

# Q&A: How Your Public Sector Organization Can Become a Great Place To Work

Becoming an employer of choice today is more important than ever to attracting and retaining top talent to your organization. But what does that mean in the public sector? UKG Public Sector Senior Fellow Bob Lavigna recently sat down with Sarah Lewis-Kulin, VP of Global Recognition & Research at [Great Place To Work](#)<sup>®</sup>, to discuss the Great Place To Work mission, details around their latest research, and how becoming a Great Place To Work Certified public sector organization can elevate your ability to find and keep the people you need to deliver on your mission.



## Bob Lavigna, UKG Public Sector Senior Fellow

Bob Lavigna is an award-winning public sector leader, innovator, and author with more than 30 years of experience leading government organizations and programs. In his role at UKG, he advocates for, promotes, and advises on effective practices that enable government organizations to attract and retain talent.



## Sarah Lewis-Kulin, VP Global Recognition & Research, Great Place To Work

A member of Great Place to Work's executive team and an eager innovator committed to its mission, Sarah Lewis-Kulin has more than 20 years' experience working with great companies through consulting engagements, events, research, and evaluation of best companies.

Today, Sarah leads Great Place To Work's global recognition team, overseeing the methodology for certifying companies and evaluating them for lists around the world, as well as identifying trends and sharing research findings to help companies create better workplaces for all.



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### Bob: Sarah, what is Great Place To Work and what does it do?

**Sarah:** Great Place To Work is the global authority on workplace culture. We've focused on building great workplaces for 30 years even before being a great place to work was viewed as a common organizational success metric. We've led understanding the connection between workplace culture and organizational performance.

We have more than 100 million employee survey data points across 150 countries and are able to produce global benchmarks. We define what it is to be a great place to work and create a certification standard. Underneath all that, our mission is to help every place become a great place to work for all. We give leaders and organizations the recognition and tools needed to create a consistently and overwhelmingly positive employee experience that helps their organizations perform better.

### Bob: What does it mean for an organization to be Great Place To Work Certified?

**Sarah:** Certifying an organization starts with an employee survey of 60 different metrics measuring trust within the organization — because what predicts creating a great workplace is trust and relationships in the workplace.

Our surveys ask questions about employees' daily experiences. How well do you trust your employer to tell you the truth when you ask a question? Is there strong two-way communication in the workplace? Do you feel respected as a professional with development opportunities as well as a person with a life outside work? Do you feel treated fairly in the organization? Do you have the same opportunities as other folks? Can you be yourself? If an average of seven out of 10 employees report they're consistently having a positive experience on these and other measures of trust, the organization will be certified as a great place to work.

84% of employees at Great Place to Work Certified organizations say they "plan to work there for a long time," compared with 55% of the overall U.S. workforce.

Source: [Great Place to Work](#)

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**Bob:** Can the certification process still be valuable to an organization even if it doesn't achieve certification to help them better understand the cultural components of their workforce?

**Sarah:** Yes, absolutely. I look at the process of seeking certification as a strategy to continually improve your workplace. It provides pinpointed data that helps you avoid common pitfalls with the added benefit that, as you improve, you're going to be profiled as part of a unique community of public and private sector organizations that are the best in the country.

The most significant value of seeking certification is the data that allows leaders to truly understand what's working and not working for their people and make well-informed decisions about what kind of investments of time and money will pay off with meaningful impacts in their organizations. A really important part of what Great Place To Work does is point out what are you doing uniquely well. No organization becomes a great workplace by being neutral or solely focusing on fixing low-hanging areas. You absolutely need to fix what isn't working — but you also need to find out what you do exceptionally well and build your best culture around that. So the data we provide allows leaders to see what you need to do more of, what you need to fix, and make data-driven decisions to improve faster and avoid wasting time and money.

**Bob:** How does Great Place To Work help with recruitment, particularly for public sector organizations struggling to attract and retain top workers?

**Sarah:** One of the biggest benefits of being recognized as a great workplace by Great Place To Work is that you can put your organization right alongside the brands of compelling public and private sector organizations.

For example, if you want to recruit tech-savvy talent for long-term careers, the best job seekers are going to compare your offer with those of other organizations, including start-up or major tech firms with big employment brands. Being certified by an objective third party and having the data points you need to continue improving your workplace allow you to show that your own people validate that your workplace is among the same caliber as other workplaces, even if they have bigger brands or budgets.

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**Bob:** What other advantages can a public sector organization gain with Great Place To Work status?

**Sarah:** Organizations can recruit and retain employees better by reflecting back to their current workforce and potential recruits what their organizations are doing exceptionally well and how it compares with what's typical. The grass may seem greener somewhere else but Great Place To Work provides hard numbers that show how you're stacking up.

It's clear there's never been a more important time for public sector work. Anytime you pick up a newspaper, the headlines are about how we rely on public sector organizations to deal with a huge variety of global, national, and community crises. What does that mean for public sector leaders? How do you motivate and engage teams when the scale and pace of change confronting your people is enormous? When economic pressures may be creating fear of furloughs or budget cuts? When, I'm sorry to say, so many public sector employees have to deal with a public that is insufficiently appreciative of the work you're doing?

The data Great Place To Work surveys provides allows you to understand where your organization's specific strengths and weaknesses are benchmarked against the very best organizations in the country so you can better support your people. Survey results allow you to catch issues before they become full-scale retention problems and give you insights into how you can better support employees who may have very different backgrounds and points of view.

**Bob:** Tell us about some of your most recent research as it pertains to the public sector.

**Sarah:** We just did a study where we looked at the employee experience of the typical employee in the U.S. What we found in the data was that the key challenges the typical public sector employee perceives in their organization are favoritism, unfair promotions, and politicking. Less than half of the public sector employees we surveyed reported that these issues were handled positively. Obviously, no one can do their best work under those circumstances. And our data shows strong impacts not only to retention and employee well-being based on these issues, but also to employees' discretionary effort and agility in the face of change.

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**Sarah (continued):** Some of the notable strengths we saw in the public sector were leaders' support of employees' work-life balance and people's pride in the impact they have on their communities. More public sector employees feel supported with their work-life balance than private sector employees, which is a great recruitment and retention advantage. Pride in community impact measurably increases employees' sense of purpose and well-being. And meaningful work is consistently the top driver of retention we see across all the industries we examine.

When we examine public sector organizations that have been certified, we see that they outperform the typical U.S. workplace in all areas. Not only do they offer great work-life balance support, but they also outperform on metrics of fairness, promotions, respect, workplace camaraderie, and more. So all this is to say that there's no limit to how great a workplace you can create based on whether you're public or private. If you do put in the work to create a great workplace, then as a public sector organization you can compete for talent against any other industry — and will be *more* competitive than the typical employer in any other industry. So you can, with the data behind you, out-compete all the other job postings you see to find the top talent you need — especially if you have the certification and employee data to back up your claims.

**Bob:** You've mentioned that leadership is an important component of being a great place to work. What does your research reveal about the behaviors of leaders in great places to work?

**Sarah:** Great Place To Work has identified nine different areas leaders focus on to create great workplaces. The most important of these is how leaders listen to their people. That needs to happen at a systemic level in organizations — through surveys, meetings, regular check-ins. But a lot of it is also how individual leaders show up in one-on-one conversations. Do you put your own opinions aside and really consider other points of view? Do you ask questions because you are really paying attention and learning? Are you willing to change your mind? Do you notice who you haven't heard from and seek out their voices?

Leaders who listen with humility, vulnerability, and empathy will make great strides in creating a great workplace — and their people will help them do it.

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