Solving Labor Shortages with a New Hiring Strategy

How San Diego County, California strengthened hiring processes to reach a new milestone of 20,000 employees

In San Diego County, the one-two punch of population loss and difficulty attracting candidates to public service compounded hiring difficulties for positions including public health, public safety, and technical staff. Delays stretched hiring timelines up to five months for some positions. To address these problems, the county deployed a three-prong strategy. Here is the story of how their approach helped them reach a new milestone of 20,000 employees.

SAN DIEGO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

POPULATION: 3,286,000

The fifth most populous county in the United States, San Diego County has 70 miles of Pacific Ocean coastline and shares its southern border with Mexico. Recently, the county surpassed the 20,000-employee mark.

Among those who have had a hand in seeing San Diego County reach this milestone are Brandy Winterbottom, deputy director, Human Resources Department, and Joshua Ramirez, financial policy & planning officer, Finance and General Government Group.

THE SITUATION

Outdated hiring practices, lack of inclusivity, and shrinking applicant pools

One of the biggest post-pandemic challenges San Diego County has faced is the reality of how population loss affects hiring. Although three million people live in the county, it is not immune to the macro trends of population loss: 30,000 fewer people live in the region than prior to the pandemic crisis, which shrinks the pool of potential employees.

Compounding this general shortage of labor were difficulties attracting candidates to public service. Not only is the pay not always competitive with the private sector, but also many public service jobs can be demanding. As a result, the county faced acute difficulties hiring

psychiatrists, counselors, nurses, engineers, machine operators, and public safety officers. In addition, unprecedented growth in certain county staffing over the last three years had created thousands of new job openings. Whereas once county employees had totaled 17,000, new growth and demand would push the government toward a new milestone of 20,000.

This growth has come amid San Diego County's use of a bifurcated hiring process, which could take up to five months from start to finish in some instances. In this process, the Human Resources Department would establish job requirements, advertise positions, evaluate applicant qualifications, and build a list of eligible candidates. This list is then turned over to the hiring department, whose staff screen the pool, schedule interviews, check references, and make offers. This bifurcated system was something that "could be improved," according to Brandy Winterbottom, deputy director, Human Resources.

THE SOLUTION
Increase communication and coordination to streamline hiring process

To streamline its hiring processes, San Diego County staff decided to increase the frequency and effectiveness of its communication with applicants and the broader public. The county deployed a three-prong strategy to provide its hiring processes a boost, including pre-planning interview dates, introducing same-day offers, and allowing for walk-in applicants. In practice, the strategy includes:

- **Interview dates.** Job postings for the county now include the date in which the county plans to hold interviews for the position. This not only prevents misunderstandings and frustration but also allows individuals an opportunity to plan for their interview and make proper arrangements if needed.

- **Same-day offers.** Same-day offers were adopted as a way to expedite the hiring process as well. These efforts have taken considerable planning and effort on behalf of interview panels who must make time in their schedule for these events, but the results have been worthwhile, especially regarding nurses.

- **Walk-in days.** The county established Tuesdays as a day for the general public to "walk-in" and inquire about open positions. There have been examples of a candidate being interviewed and receiving an offer the same day as a result of this practice.

Each "prong" has contributed to improving San Diego County's hiring challenges. Foundational to these efforts were continuous internal dialogue and a supportive governing board.

PROBLEMS TO SOLVE

- ? Expand applicant pools
- ? Improve hiring processes
- ? Cut time to hire
- ? Keep pace with growth

RESULTS

- ✓ **20,000** total employees
- ✓ **18% growth** in employees *2020–2023*

THE RESULTS

The county has not only noticed improvements in its time-to-hire and candidate pools as a result of its three-pronged approach but has also seen other benefits as well. Communication with applicants has been streamlined, and the onboarding process is now both more effective and more welcoming. The hiring process itself feels more tailored to meet the population where they are and allow them to see themselves in the potential role.

The county's new hiring strategy has been so effective that it has been codified in its Human Resource guidelines. To promote continuous improvement, the county now holds lunchtime events in which departments interested in deploying any aspect of its strategy can learn more.