

Recruitment and training in the Australian Public Service

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Changes to the work of the APS requires new careers and skills

Both the work of the Australian Public Service and the skills required by public servants have changed considerably over the last two decades.

The shift in work can be characterised as having gone from ‘rowing’ to ‘steering’, while the shift in skills can be characterised as having gone from ‘doing’ to ‘facilitating’. The changes have resulted in:

- a reduction in the number of APS staff actually providing goods and services to the public and government. For APS technology professionals, this has meant that there is a much reduced need for people undertaking technical activities such as design, construction, asset management, software development, geotechnical assessment, and network administration.
- increased demand for skills which enables public servants to effectively interact with non-government organisations such as the private sector and not-for-profit organisations. For technical professionals, this has meant that they need to have some subject matter expertise, knowledge of the industry and its drivers, and specialist cross-disciplinary skills such as risk management and contracting skills.
- the disappearance of the traditional path for growing people into mid-level positions. Historically, APS technology professionals were grown from the ground up. This involved taking them in as graduates or undergraduates and placing them on lengthy rotation program that gave them exposure to various elements of work including operational activities, workforce supervision and project management. However, with the elimination of in-house provision of goods and services, there is now no operational positions to place staff in.
- the replacement of the workforce pyramid with a mid-level workforce bulge. Historically, with in-house provision of goods and services, there were a large number of entry level positions required to actually deliver them. This created a workforce pyramid, which had decreasing numbers of staff at each successive seniority level. This structure has now been replaced with one that requires more mid-level staff than entry level staff. This structure is not sustainable without significant lateral recruitment. For APS technology professionals, this is increasingly resulting in them having an industry background rather than an APS one.

Together, these trends are making it difficult for the APS to obtain the required number and quality of technology professionals. Increasingly, the APS is requiring industry to produce skilled staff that the APS can hire. For many technology areas, lateral recruitment can provide these people if the APS can pay the market rate. However, there are a number of areas where

lateral recruitment is not optimal, as the skills sets required are found in people who have previously worked in the public sector, usually at a reasonably senior level. to the APS.

An example of this is a Project Director for a major public private partnership project. The Project Director has the overall responsibility for the day to day management of the project, and is responsible for the management of the Government project team and external advisers. The Project Director requires highly developed project management and commercial skills and a sound practical knowledge of Government processes including accountability and due process, and may also be desirable to have the appropriate technical skills (eg engineering) relevant to the project. Specifically, they will need to have the skills to:

- develop positions on a range of policy, commercial and administrative issues,
- manage the consultancies (satisfactory performance, deliverables achieved etc),
- manage the competitive bid process,
- manage stakeholder relations and community consultation, and
- provide advice and assistance to the Evaluation Committee on its assessment of Expressions of Interest (EOIs) and Binding Bids.

Industry rarely requires this combination of skills, and in this instance, it would be inappropriate to rely on the private sector to produce such staff.

The attributes of today's APS technology professional

Today, the typical APS technology professional requires four attributes. They are:

- **Experience.** There is a greater demand for personnel from about 7 to 15 years of work experience in the APS compared with the past. This is reflected in the APS profile where in 2001 the mid-level management levels of ASO6 to EL2 made up 40% of the workforce compared with 27% in 1992.
- **Skills to effectively interact with the private sector and non-government organisations.** Interaction comes in a range of forms from contract-based arrangements to policy development, and from regulation to partnering. Building a collaborative relationship requires negotiation and communication skills as well as awareness of each partner's agenda, abilities and limitations. It also requires knowledge of the drivers, options and limitations of the organisations they are interacting with.
- **Subject matter knowledge.** To effectively work in an area obviously requires knowledge of the subject matter. The depth of knowledge will depend on the work and range from superficial knowledge to substantial knowledge. For example, managing an IT contract may require substantial knowledge of the effort needed to rectify certain types of network failures, while managing the National Highway System may require knowledge of road design standards and assessing if technical performance standards are appropriate. Invariably for technical professionals, gaining the required subject matter expertise will require considerable operational experience.
- **Traditional public sector skills.** These are skills specific to the public service and include an appreciation of the public service ethos, values and code of conduct. Specifically it will require that staff work within a framework of meeting the priorities of the government of the day, parliamentary controls, statutory requirements, accountability and consideration of equity and social justice. The traditional public sector skills, which include the need to balance achieving outcomes with due process, are becoming more important with the increasing interaction between government and non-government organisations.

A lack of these attributes may mean that staff:

- focus on contractual terms rather than outcomes,
- are uncomfortable with risk sharing and allocate risk on the basis of minimising risk to themselves rather than to the party best able to manage it,

- are unable to justify the option which offers best value for money, and instead select the lowest priced option,
- increase contractor risks by not providing relevant technical details in tender documents, and
- are exploited by unscrupulous contractors who take advantage of the buyer's lack of knowledge.

The existing APS approach generally does not generate staff with these attributes. For example, while rotation programs for graduates exist in most agencies, they invariably consist of rotating staff within the agencies. This does not provide them with subject matter experience nor experience of non-government organisations with which they will have to work. While the rotation program may provide them with some interaction with non-government organisations, it will be solely from the agency's perspective. While site visits, reading industry journals and attending courses provide graduates with some exposure to industry, it does not give them the knowledge of industry best practice, norms, operational procedures, profit margins and other issues essential to maximising the outcomes of government to non-government interaction.

Possible solutions

A number of initiatives can create APS technical professionals with the required skills.

Firstly, the APS and each agency needs to recognise that it is in its own best interests to actively create the workforce it requires, rather than relying on market forces to generate people with the needed skills. This is not to deny that there is not a significant role to be played by lateral recruitment. However, the issues of public-private pay differential and the unique skill sets required by the APS means that the potential of lateral recruitment is limited.

Incidentally, the need to grow technical professionals in the public sector is being recognised around the country. This can be seen in the reintroduction of cadet programs, rebuilding of internal expertise and expansion of graduate recruitment in various State agencies. See Attachment 1 for a summary of the experience in the Western Australian Department of Main Roads.

Secondly, there is a need to introduce a professional development program that offers to provide graduates with both operational work in order to gain subject matter expertise, and work with non-APS organisations in order to gain skills in collaborating. This may mean placing staff with non-APS organisations such as industry, State government agencies and local government organisations. This practice is already occurring in isolated areas such as Navy. It organises a six month industry secondment for junior professional engineers. For other organisations, the secondment does not have to be outside government. For example, staff who need a knowledge of roads and infrastructure could work for the ACT Department of Urban Services or Cooma-Monaro Shire Council.

Thirdly, there is a need to ensure that the Graduate Development Program results in competency in specialist cross-disciplinary skills such as risk management and contracting. Some agencies' programs are already providing these skills, having recognised they underpin knowledge for most senior APS positions. It is important that all graduates obtain these skills to some degree.

These three changes would be expensive, but the APS would gain in the medium term as staff would be more competent. Individuals would also gain, particularly in the short-term as they would become more marketable. Consequently it is reasonable to expect that there would be

some obligation for a return on service for graduates. If a professional development program lasted for 3 years, a 3 year return of service would be appropriate.

Fourthly, the concept of the Graduate Development Program should be applied to more mature technology professionals as well as for graduates. Agencies should encourage staff to obtain relevant education each time they move into a new area. For example, if a person moves from a contracting to policy area then it would be reasonable to expect that they obtain a post-graduate diploma in policy development or equivalent. A secondment to a non-APS organisation may also be appropriate for people who wish to specialise in an area for several years. Again, some form of mutual obligation would also be appropriate.

Fifthly, the existing career structure for APS technology professionals needs to be changed so that it rewards people for gaining deep competence. Currently the career structure can only reward people, via promotion, for gaining an increased breadth of skill. While the APS does not require many deep technical specialists, some are essential. Because of their small number, it is far more efficient to retain each individual for longer, than it is to replace them every few years by lateral recruitment or growing them internally. Currently technology professionals mostly have a career ceiling at the EL1 or EL2 level. Because the only way for these people to increase their salaries is via promotions, many are encouraged to leave their areas of competence earlier than they would like. Organisations like DSTO have recognised this problem and have created a new career structure which allows all technical personnel, including scientists and engineers, to reach a Senior Executive Service equivalent level while still working in technical fields. See Attachment 2 for more details.

Sixthly, ways to increase the understanding by non-government organisation staff of the work of the APS is required. One approach may be for industry to second staff to the APS, providing there is no conflict of interest.

Finally, for mid-level technology professionals who are laterally recruited, training in skills specific to the public service is essential. This would include the public service ethos, values and code of conduct, as well as balancing achieving outcomes with due process.

Conclusion

The APS has radically changed over the last two decades and one of the results is that today, the APS is generally not considered an informed technology buyer, regulator or policy developer. To address this, a holistic approach is required which considers technology professionals' skills, career structure, education, training, experience building process and remuneration.

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