



Future-Proofing the Public Workforce:

How Cross-Skilling Unlocks Government Performance

State and local governments today must find new ways to operate efficiently and optimize every member of their workforce. At the same time, artificial intelligence and generative AI are transforming the roles and responsibilities of public employees — freeing them from repetitive, mundane tasks but also demanding more creative thinking and cross-functional planning.

To successfully navigate this changing environment, governments need a workforce that's nimble and adaptable.

Cross-skilling — providing employees with a breadth of knowledge across different domains — can help governments unlock the full potential of their workforce.

The Benefits of Cross-Skilling

Historically, high-performing teams in the public (and private) sector have evolved toward ever-more specialized roles and skill sets. That's led to a problem, says Tony Holmes, practice lead for solutions architects in the public sector at Pluralsight, a technology workforce development company.

"We've taken specialization and put it on a pedestal and said, 'This is the ultimate ideal,'" Holmes says. "That has educated some of the creativity out of us. Cross-skilling expands your workforce agility and their specialization."

By training existing employees on a broader set of skills, an organization is better positioned for the future. "Cross-skilling is about building a workforce that can adapt to whatever comes next," Holmes says. "Agencies gain flexibility to respond to evolving needs without having to wait for new hires."

Cross-skilling allows your organization to:

- ▶ **Navigate change:** Increase organizational flexibility and adaptability amid rapid technological advancements.
- ▶ **Close skills gaps:** Overcome longstanding skills gaps to respond quickly to shifting strategic priorities and new operational demands.
- ▶ **Confront the silver tsunami:** Address key-person dependencies as you deal with impending retirements and the loss of institutional knowledge.
- ▶ **Accelerate adoption:** Maximize your use of AI and other emerging technologies to increase efficiency and productivity.
- ▶ **Nurture career growth:** Support career mobility to improve employee morale and retention.
- ▶ **Foster collaboration:** Strengthen cross-departmental collaboration and reduce silos and bottlenecks.

Best Practices for Cross-Skilling Government Workforces

Find the right tech: Invest in a training platform that provides rich data insights to help you identify skills gaps at both the individual and team levels. With this data, you can create customized learning paths tailored to specific roles or departmental needs. These tools also track employee engagement and surface new learning opportunities.

Look for solutions that highlight role-specific development areas and map out both essential and complementary skills needed for success. This kind of visibility helps your organization better understand its strengths, address capability gaps, and recognize who your expert generalists are — and who your deep specialists are, Holmes says.

Foster a culture of learning: Carlos Ramos, a public sector technology consultant and former California state CIO, says agencies must create time and space for learning.

"Leadership has to make a commitment to developing their employees' skill sets," Ramos says. "Give staff the time to learn."



The Most Common Skills Gaps in Government IT Today¹

- Cloud computing (architecture, management, security)
- Cybersecurity
- Data management and analysis
- Project management and agile methodologies
- Organizational change management
- Mainframe and legacy system maintenance
- AI fluency and digital literacy

Set up a sandbox environment that allows employees to practice new skills, ideally addressing real-world problems. "Some of the best government agencies I've seen will focus people on a real problem, a real workplace challenge, and turn employees loose to try to solve it," Ramos says. "It does wonders to motivate people to learn a new skill, to put it into practice and to actually solve a real problem for your organization."

Integrate training every single day: Build learning opportunities into the workday, whether through on-demand virtual training or microlearning that lets employees engage with five- to 10-minute videos or training modules on hot topics like AI, cybersecurity and data analytics. These approaches can "show people that learning is a part of the job, and it's expected," Holmes says.

Ramos agrees: "Regardless of your demands, regardless of your time and resources constraints, you have to build it into their work schedule."

Align learning to your mission: Tie learning goals to strategic priorities so that employees not only understand what they're learning but why it matters. Ramos says the California Employment Development Department has taken this approach, enabling employees to use AI to translate the agency's forms and communications and improve language access for residents.

"Leaders need to connect learning to mission success, because people want to engage with the bigger picture," Holmes says.

Build AI fluency: AI is increasingly embedded into government systems, so building AI literacy at both the employee and leadership levels is critical. An advanced training platform can help you develop an AI-focused training curriculum that encompasses AI enablement and governance frameworks to guide responsible use.

Track progress: Track, celebrate and reward progress. Holmes says incentivizing employees and rewarding learning is crucial, "because what gets rewarded gets repeated."

Conclusion

To build future-ready organizations, state and local governments need a cross-skilled workforce. With the right tools, leadership and strategies, your organization can develop an agile, highly skilled team — one that helps you effectively navigate whatever change comes next.

"Change is going to happen whether you're staffed up or not, whether you're ready or not, whether you're skilled or not, whether you have the budget or not," Ramos says. "You have to accept that fact and do everything you can to prepare."

That begins with enhancing the skills of the employees already on your team. "Start by cross-skilling and retaining the people you already know the best: your existing team," Ramos says. "Get them up to speed, support them, give them the tools, and then turn them loose on solving the problems you're dealing with."

1. <https://webinars.govtech.com/Building-a-Cross-Skilled-Workforce-in-State-and-Local-Government-143577>

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