

What are the major challenges facing personnel managers in public administration beyond COVID-19?

Before we answer that: The challenges that we have traditionally faced will still play a part in the challenges to come – in varying degrees of intensity and complexity, and with digitalisation and globalisation increasingly coming into play. The requirements for recruiting and retaining employees, in particular, will also increase.

The 3 Ds

On top of the challenges we face in the ongoing pandemic, personnel managers in public administration will continue to be confronted by the challenges and opportunities of the 3 Ds: diversity, demography and digitalisation, practically simultaneously. A fourth D is already being discussed in the context of New Work: democracy – in the sense of more agile framework shaped by engagement and individual responsibility, within a modern organisation based on structures and processes. The increasing individualisation of personnel management, as well as an ever-wider gap in values between generations, also call for new solution approaches.

Managing diversity – promoting employability

Not only is society becoming more diverse and varied, but so too is the workforce. The promotion of equality and a work-life balance, equal opportunities, inclusion of people with severe disabilities, increased intercultural openness and all aspects of LGBTQI require

professional diversity management. It is important to harness and foster the diverse and varied skills of applicants and employees. Recruitment, qualification and staff development are equally vital in a modern and holistic understanding of talent management. And this also applies to retaining employees in the long run. Overall, employability – skills, health and commitment – should be promoted at every phase of life. A culture of leadership and cooperation, characterised by appreciation and respect, is a fundamental prerequisite for this.

Life-phase-oriented personnel management and knowledge transfer

The challenges of demographic change also come into play as we work for longer in our lives. As staff turnover is expected to be affected by a rapidly ageing population over the coming years, there is a danger that knowledge – including but not limited to practical knowledge – will be lost. Older or experienced employees not only want to feel appreciated, but also wish to pass on their knowledge to younger people. Nowadays, resources are often directed toward on-boarding new employees, but it seems equally important to provide appropriate support for retirement and a well-structured system for knowledge transfer as a personnel development instrument. However, this will only be effective if employees actively and openly participate and if managers support this. The old guard must step down and pass on the torch to new generations, and every off-boarding should typically be followed by an on-boarding.

Promoting personal responsibility and self-organisation (empowerment)

As mentioned, the modern working world will also be characterised by more personal responsibility, self-organisation, engagement and changing forms of cooperation and communication. In view of the declining ‘shelf life’ of knowledge, employees’ personal responsibility for their individual development will have to be strengthened, as will their willingness

to engage in lifelong learning. As knowledge is becoming obsolete increasingly quickly, organisational structures and workflows must become more agile and flexible if they are to cater to changing circumstances and the needs of stakeholders. Organisational and personnel development can no longer be separated and are instead inextricably linked. All these developments also have an impact on the skills that employees require to complete their tasks.

The role of personnel management in the future

Personnel management of the future must provide structure. It is important to promote and shape digital transformation, as well as to make a cultural impact. The evolving role in ecological transformation in public administration still appears to be neglected. Modern feedback systems can support this and help respond to changes in good time. Today's personnel work in the context of New Work also requires modern facilities management and calls for us to change the way we manage spaces. It requires space for cooperation and collaboration, communication and innovation – especially with a view to expanding mobile working environments. But managers also need support from the personnel departments. Efficiency gains can be gained here through the digitalising traditional personnel tasks, which can be reinvested in genuine human resources and learning guidance.

Individual skill development required

This is also closely linked to individual skill development, with a focus on strengths, from as soon as the employee is recruited until the moment they leave the organisation. Modern personnel work must identify the skills relevant now and those required for the future – but also recognise deficits. This always comes down to two levels: strengths and weaknesses, individually at an employee and organisation level.

Critical skills for a modern and digital work environment

We have been talking about New Work since the 1970s. But given the developments outlined above, the discourse should not be focused solely on digitalisation. The modern world of work requires a variety of talents, abilities, attitudes, values, and therefore skills.

Not just a matter of IT

Digital skills are about much more than using IT applications. A company's expertise and methodology skills undoubtedly include IT knowledge and experience, as well as knowledge of the applicable data protection regulations. However, the increasing overload of data also requires a certain ability to filter information and data, as well as the ability to reflect. Experience with working from home has shown that information and communication skills, as well as resilience, are vital skills.

The importance of social skills

Many of the skills required in the analogue world are still needed in the digital world of work. Shifts are likely to occur in determining the degrees of developing the skills required to carry out tasks. What is relevant is the way we describe skills, the 'behavioural anchors'. Requirements can change, increase or even decrease in terms of content. In particular, soft skills such as social, communication and interpersonal skills will become increasingly important. In view of the increasing technical complexity and diversity that we can expect when carrying out tasks, higher demands will have to be placed on the type and intensity of cooperation and collaboration. Good communication skills and active relationship management, as well as networking within and outside your own organisation, are becoming relevant to performance. Public value is another interesting facet, especially in view of the discussions surrounding values and culture. It is precisely the incentive to contribute to the common good that promotes employee

commitment and identification with their tasks. With regard to the new working environment and agile structures, greater attention must also be paid to identification with the team. This is where recruitment comes in.

German Federal Employment Agency e-skills project

An essential function of modern personnel management will be to define the skills necessary to successfully allocate tasks, in a future-oriented and visionary manner. If necessary, deficits must also be analysed.

The German Federal Employment Agency and its affiliated University of Applied Labour Studies conducted the e-skills research project with a view to updating the existing skills model. In the first step, the agency determined on an empirical basis the requirements for skills that employees needed in an increasingly digital work environment, based on interviews and reflection workshops with practitioners from different fields and hierarchy levels, evaluation of international literature on the topic and observations of work episodes.

Outcome of the e-skills project

Challenges for skills models

The project produced a challenge for each skills model as the basis for all process functions in personnel management and also in organisational development – think of job profiles or job descriptions and other tools.

Readiness and openness to change will be required more than ever before. Initiative, action and flexibility are just as necessary as the will to implement them.

In particular, the self-organisation required for the mobile working environment demands the ability to act independently and the assumption of personal responsibility. Learning ability and willingness to learn are mission-critical skills for performance in organisations. A variety of information and acquired knowledge needs to be

processed and applied in practice. Only then can skills be acquired in the traditional sense. All of this also plays a part in digitalisation or digital transformation.

Diversity requires sensitivity, including empathy. Dealing with uncertainty requires resilience and resilience. Creativity within the framework of innovation management is based on lateral thinking. But this rests on a culture that promotes learning from our mistakes. The ability, willingness and permission of the organisation and its employees, including managers, are also crucial for digitalisation to work.

A digital culture also needs values to shape the transformation effectively. These serve to firmly guide the way we work and lead others in the new digital world of work. A holistic understanding of how tasks should be assigned and the effect of our own actions is essential, especially how we act within digital structures and processes.

My personal conclusion, thus far, is that you have to think together as one on the 3 Ds or even the 4 Ds.

The impact on learning

I wouldn't want to start with learning at first.

The right recruitment as a basis

An important step will also be to attract the right young talent for the modern and digital working world based on their skills who fit the bill as closely as possible. Organisational and personnel development are required here in equal measure. Skills models or other forms must be defined: which skills are critical to success for the organisation in future and which ones are lacking? With digitalisation in mind, this will not only be the expertise and methodology skills provided through training and further education.

We will certainly also have to ask ourselves whether some important skills, such as the

ability to analyse, reflect and self-learn, can be taught or can only be built up progressively.

Learning is changing

In addition to the classics such as the change in the content of training and the learning plans, the use of different forms of learning and learning environments will become important; a healthy mix of theory and practice also seems to be necessary. Lifelong learning begins from on-boarding, possibly involving mentors to impart their organisational knowledge and their experience. Intergenerational learning offers an opportunity for the entire organisation. Reverse mentoring as a personnel development tool offers an approach to solution. Mentoring, coaching and learning support are also important aspects to promote learning.

Driving innovation

Learning ability should be supported from the outset through formats that are independent of time and location (in addition to face-to-face formats). Seminars can also be combined with self-learning tools in a meaningful way by using other digital media. Close interaction between trainers and trainees within a network seems desirable. Networking should be practised from early on. Spaces for learning and innovation and inclusion in project work make training and further education more interesting, but also offer the opportunity to apply what has been learned in practice. IT-supported tools for self-assessment and external assessment are desirable here. New innovation techniques such as design thinking should also be form of the training right from the start. Experimental spaces, laboratories, etc. offer alternatives to traditional face-to-face formats. Accordingly, these spaces must be designed with different formats appropriate to the type of learning.

Holistic personnel strategies required

All process functions in recruitment, training/studying and recruitment should be strategically and conceptually aligned and linked

to a common goal, in line with the skills required and based on digitalisation and change in the working world. This would also make it easier to develop the skills.

Leadership skills

Transformational leadership is key

In addition to the technical and methodological skills of the IT procedure, new IT-supported conference technology, managing social media, one 'old' skill is now very much effective: transformational or employee-oriented leadership. Inspiring leadership is also often mentioned in this context. Of course, transactional (results and performance-oriented) leadership will continue to be required as the basis for a high-performance organisation. Performance-oriented, transactional leadership is good, but employee-oriented leadership is better. By bearing this in mind, change processes can also be made more effective.

Shaping change – shaping culture

Managers are tasked with shaping digital culture and change, as well as work environments that enhance learning. Good working relationships and working conditions with increased involvement of employees in development and decision-making processes are also success factors for employee engagement. Attitudes and behavioural changes can only be achieved in dialogue at the same level; this is a characteristic of New Work.

The challenge of two-handed leadership

In this respect, managers are faced with the challenge of managing an analogue and digital working environment, supporting their employees and translating meaning when dealing with a wide range of work and approaches.

Presentation skills are more important, as is the ability to communicate and to guide discourse. Managers need to interact and communicate in a much more networked way, both internally and

externally, nationally and internationally. Providing leadership in the digital world of work requires different strategies to deal with uncertainty. Two-handed leadership is presenting a challenge, especially with regard to digital leadership and remote leadership. Innovative solutions are still required here.

Recent studies certainly suggest that the middle management in particular feels under more strain. Promoting mental health and well-being in the workplace are new and challenging tasks of modern personnel work of the future.

The views expressed in this blog are those of the author and not necessarily those of EIPA.