

Not As Seen on TV: FBI Using New Tactics to Attract Talent

FBI HR leader Michael Schneider talks to Steelcase about how culture, connection + wellbeing are key

 Read 6 mins

When you think of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, you may think of special agents in black suits running along rooftops, engaging bad guys in brazen gun battles. While that Hollywood depiction of the Bureau is popular, members of the organization's human resources division say the day-to-day reality of one of the world's most famous law enforcement agencies is often different from the action and intrigue we see in film and television. Dr. Tracy Brower, vice president of Workplace Insights at Steelcase talked with the FBI's Michael Schneider to find out what the agency is doing to attract and retain talent, and how the FBI's action-packed image impacts recruitment.

TB: Your world is unique because of all the portrayals of the FBI on TV and in the movies. How do you approach the process of attracting, recruiting and employer branding, given the portrayals?

Michael Schneider: In the past, we've been able to rely on the public portrayal, especially the intrigue portrayed in Hollywood, to appeal to our candidates' sense of adventure and excitement. While the work is exciting and you get to be part of an incredible mission, we also want to make sure that we are demonstrating what it is really like to work for the FBI. I like to tell my wife that I'm like Jack Bauer in "24" – I'm saving the world every day – but the reality is, while the work is exciting, challenging, and certainly motivating, there are many different roles in this organization that help support our mission of protecting the American people and upholding the Constitution. What we have done relatively recently is adjust our marketing and recruitment efforts, especially on our online platforms, to show not just the Hollywood portrayal of what it is like to work in this organization, but also the real people doing the important work. That fits right in with our efforts to recruit a more diverse workforce as well.

TB: Thinking of the work experience, how have your perspectives changed recently?

MS: We are not immune to the changes affecting other government agencies and the private sector as well. In the past, we were able to rely purely on the mission — come work for us so you can be part of this cool mission, make a difference in the world, and be part of something bigger than you. Now, there's an expectation among workers that their needs should be taken into consideration more than ever before. We've had to adjust our recruiting techniques to highlight the value we provide to our employees. While mission remains a big draw, we now also talk about how we invest in training and development. We talk about innovation when recruiting people with STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) backgrounds, as there are incredible opportunities to be innovative and help solve complex and important problems. Lastly, we talk about the benefits of working for an organization like the FBI — like stability and security, and earning a good pension. Because of the nature of our work, we can't always offer the same level of remote work that some private sector companies can offer, but we have also recognized that we need to be flexible in ways that we haven't always been in the past.

TB: New Steelcase research suggests wellbeing is a top priority for leaders around the world. How does the FBI approach that?

MS: That's another element of the employee experience that's shifted — the increased emphasis post-pandemic on wellness, mental health, and resilience. This is incredibly important to our organization and to our workforce.

We've always done well prioritizing physical fitness, especially with our special agent cadre, but we're focusing more now on the importance of wellness and mental health for all our employees.

MICHAEL SCHNEIDER | FBI

We started incorporating these themes as part of our onboarding, and we continue to emphasize and support it all the way through retirement. This has been incredibly well-received by our workforce, and it is important for us as an organization.

TB: You mention that a great work experience involves a collective mission — can you tell us more about that?

MS: Our efforts are centered around creating, developing, and supporting our world-class workforce from recruitment through retirement. We strategically assess the opportunities to influence our employee experience throughout their entire lifecycle in the organization. We think of ourselves as the premier law enforcement and intelligence agency in the world, so it's important that our workforce has a premier employee experience to match. If we're successful in that effort, it makes it much easier for us to recruit the talent we need to continue to meet our mission.

One of our unique challenges is that we have many dedicated employees who live and work in areas with a very high cost of living. In our San Francisco field office, for example, many of our critical employees working in cyber and STEM-related fields could leave tomorrow to pursue tremendous career opportunities and join companies where they could ultimately get paid a lot more money. With that in mind, it's truly inspiring to see our talented workforce stay committed to the mission because they love what they do and want to continue to make a difference for our country and the world.

TB: In what specific ways are you addressing wellness and wellbeing?

MS: This isn't your traditional nine-to-five job, so our employees routinely reference the camaraderie – being part of the FBI family – as critical to their wellbeing. When we talk about wellness holistically across the organization, we recognize our workforce greatly values flexibility, and that flexibility allows us to build a cohesive team. I'm a big believer in providing our employees a level of independence that demonstrates to them that we trust them, we value them, and we will support them. We want to make sure that we continue to give them the space to grow and develop their skills.

TB: How has the role of HR shifted recently?

MS: Historically, HR work has tended to be transactional. However, if that's all we're focusing on, we're not driving the organization to be the best we can be. Having served in many leadership roles across the organization before returning to run our Human Resources Division, I am well-positioned to drive some larger strategic efforts to ensure our long-term success. These efforts include developing future leaders so they are ready to take on bigger roles across the organization, implementing better processes to ensure we are selecting the best leaders, thinking differently about talent management and succession planning, and strengthening our structure to ensure we hold our leaders accountable.

TB: What do you see as the relationship between people and the physical space?

MS: The FBI is unique when it comes to place — because of how the organization is structured, the idea of “place” is a little bit of a misnomer. We certainly have a large presence in Washington D.C., but we are somewhat decentralized through our 56 field offices across the country and our legal attaché offices around the world. That's why we really focus on the employee experience and the connection to the mission rather than the concept of “place.” Since we're spread out, we need to have a constant level of connectivity with our 38,000 employees. We must be incredibly transparent in the implementation of our policies and processes. While we are united as an organization, we must also ensure there is flexibility for our field leaders to be able to lead. Because of the nature of the FBI and the work we do, we face challenges that other organizations don't have. However, it is the people of FBI that make this place special, and we strive to ensure everything we do is focused on creating an environment for them to be successful.

Michael H. Schneider was named assistant director of the FBI's Human Resources Division in August 2022. He had most recently served as the special agent in charge of the Denver Field Office.

Mr. Schneider joined the FBI as a special agent in 2004 and has led counterterrorism, counterintelligence, intelligence, and cyber programs around the U.S. and the world. Schneider also served as the U.S. government's on-scene commander for the Winter Olympics in Seoul, South Korea, leading the team that ensured the safety and security of U.S. interests before and during the games.