As an executive recruiter for the public sector, I have the privilege of working with many great leaders and interviewing many talented candidates. It’s very satisfying when a recruitment process results in a great match of a dynamic organization with a motivated and enthusiastic new leader.

I’m a citizen of Nova Scotia, a parent and a taxpayer. I’m happy when the public service is refreshed and revitalized by the addition of innovative and talented people. Those employees not only ensure the quality of public service in the province, but they create workplaces that will continue to attract the best and the brightest.

As we all begin to think beyond the current recession, many public sector leaders are already planning for the delivery of excellent service within the context of tougher financial times. Achieving that difficult balance will require the best minds that we can recruit – people who thrive on challenge and think beyond the regulatory boxes. And, as the economy improves, the public sector will be recruiting those people in competition with a revived private sector from amongst a smaller talent pool. Building a strong employment brand and addressing negative perceptions will be increasingly important.

From the perspective of an early or mid-career job seeker, the public sector offers a range of exciting opportunities for meaningful, rewarding work and personal and professional growth. In fact, in Nova Scotia, the public sector may be the best opportunity for an engaging and successful career. The public sector, including the Armed Forces and the health system, is Nova Scotia’s largest employer—with a plethora of technical, professional and management positions across the Province.

The impact of this sector on the provincial economy is staggering: public sector workers in every community contribute to the local and provincial economies through their expenditures, their taxes – and their volunteer contributions and time!

Unfortunately, I see evidence every day that many people who would be excellent candidates for careers in public sector are not aware of the range of opportunities in the public sector. They aren’t even conscious of the interesting, challenging work that public servants do. So, when we advertise an opportunity, they aren’t paying attention.
“So what?” you may say. “When we run an ad, we get hundreds of responses – we have no trouble filling positions.” The fact is that a large number of applicants does not necessarily mean a large number of the right candidates. If top talent is ignoring your recruitment efforts because of undeserved negative perceptions, your organization loses – and so does the general public.

Recently, we conducted an on-line survey to test our sense that the public sector is missing out on some of its best recruitment targets because of inaccurate perceptions. From that, we’ve been able to identify some specific misunderstandings that may hamper public sector leaders in attracting the very people we need to establish a strong succession and a confident and effective public service.

A negative employment brand not only inhibits current recruitment efforts, especially against a post-recession private sector, it affects the capacity to retain existing strong employees. The most committed workers not only feel rewarded in their jobs, they feel pride in their workplace. When the feedback from friends and acquaintances is negative, it diminishes that pride – and the sense that the job is important, valued, and worthy of their best efforts.

Our evidence suggests that the talent the public sector will need to recruit in the coming years have misconceptions and do not understand the value proposition of a career in the public sector. A public sector career is one of challenge and opportunity – but we need to let people know that.

In our next Viewpoint, I’ll share some detailed results of our survey, as well as some of our thoughts on shifting the public sector employment brand to that of “employer of choice for the candidates of choice”.

If you have thoughts or questions on employment branding, or know of an example of a public sector organization that has created a strong, positive employment brand, please contact me. This is a conversation that I am eager to have!

Anna Stuart is a Partner at Knightsbridge Robertson Surrette, Atlantic Canada’s leading human capital solutions firm. Throughout her 20-year career, Anna has provided recruitment, strategic and operational advisory services to government, industry and family business throughout Atlantic Canada.