TECH TALENT PROJECT

Presidential Personnel Office:
Top 10 Opportunities for Tech Talent

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As the nation continues to tackle COVID-19 response and recovery, a second-term or incoming 2021 administration will face an unprecedented set of economic, social, and public health challenges. Navigating this crisis will require leaders who possess a strong understanding of modern technology, and the White House Presidential Personnel Office (PPO) — which is responsible for identifying, vetting, and hiring candidates for the over 4000 presidentially appointed roles across the Executive Branch — can help ensure that the president's team has the necessary technical and operational expertise to begin implementing his or her policy agenda on day one.

This memo provides transition teams and PPO leadership with **ten key opportunities to better leverage tech talent** and help the 2021 administration deliver key policy outcomes in the early days of the administration.

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1   Start the personnel operation early.

The task of governing and protecting the nation does not pause during a presidential transition, and early transition planning can ensure that the president's advisors are in place and ready to tackle any crises that arise.[1] In 2001, for example, the attacks of September 11 occurred within eight months of President George W. Bush's inauguration, and in 2009, President Obama had to combat the ongoing economic crisis immediately upon taking office. After the election, **the transition team should set up the White House personnel system so that it will be ready to accept applicants on January 20, identify outside organizations and groups to help source qualified talent, delineate priorities for nominees and appointees, and build a personnel team with the necessary technical expertise to screen and assess candidates**.

Across all policy areas, modern technology expertise will be an essential criteria for a president's first few personnel decisions. An understanding of the underlying technology used to implement policy can ensure that the president is not only ready to deliver key policy wins in the first 100 days, but also prepared to tackle any early crises that arise — be it the collapse of critical infrastructure, a cyberattack from a foreign actor, or the breakdown of computer systems used to distribute stimulus benefits.

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[1] James Pfiffner, "The Office of Presidential Personnel," White House Transition Project, Rice Baker Institute for Public Policy, 2017, 2. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2SzD5NJ

2   Staff the transition team's personnel operation, and later the PPO itself, with people who possess modern technical expertise.

Past presidential transition teams have typically been organized by policy area, with dedicated teams for topics like the economy, national security, legal, healthcare, and the environment.[2] Some transitions, such as the Obama transition, have also assembled an outreach team that was specifically responsible for recruiting diverse candidates from beyond the Beltway. **The transition team should ensure that qualified technology experts are embedded throughout both the recruiting arm of the personnel operation as well as in each of the policy teams**. Technology expertise in the policy teams can help identify and vet candidates for the many agency-specific operational roles, such as Deputy Secretary and Chief Information Officer roles, that depend on technology. After the inauguration, once the responsibilities of the transition team's personnel operation are shifted to PPO, **PPO should retain staff members who possess technology expertise who can continue to help source, identify, and vet tech talent**. Doing so ensures that technology is emphasized across PPO's personnel decisions, and that PPO has the necessary expertise to engage technical stakeholders and evaluate technical candidates.

3   Engage outside organizations — that are already doing the work of identifying and recruiting modern technical talent — in order to source candidates.

One of PPO's main responsibilities is processing applications of the tens of thousands of Americans interested in federal service, but those with the necessary skills and expertise required for technical roles may not be proactively seeking federal employment. These qualified individuals often work in industry, and may not reside in the Washington area.
[3] In the past, PPO has worked with law, business, and diversity groups to help identify candidates, and PPO should expand that outreach for technology-focused organizations. **To bolster PPO's capacity to source technical candidates from outside the Beltway, PPO should work with external organizations who have already worked to identify cohorts of qualified, diverse technologists ready and capable for federal service.** These groups implement best practices for recruiting candidates and evaluating their technical qualifications, and engaging them can help reduce PPO's workload while ensuring that key operational roles are filled by qualified executives.

4   Quickly nominate and confirm a U.S. Chief Technology Officer.

The Chief Technology Officer of the United States (U.S. CTO), based out of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, plays a key role in leveraging technology and building capacity to deliver a president's policy priorities. **Selecting a**

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[2] Partnership for Public Service and Boston Consulting Group, "Presidential Transition Guide," April 2020, 64. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2FdaScC
[3] "Science and Technology Leadership in American Government: Ensuring the Best Presidential Appointments," National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicine, 1992, 55. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3nr0qzr

U.S. CTO with widely recognized technical savvy can signal a president's commitment to technology in their policy priorities, and securing Senate confirmation as quickly as possible ensures that he or she can most effectively assist PPO when examining the technology qualifications of a president's initial appointments.[4] Candidates for this role should be considered on the basis of their familiarity with technology-informed decision making, information security, human-centered design, modern software development practices, and emerging technologies, as well as a demonstrated track record of institutional change management.[5]

5   Collaborate with the U.S. CTO, the U.S. Digital Service, and other stakeholders who understand technology to identify operational, tech-dependent roles and fill them with qualified candidates.

Nominees or appointees for tech-dependent roles should demonstrate the necessary competencies and experience that will indicate success in the role, and those with significant technical expertise can help assess these criteria. **PPO should engage technology experts across the federal government — including the U.S. CTO and the U.S. Digital Service, among others — to first identify a list of government positions for which technology expertise will be crucial, and then work with those groups to help select the most qualified candidates for these roles.** In particular, these stakeholders have a strong grasp of the scope of the digital service and technology modernization projects happening across federal agencies, and are best positioned to choose the most promising candidates to lead those efforts.

6   Select candidates based on their modern technical expertise and managerial experience.

To ensure that technology positions are filled by the most qualified candidates, PPO should prioritize technical expertise when making hiring decisions. Candidates for technology positions in past administrations have reported that technical questions were not asked as part of the interview process,[6] and appointees for some roles do not always arrive with the right experience to lead technical projects. Early in the administration, **PPO should work with subject matter experts (SMEs), including the U.S. CTO and USDS staff, to draft a list of criteria that candidates for technology-related positions should possess.** Depending on the role, these criteria may include competencies in data governance, technology procurement, human-centered design, change management, and emerging technologies, among others.[7] **Then, during the interview process, PPO**

[4] "Science and Technology Leadership in American Government: Ensuring the Best Presidential Appointments," National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicine, 1992, 13. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3d88mB1

[5] Partnership for Public Service and Tech Talent Project, "Tech Talent for 21st Century Government," April 16, 2020, 31. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/32zaM8k

[6] Partnership for Public Service and Tech Talent Project, "Tech Talent for 21st Century Government," April 16, 2020, 14. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/31CVops

[7] Partnership for Public Service and Tech Talent Project, "Tech Talent for 21st Century Government," April 16, 2020, 18. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/32zaM8k

should ask technical questions and engage SMEs to help PPO more accurately assess candidates' competencies.

PPO should consider delegating increased authority to cabinet secretaries and agency heads in making appointments to operational, load-bearing roles that are non-policy in nature. While all presidentially appointed positions are made at the discretion of the president, agency leaders will have a stronger understanding of the agency's non-policy operational priorities, as well as ongoing modernization projects that require specific technology competencies.

7   Ensure PPO has sufficient staffing to efficiently source and vet candidates for technology-focused roles.

Recent administrations have generally staffed PPO with 100 or more people during the early months of the administration, with that number falling to between 30 and 40 after the initial flood of applications has subsided. Past PPO directors, including Don Gips of the Obama administration and Clay Johnson of the Bush administration, have advocated for increased PPO staffing to more rapidly nominate and fill the most important positions at the beginning of the administration. Under Don Gips, the key hurdle was that "the budget had already been determined," and it was too late to allocate additional funding.[8] **PPO should be provided with sufficient funding so that it can adequately staff teams** with qualified technology expertise, guide candidates through the most difficult steps, and conduct follow-ups to reduce attrition over the course of the hiring process. To fill gaps in staffing, **PPO can also consider alternate models, such as utilizing political appointees at an executive agency who are assigned to a temporary detail at PPO to assist with vetting for that agency.**

8   Follow best practices for hiring so that candidates and nominees do not feel lost or forgotten throughout the process.

Given the length and complexity of the federal hiring process and the volume of candidates that PPO must engage, candidates often feel lost or forgotten over the course of the process. While many technologists are excited by the prospect of public service, these individuals often come from the private sector, where job candidates can go from application to offer in a much shorter period of time.

To reduce attrition from qualified candidates who feel that the hiring process is too complex or opaque, **PPO should build on efforts undertaken in prior administrations to improve the candidate experience and adopt a set of best practices for hiring, motivated by those used by the U.S. Digital Service.[9]** These strategies include regularly following up with candidates to inform them of their progress through the application

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[8] James Pfiffner, "The Office of Presidential Personnel," White House Transition Project, Rice Baker Institute for Public Policy, 2017, 13. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2SzD5NJ

[9] Partnership for Public Service and Tech Talent Project, "Mobilizing Tech Talent," September 2018, 18. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/31CVops

process, guiding them through the most difficult steps, iteratively incorporating candidates' feedback on the hiring process, and ensuring that they have a clear point of contact in case questions arise. Allocating sufficient funding and staff for PPO, as well as working with outside technology groups, can help ensure that PPO has the resources to conduct the necessary outreach to candidates.

9   Shorten the background check process where possible.

For technology candidates coming from the private sector, the complexity and length of the process from application to offer can be one of the more intimidating and uncertain parts of federal service. **PPO should work to make the experience less daunting by streamlining the hiring and background check process where possible.** One such approach, adopted by prior administrations, involves a risk-oriented vetting process: rather than a one-size-fits-all protocol for vetting candidates, **PPO can adapt the depth of the vetting and background check process for a candidate based on the political risk that the role presents to the president and his or her administration**. A risk-oriented strategy allows PPO to more rapidly fill vacant positions at the beginning of a president's term, and not only ensures that the president has trusted, knowledgeable advisors to lead the country through any urgent national emergency, but also provides agencies with the necessary personnel to immediately begin delivering policy wins on day one.

10   Consult with previous personnel directors to learn best practices and preserve institutional memory.

The Director of the Presidential Personnel Office is a role that sees frequent turnover — the Trump, Obama, and Bush administrations all had three or more different PPO directors in the first few years of their terms — but it is also a unique role, one where only past PPO directors have first-hand knowledge of the strategies that make up a successful playbook. **Consulting with previous PPO leadership can serve as a key source of institutional knowledge, providing invaluable guidance for running an effective personnel operation.** In 2008, for example, the outgoing Bush administration helped Obama's incoming personnel team procure and set up software systems that could efficiently process hundreds of thousands of applications, advised the new administration on key positions to fill quickly, and provided detailed descriptions of the responsibilities of each of these roles.[10]

No matter the president's party, every PPO is charged with the common mission of selecting appointees who are qualified to deliver the president's agenda. Working with previous personnel leadership can help the 2021 administration work toward this goal, heeding the lessons and avoiding the pitfalls of prior personnel teams.

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[10] Martha Joynt Kumar, "The 2008-2009 Presidential Transition Through the Voices of Its Participants," White House Transition Project, October 15, 2009, 843. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2ICeCFJ

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Collectively, these opportunities will help the 2021 administration better attract qualified technologists, more effectively vet recruits, and more efficiently hire candidates who can immediately begin delivering the president's policy agenda.

In the long run, good government advocates have called for a reduction in the number of political appointees who are subject to Senate confirmation, particularly for operational roles without strong policymaking authority. **There is an opportunity to change two roles that fall into this category — the Chief Information Officers at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and at the Department of Defense (DOD) — from PAS to PA, in order to allow selection of these roles to focus on operational competence and technical expertise.** The VA, for example, is undergoing one of the most extensive modernization efforts across the federal government, including an overhaul of the electronic health record system that powers the largest healthcare network in the United States. The vital role that technology plays in caring for our nation's veterans underscores the importance of focusing on candidates' experience with managing large, complex technology modernization projects and leading organizational change, rather than subjecting candidates to the whims of the Senate confirmation process. While removing the Senate confirmation requirements requires statutory change and falls outside of the immediate control of PPO, we believe that making it a priority has the potential to positively impact policy implementation in agencies and provide better social and economic outcomes for all Americans.

These recommendations build on previous work to strengthen the capacity of the federal government to attract and hire modern tech talent, and to better equip PPO with the tools it needs to recruit executives who will help deliver presidents' policy agendas:

- [Tech Talent for 21st Century Government](#), which lists key positions in federal agencies that depend on technology and details ten technical competencies for government leaders
- [Mobilizing Tech Talent](#), which outlines seven strategies for strengthening the federal government's technical workforce
- The White House Transition Project's [Presidential Personnel Office report](#), which offers key lessons for an effective PPO and discusses political challenges that PPO must overcome in new administrations

In any election, a presidential transition focused on personnel can help ensure that a president is surrounded by advisors who are ready to begin implementing a policy agenda on day one, setting them up for a successful term. In 2021, however, as America confronts a simultaneous economic and public health crisis, a second-term or incoming administration will have no time to spare. Policy implementation increasingly relies on technology, and **an emphasis on modern technical talent throughout the personnel operation will be even more crucial toward providing Americans with much-needed COVID-19 relief and helping all Americans return their lives back to normal**.