

# Dr. Jeff T. H. Pon

Chief Human Capital Officer

U.S. Department of Energy

By Lauren Kronthal

## Redefining the Business of Human Resources

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) stands at the forefront of the nation's efforts to meet its energy, scientific, environmental, and national security goals of developing and deploying new energy technologies and reducing dependence on foreign energy sources. The success of such a critical mission rests on DOE's pursuit of an effective workforce strategy. As DOE's chief human capital officer (CHCO), Dr. Jeff Pon plays an integral role in building the department's critical resource: its workforce.

"I act as the principal advisor to the secretary and deputy secretary in all matters concerning our workforce, the development, retention, and recruitment of our workforce.... We're not only working as human resources people, but really as strategic business partners to our most-senior leadership," explains Pon. "My primary mission and goal [is] to make sure we have the right talent at the right time at the right place. My responsibility is to make sure that each and every one of our managers has the right information to make critical decisions. We make sure while we are recruiting, selecting, and retaining people that our workforce strategies are effective and in alignment with our priorities as an organization."

Pon offers a sense of the scope of the department. "We run a \$24 billion business. We're the largest funder of the physical sciences.... We have about 14,000 federal people across the entire complex. We run 27 national laboratories, some of which you probably know: Lawrence Berkeley, Sandia National Laboratories, Argonne, and Fermi.... We pride ourselves on being at the forefront of scientific discovery. Where else in the whole entire world can you actually claim that you work for an organization that's trying to discover the meaning of the universe or mapping the human genome?" He points out that the Department of Energy is "really in the business of managing science [and] technology for energy security, national security, and American competitiveness in an environmentally responsible way—that's a huge portfolio."

### CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- Chief Human Capital Officer, U.S. Department of Energy
- Deputy Director, E-Government, U.S. Office of Personnel Management
- Director, Brandsoft
- Corporate Organization Development Consultant, Seagate Technology

Pon recounts a discussion he had with Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman. "I asked [Secretary Bodman], 'Are we one company, one corporation, with a leadership philosophy that's integrated across our organization, where the bar is set at a certain level and everybody follows it? Or are we a holding company with 24 or 27 different LLCs?' He answered me by saying, 'I believe that we are the latter, but striving to be the former.' And that's my job here—to make sure we manage effectively across the organization."

The Department of Energy has earned green status in human capital management on the President's Management Agenda scorecard. Pon identifies some of the challenges in getting the department to green and staying green: "It's making sure we have a strategic plan for the whole entire organization—a five-year strategic human capital plan that's integrated across our whole entire organization. It's making sure we're closing the gaps in mission-critical occupations.... It's really related to how we operate our business.... We're making sure that our human capital processes are in support of the program mission."

"I think we're one of the leaders in government trying to change the culture through the human capital plan," says Pon. "It's not just about checking the boxes. We want to make sure that these priorities are meaningful so that we have the right people in the right place at the right time."



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“We [the Department of Energy] pride ourselves on being at the forefront of scientific discovery. Where else in the whole entire world can you actually claim that you work for an organization that’s trying to discover the meaning of the universe or mapping the human genome?”

We’re training and developing the best of the best, because we are the best of the best, and we want to remain that way as a nation in this global competitive environment.”

Pon explains the prominence of a human capital strategy in the larger picture: “The president and secretary of energy have 10 priorities, one of which is the strategic management of human capital. Why is it so important? It’s because human capital is something that has to be at the forefront of the conversation as opposed to human resources, as in the transactional nature of those things.” He continues: “The strategic management of human capital is a wide brush of how we do things in the department—what do we find important in terms of knowledge skills, abilities, and experiences of our employees. But from there, you can actually define your recruitment strategies, hiring strategies, your development strategy and retention strategies.... This is central to running an effective organization, and the strategic plan actually reflects that: where are the hiring priorities, where are the development priorities, and actually managing it as one organization.”

Prior to his role as CHCO, Pon served as the Office of Personnel Management’s e-government deputy director, where he led the government-wide effort to implement the five e-government initiatives as well as the Human Resources Line of Business (HRLOB). With respect to DOE’s plans to transition to an HR Line of Business, he says: “The Human Resources Line of Business is a very, very important effort across the government. It really has to do with what is the business of HR, defining what the business is, what are the different types of services HR provides, how do we keep track of this performance, what’s the information that we track, and what’s the technology. [In addition to that,] it’s taking a look at the shape of HR and what we do now.... HRLOB, along with the e-government initiatives, is really taking a look at how do we go from a paper-based human resources function to a digital function. I think that’s a very important aspect, because it’s the on-demand data that you

have that I don’t have right now.... The ready use of data is so important to making critical, timely decisions.... Technology offers that to us.”

Pon believes workforce planning is vital to helping leadership draw a clear picture of current and future human resource decisions. “Workforce planning is central to human capital management. It’s a contract between the programmatic manager and human resources. With a workforce plan, you actually have a forecast and model on what the priorities are, who they’re going to be recruiting, what the next 100 hires are going to be, and who they’re developing.”

Looking ahead, Pon reflects: “I think our challenge is to get out of transactional administration and move towards a more strategic one. It’s really about working directly with the businesses. Instead of just processing the blue paper or the 52s and the 50s—that’s HR speak for the paper process—we really need to get in front of that and take a look at the mission of an organization. How are they meeting the challenges of the next one, three, five years? What are their areas of growth or decline? How are they going to identify the right vocations within that skill set in the next one, three, and five years? That should all be teed up by a human capital professional.” ■

To learn more about the U.S. Department of Energy, go to [www.doe.gov](http://www.doe.gov).



To hear *The Business of Government Hour’s* interview with Dr. Jeff Pon, go to the Center’s website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org).



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To read the full transcript of *The Business of Government Hour’s* interview with Dr. Jeff Pon, visit the Center’s website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org).