

Report: As Tech Changes Law Enforcement, Its Workforce Must Adapt



Technology will continue to change the work of law enforcement and staying ahead will mean not just adopting the latest tools but hiring and retaining the best employees, forging unique partnerships and even reorganizing the force, according to a new report from Accenture.

In *Reimagining the Police Workforce: A Vision for the Future*, the technology company surveyed 309 people in policing and law enforcement around the world, in Australia, France, Germany, Singapore, the United States and the United Kingdom. Authors found the core mission of law enforcement, which it defined as protecting the public, preventing crime and keeping the peace, while maintaining the public's trust hasn't changed. But if agencies intend to continue to effectively serve, they'll have to "develop a more agile workforce and rely on an increasingly expanded ecosystem of partners," authors wrote, whether in traditional policing or a more "preventative policing model."

Jody Weis, Accenture's public safety lead for North America, and a former FBI and Chicago Police Department (CPD) official, said he was pleased to find more agencies actually using some form of artificial intelligence (AI) than he thought. The report noted 62 percent of law enforcement professionals said AI would have a positive impact on their jobs, while 76 percent predicted digital skills would be more in demand during the next three to five years. A clear majority of those surveyed, or 75 percent, expect "digital skills to be required" during that time period and are eager to embrace those skills, while only slightly fewer, 67 percent, were motivated to stay in law enforcement.

"I think it's really important for police executives to start thinking about the future today. You're going to have to have a workforce that's diverse, it's going to be agile, it's going to have to understand how to use technology. It can't be afraid of it as some of us old-timers might have been," said Weis, a CPD superintendent from 2008-2011.

He acknowledged a resistance to change and skepticism toward technology do still persist in law enforcement. But the law enforcement unit of the future should look and perform differently than its predecessors, the report's authors wrote, proposing it consist of a "strategic nucleus" of senior leadership guiding a "core police workforce" that would be assisted and augmented by a variety of public and private partners.

"The adaptive workforce will provide access to specialists such as cybersecurity and data experts, volunteers, 'wisdom workers,' and alumni," the report noted, adding: "Role descriptions will become less important as emphasis is placed on whether each person has the right skills for the job at hand." Weis compared it to the FBI strategy of gathering "task forces" to address counter-terrorism, gang investigations and the like.

The report, released Oct. 8, in conjunction with the annual International Association of Chiefs of Police conference in Orlando, Fla., also recommended law enforcement build "radical relationships" with partners. These, authors noted, could include residents, academia, startups and tech providers, charities, banks and the private sector. Among police professionals surveyed, 56 percent indicated they expected greater sharing resources and skills between agencies going forward, with 85 percent indicating they had "positive" feelings about the change.

Even as authors suggested a change in the composition of law enforcement units, they identified an ongoing change in the skill sets valued, underscoring the significance of soft skills. Sixty percent of those surveyed said police professionals will need "more communication and collaboration skills" in the future, while 53 percent identified a need for "softer" skills like empathy, negotiation and creativity.

Jim Burch, executive vice president of the National Police Foundation, agreed the law enforcement workforce will have to change to attract younger people accustomed to asking why and questioning traditional methods, and who may have the needed skill sets — but may not have risen through the ranks of patrol.

“The traditions of policing and the traditions of the paramilitary model in policing are going to be very difficult traditions to break. We have to sort of challenge ourselves, I think, to reimagine what it could be like and should be like, and I would suggest that the new generation needs to be a part of that conversation,” Burch said.

Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, agreed the “workplace and the workforce” are changing and said a meeting the group will convene Dec. 4 in Washington, D.C., may touch on related issues including employee retention.

“These millennials and (Generation Z), they look at work differently and so, for them, the paramilitary structure is a hierarchical challenge that they don’t face in most jobs. It’s all very archaic, if you will, for the generation that is increasingly more inquisitive, questioning, challenging of authority and more, sort of professionally ambitious,” Wexler said, characterizing the shift underway as moving from “crime fighter” to “problem solver.”

Bill Schrier, senior adviser to FirstNet, and former deputy director of the Center for Digital Government,* said there’s a “dichotomy” around tech in law enforcement between older and younger staff members and their use and embrace of it. He recommended agencies adopt a “mobile-first” approach to tech because of the profession’s field-based work, but also leaned heavily on soft skills like communication, approachability and engagement.

“That skill, the ability to interact with people, which is so important to police officers, might actually be harder to find in the future. Because of technology,” Schrier said, highlighting the dominance of video games and being “immersed” in screens.

Law enforcement can and is, report authors wrote, enhancing its work through tech. The speed and quality of “actions and decision-making,” they said, could be dramatically improved through the use and analysis of data, and cited mobile devices, wearables, virtual reality devices, sensors and drones as just a few of the technologies now in use. This use, writers said, could flatten hierarchies as employees with less experience are able to take on more responsibility.

Encouraging a “culture of experimentation,” they said, is key to success in the “digital age,” pointing out

only 45 percent of police professionals surveyed agreed their agencies had a “creative and open-minded culture.”

Only 40 percent of those surveyed rated their police force’s recruitment strategy as effective, calling hiring new recruits vital to the future but difficult. The key, the report said, could be “targeted digital recruitment strategies” that bust myths of what police work is like, and a personalized approach to onboarding and career pathways. Smart use of emerging tech like biometric wearables, the authors wrote, could help promote a “resilient, engaged and productive” workforce by assessing officers’ well-being.

“Again, you just have to be creative, and this goes back to my point of view of hiring the right people, especially in the IT departments, that look for those creative ways to work together rather than just taking a challenge and making it a hurdle that somebody can’t get over. It’s like ‘Let’s figure a way to make this happen,’” Weis said.

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