

Roundtable Report

Government AI Hire, Use, Buy (HUB) Roundtable Series

Roundtable 2: Government as an
Employer of AI Talent

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence has rapidly proliferated throughout the U.S. and global economy, including in government services and functions. As a result, many people are looking to the U.S. government as a standard-bearer for how to responsibly adopt and use AI. In late 2023, President Joe Biden signed the groundbreaking Executive Order on the Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence, which laid out a road map for how the U.S. government would set this example.¹ This EO is complemented by other efforts, such as the Office of Management and Budget's policy, Advancing Governance, Innovation, and Risk Management for Agency Use of Artificial Intelligence.²

However, the challenges that the government faces in acquiring and deploying AI systems—or hiring the talent to build them—are far from solved. It is with this in mind that Georgetown University's [Center for Security and Emerging Technology](#) (CSET) and [Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation](#) (Beeck Center), together with the [Georgetown Law Institute for Technology Law and Policy](#) (Tech Institute), led a series of invite-only roundtables over the course of 2024 to discuss the government's role in the use of AI. **This resulting report was authored in 2024 after those discussions.**

The [Government AI Hire, Use, Buy \(HUB\) Roundtable Series](#) is bringing together leading voices to grapple with the questions that AI poses. The series examines three key roles the government is poised to play:

1. As a user of AI.
2. As an employer of AI talent.
3. As a buyer of AI.

The series seeks to illuminate important hurdles and possible solutions in each of these areas as AI stands to potentially transform government services and operations. The series is generously funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.

On August 22, 2024, CSET hosted the second roundtable in the series. This event focused on the government's role as an employer of AI talent and followed the first roundtable, hosted by the Tech Institute, examining the government as a user of AI.

This report summarizes and reflects on the key findings, takeaways, and recommendations from the second roundtable, which was conducted under the Chatham House Rule. All names, affiliations, and other identifying information have been omitted from this report. Recommendations mentioned in this report reflect those

made by participants during the roundtable and do not necessarily reflect formal recommendations issued by CSET, the Tech Institute, or Beeck Center.

Overview of Discussion

The roundtable included two sessions, each with its own focused theme: first, the government's ability to attract AI talent and, second, the government's ability to retain that talent once it is inside the door.

The first session examined questions such as:

- What barriers exist to attracting and hiring AI talent in government?
- Are training, education, and certification programs appropriately training AI talent for government roles? Are there appropriate on-ramps for this talent to enter government?
- What advantages does the government have over other sectors that it can leverage to recruit AI talent?
- Should the government consider setting up programs similar to the federal CyberCorps for AI?

The second session examined questions such as:

- Does the government have a good sense of its current AI talent base? If so, is the existing talent base meeting demand?
- What barriers exist to retaining AI talent in government?
- What advantages does the government have over other sectors that it can leverage to retain AI talent?

Key Challenges Identified

Participants identified a number of key challenges to attracting and retaining AI talent in the U.S. government.

Attraction

Identifying Talent Needs

The first key takeaway quickly voiced by the group focused on correctly identifying the talent the government needs. The early consensus was that the government requires a broad swath of AI talent, going beyond technical roles to include program managers, strategists, and policy analysts with an understanding of and expertise in AI technology.

Beyond the need for a broad view of AI talent, some participants called for ensuring that agencies speak the same language in defining AI roles. Participants pointed to the National Institute of Standards and Technology's NICE taxonomy of cyber jobs and skills, and recommended a similar effort to scope a common understanding of the AI workforce and its key skills and abilities.³

Scoping Projects for AI Talent

Having addressed the type of AI talent needed, the group raised the importance of appropriately scoping the work these employees will perform. Participants advocated for shovel-ready AI work for new hires to tackle.

Some in the group noted that a rudimentary understanding of what AI in government means leads to new hires coming on board to “do AI” without much direction. As a result, hires brought on to develop and deploy cutting-edge tools are often steered toward general information technology work that fails to leverage their specific skill sets.

In an ideal setting, many argued, new hires would come on board with well-defined projects that serve specific strategies and goals within a given department. Agencies looking to deploy AI need leaders who understand what they are looking for—for example, AI for delivery of services or for improving internal operations—and who can ensure the ground is appropriately prepped (e.g., having a handle on agency data) for AI talent to deploy their skills.

Moreover, the group called for dedicated leaders who can focus their attention—and the resources they command—toward identifying such strategic projects. This stands in contrast to the “dual hat” nature of many current chief AI officer roles, which simply add AI compliance requirements to the plate of already busy agency leaders.

Some participants pointed out that the same challenges prevent the government from capitalizing on AI talent already in its workforce. According to one participant, there is plenty of hidden talent in government that is not captured in current talent tracking. One estimate offered in the room was that 20 percent of government AI talent goes unidentified.

Hiring Process for AI Talent

While the first session focused on attracting AI talent, one participant raised a point that quickly drew agreement from the room. They noted that attracting AI talent is not the issue, with many talented technologists eager to work for the government. Instead, the length of time it takes to hire and onboard workers leads to many dropping out of the pipeline before they ever get in the door. Many participants agreed that this was the crucial challenge to address to bring more AI talent into agencies.

Some in the group also noted the importance of the government meeting AI workers where they are. One participant noted that well-resourced agencies excel at going to places such as South by Southwest, Red Hat Summit, and similar events or have the ability to hire workers in San Francisco, Austin, and other tech hubs. However, smaller, less-resourced, or less technologically savvy agencies are not able to reach talent nationwide as effectively.

The group agreed that recruiting talent at events like these is a valuable use of resources. One participant also recommended that agencies need to be prepared for waves in the technology labor market. The participant argued that agencies should be prepared to move when the tech sector initiates large-scale layoffs or in the face of any future “AI winters.”

Retention

The second session focused on ways to retain employees once they are inside government. In many ways, the conversation echoed similar themes to the first session; however, a few unique points were raised.

Opportunities for Advancement

First, participants called for “de-risking the career switch” for technical talent. Some in the room highlighted that there are clear paths for advancement and an inherent understanding of what building a career looks like in the private sector. For technical talent moving into government, an equivalent picture of career advancement is more opaque. In some cases, technical talent is hired into government at GS-13, GS-14, and even GS-15 levels in order to compete with the private sector on pay. While this helps neutralize salary differences, according to some in the room, it can also lead to stalling out early in one’s government career.

The group identified two recommendations for addressing this issue:

1. Several called for providing opportunities to rotate in and out of the private sector to promote continued skills development while preserving government employment and security clearances.
2. Others noted the need for additional training opportunities, so that AI talent can maintain and build upon their technical skill sets.

Challenging and Fulfilling Work

The second core theme identified was the need for a clear mission that allows AI talent to do fulfilling work. Participants called for a mission statement from agencies on how AI fits into their services and operations, rather than checking boxes on a list of deliverables outlined by President Biden’s AI executive order.

One participant specifically called for investing more effort into cutting-edge AI projects, noting that one of the government’s core advantages is that it can offer work that is more fulfilling and, in some cases, more intellectually engaging than other employers.

Maintaining Motivation in the Bureaucracy

The final major theme the group highlighted was the need to support new AI talent so that they do not feel defeated in the face of navigating government bureaucracy. As one participant noted, the government wears down ideas, and true successes can be hard to come by.

One participant highlighted the success of programs like the U.S. Digital Service and other fellowship programs that steer AI workers into government.⁴ The nature of these programs provides a built-in cohort of peers that can share lessons learned across

agencies, commiserate in challenges, and celebrate wins. Anecdotally, some in the group noted how high the retention rates were for some of these programs, with nearly all participants extending their time in government beyond their initial term.

Conclusion

The roundtable participants agreed that the session helped identify relevant challenges and potential solutions to issues around government hiring of AI talent. One of the most evident takeaways seemed to be how valuable it was for the folks in the room to sit down together, share ideas and challenges, and collaborate on how to move forward on the common mission of bolstering government AI expertise. Several members of the group called for further discussions to share resources and lessons learned with one another.

The discussion was wide-ranging, reflecting the sentiment that there is not one challenge to overcome or a silver bullet to improve government AI hiring. Instead, voices across civil society, philanthropy, agencies, Congress, and academia have a role to play in collectively moving the ball forward on this issue.

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Endnotes

¹ Exec. Order No. 14110, 88 FR 75191 (2023), www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/11/01/2023-24283/safe-secure-and-trustworthy-development-and-use-of-artificial-intelligence.

² Director of Office of Management and Budget, *Advancing Governance, Innovation, and Risk Management for Agency Use of Artificial Intelligence*, M-24-10, March 28, 2024, www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/M-24-10-Advancing-Governance-Innovation-and-Risk-Management-for-Agency-Use-of-Artificial-Intelligence.pdf.

³ Rodney Petersen et al., *Workforce Framework for Cybersecurity (NICE Framework)* (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Standards and Technology, November 2020), <https://nvlpubs.nist.gov/nistpubs/SpecialPublications/NIST.SP.800-181r1.pdf>.

⁴ U.S. Digital Corps, “The Opportunity,” General Services Administration, November 21, 2024, <https://digitalcorps.gsa.gov/opportunity/>.