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SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS IUPUI

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ARE PRIVATE SECURITY GUARDS MOTIVATED BY PUBLIC SERVICE?

INTRODUCTION

When government agencies outsource what many consider to be essential public services—such as protecting people against dangerous threats including terrorism, vandalism, or theft—the ability of private-sector contractors to meet those requests depends largely upon whether the organization and its employees understand the nature of public service.

The growth and predicted future growth of the so-called “gig economy” and private security industry, along with other economic factors, have spurred private security agencies to hire more part-time employees. This trend appears likely to remain a permanent fixture of the private-sector job market.

Given increased incentives to employ part-time workers, public managers need to know whether there are meaningful motivation differences between part-time and full-time employees, and how any differences affect the performance of private-sector contractors.

The **study** detailed in this brief examines whether public service is a motivating factor for part-time and full-time employees of private security firms that regularly partner with—or seek to protect the public independent of—local police.

METHODS

IUPUI researchers interviewed 17 private security guards across two private security agencies in the Midwest. Ten were part-time employees and seven were full time. The two private security firms from which the researchers selected study participants were chosen

because both firms have been in operation for more than two decades and are among the largest in the region, employing more than 1,000 part- and full-time workers. Additionally, both organizations in this study aim to offer innovative security management to government and private clients in cities throughout the Midwest, including law enforcement support, security staffing, and event services for government agencies.

During interviews, researchers spoke with participating employees about their perceptions of their firm's mission, organizational responsibilities, and their own initial and current work motivations in light of the organizational mission and responsibilities. Participants were asked why they decided to work for a private organization rather than a government agency. They also discussed their perceptions of their employer's clients, challenges they experience while doing their job, and whether self-accountability or accountability from a supervisor more strongly motivated effective job performance.

FINDINGS

Our analysis found a clear distinction in motivations between part-time and full-time employees. Full-time employees exhibited motivations consistent with public service motivation, while part-time employees' motivations centered on pay scales.

Part-time employees felt a sense of duty toward clients, fellow employees, and their supervisors rather than toward the broader public. In contrast, full-time employees expressed a motivation to protect the general public and a commitment to developing and/or sustaining partnerships with government agencies that

would foster or enhance methods of ensuring public safety.

Interestingly, while the motivations of full-time security personnel reflected tenets often associated with public service motivation, they did not have a desire to work in government. However, part-time personnel often indicated a desire to pursue public-sector careers despite not necessarily being motivated to serve the general public.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

In addition to differences in motivation, the demographics of the part-time workforce in this study warrant attention: part-timers were often younger than 40 years old, with educational levels at or below “some college,” and with employment histories that suggested neither interest nor expertise in public safety work (e.g., real estate broker, sales manager at a car dealership, supervisor at a food production firm).

Better insight into the backgrounds of these part-time employees may lead to improved recruitment, training, and development programs that emphasize public service motivation. However, it is not clear whether training regimens can be devised to effectively elevate public service motivation, particularly among part-time employees.

Assuming that subsequent research confirms the findings in this study, government organizations contracting or collaborating with private security firms should examine the composition of a prospective contractor’s workforce when evaluating competitive bids. Furthermore, public administrators should not only inquire about the prior training and skill development of both part- and full-time security, but seek to encourage private firms with which they contract to emphasize public service in employee training.

CONCLUSIONS

If further research confirms the findings outlined in this brief, the relative percentages of part- and full-time workers become a highly relevant consideration in other public service domains, including nonprofits that deliver public services. Public administrators charged with contracting responsibilities may need to take those percentages into account when assessing the public service performance capacities of potential contractors which are increasingly indispensable to the public good.



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