Human Capital: Connecticut’s Judicial Branch Is Investing in Its Workforce

Heather Nann Collins  Court Planner II, Connecticut Judicial Branch, Project Management and Administration Unit, Superior Court Operations Division

The Connecticut Judicial Branch spent ten years implementing a strategic plan to improve services to the public. Now it is implementing a multiyear plan to improve employee satisfaction by focusing on communications, well-being, training, connectivity, and professional growth and opportunity for its biggest asset: its human capital.

What do 103 questions, 1,701 responses, 41 focus groups, and 4,000+ comments equal? The Connecticut Judicial Branch’s Strategic Plan Phase II: Human Capital, a blueprint for improving employee satisfaction for all 3,800 non-bench staff members.

Connecticut Supreme Court Chief Justice Richard A. Robinson unveiled the plan in September 2018. “Changing the culture of an organization does not happen overnight, but that is exactly what we’re setting about to do,” the chief justice said in a video that accompanied the plan’s emailed delivery to all staff. “You, as dedicated employees of the Connecticut Judicial Branch, deserve no less.”

The first phase of the strategic plan focused on increasing the public’s trust through the implementation of hundreds of activities supporting five goals: increasing access to justice for all people, responding to changing demographics, improving the delivery of services, collaborating with internal and external judicial stakeholders, and providing

...
accountability to all. Released in 2008 by then-Chief Justice Chase T. Rogers, phase one saw the establishment of a Public Service and Trust Commission and dozens of committees, which developed hundreds of activities and initiatives that changed how the branch conducts business.

Connecticut’s economy struggled through the Great Recession, and its upturn has been slow. The judicial branch’s budget—$537 million in 2017—has seen precipitous fluctuations, and reductions have caused administrators to close some facilities, while absorbing certain executive-agency functions. Staffing of the branch has declined, too, as Baby Boomers begin to retire. In short, the will to create an employee-focused strategic plan was frustrated by the means to develop and implement such a plan.

The wait is over, and the branch is beginning phase two—the human capital initiative. This phase was developed over three years and turns the branch’s focus inward, on the people who have made public service a meaningful career.

### The Plan

The branch has defined human capital as “the collective sum of values, life experiences, knowledge, skills, innovation, energy, and passion that an organization’s people choose to invest in their work,” and centered the human capital initiative around five areas of focus, with each supported by one or more strategies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Plan</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Action Steps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>Utilize effective mechanisms to disseminate timely and consistent communication on all matters of personal and professional concern to Branch employees.</td>
<td>Ensure that temporary and part-time employees are included on all Branch-wide emails.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training</strong></td>
<td>Develop relevant and accessible job-specific training for all employees.</td>
<td>Evaluate pay scales periodically in light of job descriptions, responsibilities, and minimum education requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide ongoing training to develop and support supervisors in all aspects of their job responsibilities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connectivity between the managers and policy makers, and the supervisors and staff in the field</strong></td>
<td>Central administrative offices should work to achieve a better connection with the field on operational matters.</td>
<td>Providing supervisors with tools and techniques to use in creating a work environment that fosters a team culture, encourages the free and open exchange of ideas and suggestions, and empowers employees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foster and encourage employee input on matters that impact them in the performance of their jobs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Growth and Opportunity</strong></td>
<td>Provide access to information and resources that support employee career development.</td>
<td>Develop a formalized process within each division to solicit the input, comments, and suggestions of field staff before the implementation of new legislation, rules, and administrative policies and procedures and in the development or revision of forms, office procedures, and systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ensure that the hiring and promotion process is fair and transparent.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explore policy changes that would allow for non-monetary compensation incentives.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ensure that professional and personal interests of employees that are addressed through the review and assessment of job descriptions and classifications, compensation, performance appraisals, and the disparities between union and non-union employees.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employee Well-Being</strong></td>
<td>Be committed to improving the physical and emotional health and well-being of its employees.</td>
<td>Provide training and explore other options to assist employees who, because of their position, are subjected every day to the trauma and stress experienced by the individuals they serve.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each strategy has one or more recommended action steps, with 33 action steps in all, including:

- **Communications**: Ensure that temporary and part-time employees are included on all Branch-wide emails.

- **Connectivity**: Providing supervisors with tools and techniques to use in creating a work environment that fosters a team culture, encourages the free and open exchange of ideas and suggestions, and empowers employees.

- **Professional growth and opportunity**: Develop a formalized process within each division to solicit the input, comments, and suggestions of field staff before the implementation of new legislation, rules, and administrative policies and procedures and in the development or revision of forms, office procedures, and systems.

- **Training**: Evaluate pay scales periodically in light of job descriptions, responsibilities, and minimum education requirements.

- **Employee well-being**: Provide training and explore other options to assist employees who, because of their position, are subjected every day to the trauma and stress experienced by the individuals they serve.

Where did the areas of focus come from, and how do branch leaders, including the Office of the Chief Court Administrator, know that the areas of focus will address employee concerns? They asked, listened, asked some more, and listened harder. More specifically, they are the direct result of the information and data gathered by the Human Capital Workgroup via the branch’s Employee Satisfaction Survey in 2016, and the comments of more than 300 employees who participated in 41 focus groups in 2017.

The data represent the collective voices of Connecticut’s unified judicial system and include employees from all five divisions: Administrative Services, Court Support Services, External Affairs, Information Technology, and Superior Court Operations. Those voices include judicial marshals, office clerks, probation officers, information technology developers, temporary law clerks, facilities maintainers, law librarians, interpreters, human-resources professionals, staff attorneys, courtroom clerks, victim advocates, child-support-enforcement officers, and part-time court monitors.

Including the voices of employees from across the branch’s rich spectrum was part of the human capital blueprint since its inception in 2015. That is when a Human Capital Steering Committee, led by Chief Justice Rogers, began discussing the next phase of the strategic planning process. At Chief Justice Rogers’s request, a human capital concept paper was drafted. At a December 2015 Steering Committee meeting, Chief Justice Rogers stated that developing a long-term human capital plan would be her “main priority for the foreseeable future,” a move that imbued the importance of the efforts in the other branch leaders on the committee.

The Steering Committee considered many resources (for example, Verborg and Zastany, 2015; Griller, 2015; National Center for State Courts, 2011; and United States Office of Personnel Management, 2015). The committee then established a Human Capital Workgroup to develop a survey and chose members representing each division and the supreme and appellate courts. Chief Justice Rogers appointed Judge Elliot N. Solomon to chair the group. Executive directors were asked to include managers and staff members from human resources, program management, and employee-training units, as well as information technology experts, in their appointments to the workgroup.

---

1 Other members of this committee included Chief Court Administrator Judge Patrick L. Carroll III, then-Deputy Chief Court Administrator Judge Elliot N. Solomon, Chief Appellate Court Judge Alexandra D. DiPentima, the executive directors of each division, and the chief executive officer of the supreme and appellate courts.
In January 2016, Judge Solomon and the other 18 members of the Human Capital Workgroup began vetting information and debating how the survey should look. The members held an affinity diagram session, a brainstorming session that helps group ideas into their natural relationships, centering on potential questions. The results were forwarded to Stephen J. Cox, a Central Connecticut State University professor who has worked extensively with the branch on developing assessments, for his review and recommendations. The workgroup also created smaller teams to address various components of the survey project, including technical issues, marketing, and legal matters, and Judge Solomon encouraged the teams to seek assistance from subject-matter experts among the staff.

In the winter and spring of 2016, workgroup members and small teams met frequently, developing a first-draft survey and conducting a pilot of more than 30 employees, who offered feedback on the questionnaire’s value, length, and style. A marketing plan was outlined and, working with Prof. Cox, a system designed to allow staff to complete and submit the survey from their computers to an email address at the college to ensure anonymity. By early summer 2016, the workgroup presented to the Steering Committee a comprehensive package of recommendations, including a second-draft survey, a proposed intranet website dedicated to information about human capital, a dedicated email address for employees with questions or concerns about the survey or issues related to human capital, and a marketing plan to inform employees about the survey and encourage their participation.

The efforts of the workgroup and Steering Committee happened during a state budget crisis. Despite that, the Steering Committee determined that developing a long-term plan to retain and attract the best and brightest in public service would continue to be a priority and, over the summer, the chief justice recorded a video to help launch the survey in the fall. In September, ten months after the initial Steering Committee meeting, the chief justice and members signed off on a final version of the survey, which would be delivered from November 1 to 30.

The 103 questions were broken into six areas: Work Experience, Work Environment, Immediate Supervisor, Second-level Supervisor, Career Development, and the Judicial Branch. Additionally, the survey captured demographic information, including education levels, hours worked per week, length of service and expected length of service, generation identification, and gender and ethnic/race identification. The survey implementation team consulted with Prof. Cox on the survey-response continuum, in which respondents would be presented with statements and reply by selecting “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “neutral,” “agree,” and “strongly agree.” The survey used positive statements, such as:

- I am proud to work for the Judicial Branch.
- My workload is reasonable.
- My supervisor encourages staff to exchange opinions and ideas.
- My supervisor supports professional growth.
- Career opportunities are important to me.
- Judicial Branch programs effectively promote the importance of a diverse workforce.

To promote participation, the chief justice sent an email to employees a month before the launch date, encouraging employees to complete the survey and explaining in a video that the results would be the foundation for a long-term blueprint. On the launch date, an email was sent to all employees, and a “Human Capital” icon embedded on all staff computers, prompting participation in the survey. Employees without regular access to computers, including several hundred judicial marshals, were notified by their supervisors and given opportunities to complete the survey during the month. Managers sent periodic reminders to encourage staff to set aside 15 to 20 minutes to participate. While Prof. Cox said the branch should expect a participation rate of between 30 and 40 percent, the ultimate completion rate exceeded that, with 44 percent, or 1,701 employees, completing the survey.

Human Capital: Connecticut’s Judicial Branch Is Investing in Its Workforce
The Results

In spring 2017, the Steering Committee discussed the next steps and assessed the results. Among the highlights of the survey findings (combined percentages of agree/strongly agree):

82 percent of employees said they like the work they do
78 percent said they are proud to work for the branch
75 percent said their work gives them a sense of accomplishment
76 percent said they can rely on the people they work with when they need assistance
75 percent said their supervisor supports collaboration across work units to accomplish work objectives
79 percent said their supervisor supports their need to balance work and other life issues

Other responses indicated areas of concern in office morale, communication of information and the level of employee input on decision making, and a lack of clear career development opportunities. For example, just:

35 percent said career opportunities are available to them
32 percent of employees said office morale is high where I work
54 percent said their supervisor conducts regular staff meetings
42 percent said they received support from their supervisor or a work mentor in developing a career path in the judicial branch

Chief Justice Rogers in May 2017 emailed all branch staff with the survey results and directed them to the new “Employee Insights” intranet webpage, where the data could be accessed.

The summer issue of the branch’s internal newsletter, Strategic Talk, featured a lengthy message from the chief and articles about what the human capital initiative would mean to branch staff.

Then the Steering Committee began blueprint development: analyzing the responses and developing questions for in-person employee focus groups. During the summer, a Human Capital Focus Group Subcommittee, comprising members of the workgroup and other staff, developed parameters for focus groups to seek input on the specific survey areas that generated the most concern across all divisions and gathered more information on how the branch could address those concerns. Prof. Susan Koski of Central Connecticut State University helped establish focus group guidelines, and facilitators from across every division were identified.

After reviewing the survey answers, the Focus Group Subcommittee developed six specific questions:

1. How do you feel about the communication you receive from the Judicial Branch?
2. How do you feel about the communication you receive from your supervisor?
3. How do you feel about your level of involvement with decision-making that affects you?
4. What do you think about career opportunities available within the Judicial Branch?
5. What do you think the Branch does well, and what should be changed, with regard to promotions, transfers and hiring?
6. What can we do to attract and keep people in the Judicial Branch?
Human Capital: Connecticut’s Judicial Branch Is Investing in Its Workforce
Emails encouraged staff participation in focus groups, which were held across the state, and facilitators had ground rules to ensure consistent experiences. Between October and December 2017, pairs of facilitators conducted 41 focus groups, yielding 4,000 comments from 317 employees from all divisions and the supreme and appellate courts. Focus group participants included dozens of job classifications, ranging from directors and deputy directors, to probation officers, paralegals, administrative assistants, law librarians, IT developers, and office clerks. Both full- and part-time employees were included, as were temporary and permanent classifications.

The results were shared with the Steering Committee, and Judge Solomon led a small analyses team of directors, managers, and line staff from the Human Capital Workgroup with experience in strategic planning to do the time-consuming work of parsing the comments. Each comment was written on a yellow sticky note and posted on conference room walls—a wallpaper, of sorts. The analyses team read the comments and patterns emerged; the 4,000 comments were synthesized into 263 statements, and those statements into 27 categories. Those 27 categories were further funneled into the 5 overarching areas of focus that capture the concerns of judicial branch employees.

Judge Solomon and the analyses team turned to the human capital definition in developing an overarching goal: “To carry out its mission, the Judicial Branch will create an environment that will attract, develop, and retain a highly competent and invested workforce, by providing meaningful opportunities for their professional development and career advancement, while acknowledging their personal needs and responsibilities.”

Chief Justice Rogers announced in November 2017 that she would retire from the court in February 2018, having served ten years as chief justice and ten years on the appellate and superior court benches.

In one of her final administrative acts, she accepted the analyses of the survey and focus group results and encouraged the Steering Committee to continue working on a human capital blueprint.

**Next Steps: A New Chief Justice and Implementation of the Human Capital Plan**

Under the Steering Committee’s purview, the human capital blueprint was finalized in the spring of 2018 and shared with the workgroup. In April, Governor Dannel Malloy nominated Associate Justice Robinson to serve as the chief justice, and he was unanimously confirmed by the state legislature’s House and Senate in the first week of May. In July, the 22-page *Human Capital Plan: A Blueprint to Enhance Your Job Satisfaction* was formally approved for implementation by Chief Justice Robinson and the Steering Committee.

The chief justice thanked branch employees in the video emailed to all staff in September on the launch of the human capital blueprint and asked for patience as the implementation process begins. “Working together, this plan will become reality for all of us,” he said. “You are an outstanding group of individuals, who bring an amazing array of talents and skills to the table. I am absolutely confident that we are an unstoppable team that can achieve any goal that we put our minds to.”

Chief Justice Robinson and the Steering Committee created a larger Implementation Committee, including the new deputy chief court administrator, Judge Elizabeth A. Bozzuto; all division executive directors; and a cross-section of directors, deputy directors, managers, and line staff from across the branch. The Implementation Committee, under the direction of Judge Solomon, created subcommittees to address each of the five areas of focus as delineated in the plan. Each subcommittee is composed of staff and managers with subject-matter expertise, and each has a charge and a directive to create a realistic implementation plan for their area of focus.
For Judge Solomon, who stepped down as deputy chief court administrator in the fall 2018 to serve as a senior trial judge but continues as a leader of the implementation effort, the human capital blueprint has been a worthwhile investment of time and resources:

“All of us, from millennials to baby boomers, can safely say that our personal lives have changed over time and we have had to adapt to meet the opportunities and challenges presented by those changes. There is no reason to believe that the workplace has been immune from the changes we have experienced in our personal lives. The Human Capital initiative is the vehicle which will guide the Branch in pursuing those opportunities and confronting those challenges in order to maintain an optimal environment in which branch employees can succeed and thrive in their professional and personal lives.

Many know the state of Connecticut as “The Land of Steady Habits.” Courts have existed within the state’s boundaries since the 1600s, and the court of last resort was established 201 years ago with the state’s first constitution. Judge Solomon, like the chief justice, acknowledged that a culture change within the branch, which considers its employees’ well-being and their professional aspirations, may be difficult at first, but it is a necessity.

Judge Solomon said, “Change isn’t necessarily speedy and the path isn’t always clear, but change is essential to the success of an institution as essential as the Judicial Branch. As John F. Kennedy once said, ‘Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.’

In its first phase, the Strategic Plan represented the Branch’s ongoing commitment to the public to do those things going forward to resolve matters in a fair, timely, efficient and open matter. The Human Capital phase of the Strategic Plan represents the Branch’s ongoing commitment to its employees to maintain a work environment which best provides them with opportunities for professional satisfaction, growth and advancement while still accommodating the challenges they confront in their personal lives.”

References


