as those in IT and cyber, rely on skills that can be successfully cultivated in certification programs, *effective recruitment* requires broadening the selection criteria beyond traditional degree requirements.

**Shift job opportunity  
announcements from  
credentials-based to  
skills based**



<sup>7</sup> <https://www.federaltimes.com/management/hr/2020/09/28/more-than-a-quarter-of-federal-jobs-require-a-degree/>

## Graduates encounter barriers to federal jobs

### Finding

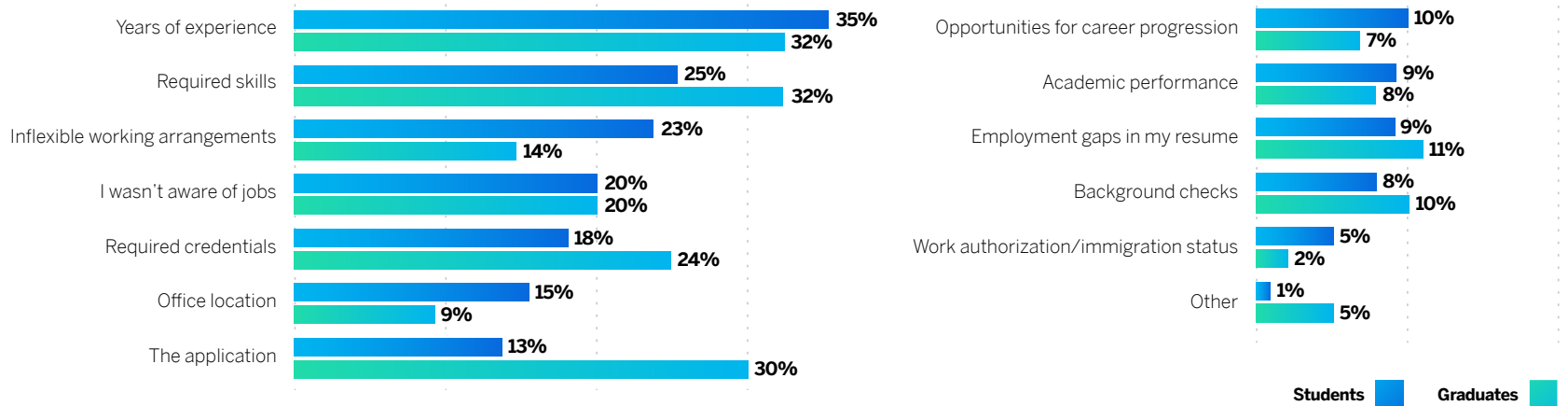
We also asked recent graduates of post-secondary education whether they would consider working in the federal government, and we identified the key drivers behind their responses. Our findings show similar attitudes among graduates toward pursuing public sector jobs.

Like their student counterparts, the rates of recent graduates who will consider a public sector career are low. More than half (56%) of graduates surveyed (n= 545) said they would not consider federal employment.

**56%** of recent graduates said they would not consider federal employment

Among this group, thirty-six percent (36%) reported feeling under-qualified for federal employment. When asked about the top barriers preventing them from applying, graduates cited many of the same blockers as students: years of experience, required skills, and required credentials ranking highest.

### Perceived barriers preventing students and graduates from applying



Both students and graduates cited many of the same reasons preventing them from considering federal employment, with a few key differences. Compared to current students, graduates were much more likely to cite the application process (17 percentage point difference) as a top barrier. Inflexible working arrangements (9 percentage point difference) and office location (6 percentage point difference) seemed to matter less for graduates than for students. For both cohorts, twenty percent (20%) said they weren't aware of federal jobs.

Graduates also described other barriers, including drug testing, a criminal history, and general lack of trust.



**Additional reasons graduates cite for not applying:****“Drug testing”****“I have a criminal background”****“Do not trust the government”****Implications and recommendations**

Recent graduates represent a strong candidate pool for government organizations, as they may have more world of work experience to bring to their roles than current students. They also understand the options available to them for flexible work arrangements, and may place a higher premium on work-life balance.

Qualtrics helps government agencies pinpoint experience gaps across the candidate experience and gives clear actions to take to improve hiring outcomes.

[LEARN MORE](#)

**Government organizations need to adjust their workplace policies to attract and retain these skilled, more experienced early career employees. And human resources officials must measure and improve the hiring experience in order to encourage this workforce to apply for government jobs.**



## Minority graduates are less likely to consider government jobs

### Finding

Respondent perception varies by respondent characteristics, making these gaps even larger for some groups. One of the largest and most persistent differences we observe is by race.

**60%** of minority graduates say they would not consider federal employment

While about half (49%) of white graduates surveyed say they would consider government jobs, 42% of Black or African American graduates and 43% of Hispanic or Latinx graduates say the same. This gap is largest for Asian graduates, with only 30% saying they would consider a government job.

When asked whether feeling under-qualified was a barrier to applying, Hispanic or Latinx graduates were more likely to agree (46%), compared to 36% of Black or African American graduates, 37% of Asian graduates, and 38% of white graduates.

Of particular note is the overall difference between minority students and recent minority graduates. In our survey, minority students were about as likely to say they would pursue a career in public sector as white students (about a third of respondents across each cohort). However, there is a drop-off among graduates, with minority candidates significantly less likely to report they would pursue a career in government than their white counterparts (9 percentage point difference).

## Implications and recommendations

This shift in attitudes following graduation has important implications for [DEI efforts across federal agencies](#). Agencies seeking to recruit a diverse pool of early career talent will do better by catching the attention and interest of students while they are still enrolled. At the same time, government organizations must redress how minority graduates perceive a career in government – starting with understanding the root causes of their declining interest.

**Agencies can start by assessing the experiences they are delivering to different community segments, and improving the interactions that directly affect the degree to which people view the government positively.**



## **Executive Order 13985 mandates advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the federal government**

The Executive Order highlights the need for the federal government to strengthen its ability to recruit, hire, develop, promote, and retain diverse talent and remove barriers to equal opportunity. Qualtrics connects with your HR systems so you can connect operational data and employee directories to your DEI programs. Its pre-built survey question sets and guides help leaders ask the right DEI questions in the right way at the right times.

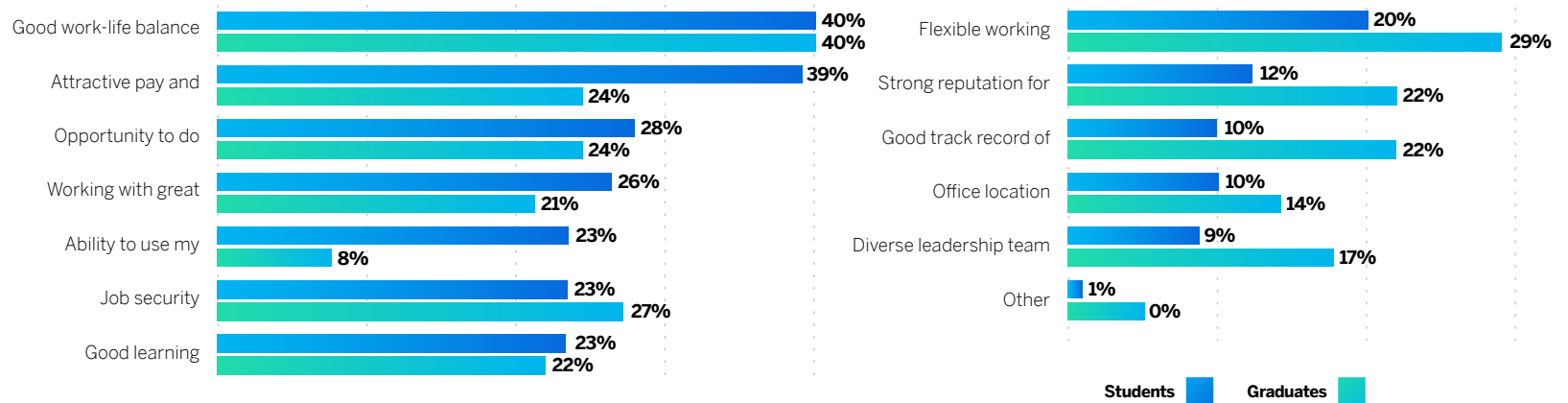


## Early-career job seekers are looking for work-life balance

### Finding

So what does matter to early career job seekers? We asked students and graduates to rank the top three attributes they are looking for in a job across twelve different criteria.

For both cohorts, work-life balance consistently ranked as the top quality they sought in a job, with 40% of students and graduates both selecting it as a key attribute.



Notably, attractive pay and compensation ranked higher for students than graduates (15 percentage point difference), as did the opportunity to use one's degree/certificate (15 percentage point gap).

### **Finding and implication**

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is growing evidence that jobseekers are reassessing what they want to do, and how and where they want to work and live. For graduates in particular, flexible work arrangements, including remote and hybrid opportunities, were a key factor in their decision to pursue a job (up 9 percentage points from students).

Corporate values, too, have become increasingly important in how Millennial and Gen Z workers determine a future career path. Values drive graduates more than students. While the opportunity to do meaningful work was a top job criterion selected by students, having a good track record of social responsibility, a strong reputation for services, and a diverse leadership team ranked among the least-selected aspects. For graduates, however, having a good track record of social responsibility, a strong reputation for services, and a diverse leadership team were among the most-selected qualities.

And while having a diverse leadership team is important to graduates, recent minority graduates are among the least likely to apply to federal jobs (Fig. 6). Recruitment strategies need to emphasize social responsibility and service-minded approach as well as diversity among recruiters, colleagues and senior leaders to *effectively attract diverse talent*. Additionally, given that many public servants choose a career in government because they are service-minded, federal agencies should gather feedback from their existing workforce on the aspects of their careers they find fulfilling and weave these stories into recruitment campaigns.



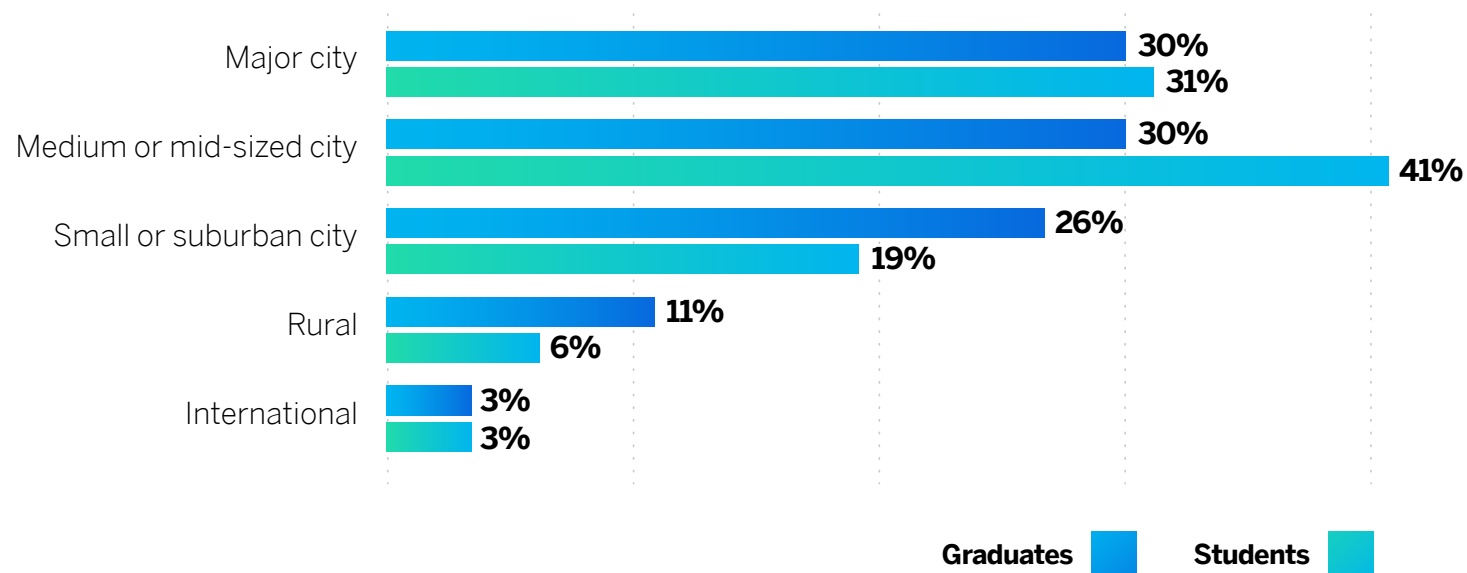
**Recruitment strategies need to emphasize social responsibility and service-minded approach as well as diversity among recruiters, colleagues and senior leaders to effectively attract diverse talent.**

## Early-career job seekers are looking for work-life balance

### Finding

Qualtrics' global research finds that post-pandemic workers have evolving expectations – and often, greater autonomy – in choosing how and where they want to live and work.

Among our survey respondents, approximately one third of students and graduates prefer to work in a major city. Compared to graduates, students show a stronger preference for work in a medium to mid-sized city (11 percentage point gap) and are less likely to prefer a small or suburban work location (7 percentage point difference).





## Implications and recommendations

Agencies need to create and communicate more flexible work arrangements to recruit and retain skilled workers. As part of this communication strategy, agencies should also emphasize that a sizable number of jobs are located outside of Washington D.C. and workers can live within their community while working for the federal government. Pay policies will need to address higher costs of living in large and medium sized cities in order to compete for early career, skilled workers.



SECTION 3

**Insight & action:  
Final recommendations from our experts**

## Final recommendations from our experts



**Angela Bailey, MA, NPLI**

*Former Chief Human Capital Officer,  
Department of Homeland Security*



**Jenna Milani, PhD**

*Global Head of Research,  
Government*



**Sydney Heimbrock, PhD**

*Chief Industry Advisor,  
Government*

---

### Final recommendations from our experts

The results of the survey reinforce the industry's broader understanding that the labor market is well into a deep shift from formal education and "for life" employment, to a much more flexible environment reflecting the diversity of the nation. This transformation demands a human centered approach to talent management.

Human capital leaders can take simple steps to shift their recruitment and hiring in ways that meet early career employees' diverse and evolving needs, close skills gaps, and set their organizations on the path to sustaining a continuously improving employee experience.

**Frame qualifications requirements in ways most people understand.**

Job announcements that list formal education requirements are at cross-purpose with attracting the diverse talent acquiring knowledge and skills through certification and vocational training. The cost of an education in the United States – which can leave students with more than \$100,000 of debt upon graduating – is leading many to choose certification and vocational training as their best path to employment. Even federal jobs themselves, such as those in the increasingly-important domain of cybersecurity, are using state-of-the-art assessments to determine whether candidates can actually perform – or have the potential to perform – the role, rather than relying on formal education and degrees as qualifying criteria.

For students and graduates who have not pursued a traditional four-year degree, it is perhaps unsurprising that they might feel under-qualified for federal jobs when job announcements phrase qualifications in terms of degrees. Federal organizations could reference Executive Order 14035<sup>8</sup> which refocused selection criteria away from traditional degrees and toward skills-based assessments, including potential needed to perform a job.

<sup>8</sup><https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/diversity-and-inclusion/reference-materials/diversity-equity-inclusion-accessibility-in-the-federal-workforce.pdf>

In the private sector, IBM implemented a similar skills-based policy and were better able to recruit talent from different segments of society, including those that are consistently underserved.<sup>9</sup> Under the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) lead, federal agencies can successfully improve recruitment and hiring by moving away from a degree-based approach to one centered on skills — especially for the vast majority of positions that do not require a degree. This way, potential candidates can better determine whether they meet required qualifications and demonstrate how their skills and potential match the role.

### **Keep pace with how people are experiencing their work lives**

The world of work has *changed dramatically* in recent years. The gig economy, as well as technological advancements and evolving expectations around work, enable workers to pursue different types of jobs over the course of their career. Performing work from home or in remote locations has become the norm for many jobs. Many technology companies in the private sector even offer new work policies that enable employees to live and work anywhere.

<sup>9</sup><https://www.gallup.com/workplace/344621/why-ibm-chooses-skills-degrees.aspx>

In government, we must do our best to meet potential talent where they are in life, rather than create fixed policies that do not take into account human experience. While early career workers may wish to live and work in a major city, as we found in our data, preferences change over time. As workers grow older and plant roots, these same graduates and students may want to work from home or other locations that do not require a commute or better enable care-taking. Having a one-size-fits-all approach to work policies will not be successful.

And while it is important to acknowledge that not all federal jobs are not performed in major cities, or lend themselves to a “work from anywhere” posture, it is nonetheless important that agencies make a good faith effort at assessing their policies, culture, and norms that drive such policies. Conducting deliberate discovery of the human experiences their employees need and want will empower agencies with the insights they need to design for their people.

## Keep the federal government reflective of – and responsive to – those it serves



While the federal government certainly still needs to make better inroads in DEI, especially among senior leadership, it has, historically, been a place where systematically disadvantaged groups could find employment in a safe environment, with a liveable wage and benefits – something many private sector companies, even today, do not provide.

The fact that minority graduates were least likely to apply for a federal job reflects how minorities view the federal government as a whole. Underserved communities, as well as younger populations, like Millennials and Gen Z, want a federal government that is reflective of them and their values. And while there is no magic bullet, federal agencies must better [\*listen and respond to the needs of workers\*](#) - and of the diverse communities they serve. When any member of the population has a negative experience with government interactions, we risk alienating potential employees.

SECTION 4

# Improve recruitment metrics with experience management



## Improve recruitment metrics with experience management

These data showcase opportunities where federal agencies can improve the recruiting experience they are delivering. Whether your agency is seeking to create a more diverse workforce, provide better access to students and graduates of non-traditional degrees, improve DEI efforts, or tap into additional listening channels, Qualtrics can help you design and improve key recruiting experiences.

Building upon our 20-plus years in government and expanding upon our expertise in [experience management](#), Qualtrics delivers the ultimate solution for managing and improving every key experience across government.

### Ready to see it in action?

GET IN TOUCH

