

Transferring from the public sector to the private sector

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1. Overview

Last year the CIPD forecast that up to half a million public sector jobs will be cut by 2015. The result is significant numbers of workers entering the jobs market, putting pressure on other sectors to absorb the numbers. Government hopes that the private sector is the most likely alternative for public sectors workers, but there is evidence to suggest that many do not see a move between sectors as a feasible alternative.

In a survey run by a leading recruitment firm at the end of 2010, 22% of public sector workers felt their background would put them at a disadvantage in the private sector. In reality, transferring between sectors may be easier than first thought.

Transferring to another sector is likely to require more work from an individual to ensure they are seen as a viable candidate. Competition will be fierce between those transferring sectors for the majority of available jobs. After a successful transition, in addition to the pressures associated with any career change, sector change may mean that individuals will have to adapt to the very different corporate world of the private sector.

Stereotyping is a big issue that both employers and employees must overcome. There are differences between the sectors but these are often generalised or simplified which generates considerable stereotyping.

The private sector is far from homogenous. SMEs, large private companies and multinational corporations are probably as different from each other as public/private sectors. For example, smaller organisations will have less role specialism and a likely focus on other flexible skills such as being entrepreneurial. Larger organisations will have considerable role specialism and for managers there will be focus on achieving change through significant people and process management.

2. Breaking the stereotypes

Those in the public sector will face stereotypes from recruiters and employers alike. These are familiar to most and need to be understood and efforts made to manage resultant perceptions. This perception management is assisted by scrutinising both the content and language of the messages the job hunter projects. Whilst there is always a danger of generalising attitudes and making assumptions, employees should be aware of commonly held perspectives of the sector and how to counter them.

The following examples illustrate this:

a. Ineffective delivery

It will likely frustrate but the public sector is not viewed as delivering successfully. There is a need for particular focus in applications and answers on achievements, preferably measurable and evidenced. It is important that these achievements are personalised. This can be a challenge when coming from an environment with an emphasis on collective endeavour. A strong focus should be made on providing examples of personal risk taking, innovation and creativity.

b. No concern for “bottom line”

The concern for resource effectiveness in the public sector will provide many opportunities to show financial acumen. Commerciality may be less readily apparent but effort can be made to show a concern for costs and revenue and to use the language of commerce.

c. Overly concerned with process not outcomes

Effective compliance with procedure may be highly relevant for a private sector organisation but care must be taken not to appear overly “bureaucratic”.

d. Managing demands and pressure

Whilst understandably frustrating to public sector staff, there is a widely held view that working in the public sector is less demanding and unlikely to be as pressurised. Examples of handling large scale demands, pressures and deadlines should be given. Care should be employed if making queries regarding work life balance. Evidence should be provided of drive, tenacity and endeavour.

e. Ignorance of private sector

There may be a view that the public sector employees are ill informed about the private sector. It is always important to research any employer pre-application and especially before interview. This is perhaps more crucial when transferring sector. Do particular research around current “commercial” issues in the financial and commercial press. For example share price shifts, the organisation’s competition and market issues.

It may be possible to share experiences of partnerships with private sector organisations and an awareness of their commercial perspectives.

3. “Playing to strengths”

Whilst there will be a need to counter negative perceptions of the sector there may often be a competitive advantage to a public sector background. A confident (and unapologetic) presentation can be made of successes in the areas of:

a. Managing complexity

Prior experience of managing with the challenges of multiple stakeholders, competing priorities and demands can be evidenced. Explaining how complexity was addressed, showing strategy, clear goals and associated emotional intelligence can prove transferable talents. Compared with the relative simplicity of a “bottom line”, the public sector is complex and involves considerable and sought after political skills.

b. Scale of resource responsibility

Typically public sector managers can often have greater scale of resources in terms of budgets and people than in the private sector. This may be balanced by less freedom to act and decide but can be presented to impress. Look to quantify this scale in terms of financial measures, if possible.

c. Industrial and staff relations

Some aspects of public sector people management may be in advance of a simpler ‘command and control’ environment. Whilst care should be taken to show relevance and not reinforce negative stereotypes, there may be evidence of leading on impressive partnerships, staff empowerment and coaching style approaches. The language used should be chosen with care. Also, appropriate evidence of impact and outcome of such progressive people management should be given.

It is important to emphasise the effectiveness of influence whilst showing a sophisticated approach. Avoid any risk of being seen as part of the possible stereotype of not using the appropriate authority or properly holding staff to account.

d. Partnership and public sector experience

Many private sector organisations are seeking to develop effective commercial partnerships with the public sector. Knowing the public sector’s culture and needs will be useful. It is crucial this understanding is presented in terms of “they” not “we” (i.e. objectively, analytical and dispassionately). In this analysis, informed constructive criticisms can be stressed.

e. Change and innovation

The private sector is well aware of the need to be flexible and rapidly adaptable to change. Many public sector organisations have managed significant transformations in recent years. Showing an ability to lead, adapt and manage the complexities of public sector change in a relevant language may give considerable benefit.

f. Self image and presenting yourself

One issue for those people with a background in the public sector is their tendency to permanently label themselves as 'public sector'. In job applications when describing previous experience, the focus will be on 'where' and not 'what'. Rather than drawing attention to their achievements, the information will ground the individual firmly in the public sector. Thus, from an employer's perspective, they gain little or no insight as to how the applicant might fit into their organisation.

Research by recruitment consultants Badenoch and Clark suggested that over 50% of public sector workers fear they do not have the required skill set to succeed in the private sector. This may lead to a blinkered commitment to try and stay in the public sector for life. Such a resolution may not be in an employee's best interests or even possible given the current changes within the sector.

This mentality may come from an inherent fear in many public sector workers. It may be fear of an unknown sector or that they lack the necessary attributes to succeed. Overcoming this and realising there is no difference between them and private sector applicants is crucial.

However, the problem is not limited to an employee's self-perception. Private sector employers need just as much education in the value of external candidates, particularly those from another sector. Many assume that their problems within their sector are unique, requiring in-depth knowledge of the sector to solve them. This is obviously not the case and there are a number of measures which can break this mentality. We will explore these in more detail later in the paper.

4. Seeking work in other sectors

Research is incredibly important before you submit an application for any new role. The language, terminology, goals and areas of importance differ drastically from that of the public sector. Look at the literature produced by the target organisations and spend time on their websites. Learning to adapt the method of application and CV to speak their language will be advantageous.

Ensure that transferable skills and an awareness of both the sector and target organisations are clearly presented. Demonstrating an

understanding of the challenges of the particular role and possession of the appropriate skills with which to deal with them is vital.

4.1 Transferable skills

It is paramount that the 'what you can do' information stands out on application forms rather than the 'where you have been'. Attempt to disguise the sector and make the experience gained from the position more prominent. So instead of the HR representative seeing a public sector worker, they will recognise an individual who has the skills and experience to fulfil the vacant role with competence and expertise.

In an open letter to the Financial Times, Ian Watmore the COO of the Cabinet Office argued:

“Many former civil servants can be found in FTSE 100 companies at all levels...The civil service has invested heavily in increasing its professionalism and now compares favourably when independently benchmarked with the private sector.”

Mr Watmore goes on to say that the public sector deals with arguably more testing working situations than the private sector. He gives examples of human resources experience when facilitating the movement of staff to a warzone, and technology expertise when running the very complicated and detailed tax and benefits system. His arguments demonstrate that in terms of experience, public sector workers have honed their skills in often complex and difficult situations. Therefore, the expertise individuals can bring to the private sector equals those possessed by existing private sector workers.

4.2 Tailor your CV

Many public sector workers may never have had to use a CV in a job application before. If someone has had a particularly long tenure then the concept of selling themselves on a piece of paper may be entirely alien. There are three key areas to focus a good CV:

- Skills;
- Talents; and
- Achievements.

Skills are the transferable skills referred to above. Ensure these reflect relevant experiences and how these will benefit the private sector. Talents relate to strengths and are possibly more emotional facets. Achievements are particular successes gained in a working environment. Remember that they should not be just examples of how the organisation or collective setting has excelled but rather

explain the individual influence over these achievements. It is not a time for modesty or being overly generous in recognising others' contributions to successes.

There are various CV builders online which can help create a good CV. Often these are free services. Remember to tailor the document for each application as private sector companies look for a demonstration of knowledge in terms of what they do. Every private sector organisation considers themselves unique and an appreciation of this should be shown in the application and CV.

Where a generic or tailored CV has been used by a recruiter for an alternative job opportunity seek to update the CV before any interview to fine tune the document to the particular vacancy.

Open publishing of a person specification is less common than in the public sector. The spec however should be taken from adverts, recruiters, website or even "best guess". All application information should be tailored to what is required by the employer. It is okay to look to differentiators in talent and experience but only after first matching to their specification.

4.3 Skills shortages

The current jobs market can be difficult. People outnumber available jobs. However, this does not mean it is impossible to find new work. It is a matter of being smart about the type of work to seek and keeping an open mind.

The Guardian states "...the recession is not affecting employment across the board...but has instead impacted on specific sectors and types of work." (Guardian Careers, 29 June 2010)

This obviously refers to the public sector and how dramatically it is being changed due to the economic downturn. However, the article also references areas of work such as healthcare, gaming, entertainment and biotech, which have significant skills shortages. Self-assessment is even more vital in these circumstances in order to read between the lines and identify what the employer requires.

4.4 The Third Sector

One way to enable the transition between sectors is using the third sector to improve or learn skills which are required in the private sector. The government is keen to use its Big Society initiative as a way for the third sector to backfill some of the facilities and services which the public sector can no longer afford to supply. There is likely to be an increased demand for skilled workers to provide support to the third sector.

There is a dual advantage to this course of action. Firstly, diversifying experience across a new sector will dilute the possible discrimination from private sector employers to a public sector background. Refreshing or deepening an existing skill set within the third sector will prove adaptability and willingness to learn or engage new challenges. Secondly, though many third sector vacancies will be voluntary, and therefore unpaid, an opportunity may develop to remain in the sector. A temporary unpaid position could lead to full-time paid work.

5. Networking

The growing influence of the Internet and new technology in job searching has increased exponentially over the past decade. Within the e-sphere there are many opportunities and tools to ease the transition between sectors.

Social networking is an ideal way to expand a business network and seek new contacts. Invest some time in building a profile on LinkedIn, which is the largest business networking website in the world. It has an average of one million new users every 12 days. Sites such as LinkedIn can be used to meet new contacts, showcase experience and increase knowledge about different subjects. Connections made might develop into a discovery of job opportunities in the future. Online exposure is vitally important in today's jobs market and something all job seekers should exploit.

6. Conclusion

As the government continues to implement its plans to navigate the recession, public sector workers will increasingly need to look towards the private sector for continued employment.

The reality is that transferring between sectors is not as hard as first thought. As is true with any contentious issue the majority of hearsay and conjecture will concern the horror stories and failures of those who struggle to make the transition. This is common and while the process can be difficult it is far from impossible. Roles are different in terms of attitudes, not skills. Individual skill sets are definitely transferable once the facets of a job are identified which match previous experience.

Though different approach will certainly need to be considered when moving to the private sector from the public sector, previous experience should not be entirely discounted.

Remember that proving capability to perform in a particular role is paramount, demonstrating relevant competence and competencies.

However, public sector workers have the unique opportunity of providing a new perspective for work in the private sector. This will be extremely important in an environment where businesses are continually striving to get ahead of the competition and stand out. In this sense a public sector background is a major plus and not something to hide.

Ultimately, it is important to allow sufficient time to make the transition effectively. Even those who do secure private sector jobs will not be expected to excel immediately. There will be a cooling off period similarly to moving from HR to marketing. Ultimately, many public sector workers proceed to have extremely successful careers in the private sector once they acquire the cultural idiosyncrasies to accompany their existing skills.

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