

# Digital Service Network

Hiring Question Bank ++

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## BACKGROUND

Since the mid-2000s, the U.S. government has committed to developing and improving local, state, and federal digital resources to better cater to the changing world. The Obama Administration pioneered these efforts, founding the United States Digital Service (USDS), a White House-based startup which aims to “improve the usefulness and reliability of the country’s most important digital services.” Also founded in 2014, 18F is a federal digital consultancy which was created during the implementation and subsequent breakdown of healthcare.gov. 18F operates inside the Technology Transportation Service (TTS) of the General Services Administration and aims to “buy, build and share modern software using agile development and human-centered design” (GSA Technology Transformation Services). While 18F only serves federal agencies, USDS has a wide range of partners it works with, including more localized agencies.

Coupled with the need to improve and implement digital governmental services, Digital Service Teams (DSTs) have and continue to be developed at the state and local level. DSTs are units set up by governmental authorities to help with the redesign and implementation of government digital services. As the services governments provide become more complex, governments have found it increasingly necessary to assign internal teams to this work instead of using contracting to compete and keep up with private sector digital innovation. DSTs operate outside of traditional government authority in that they do not always answer directly to a governmental figure, but are still managed within a government framework. This unique relationship is distinct from the traditional government practice of contracting out technical services, and thus requires new approaches to management and hiring.

Moreover, governments have consistently identified the difficulty of hiring and retaining top tech talent. These difficulties can be traced to several factors. First and most obviously, the private sector offers far more competitive compensation. Second, candidates lack excitement around the work of public sector IT based on perceptions of mundane and dull tasks in the field. DSTs operate in a unique space of government that may not be easy for candidates to understand. When paired with the challenges of competing with private sector organizations for talent and explaining the landscape DSTs operate within, DST leadership may find themselves struggling to identify, attract, and hire qualified candidates.

DSTs are guided by private sector principles in providing high-quality digital services to customers/

citizens at the point of contact. This crucial difference is what guides much of USDS and 18F's work in this area: attempting to create digital resources and tools that work as efficiently as private sector digital tools. Given this complexity, hiring for DSTs has required a different approach than traditional public sector hiring. Matched with the need to seek public service motivated individuals, DSTs look for highly talented individuals currently working within the tech sector, or recently graduated from college. Not only do they look to hire individuals with the necessary technical acumen, but they are also looking for “non-HR skills; entrepreneurship, innovation, executive mindset” (Mergel, 2019) to create dynamic and creative teams that can effectively solve public sector challenges.

The unique combination of skills and personality traits necessary to serve on a DST means hiring for these teams is a challenging process. It requires in-depth interviewing to determine if an individual carries the skills, motivation, and creativity to succeed in the role. As DSTs are still relatively novel and many jurisdictions are only just beginning to create their own, hiring can be a pitfall for teams getting off the ground. Most individuals currently employed in DSTs are software engineers, UX designers and ex-Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, demonstrating the types of talent that emerging DSTs are targeting.

This report introduces an interview question bank for Digital Service Team recruitment and hiring. The question bank is designed specifically for the Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation at Georgetown University. The bank is the first-of-its-kind in that it will be universally applicable to DST hiring in all levels of government. It includes questions that touch on the unique aspects that make DSTs different from both traditional public and private sector work; such questions include examinations of candidate motivations, interest in creating effective digital solutions for public sector problems, and how they hope to interact with clients, customers, and colleagues. The question bank may be found in Appendix B.

In support of the DST interview question bank, this report begins by previewing the purpose of our research and effort. It then discusses the findings from academic and professional literature on effective interview questions and public service recruitment. The report also describes our findings from interviews with DST leaders and recruiters who identified key hiring issues, goals, and how interviewing is currently done for these roles. Given that DST workforce development is an emerging field in government, the interviews served as our primary source of information for developing an effective question bank. It concludes with implications, limitations, and key takeaways from the research.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

Developing a DST question bank involved reviewing the academic and professional literature on general interview question design as well as public sector motivation. We pulled literature on these topics from both academic and industry sources. This provided guidance on how to design effective interview questions, topics for a successful structured interview, and specific questions for technical roles and public service roles.

With the assistance of the Beeck Center, we connected via email with six digital service teams across the country, representing units which are both respected in the field and have a track record of building dynamic, successful teams. Virtual interviews took place via video call from February to April 2023; interviewees represented both municipal/city and state-level units. Insights were gathered from the Chief Digital Service officers of the respective teams at minimum, and sometimes included feedback from additional team members (e.g., deputy directors, design specialists). These interviews primarily concerned current interview practices but were also used for insight into the work that DSTs do, specific skills necessary for those services, and the traits DST managers and leaders want and need to see in candidates. The full interview script is available in Appendix A. The literature review and interview data enabled the design of an interview question bank tailored specifically for the hiring of DSTs.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Interviews are a standard part of most hiring procedures in all sectors. They are an opportunity for hiring managers to probe individuals about their experience, their motivations for wanting the job, and for evaluating whether the candidate is a good culture fit at the organization (Mueller and Baum 2011). Not only are the interviews themselves important but the quality of the questions asked, and the candidate's responses can help hiring managers make effective decisions about the people they hire and ensure they identify the right person for both the organization and the specific work that must be done (Hartwell et al. 2019). Many organizations, especially large public sector organizations, have developed question banks to moderate and normalize the interview process and streamline hiring (Mueller and Baum).

Existing literature examines how to make interviews more effective and the types of interview questions that can draw better results for finding the best candidates possible. There is also literature that expands on the specific requirements of public sector roles and the types of questions that will draw out the motivation for candidates wanting to work in the public sector, including whether they hold necessary motivation and culture fit specific to public facing roles. While there is a lack of literature specifically exploring question banks, we can draw effective conclusions about creating interview questions for public sector roles and for digital roles from existing research. We will evaluate this literature by exploring three core questions: first, what types of questions should be included in an interview for the best results? Second, how should employers go about developing interview questions for specific circumstances, such as digital or technical teams and public sector roles? And finally, how can we apply these findings to the development of question banks in particular?

### *Interview Questions*

Developing interview questions is crucial for organizations who hope to identify and hire the best talent and the right individuals who fit their specific culture and needs. Asking behavior-related questions is key to understanding an employee beyond their experience and skillset, allowing employers to understand the candidate and how the employee would fit into the workplace culture (Mueller and Baum).

Employers tend to ask questions that seek evidence of specific desired traits, such as a candidate's job experience, how they prepared for the interview, or their career ambitions. In contrast, Mueller and Baum highlight the equal importance of counter-evidence seeking questions. These questions target employee experience and allow employers to ask about failures and weaknesses without explicitly stating as much to the candidate. A counter-evidence question usually comes directly after an affirmative question; for example, an interviewer might ask: "Tell me about a time you had to work to meet a deadline," and then follow with, "Now tell me about a deadline you tried hard to meet but were unable to" (Mueller and Baum). These questions help to draw evidence and opposing evidence about candidate experience, highlighting both positive and potentially negative traits (Hartwell et al.). Past-behavioral interview questions are positively correlated with job performance in Hartwell et al.'s work, which identifies the best ways of creating structured interviews; these questions focus on a candidate's previous performance, interactions with colleagues and management, and their working styles.

Campion et al. identified four main types of interview questions: situational, past behavioral, background, and job knowledge (1997). They posit employers should aim to touch on all of them to have the most comprehensive picture of the candidate. The authors discussed the importance of structuring interviews and their questions in tandem, so there is thematic flow to the interview to facilitate on-the-spot analysis. Structured interviews place questions in a specific order and ensure the same questions are asked of all candidates, creating a standardized sequence for the conversation and consistent criteria for evaluating responses. Question banks may facilitate the creation of structured interviews, thus providing a stronger framework through which candidates are evaluated and serving as an effective hiring tool (Campion et al.). Furthermore, the authors highlighted the importance of standardization of questioning, or asking the same questions, in the same order, with the same wording, of all candidates. This practice ensures uniformity of the procedure and is the simplest way to convert interviews into a measurement of desirability of candidates. In all, generating a consistent interview script from question banks may act as a more objective, consistent, and effective screening for job candidates. It provides employers with the opportunity accurately benchmark candidates, create a framework for comparison, and ultimately hire employees with the best chance of making long-term contributions to the organization.

Developing specific questions will naturally vary from industry to industry and based upon the specific demands of the organization and the role. There are, however, a few key questions that literature identifies as critical to uncovering strong candidates. The first of these asks the candidate what research they have done about the position, organization, or job description. This reveals candidate

motivations, preparedness, and qualifications for the role and is cited as a cornerstone question for effective interviewing (C E Noticias Financieras 2022). Organizations should also pay close attention to asking candidates about future career goals, especially as it pertains to public sector roles. Uncovering an individual's motivations is crucial to deciding whether they will mesh with an organization's culture and can be useful when choosing between candidates (Campion et al.).

Much debate surrounds the relative importance of interview questions focusing on actual experience, or experience-based questioning, versus hypothetical work situations, or situational questioning (Pulakos and Schmitt 1995). Experience-based questions focus on what candidates have already done. They require retrospective analysis of candidate actions and explain the reasoning underpinning those actions. Situational questions, meanwhile, pose a theoretical situation and ask a candidate how they might react. In a test of validity, Pulakos and Schmitt demonstrated that experience-based questions produced a greater number of valid answers, meaning responses better reflected the actual experiences of candidates. Furthermore, answers provided were more consistent across candidates and made more sense compared with situational test groups whose answers were more scattered, less consistent, and less understandable. For this reason, interview questions should avoid hypothetical work situations and instead draw focus to lived experiences to determine aptitude and ability to dissect one's own job performance.

### *Specific Interview Questions*

There is a gap in academic literature as it pertains to the specific types of interview questions that are required for technical or digital-focused roles. One explanation for this is that interview questions age quickly. The tech industry is rapidly growing and changing; as it does the requirements of employees entering the market are evolving. Furthermore, the tech industry is overwhelmingly located in the private sector where competition is fierce, pushing employers to maintain an element of secrecy in their hiring procedures. There is also an expectation that candidates applying to technical roles complete a pre-interview screening; for example, in the software development industry, candidates commonly undertake a code-writing test to determine their eligibility before reaching the interview stage (Smith 2021). Given this, it can be difficult for public sector employers to develop tech-specific interview questions.

While there are few resources regarding technical interview questions for a hiring manager to ask, there are many resources available to candidates that examine the types of questions they may be asked. Aside from technical questions—such as, “What programming languages are you comfortable with?”—



there are also several IT/digital specific questions that can be asked (Solender 2023). These include:

- Tell me about a time when you explained a technical process to someone unfamiliar with the technical background.
- What tools and strategies do you use to organize, prioritize, and produce clever work?
- What is a new software or product you worked with recently that you think every organization should use?
- Tell me about how you have built strong relationships with non-technical teams in your organization?

These questions are technically focused, but do not ask about a candidate's specific skills, instead, they focus on the application of those skills and their knowledge both surrounding their area of expertise and how their role fits into the workplace (Solender).

It is not only important to probe an individual's technical abilities; in public-facing organizations it is also important to uncover a candidate's motivation for the role to identify a potential fit. Employees in the public sector are described as holding pro-social motivation, ideally. Pro-social motivation is driven by the desire to do good for others (Esteve and Shuster 2019). Pro-social motivation is also described as "a general altruistic motivation to serve the interests of a community of people" (Rainey and Steinbauer 1999).

Public administration research takes this concept one step further with the description of public service motivation: "an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily in public institutions and organizations" (Ritz et al. 2016). It posits that some individuals possess a distinctive spirit of public service that both attracts them to the sector and impacts their job performance (Jacobson 2011). Scholars agree that employees who perform best in public sector organizations tend to hold display traits of public service motivation, though it is not a guarantee of attraction to or satisfaction with public sector work (Christensen and Wright 2011).

An obvious approach to identifying these motivations is to simply ask a candidate why they are excited about the job in question, and what motivates them to pursue this kind of work. Motivation-based interviewing is a separate type of interviewing itself and is already used in the private sector to determine a candidate's reason for applying for a job and whether this fits with the organization's culture (Quinn 2011). Motivation may be identified in a candidate's previous experience—whether work or volunteer-related—and in their education history (Hedges 2013). Asking employees indirectly about their career goals, aspirations, and hypothetical dream jobs can also uncover motivation without directly

asking the individual whether they are pro-socially motivated, for example (Hedges). The most critical takeaway for hiring managers: there are many indirect ways to ask about motivation, and they are likely already asking without realizing it (Quinn).

### *Developing Question Banks*

An interview question bank is a list of standardized questions that hiring managers have on hand prior to beginning the interview process. The purpose of a question bank is to give the interviewer a range of possible topics and questions that may be drawn from in order to structure interviews. Question banks help interviewers develop conversational flow while simultaneously capturing important aspects and ensuring key characteristics of the job are clearly communicated. For example, in the tech industry a question bank may include a series of technical aptitude questions (Esfahbod 2023).

Developing question banks largely follows the same strategy as developing interview questions as previously discussed. Aside from ensuring the questions in the bank are broadly applicable and cover all necessary technical requirements, question banks differ from interview question development in that they aim to make interviews more consistent for both the interviewer and the candidate (Esfahbod). This is because they present a logical framework from which a structured interview protocol may be drawn.

There are a wide range of non-academic resources available concerning question bank development; however, these resources focus on the private sector. Development of the DST question bank will consider the private sector advice, the literature on interview questions in general, and the unique properties of the public sector in this scenario. Our team focused on a core set of takeaways in question bank development: consistency of interviews, capturing main skills of candidate, ensuring candidate meets necessary requirements of the job and for the public sector case, and capturing whether a candidate is sufficiently motivated for the job in question (Vlastelica 2023).

## INTERVIEW FINDINGS

The interviews conducted with six DST professionals provided insight into three core areas: the challenges human resources personnel and digital service leaders face in hiring for DSTs; the hiring processes commonly used; and attributes that digital services officers have identified in successful team members.

### *Challenges in Hiring Digital Service Employees*

Human resources personnel and digital service leaders face unique challenges in hiring personnel for digital service teams. These challenges include setting the groundwork to establish the team, navigating outdated human resources policies, and recruiting and retaining technologists willing to make the switch from the private to the public sector. One interviewee explained that a large amount of difficulty in starting up a new team can come before the team is created. Digital service advocates must convince local or state officials that a digital service office is needed and must be able to justify its existence. Officials often question why this new office is different from existing IT, or why product managers are needed when the city already has project managers. Being able to sell the benefits and necessity of creating a digital services office is crucial for advocates to obtain buy-in from city or state officials.

Once a government entity has decided to establish a digital services office, it must undertake the process of budgeting for the new office's roles, a process that can take up to a year depending on the current stage and length of the unit's budget cycle. In determining which digital service roles should be prioritized as initial hires, leaders must examine the structure of the government, identify its unique needs, and build a team to address those needs. Will the team manage its own data or do so in partnership with the existing IT department? Should the team build a new technology internally or purchase it from outside vendors? These are the types of questions that digital services leaders must examine to determine the initial makeup of a digital services office. Another interviewee stressed the danger of over-engineering a team from the onset, stating that digital services offices must be able to grow and adapt to challenges they face over the first few years. Starting with a small, flexible team and hiring roles as needs are identified is often the best strategy.

Once a digital service office is established within a government, hiring for these newly created positions can be slow and onerous. Unattractive or outdated human resources policies make it difficult to attract candidates from the private sector. In addition, many digital service office positions, such as user researchers and product managers, do not fit within the existing human resources' role classification system, and human resources personnel struggle to classify these new roles. Poor onboarding programs within a government also mean digital services offices must take on more of the burden of onboarding new employees.

During the hiring and interview process, digital service leaders benefit from being as transparent as possible with potential employees regarding the challenges of the job. Most digital service employees are hired from the private sector and have little to no government knowledge or experience, so it is up to team leaders during the hiring process to sell the position and explain why a potential hire should make the switch to the public sector. According to several interviewees, public service motivation is a huge factor in those who choose to enter civic technology. It is very difficult for a government to remain competitive with the private sector when the government cannot compete on pay, and many civic technologists take a pay cut when making the transition. Some teams opt for a flat pay-scale wherein all team members are compensated at the same salary; in these instances, hiring managers have found it useful to disclose salary from the start to manage expectations and ensure applicants are willing to continue with the interview process. (In most hiring processes, pay is usually not discussed until the end and is negotiable, so discussing pay at the beginning and clarifying that the pay is non-negotiable is notable.) In identifying potential talent, digital service leaders look for people who are mission-driven and have a sense of civic responsibility. Leaders highlight the substance of the work, the ability to improve how government interacts with the people, and the ability to grow personally and professionally by solving unique problems. Successful team members join civic technology to make an impact, achieve positive outcomes, and contribute to meaningful work. Digital service leaders can reduce attrition once employees are hired by being straightforward during the hiring process about what a role is, the purpose of the role, and the expectations of the role.

Defining role expectations and responsibilities can be difficult as digital service teams are still a new concept and each team is built around the unique needs of a government; therefore, until a team is firmly established, day-to-day operations change rapidly. Digital service leaders and hiring managers cannot always provide a candidate with examples of the team's previous work or sample projects, as new projects are still being identified during a team's early years. One interviewee explained how leaders can

focus heavily on expectation management and being honest with candidates about the challenges team members often face. Civic technology can be lonely and isolating, and team members often feel they are on their own trying to accomplish an uphill mission within their government. Building robust internal camaraderie within the team can alleviate some of these feelings. To set expectations, leaders can explain during the hiring process that these feelings of loneliness are normal and explain what measures the team has in place to mitigate this sense of isolation among its team members.

### *Attributes of Successful Team Members*

Interviewees outlined several attributes that make team members successful across the digital services arena, including communication skills, the ability to form relationships, resilience and grit, humility, change management skills, the ability to put users at the center, and a having delivery mindset. Individual roles require technical expertise and skills specific to each role, but these are additional attributes that digital service leaders look for in candidates across the board. First, team members must have good communication skills, as they must be able to communicate effectively with a variety of government officials who often have no technical background and are skeptical of the necessity to adopt new technologies. Similarly, successful team members know how to build and maintain relationships with others, as well as make others feel comfortable around them. Digital service projects move at the speed of trust, and as many officials are often resistant to the necessity of new technology in the first place, relationship building can be crucial to obtaining buy-in for a project from decision makers across the government. In response to this resistance, digital service officers must be able to justify projects that other officials may view as unnecessary or a waste of resources and must be able to communicate why and how both the team's presence and its project is adding value to a specific government operation. Resilience and grit are also important because most of the time, digital service officers operate in environments with a low number of resources and high number of constraints. Members of DSTs often need to deliver outside-of-the-box solutions, or problem-solve as if the box does not exist at all. It is not uncommon for projects to be cancelled midway through for reasons outside of the team's control, which can be extremely frustrating for team members who have already put large amounts of time and effort into the project.

One interviewee explained that when digital service team members conduct work with departments that address challenging issues, such as public health, maternal mortality, and child abuse, a higher level of emotional labor is required than may be expected in similar private sector roles. For

these reasons, digital service leaders look for candidates who are self-motivated and can work through problems as they arise without becoming discouraged. Interviewees also stressed the importance of humility in team members; because most new teams are small, everyone on the team must be willing to do the “grunt work,” and avoid ego that would put self above the team. Leaders look for team members who are willing to ask questions, be proven wrong, or reevaluate a decision based on new information.

One of the most important attributes that makes digital service officers successful is their ability to put users at the center in such a way that provides the most value to the government. One interviewee stated that teams “are a change management team disguised as a tech team.” Digital service offices are trying to change the way governments conceptualize technology. Team members operate with a “people-first” mentality and an understanding that technology should serve people, not the other way around. Therefore, it is important that officers prioritize putting users at the center of the programs they design, ensuring that the program or product is a value-add instead of an additional constraint to the government’s ability to serve its citizens. Finally, interviewees recommended hiring individuals who are action-based and have a track record of delivery success. These are individuals who have experience creating, shipping, and delivering products. They are detail-oriented and have a bias toward action in that they know how to start processes and get those processes moving forward without getting stuck in a recommendation phase. These individuals are also capable of analyzing a large problem and breaking it down into small, manageable projects that can be more easily addressed. The goal of digital services is to deliver some kind of value, large or small, to a government, so finding individuals who know how to deliver is important to the success of a team.

### *Hiring Methods and Conducting Candidate Interviews*

In addition to discussing the attributes that makes digital service employees successful, several interviewees discussed both methods and the interview questions they use in hiring digital service personnel. While some common themes arose around which roles should be considered key initial hires, such as a director, engineers, and product managers, there was little consensus on what roles should comprise a DST due to the variation in needs and budgetary constraints among individual governments. For example, some digital service offices consider their own user experience (UX) researchers and designers essential to their team, while others contract out these positions. Digital service leaders generally conduct multiple rounds of interviews in hiring for a new position, sometimes with each focusing on a different measure of evaluation. For one state government’s digital service, interviews that

assess technical abilities come early in the interview process; after a candidate has exhibited the requisite technical experience and skills, an additional interview will be scheduled to evaluate a candidate's interpersonal skills. Others prefer to confirm a candidate's fit among team members first before moving into technical qualifications. Another state's process includes only two interviews in which questions remain mostly uniform across positions, but digital service leaders look for different attributes among candidates depending on the role for which they are interviewing. Interviews are generally conducted as a panel with a minimum of two interviewers to reduce bias and gain multiple perspectives on a candidate's potential during the hiring process.

In the interviews we conducted, digital service leaders tended to focus more on generalized interview questions they use when evaluating candidates. Questions leaders use range from the general, such as "Why are you interested in this role?" and "Why are you interested in public service?" to those that address more specific challenges public officials face. To evaluate a candidate's resilience and grit, an interviewer might ask a candidate to discuss a time when the candidate had to solve a problem with very few resources, or when the candidate had to fight an uphill battle to complete a project. To analyse a candidate's communications skills, digital service leaders might ask the candidate to discuss a time the candidate used informal authority or informal relationships within an organization to accomplish a goal. Some questions within the category focus specifically on a team's need to continually justify their presence and the projects they undertake; questions like this include, "How would you advocate for yourself or defend your presence among government officials who believe your project is unnecessary?" Variations of this question are also used for specific technical roles. For example, interviewers might ask a candidate for a user experience designer role a situational question in which the candidate describes how they would explain user research to a member of the city council who has never heard of it, or an engineer might describe how they would explain the cloud to a cabinet member who is unfamiliar with it and questions whether it is secure. These questions address aspects of the job that go beyond what technologists encounter in the private sector and assess whether they can be successful in a much different public setting. One digital service leader stated that in conducting the interview, her team pays close attention to candidate responses to the types of questions that address how the candidate would explain something technical to someone from a non-technical background. If the candidate seems annoyed by this prospect, they are probably not a good fit for the role, however if they remain upbeat and are able to explain their process clearly, that is an indication that the candidate has been in this situation before and understands the need for this skill. Other common themes addressed in the

interpersonal skills parts of the interview process are a candidate's ability to collaborate with others, manage change, address conflict, and demonstrate humility and adaptability.



## IMPLICATIONS

The public sector currently lags behind the private sector in their provision of digital services, but digital service teams seek to minimize this gap and set up governments to provide high-quality digital services to citizens.

Naturally, each position on a digital service team has different requirements, and we cannot create a question bank that caters to each eventuality in the hiring procedure. Each DST we spoke to had different hiring approaches - some asked about technical abilities early as a screening measure, while others evaluated these skills later in the process. Regardless of these variables, the question bank introduced in this report provides a resource for governments establishing DSTs. The question bank also facilitates the development of structured interviews that allow comparisons across candidates. It is important to note that the DST question bank introduced in this report does not include technical competency questions; rather, it focuses on the fit of individuals to work in a public sector digital environment.

## LIMITATIONS

Due to the emerging nature of DSTs within local, state, and federal governments, information about hiring practices, interview questions, and types of roles is more limited than for other similar projects. For example, the interview sample size (n=6) was smaller than one might find in other more established sectors. The competitive nature of tech industry hiring also means government entities face an uphill battle in the competition for talent. Because of this, participants were understandably hesitant to reveal too much about their hiring processes, wishing to protect them from being co-opted by similar organizations and increasing competition in an already challenging market.

The project also faced limitations in the availability of literature on question bank development and hiring of technical staff in the public sector. The literature compiled was largely based on non-academic sources for both topics. This limited the foundation of scholarly analysis underpinning the report. The literature on public sector interview techniques is also limited, leading us to rely on private sector literature. The latter literature proved useful but did not address the public sector environment of DSTs, which has unique implications for the hiring and interviewing process.

More time would have enabled the research team to connect with more DSTs for interviews and devoted additional time to assessing existing literature. There is certainly room for more work on this as DSTs become a larger part of numerous governmental bodies in the future.

## CONCLUSION

Government agencies are beginning to launch DSTs to enable the creation of a wide range of digital services for citizens, whether at the local, state, or federal government levels. As the United States continues to advance through the digital age, the necessity of finding, screening, and employing skilled workers into technical roles becomes increasingly relevant as governmental services are implemented online. The need for employing the best, public service-minded individuals to fill DST positions has become prominent in federal programs such as the United States Digital Service and 18F, state governments, local governments, and invested third parties.

Our team, in partnership with the Beeck Center at Georgetown University, decided to face the challenge of hiring head-on. In doing so, our team researched existing studies on hiring, interviewed professionals in the field, and curated a formal question bank to supplement an online database created by the Beeck Center. Following the research and development of a literature review to gain background knowledge, our team connected with different DSTs nationwide whom we interviewed to determine what their organizations do well and what they look for in employees. Following the completion of six interviews, we crafted a question bank relating directly to specific questions, as well as attributes that the interviewed DSTs informed us were important to their mission and future development. This included the professional and technical aptitude and personality traits that are most well-represented in the DST members.

As internet technology continues to influence daily life for Americans, digital service teams must robustly exist to support the ever-evolving technology. The question bank we created will help guide employers during the hiring process to ensure that the employees they hire are technologically adept, motivated by public sector ideals, and will fit the mold that is beginning to form within the budding arena of Digital Service Teams. With the assistance of a question bank specific to DST hiring, not only will the hiring process be expedited, but it will theoretically be more fruitful in determining and persevering, proficient, and personable applicants.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

- How would you describe your approach to the hiring process for digital service teams?
- What challenges are inherent to this process, especially when starting a DST from scratch?
- When you are working on building digital service teams, where do you begin? Which roles are key initial hires?
- As far as we understand, a formal question bank like the one we are developing does not yet exist. How did you navigate this process yourself? What tools and resources were helpful?
- What types of people are already in the roles and performing well?
  - o What kinds of attributes did those people have?
  - o Did those attributes show up in the interview process?
- What have been the most effective interview questions you have used to hire people with both the skills and talents needed for these dynamic roles?
  - o If you have any existing documentation of questions you have used or any other useful written documents, we would greatly appreciate if you could send along to aid our compilation process!
- Is there anything you wish you had known when you were making your first hires?
- (Depending on interviewee – if intermediary) Do you have any best practices when you are helping a government unit start up a digital services team from scratch?
  - o *e.g., hire CDSO (Chief Digital Service Officers) first; then sequence hires from there?*

## Appendix B: Question Bank

| Question   | Attribute                            |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| <b>Motivation</b>  |                                      |
| Why are you interested in this role?   | PSM                                  |
| What do you know about Digital Service Teams and how they serve their respective governments?  | PSM                                  |
| Can you talk about why you want to work in the public sector?  | PSM                                  |
| What are you looking for in a new role?  | Motivation                           |
|  |                                      |
|  |                                      |
|  |                                      |
|  |                                      |
| <b>Experience &amp; Performance</b>  |                                      |
| Tell me about your background/experience.  | Competency                           |
| Why do you think your personal and professional experience has prepared you to succeed in this role?   | Competency                           |
| Have you worked directly with clients before?  | Communication<br>Collaboration       |
| If yes, how would you describe your approach to working with clients?  | Communication<br>Collaboration       |
| How do you work with clients/teams to understand their needs?  | Communication<br>Collaboration       |
| Describe a time where you saw something at work that could be improved. What did you do? Why?  | Communication<br>Change Management   |
| Tell me about a time you encountered conflict at work.   | Communication<br>Conflict Management |
|  | Communication<br>Self-Awareness      |
| Tell me about a time you/your project failed. What did you learn?  | Adaptability                         |
| How do you think you will be challenged in this role, and how would you overcome those challenges?   | Competency<br>Self-Awareness         |
| Tell me about a time you had to navigate a tense situation with a project client or outside vendor. How did you navigate the situation? What did you do? How did you engage with your team or organization's leadership to come to a resolution? | Conflict Management<br>Collaboration |
| Tell me about a time you were fully committed to a goal.   | Autonomy                             |
| Tell me about a time you underwent a significant change at your organization.  | Change Management<br>Collaboration   |
| Have you worked with outside vendors before?   | Collaboration<br>Misc.               |





|  |  |                                    |
|--|--|------------------------------------|
|  | What is your preferred teamwork/management style?  | Culture                            |
|  | Where do you see yourself fitting on a team? OR What role do you usually find yourself playing in team settings?   | Personality<br>Culture             |
|  | Tell me about the project you worked on that you are most proud of?  | Values                             |
|  | Why are DSTs important?  | Culture                            |
|  | How would you advocate for yourself or defend your presence among government officials who believe your project is unnecessary?  | Communication<br>Culture<br>Values |
|  | How would you describe your approach to the user experience throughout your work? How do you think about meeting end-user needs, including underserved or hard-to-reach users? | Values                             |
|  | How do you approach user experience research? What methods do you use?   | Values                             |



**Hiring Process Components | DSTs vary in their approach to the hiring process components, sequence, and timeline. Here are some example components.**

| Component   | Typical Length  | Notes   |
|---|---|---|
| Application / Resume Review                         | 10-20 mins  | Reviews of resumes (and any other application materials) consistently constitutes the first step of the hiring process. Many teams emphasize the importance of having at least two sets of eyes on each resume to minimize bias and error.  |
| Initial Screening                                   | 15-30 mins  | Initial screens can probe for multiple attributes, depending on what is most important to the DST and their greatest needs for a new hire. Some DSTs find this important, while others rely more on the application/resume review as the initial screen and dive straight into more substantive interview components.   |
| HR / "Official" Interview or Application            | (Longer than expected)                                  | Teams often deal with requirements from their respective government HR departments that are disconnected from or present additional hurdles than those of comparable private sector roles, e.g. re: job classification. Whether at the beginning (application stage), throughout (interview requirements with specifically/only HR personnel), or at the final offer stage, DSTs must be mindful of how they approach these requirements and communicate them to candidates.  |
| Technical/Discipline-Specific Skill Screen          | 45 mins - 1 hr  | Technical requirements are always assessed, sometimes as a first hurdle to pass, and others as a later step to ensure qualification after assessing for motivation and culture fit. Some emphasize detailed explanations of past experience as the primary hurdle, while many others present hypothetical scenarios to see how a candidate would approach their response, and review code generated for hypotheticals, if applicable.   |
| Emotional Intelligence / Interpersonal Skill Screen | 30 mins - 1 hr  | Teams refer to this as EQ, emotional intelligence, or interpersonal skills. Some teams screen for this before drilling into technical qualifications; others require technical hurdles to be met before drilling into this dimension.   |
| Past Work   | (Requires devoted time for discussion with hiring team) | Best practices and our literature review indicate that opportunities for candidates to share about past work in detail are more reliable predictors of future performance. Questions about past work can probe for multiple dimensions (technical, motivation, culture fit). Extensive questions about past work should be plausible asks as many DSTs are seeking mid-career candidates with private sector backgrounds. In addition, many teams find it useful to frame questions about past work in relation to top objectives or requirements of the job, to gauge if they have already accomplished similar goals in previous roles. |
| Committee Recommendation                            | 2-3 checks; 10-20 mins                                  | Before recommendations are made, all those responsible for hiring decisions often requires devoted time for discussion and exchanging ideas, including resolving possible disagreements.  |
| Reference Checks                                    |   | Reference checks are often at the very end of the hiring process, before an offer is made; others conduct checks a little earlier but still toward the end to validate the hiring committee/hiring manager's choice. Past performance is the best predictor of future success, and hearing from past colleagues can be an important validation of candidate qualifications.   |

**Interview Best Practices** | Many DSTs begin their hiring guides with important best practices to keep in mind throughout the stages of the hiring process. These are compiled below.

| <b>Best Practice / Guideline</b>                               | <b>Reasoning</b>   |
|--|--|
| Always have at least two interviewers / never interview alone. | Minimize bias and human error.   |
| Standardize scorecards.  | Ensure all hiring committee members have a clear sense of what they are evaluating and what attributes and types of responses they are looking for in each interview.  |
| Document everything.   | Detailed notes are important to reference when making final calls on which candidates will advance to the next stage. When applicable, this means filling out scorecards and any freehand notes, immediately after interview sessions.   |
| Sell the job.  | Use the interview process as much as a conversation about marketing the job to the candidate, as the candidate marketing themselves for the job. Particularly in this burgeoning field, candidates need to be "sold" on pursuing this new path forward in their career.  |
| Push to discern team vs. individual accomplishments.           | It can sometimes be difficult to discern if major work accomplishments are more attributable to the individual candidate or their respective colleagues/team as a unit. If it's unclear, ask clarifying questions; this can help identify gaps for candidates who might tend to take credit for the work of others, or conversely, push people who are less inclined to take credit to describe their individual role and contributions to work accomplishments. |
| Check your first impressions.                                  | Many teams emphasize the importance of not allowing first impressions to disproportionately influence their opinions and ongoing evaluation. Allow there to be sufficient checks and balances in the interview process to check against first impressions, whether positive, negative, or anywhere in between.   |

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