



# Now Hiring

BY TESS VAN STRAATEN

## **A massive brain drain as baby boomers retire is sucking skills and knowledge from the public service. While that's bad news for Ottawa and provincial capitals, it presents a fantastic opportunity for new grads.**

When Joanne Lalonde started working for the federal government as a student through summer employment, she never thought it would become her calling.

"I really had no intention of being a public servant," Lalonde admits. "I intended to work in the private sector, but once I was here the great opportunities that came up, the challenges that came up, just kept me here."

Eighteen years later the University of Ottawa graduate, who is now the director general of national client services for the Public Service Commission, says she couldn't be happier with her choice. "I joke all the time that it's the summer job that keeps on going and going," Lalonde quips.

"But (seriously), I can tell you that I am probably one of the proudest public servants there are. I've had phenomenal opportunities in almost every stream of HR, enriching opportunities and learning opportunities."

## **Huge Opportunities Ahead**

With more than a third of government employees eligible to retire in the next five years, those opportunities for public service positions – and promotions – are about to become even greater.

"The baby boomer retirements are going to be a huge brain drain and I think it's going to present some interesting challenges and some interesting opportunities," says Carleton University's Kathryn Graham, dean of the Faculty of Public Affairs.

"Suffice to say, there are going to be significant job opportunities, particularly in the federal public service because of the incentive for boomers who joined the service early to retire when they turn 55."

That baby boom 'bust' has already begun in many government departments and is expected to peak for the Public Service Commission, Canada's largest employer, in 2013. The Department of Veteran's Affairs is a typical example, with 46 being the average age of its workforce.

"Across the department, the impact (of boomer retirements) is quite severe," says Robert Mercer, who is heading up public service renewal efforts for Veteran's Affairs. "Our figures show that in the next four to five years we could be losing as many as 1,000 employees in a department of around 3,500. That's pretty substantial."

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# GOVERNMENT

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Worse still for the workforce – but great news for job seekers – is that over 50% of executives and senior managers will be eligible for retirement in the next five years.

“That’s very significant and there’s lots of information in that community and lots of knowledge in that community that’s not necessarily in books and it’s going to take some time to impart that knowledge...and ensure there are sufficient qualified people behind us to carry that load,” says Mercer.

## Provincial and Municipal Labour Crisis

It’s a similar story at the provincial and municipal levels, where governments across Canada are bracing for the retirement boom. In Manitoba, the province is projecting that over 3,600 civil servants – or 26% of the workforce – will be able to retire in the next few years.

“Baby boomer retirements will have a significant impact on our workforce over the next several years,” says Ana Frias Mira, program coordinator for the Manitoba Civil Service Commission.

“In the case of senior managers, that figure is 51% so we anticipate that there will be opportunity in a wide range of departments over the next five to 10 years.”

The City of Vancouver, British Columbia’s largest municipal government employer, is experiencing similar ratios. As a result, it’s expected that thousands of jobs will become available between now and 2011.

“We do know that as time goes on our numbers will be even higher so by 2016 about 42% of staff will be eligible for retirement,” says City of Vancouver HR consultant Steve Ogram.

“Another interesting piece that maybe makes our situation unique is that we’re hosting the Olympics in 2010 and there’s speculation a lot of staff will retire after the games so we could have many more retirements than we’re even predicting.”

## Excellent Career Prospects

Experts agree all of this presents an almost unprecedented opportunity to not only get a good job out of school, but to also climb the career ladder quickly. That’s exactly what happened to Faith McIntyre, who recently landed an executive level promotion after 12 years in the public service.

“I guess I was at the point where I believed I could do that level of job, however I really didn’t see myself in that position for another five years but then this opportunity came up,” says McIntyre, the new director of HR national operations for Veteran’s Affairs in Charlottetown.

## How to Rise Through the Ranks

Despite the boom of opportunity the boomer retirements bring, bosses and experts agree that there are key things you can do once you’re in the door to position yourself for a promotion.

“You need to focus your career and strategize instead of hoping things will happen, wishing things will happen and volunteering for a ton of committees that just take up your time,” advises Barbara Bowes, author of the popular *The Easy Resume Book: A Transferable Skills Approach*.

Bowes says there are three ‘career drivers’ employees – especially new workers – should focus on to get ahead:

- Becoming known in the organization for your skills;
- Continually developing your skills;
- Developing a network.

The best tip for how to do that? Get assigned or volunteer for a task force or special project.

“It’s perfect in government because there are so many opportunities, there are so many special projects and task forces, and it’s those projects that allow you to get on the leading edge of what’s happening,” explains Bowes.

“That will get you noticed, you’ll meet new people, you’ll develop relationships across the organization and not just in your department, you may even find yourself a mentor and if a new position arises from the project – and they usually do – you’ll be in a great position to apply for it.”

While working on high-profile projects is good, Bowes says the biggest mistake many people make is agreeing to sit on committees without first evaluating how it can help – or hurt – their career.

“You really need to ask yourself, who is on the committee that I can rub shoulders with? Who can I learn from? It may sound harsh, but you have to be strategic about it,” Bowes advises.

“Otherwise, you could find yourself on 11 committees that may not add any value to your career and just zap all your energy and use up all your time.”

## Make the Most of Professional Development

It’s also important to take advantage of all the professional development programs available

in government, particularly at the federal and provincial levels.

“We promote an environment where life-long learning and innovation is encouraged and where career growth and job satisfaction are a priority,” says Ana Frias Mira of the Manitoba government.

Another growing trend right now is to get a professional designation. This is becoming especially popular for fields like human resources. Beyond that, insiders say returning to school for a graduate degree might also increase your chances of a big promotion.

“Student enrolment has gone up significantly at the graduate level and I think that’s in part because graduate level training is becoming increasingly necessary for people interested in the public service,” says Carleton University’s Kathryn Graham.

That’s why the best advancement advice may well be to do your homework and find out the skills you need not just for the job you want today, but also the promotion you hope to get down the road.

“When you’re planning your career, looking at the job posters to see the skills that are required will help you ascend the career ranks to the job you want,” says Joanne Lalonde. “It’s really just like looking at a university curriculum and it spells out exactly what you need to do to get to where you want to go.”



## Takeaways from this Article

- Government is facing a crisis as baby boomers retire, which means opportunities are opening up for new grads to create an interesting career.
- Opportunities are available at all three levels of government: federal, provincial and municipal.
- It pays to position yourself for a promotion by focusing on your career and by creating a strategy.
- A good public service career strategy includes becoming known for your skills and developing a network.
- Public service offers many professional development programs, so take advantage of them.
- A graduate degree can help you get promoted.