


INTELLIGENCE UPDATE

# Targeted recruitment can widen the talent pool

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Staffing shortages in the data center industry persist despite widespread recruitment efforts. While these shortages are largely due to rapid industry expansion, the low numbers of employees from under-represented groups suggest that a re-examination of the industry’s recruitment practices could widen talent pipelines. This could include targeting military veterans, women, neurodiverse individuals and those looking to switch careers.

Uptime Institute’s 2023 staffing survey revealed that two-thirds of data center operators have initiatives in place to hire new entrants into the job market (see **Figure 1**). Yet, in a separate question, 58% of companies report difficulty in sourcing qualified candidates. This calls into question whether current recruitment strategies are effective in reaching prospective employees. By re-evaluating their recruitment initiatives and targeting them toward smaller, clearly defined groups, operators can improve the effectiveness of their recruitment programs.

**Figure 1. Two-thirds of operators have initiatives in place to attract new entrants**

Does your organization have initiatives or programs in place to hire new entrants into the job market (e.g., recent college graduates or training program graduates)? (n=402)



## Recruitment focus shifts outside the industry

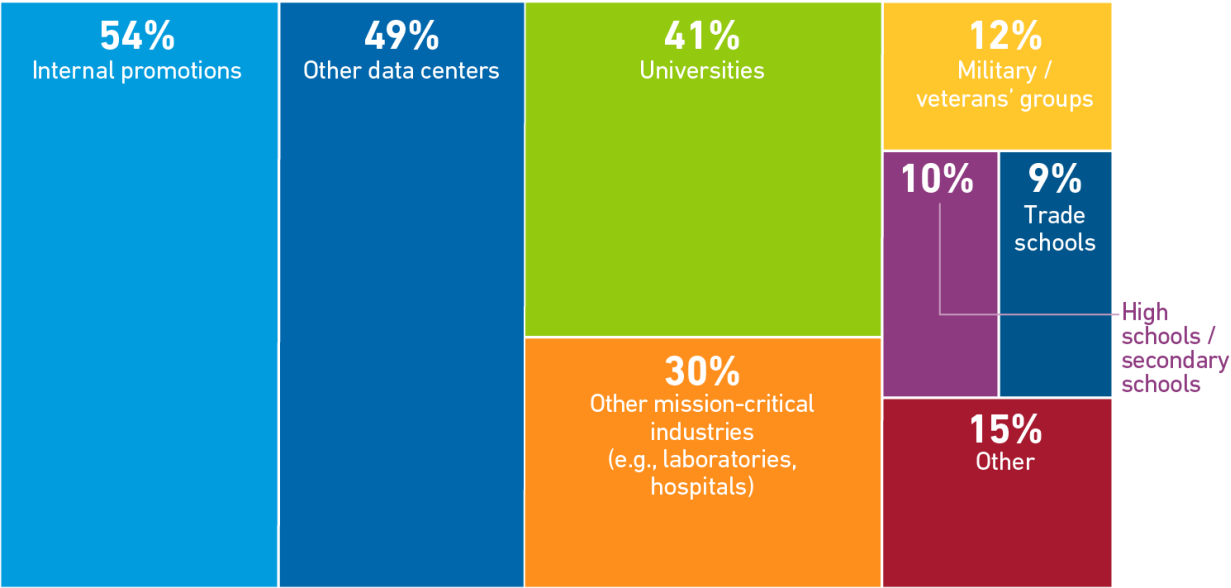
While most new hires are sourced through internal promotions or from other data centers, the

industry is not without additional talent pool options. Uptime’s 2023 staffing survey revealed that 41% of respondents recruited new talent from universities, 30% from other mission-critical industries and 12% from the military (**Figure 2**). The advantage of recruiting from these groups is that they are generally associated with large institutions that are easy for recruiters to target.

Women and minorities often comprise a fraction of these groups and funneling these individuals into a data center career may require additional strategic consideration.

**Figure 2. University hires account for highest source of recruits outside the industry**

Where has your organization recently recruited from for open data center positions? Choose all that apply. (n=226)



UPTIME INSTITUTE DATA CENTER STAFFING SURVEY 2023



**University graduates**

College-aged participants were invited to attend a recent industry event and seemed receptive and enthusiastic about job opportunities in the data center sector — although many stated they were unclear what a career in the data center industry looked like.

It is common for data center companies to offer internships to university students, but there are issues with visibility. Hyperscalers typically provide access to college internships on their websites, but data center-specific opportunities are often hidden in a mass of more general STEM internships. Without prior knowledge and the relevant search terms, it is not easy for potential recruits to track down data center internships on company websites.

Many successful outreach initiatives currently involve going into communities and educating children and young adults on data center fundamentals, but it is rare for individual data center operators themselves to implement these initiatives. Some operators fear that publishing easily accessible information about their day-to-day activities could mean exposing confidential information to business competitors. As a result, operators that engage in recruitment outreach

initiatives tend to do so through third-party organizations, so they can highlight their brands without exposing proprietary data.

While universities are an important source of talent, the industry's tendency to focus on this singular group contradicts current hiring needs. Uptime's 2023 staffing survey found that nearly half of all respondents report shortages of junior / mid-level operations staff — positions that do not require a university degree. In addition, university graduates often seek leadership positions, which they believe are warranted by their degree, but these positions are limited and usually require relevant experience.

## **Veterans**

Military veterans are a recognized source of data center operational talent, particularly in the US. The ability of veterans to follow processes and instructions with minimum deviation is highly valued.

In several countries, there are programs in place that allow military veterans to train onsite with no financial expenditure to the employer. In the US, the government-led DOD SkillBridge program allows veterans to continue receiving military salary while working on internships or apprenticeships in various partner companies.

Despite this, only 12% of Uptime's staffing survey respondents reported recruiting from the military in 2023. It is likely that, while many data centers provide opportunities through the DOD SkillBridge program, they compete with many other more widely-recognized partner industries on the program. Initiatives that exist specifically to recruit veterans into the data center industry are likely to be more successful.

## **Women**

Uptime's 2024 global survey of data center managers reports that 80% of data center operators employ 10% or less women. Women are less likely than men to pursue STEM careers, and only a small subset will be drawn to data center careers. Early education that shapes their career path is crucial for this group, however most initiatives catering to women tend to focus on those already attached to the industry.

Many organizations promote employee-led networking groups for specific demographics to connect with each other across sites and roles. While this strategy may foster a sense of visibility, it risks putting the onus of inclusion onto employees rather than employers. It also does little to bring in new talent. These diversity-based groups may at times have the opposite effect to that intended: participants may become more aware of their demographic's limited presence in the company.

External organizations that seek to connect and support female employees may offer more structure than internal groups; however, these may require subscription fees to join, deterring new entrants. Some memberships are only accessible via the employer, and companies that already encourage employee-led networking groups may not see the benefit in partnering with

an external agency.

## Neurodiverse individuals

While many neurodiverse individuals possess STEM backgrounds that can translate directly into data center work, they usually find it tough to find their way into a steady job. This is especially true for those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD): employment rates for this group are around 27.3% in Australia, 28% in Israel, 29% in the UK, and only 14% in the US and Canada ([Employment profiles of autistic people: an 8-year longitudinal study](#)). Those with ASD struggle in social situations and find it difficult to display the necessary social skills inherent to the interview process, such as failing to follow nonverbal social cues. Employers may interpret a candidate's lack of eye contact as being rude or disinterested. Those who can easily recall job-specific facts on cue may still struggle to answer interview questions that require abstract reasoning.

Neurodiversity outreach entails partnering with organizations that support candidates as they transition into their new role. This process may involve a vocational coach during the initial phases of a career as a routine is established.

Evidence suggests that, given the proper support, this group tends to demonstrate advantageous characteristics in a work setting. Researchers from York University found workers with ASD are more likely to intervene upon witnessing misconduct or dysfunction in the workplace, and less likely to engage in unethical behavior ([An ethical advantage of autistic employees in the workplace](#)). In a data center context, this may translate to adherence with operating procedures and a lower likelihood of compliance errors. Despite the high placement rates, few employers are aware that successful vocational programs for neurodiverse individuals exist. Fewer still may be willing to invest resources into this demographic due to negative stereotypes surrounding autism.

## Employees from outside the industry

Although 30% of 2023 staffing survey respondents report recruiting from outside the sector, few initiatives specifically target workers from mission-critical industries outside the data center industry. The main obstacles facing this group are a lack of awareness of the opportunities, a lack of confidence about their ability to work in the sector, and a lack of company-funded educational or training programs for those who wish to switch careers. This group usually does not have the resources to take time off work to complete a training course — let alone one that requires payment.

Various organizations offer free tuition programs, funded by grants and donations. These programs also provide students with a stipend. While this removes obstacles for the students, partner businesses typically must pay a fee per intern — these organizations may then waive recruitment fees if interns are subsequently hired. Many data center hiring managers, however, consider this investment too risky— even in organizations with high placement rates.

## Options to consider

Successful recruitment initiatives combine knowledge of a target audience with an individualized outreach strategy — but unless there is sufficient promotion of the chosen strategy, it can still fail. While operators often wish to expand their staffing efforts, many still prioritize confidentiality to the point where essential employment information is inaccessible. This practice may be rooted in misconceptions of what information is necessary to attract recruits and what information should remain confidential. Successful strategies include:

- Openly promoting opportunities to any given demographic, but only providing access to background information on data centers and industry benefits.
- Partnering with a diverse array of pre-existing third-party development programs that cater to specific demographics. Facilitators involved are usually willing to sign nondisclosure agreements to safeguard company information.
- Assessing long-term and short-term placement rates. When choosing a third-party recruitment or training agency, consider the long-term retention rates in addition to the placement success rates.
- Focusing on near-term solutions. Organizations can focus on the data center roles with the most vacancies and try to recruit appropriate employees as quickly and effectively as possible.

## Speak now or risk reputation later

There are currently plenty of data center internships on offer, yet operators hesitate to promote these due to concerns around confidentiality. While these concerns may sometimes be warranted, the aspects of data center security that rely on assumed obscurity are likely to become unsustainable due to growing public awareness of the industry. For most data center employers, an awareness of security risks will be embedded into the culture of the organization and this will be communicated to potential recruits.

Negative perceptions about the impact of data centers on local communities may deter some applicants, but owners and operators can be proactive by promoting the industry as a secure and well-paid career option.

Many issues relating to staffing shortages are systemic and require long-term strategic effort. Although encouraging school-aged children to take an interest in STEM may be an effective way to grow a future workforce, the industry is likely to achieve more immediate results by trying to attract those who are either just about to enter the workforce or those already working and looking for a new career direction.

## The Uptime Intelligence View

Data center managers are under pressure to attract additional talent to the workforce so that senior staff, many who are nearing retirement, will be available to pass on their expertise. The industry has the necessary recruitment tools to resolve this — but needs to reassess the extent

to which it sacrifices privacy for growth.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## **About Uptime Institute**

Uptime Institute is the Global Digital Infrastructure Authority. Its Tier Standard is the IT industry's most trusted and adopted global standard for the proper design, construction, and operation of data centers – the backbone of the digital economy. For over 25 years, the company has served as the standard for data center reliability, sustainability, and efficiency, providing customers assurance that their digital infrastructure can perform at a level that is consistent with their business needs across a wide array of operating conditions.

With its data center Tier Standard & Certifications, Management & Operations reviews, broad range of related risk and performance assessments, and accredited educational curriculum completed by over 10,000 data center professionals, Uptime Institute has helped thousands of companies, in over 100 countries to optimize critical IT assets while managing costs, resources, and efficiency.