

Michael Kane

Chief Human Capital Officer
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By Michael J. Keegan

Facing the Human Capital Challenges of Today



Today, the U.S. Department of Energy stands at the forefront in helping the nation meet its energy, scientific, environmental, and national security goals, while also developing and deploying new energy technologies to reduce dependence on foreign energy sources. The success of meeting such a broad mission rests on the pursuit of an effective human capital approach and workforce strategy. “The department has one of the most diverse

[missions] of any department in the federal government. It spans the sciences, from concept demonstration to applied engineering in the areas of technology, energy, and—a little known fact—in national security,” says Michael Kane, chief human capital officer at DOE.


Kane is responsible for the agency’s effective management of human capital policies and programs. “I am the advisor to DOE senior leadership,” notes Kane, “on how we acquire, retain, and actually deploy talent. It’s about ensuring that our programs have the intellectual expertise needed to meet mission.” He explains that the department is organized around three core mission areas: nuclear security, focusing on nonproliferation and preventing the spread of nuclear materials, and the environmental cleanup that is the Cold War’s legacy; the energy portfolio, dealing with everything from fossil fuels to the development of renewable technologies; and the science portfolio, looking at science in the largest sense, and pursuing new discoveries and projects that industry may not want to tackle.

With such an expansive technical portfolio, the department requires a highly skilled workforce. “We need highly

specialized experts such as nuclear engineers, scientists, and physicists. When you start hiring in very specialized areas, it’s sometimes difficult to find those people and bring them in with the pay scales available in the federal government.” To compete, Congress has provided the department with unique pay authorities. For example, “we have a pilot program in the National Nuclear Security Administration that actually deals with paying specialized engineers more money. It’s a pay-for-performance plan. It’s a five-year pilot, it’s in year four, and it’s working quite well,” notes Kane.

Kane underscores that an educated and proficient workforce is more critical now than ever for his department. Finding, attracting, and paying the right person with the right skills is only one of many challenges he faces. Getting these prospective employees onboard takes far too long. This reality further jeopardizes Kane’s ability to plan for the long term. Given lengthy hiring processes and skill shortages, Kane has sought to improve the hiring process throughout the department by streamlining the recruitment and hiring processes. Hiring reform is a cornerstone in his effort to transform DOE’s human capital system. “Time is a driver. When you slow it down you’ll lose opportunity; it doesn’t make a difference whether you’re hiring somebody just out of college or an experienced physicist. On average the end-to-end hiring process took about 164 days, can you imagine that? We now have that down to about 93 days,” declares Kane. He’s using the OPM End-to-End Hiring Roadmap as a reference model for integrating, streamlining, and measuring workforce planning, recruitment, hiring process, security and suitability, and orientation.

As part of this effort, DOE is streamlining and standardizing all job opportunity announcements (JOAs). “We’re driving very hard to make sure we turn those announcements around as quickly as we can. We’re actually having employees try



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to reach out and talk to the individuals right after we get that announcement closed and the selection made,” explains Kane. DOE is also developing standard position descriptions (PDs) to the maximum extent possible as well as investing in and enhancing the use of technologies to streamline and monitor hiring processes.

On the recruiting side, the department continues to pursue innovative strategies, such as a Student Ambassadors Program; a DOE Recruitment Island on Second Life, a popular Web 2.0 social networking site; and increasing DOE’s presence on other Web 2.0 platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. It has also moved to eOnboarding. “We’re rolling out, as many other agencies, what I call eOnboarding. It eliminates having new hires report on day one to fill out a blizzard of paperwork.” All of that paperwork can now be completed online. “Now we can use the first three or four days of [orientation] to outline and discuss the importance of our mission and talk about the people you work with—get down to why you’re really here,” admits Kane. Besides being a more efficient use of time, putting all this paperwork online has the potential benefits of reducing costs, increasing accuracy, and reducing the time to process the new hire information.

Many of these efforts rely on critical information technology systems. As some of the current systems are either outdated or coming to the end of their design life cycle, Kane is developing a comprehensive Human Resources Information Technology (HRIT) strategy with the express goal of delivering quality, timely, and cost-effective human capital products and services. The department completed a feasibility study and requirement analysis of the aging Corporate Human Resources Information System (CHRIS). The study resulted in a determination in the near term to update its software platform to maintain current service levels. For the long term, there’s a decision to be made on whether to transition to a shared service center in the HR line of business or keep service delivery within the department.

Having the right kinds of systems in place is only part of the plan. Kane is also working to transform his agency’s HR culture from a transaction-oriented environment to one that is more strategic and consultative. “When you get out of transactional environment, you can actually look for more long-term

workforce solutions. Having the HR staff consulting with the managers helps them understand mission-specific needs and gives them the ability to help managers identify the critical attributes for a given job ... We’re starting to move in the direction of comprehensive workforce analysis, much less reactive to what position needs filling today, to more what skill sets do you have now that you’re not going to need in three to five years. It starts to create that seamless community that’s about delivering not just an employee.” Forging such a collaborative relationship with the program areas also enables Kane to provide timely HR policy guidance as well as effective accountability, marked by decentralized delivery but centralized oversight. “We do use accountability audits, which I view as an opportunity for improvement. The audit gives us a chance to look at what we do well as well as an opportunity to look at what we don’t do well.”

Whatever the root cause, these efforts offer the department critical insights into how best to meet its most pressing human capital needs. Kane also understands that the workforce is changing. “Like most federal agencies we’ve aged in place. We have a very mature workforce,” he acknowledges. “Succession planning and pathway career development is very important to us right now. I want to make sure that we have healthy staffing in our technical programs.” DOE continues to invest in workforce learning and development strategies to mitigate the potential loss of knowledge and talent resulting from attrition. It is about creating a learning culture and knowledge-based workforce within DOE. As Kane notes, all of the efforts he leads are focused on the U.S. Department of Energy’s greatest asset—its people. ■

To learn more about the U.S. Department of Energy, go to <http://energy.gov>.



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