The federal government’s talent problem goes by many names—the human capital crisis, brain drain, retirement tsunami—but its essence is the same: a shortfall in attracting, hiring, deploying, and developing its next generation of leaders.

In response, the Office of Personnel Management and human capital officers have implemented a number of initiatives to improve the hiring process (Llorens 2009) and undertaken significant efforts to compete with the private sector for future leaders (Ritz and Waldner 2011). However, the sheer scale of the public sector’s talent problem underscores the need for more innovative thinking and new models for speeding up the assessment and selection of senior executives.

In this respect, the identification and development of learning agile leaders could play a critical role as the federal government strategically develops its next generation of talent. Learning agile individuals are flexible, resourceful, adaptable, and reflective; in general, even when they don’t know what to do, they can figure it out. The federal government already has embraced metrics and assessments for hiring and promotion. Incorporating learning agility—a measure of personal adaptability—as an additional metric could help pinpoint the innovative and versatile individuals whom agencies need for the U.S. government of tomorrow.

August 2012

The U.S. government, facing a wave of retirements and shortage of upcoming leaders, coupled with a challenging budgetary environment, would greatly benefit from incorporating a learning agility assessment into its talent management system. This measure of personal adaptability would identify the resourceful, flexible talent that the government needs going forward.
The federal government’s perfect storm of human capital

The federal government demands a steady pipeline of personnel from the entry-level through the journey-level and then into mission-critical positions. Unfortunately, that pipeline is aging, shrinking, and leaking, worsening an already difficult hiring situation. Among the complicating factors are:

The aging federal workforce. As in the private sector, the baby boomers who constitute the bulk of the federal workforce are speeding toward retirement. Under the civil service retirement system, nearly 37 percent of full-time permanent employees were eligible for retirement in 2006; in 1997 it was only 12 percent (Office of Personnel Management 2007). Within the next decade, the youngest of the baby boomers will be in their 60s.

Leadership shortage. The lack of managerial and leadership skills among the next generation of federal workers was a key concern captured by a survey of chief human capital officers in government departments and agencies (Partnership for Public Service 2007). A separate survey revealed that federal workers feel dissatisfied with their senior leaders: Heads of agencies, departments, and senior management teams all received low scores in areas that directly affect those working under them (Partnership for Public Service 2012). It would appear that federal executives are foundering on employee engagement.

Outdated talent management. Any scarcity in leadership skills is compounded by an outdated talent management system. For many years, the assessment system was geared to hire and promote federal employees with technical proficiencies, as opposed to broader leadership skills or adaptability. In addition, agency assessments were heavily based on professional training and job experience (e.g., education level and years of service), which research has found are not good predictors of future performance (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 2008). Certainly, neither is indicative of leadership skill and only perpetuates the seemingly low risk, non-agile culture that is most commonly associated with the U.S. government. A renewed talent management system should assess and identify employees who exhibit leadership potential early and then orchestrate developmental assignments that take them from new supervisors to senior executives.
Changing job requirements. In the information age, rote work is declining, knowledge-based work is increasing, and technology is redefining the nature of the workplace—and the change is particularly acute in the civil service. Jobs are less easily defined and standardized, requiring workers who can continually learn and innovate (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 2006). The managerial job in federal agencies in particular has become increasingly complex with more decisions to make, less time to spend making them, and fewer resources to support them (National Academy of Public Administration 2003). This too suggests that the government would do well to focus on securing learning agile federal employees, who exhibit the long-term potential to learn, grow, and evolve with the organization.

Learning agility as an indicator of leadership potential

The concept of learning agility can be traced back to a series of 1980s studies conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership in partnership with several corporations. Researchers examined how managers learn on the job—and why some become more successful than others. Their findings revealed that not everyone is equally equipped; some people are much more open to change, enjoy experimenting, and respond effectively to feedback. Learning agility is the collection of such personal attributes, which accelerates success and enables people to thrive in challenging first-time situations, such as moving into a management role (Lombardo and Eichinger 2000). Based on thousands of assessments, Korn/Ferry has determined that only a small slice of the population is highly learning agile, and that this characteristic is not associated with any demographic variable such as gender, race, or age.

Korn/Ferry breaks down learning agility into five facets:

**Mental Agility** – The extent to which an individual embraces complexity, examines problems in unique and unusual ways, is inquisitive, and can make fresh connections between different concepts.

**People Agility** – The degree to which one is open-minded toward others, enjoys interacting with a diversity of people, understands their unique strengths, interests, and limitations, and uses them effectively to accomplish organizational goals.
**Change Agility** – The extent to which an individual likes change, continuously explores new options and solutions, and is interested in leading organizational change efforts.

**Results Agility** – The level to which an individual is motivated by challenge and can deliver results in first-time and/or tough situations through resourcefulness and by inspiring others.

**Self-Awareness** – The degree to which an individual seeks personal insight, clearly understands his or her strengths and weaknesses, and uses this knowledge to improve performance.

To be sure, several other measures of leadership success exist that should not be dismissed. However, research findings demonstrate that learning agility predicts success for those put in new, challenging positions more effectively than general intelligence (IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ), personality traits, or educational attainment (De Meuse, Dai, and Hallenbeck 2010).

Among the findings from empirical studies on learning agility:

- A study with a sample of law enforcement employees found that learning agility predicted supervisor ratings of job performance and promotability better than cognitive ability or the Big Five personality traits (Connolly and Viswesvaran 2002).
- Another study observed that highly learning agile individuals outperformed those with low agility after a promotion. About 33 percent of the performance variability across individuals could be explained by the difference in learning agility (Eichinger and Lombardo 2004).
- A two-year investigation revealed that learning agility correlates positively with both potential and performance ratings. However, the correlations increased from the first year to the second year. In fact, learning agility predicted future performance outcomes better than current performance (Dai, De Meuse, and Clark 2011).
- Individuals who were highly learning agile received more promotions and higher annual pay raises than others during a period of ten years (De Meuse and Dai 2011).
- A study examining project managers revealed that learning agility predicted job performance more effectively than mental ability (De Meuse, Dai, and Marshall 2011).
Korn/Ferry has developed several methods to measure learning agility, including structured interviews, multi-rater surveys, and self-report assessments. Depending on the talent management situation, an organization can:

- Audit internal talent pools for high-potential leaders.
- Assess external candidates before hiring.
- Identify managers most likely to succeed in taking challenging job assignments.
- Evaluate strengths and developmental needs and provide coaching.

**Benefits of applying learning agility in federal government**

A talent management system that emphasizes qualities of agility and adaptability will enable the federal government to strategically plan and manage its workforce for the problems it is currently facing and will undoubtedly be facing tomorrow. Benefits of incorporating learning agility include:

**Identification of true high potentials.** Organizations often have a hazy definition of high-potential talent. A typical mistake equates performance with potential. Many organizations promote and invest in their high performers without realizing that performance in one situation does not guarantee success in a different one. The federal government should change from assessing traditional technical proficiencies to measuring learning agility to more accurately predict long-term growth potential.

**Early identification of high potential talent.** Effective succession management requires organizations to identify leadership potential early, offer selected employees developmental opportunities, and carefully move them along the leadership pipeline. Non-leadership (i.e., entry-level) candidates’ potential for future leadership roles could be more effectively assessed through the application of learning agility concepts.

**Differentiated talent management.** Application of learning agility concepts allows the government to better assess and differentiate different types of talent—such as technical expertise, structural management skills, and the ability to play coordinating or boundary-spanning roles—thus saving time, effort, and resources.
Attracting and recruiting high potential talent from other sectors. Talent management for General Schedule employees or the Senior Executive Service may require looking to the private and nonprofit sectors to identify individuals with the requisite leadership skills to meet the demands of federal departments and agencies. Assessing learning agility up front as part of the search process could benefit assimilation, retention, and future success.

Accelerated leadership development. Pressed by the retirement wave, the federal government needs to fill the leadership pipeline quickly. Using learning agility assessment, the federal government can swiftly identify the right talent, and match the right developmental assignment to the right employees, reducing costly development interruptions and misplacements.

One set of high-level leaders in particular could benefit from a learning agility focus in its recruitment, training, and assignments. A recent report suggests that more mobility among the 7,100 members of the Senior Executive Service would have notable benefits, including improved cross-agency transfers, enhanced development of leadership skills, and more strategic filling of job vacancies (Partnership for Public Service 2012). The SES was designed originally as a cadre of mobile executives who could easily and effectively move within and across different government agencies. It would allow for a government-wide understanding of best practices, lessons learned, and innovation to be shared throughout the enterprise. With that said, nearly 50 percent of SES members have remained in the same position within their home agency (Partnership for Public Service 2012). As mentioned above, specific learning agility assessments can identify those executives who would most benefit and be most likely to succeed in new situations or environments.

An adaptive workforce. Federal employees are being asked to do more with less—and do it with new technology. Agencies need to recruit people who are not afraid to re-imagine the way jobs are performed. Highly learning agile candidates will be more attractive and effective.
Conclusion

Ever since the “war for talent” was popularized by the 1997 McKinsey report, the concept of identifying and developing high-potential talent has become increasingly important to organizations. For the federal government, that war is escalating. More than ever, federal agencies require leaders (indeed, all employees) who are open to change, flexible, and eager to continuously learn, grow, and evolve. They need leaders who are comfortable with ambiguity and complexity, embrace workforce diversity, possess an appetite for innovation and experimentation, and who can inspire others to perform in tough conditions. In short, leaders who are high in learning agility.

Whether it is simply a new component to an existing talent management system or part of a talent management overhaul, learning agility principles and specific assessments can change the way the U.S. government manages talent across the spectrum, from recruitment and engagement to retention and promotion. The identification and development of learning agile leaders will help ensure that federal agencies approach their missions in a resourceful and thoughtful way on behalf of the millions of Americans who rely on the integrity and service of the U.S. government.
References


Kenneth P. De Meuse, PhD, is Vice President of Research for Korn/Ferry Leadership and Talent Consulting, based in the Firm’s Minneapolis office.

Bernadine Karunaratne is Executive Vice President of the Korn/Ferry Leadership and Talent Consulting government team, based in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area.

Aileen Alexander is a Principal in Korn/Ferry International’s Global Industrial Market, based in the Firm’s Washington, DC, office.

About The Korn/Ferry Institute
The Korn/Ferry Institute generates forward-thinking research and viewpoints that illuminate how talent advances business strategy. Since its founding in 2008, the institute has published scores of articles, studies and books that explore global best practices in organizational leadership and human capital development.

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Korn/Ferry International is a premier global provider of talent management solutions, with a presence throughout the Americas, Asia Pacific, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. The firm delivers services and solutions that help clients cultivate greatness through the attraction, engagement, development and retention of their talent.

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