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Closing the Implementation Gap:  
Improving capacity, accountability, performance and  
human resource quality in the Canadian and Ontario  
public service

## Summary of Roundtables

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## Contents

Introduction..... 3

Attracting and Retaining Employees..... 3

Communication..... 7

Talent Retention..... 9

Human Resources..... 11

Improvements to Accountability Design..... 13

Concluding remarks..... 14

Participants:..... 16

## Introduction

The ability of the Canadian public service to perform complicated tasks while maintaining accountability norms for Parliament and the public is one of the major governance issues of our time. Research conducted by the Centre for the Study of Democracy explored ways to put a different frame on future of public service other than the one that's been established in the public commentary/discourse.

This process involved preparing a series of working papers for comment by public servants and political scientists and former civil servants.

CSD invited the readers to attend a roundtable to explore the issues of accountability design; performance improvements; and attracting and retaining quality employees.

The roundtables helped inform the final versions of the research papers that recommend new management directions and instruments to improve the performance of the Canadian public service. In all, four sessions were held: in Kingston (6.27.07 and 12.04.09); Toronto (7.3.07) and in Ottawa (9.14.07). CSD's Thomas Axworthy chaired each session.

The Comparative Analysis of Public Service Employee Surveys (referred to as CSDES throughout the report) highlights the results of a survey sent to Queen's Master of Public Administration graduates countrywide (2009) and compares their responses to those of Canadian Federal public servants and to Ontario Public Service Employees to their respective emolument surveys (2008). These comparisons provide a snapshot view of the opinions of current civil servants. When combined with recent literature reviews on the Canadian system and the international system, and the latest work in the OECD, weaknesses to be fixed and areas to focus emerged.

Summaries of the comments made by roundtable participants informed each iteration of the final paper and are presented in the following pages.

## Attracting and Retaining Employees

*"Can we get to the point across in 140 characters or less?"*

It is natural for people to want to associate themselves with good organisations that say something good about 'me'—so if the only message that is getting out to the public is through the media, it's no wonder that the public service is having trouble

attracting young people. Unmentioned are success stories that can send positive messages to the public. For example, the Ontario Financing Authority is made up of a group of keen, dedicated workers who could double their pay in the private sector—why don't they? Why do they stay there?

The issue of performance comes down to hiring good people and getting them working on issues that they deem important and where they feel a real sense of accomplishment. However, it is difficult to hire good people in this era of low morale. The fundamental question that needs to be asked is: what to do about the public sector to make it attractive to high quality people? Secondly, regarding retention—how to retain good workers when they are “ruthlessly poached” by other departments, especially since this is not just a threat from the private sector but internal.

There is an undertone to the discussions that suggests that government organisations are very risk-averse and operate in stifling atmosphere. Senior public servants, on both the policy and program sides, should be encouraged to participate in recruiting efforts to share their passion and experiences to defy this sentiment. They must demonstrate that opportunities to develop energy and synergy and entrepreneurship are desired. Positive messages are vital to counteracting the negative images dominating the media.

Early indoctrination of Canadian youth is the goal of the parliamentary/legislature internship programs. Bright young people are exposed to the government organism and how it works. It is expected that the interns will become thoroughly familiar with the procedures and conventions of the legislature. At the same time it is hoped that they will contribute in some measure to increasing public knowledge and appreciation of the work of the government. The interns who return to academic life are more likely to carry out research on legislative bodies and, because of their experience, will be able to give students a better understanding of the important role of the Legislative Assembly in the provincial political system. If the experiences are positive, they'll tell the stories. If they are not, as some comments from employees indicate, the program needs to be reviewed and changed to achieve its goals.

In 2007, Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet, Kevin Lynch included the recommendation to “apply lessons from current programs such as the ... the Accelerated Economists Program (AEP) ... to develop broader initiatives that

will serve the renewal needs of the Public Service”<sup>1</sup> in his annual report to the Prime Minister.

The AEP is geared towards high calibre students pursuing Masters Studies in economics or public policy, providing them with the opportunity to work with Canada’s top decision-makers on social, economic and international policy agendas. The two year program includes four six-month assignments in government departments that have economic and public policy sector responsibilities. Three placements are with the Treasury Board Secretariat, the Department of Finance, and the Privy Council Office. The fourth placement is chosen from a list of line departments. All assignments are located in the National Capital Region.

Annually, close to 600 people apply; fewer than 100 are interviewed (a two-day interview process in Ottawa in January: during the first day, candidates write a two-hour exam; day two consists of a face-to-face interview with a panel of five interviewers); less than 20 are accepted to the program (notified in May).

Several “AEPers” attended the Ottawa roundtable and lamented on the lengthy recruitment period. It was stressful and for some, the security clearance issues seemed unusually arduous. However, the desire to take part in the program remained strong among all. They believe that participation in the program affords an opportunity to compare where they ultimately want to be.

The participants at the Toronto roundtable expressed a desire for a program similar to the AEP: They proposed the creation of a learning plan which includes a tour of the different ministries so that new hires are acquainted with various areas. Employees also want to be mobile and get a taste of everything in public service when they are starting out. Change would not be such a problem if there was a functional model which could provide guidance and answers to problems (e.g. what needs to be done, etc.).

A group of young people in Ottawa lamented on the issues of credentials when this subject was broached during a roundtable meeting on the Indian Diaspora. Although having earned Canadian credentials they experienced employment barriers to working in the public service because of citizenship.

While the report recommends employing the talents of new immigrants, to meet the needs of the future PS, one participant asked *“what will be the effect of discriminatory practices on these new workers and what will be the effect on work place morale due to diminished opportunities for the established groups to move up.*

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1 Fourteenth Annual Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service of Canada, Kevin G. Lynch, Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet, for the year ending March 31, 2007

*The paper is silent on this issue. Is it possible that we have solved all these problems including problems of the glass ceiling? “*

Both those involved in the AEP program and the Ontario public service employees expressed frustration at the job cycle process. The AEP group suggested a review of the timing of placements (currently six month stint in each central agency) that would allow recruits to experience a full budget cycle. This would appease the tenured public servants bureaucrats who expressed frustration with the “tourists”—those in the department/agency for short periods who require a lot of attention (as they earn) and then move on when they are finally working independently.

Ontario Government contracts last approximately nine months and therefore employees are required to send résumés out after six months in a position. Each one must compete for their existing jobs even if they are performing well and are interested in remaining in the position. Having to reapply for your own job is a disheartening process for employees, as well as seeming pointless and baffling. One option could be that in cases where an employee is doing well, and the manager has documented to that effect, the manager can exempt the employee from the need to re-apply. This may require more forethought on the part of the manager. Many employees do not mind job competition, but would like for the jury or tribunal process to be more transparent and to have an HR consultant present for hiring decisions.

The information provided in the survey comparisons paper that more than a fifth of MPA alumni who had once worked in the public service have since left is interesting and somewhat disturbing in light of the Clerk’s ambition to renew the ranks of the public service. It seems that it would be in the interest of both the federal and Ontario governments to work to “triangulate” these observations with further surveys. It is also in the interest of the dedicated university programs and schools of policy and administration to know whether their “for purpose” management and policy degree holders are more, less or equally likely to leave public service than those with other backgrounds.

And what of mature workers? People aren’t aware of all the options available in public service, are confused about getting in and have the perception that entry is nearly impossible. Exposure to clear, direct information about the opportunities available is essential to effective recruitment.

An expansion of personnel exchanges between the public and the private sectors to vitalize organizations and inject fresh perspectives was discouraged by several senior bureaucrats because of confidentiality issues. Instead, it was suggested public

servants in Canada could be seconded to work in their respective home departments around the world

The closed character of the public sector requires review because it is difficult to enter the public service at a management level beyond post-secondary recruitment programs.

Employees are eager to explore flexible working arrangements—using technology to work from home, for instance. Technology could also be used to increase policy shops outside of Ottawa. The benefit would be a stronger, positive image of public service.

However, if the mechanics of recruitment, which were described as ‘appalling’, are not revised, frustration will continue. Apparently, it takes twice as long to hire for the Federal public services as it does for provincial counterparts. Recruiters from the Ontario public service are able to offer jobs on the spot to MPA students during campus recruiting sessions. The Federal process takes months and by this time the best and the brightest are already hired.

We were told that in the last planned “New Wave” exercise in recruitment and promotion by the Central Personnel Agency over four years ago, over 1000 experts applied for about 100 jobs at the entry-to-executive level identified by departments as urgently required. After six months of paper work, and a battery of tests, about half were weeded out. After another six months two hundred fifty people were interviewed over a period of six months and fifty were declared to be eligible. Eighteen months later, when departments were informed that they could start drawing down on this inventory, most of the “finalists” had lost interest. The available jobs were “bilingual imperative.” Two were finally placed. Within six months one left and the other went on French Training. The estimated cost of this exercise was estimated to be over one million dollars.

Even when successfully recruited many find more barriers facing them. The orientation process is flawed. There is an information gap—finding a good contact to guide you through the system is very difficult and trying to do it on your own is nearly impossible.

## Communication

Internal communications are very important and come hand in hand with accountability. There is a real value to linking an internal communication piece to accountability and reforms. The CSDES found that systematically, across different

systems and time, there is a real disconnect between what managers and policy boards are saying and what is being implemented.

Roundtable participants told us that there are too many people trying to make decisions at the same time—resulting in inaction because “we don't know what we are doing!”

One wonders if there is a correlation between centralization and internal communications. Newer and more junior employees lack understanding of the decision-making process and there is little to no opportunity to sit down and discuss these issues with managers. There are problematic interactions between those at the centre and at the periphery (and it would be interesting to explore this differential). Those at the centre are excited and aware of what is going on while others are left feeling disconnected.

We also heard of the dire need for improved communication between exempt staff and public servants. Neither understands the other's roles and the result is divisiveness, frustration and lack of achievement.

Strong objections to the title of “Chief of Staff” were expressed because it falsely denotes executive authority, and replace it with Executive Assistant, or another title that accurately reflects the nature of the position. All felt that political advisors are assistants not decision-makers and that making this more obvious is important.

The hierarchical layers and inconsistent processes of approval also frustrate roundtable participants. Even long term employees in OPS remark that they are not sure what their roles and responsibilities are. For example, if one disagrees with their manager or finds something unethical, they may not react or question it because they are uncertain about the support they will receive (especially regarding whistle blowing). Reactions and decisions are ad hoc and there is little direction given. Managers only give as much information as their personal discretion permits. There is no established planning process or set of corporate values (or if there are, they are not being implemented).

Managers and directors, while respecting protocol, should look for opportunities to include a new recruit into a deputy's boardroom or director's meetings, as a way to build trust and mitigate fear. Without this, a realistic perception of higher officials is lacking. Attendance at a meeting would expose junior employees to the decision-making processes and rationale for a course of action. Information from “the Centre” needs to be connected and disseminated—something that is not happening now. Borrowing from the private sector, efforts to bring people together frequently for energy and morale boosting activities should be encouraged.



However, these activities require planning and public service employees told us that they are often working on deliverables due yesterday. Constantly imposed impossible timelines create frustration and stress. Personal ambitions are sacrificed for corporate goals.

While those involved in the AEP program rated their experiences to date as positive, there was a sense of aggravation produced by the mismatch between the government's plan and what is happening at individual offices. Due to short staffing some recruits were thrown into high pressure situations instantly while others felt "underemployed" because they were doing little more than administrative tasks. In these cases there were either more people than amount of work which leads to inactive short term employees or, the unit was understaffed and 'someone has to do it' (the mundane tasks). Other public service employees concurred—feeling that they were just being "thrown into the mix" rather than being seen as talent to nurture.

### **Talent Retention**

Most young people apply for a job in the public service because they are strongly motivated by a desire to have an impact. But they also anticipate fluid careers and expect to choose positions expected to offer growth, a feature more commonly associated with private rather than public jobs. Many young people join the public service because they believed they would have some influence or opportunities to deal with interesting policy developments and have a notion of empowerment to affect outcomes, but it appears that this is missing in the public service today. Of those who do not feel disempowered, having a mentor seems to have been instrumental. Junior talent should be encouraged to find their niche within the public sector.

Specifically, young public servants possess a strong desire to work abroad. They proposed the development of a Public Service Exchange that would see Canada developing a cooperative arrangement with comparable departments internationally in order to widen their exposure and to share experiences and expertise with their counterparts in other countries. The idea of interchange with public servants in other parts of Canada was also discussed. This would recognize that the demands of public servants are changing—there is a generation of generalists who are very talented and thirsty for knowledge.

It was also suggested that immersion into another culture, socially and professionally, could be used for language training and other forms of professional development. In lieu of a full exchange program most would be satisfied if they were

able to take a leave of absence for one or two years on reasonable grounds which would guarantee them on their re-entry no loss of seniority or security.

A formalized mentorship program was suggested as a means to assist a new recruit's integration into the public service and to inform career path choices. An OPS mentorship program is apparently being launched, although little information about it is forthcoming. It was felt that this effort would thwart the exodus of young people leaving due to frustration with their inability to nurture contacts and develop expertise.

In contrast, referring to themselves as "AEPers", Accelerated Economists Program recruits described a strong sense of affinity to the program. They spoke of development activities (lectures), social events and a strong alumni network that offers support. Participants felt a sense of belonging to an elite culture where their skills are desired and sought after. This, of course, impacts their chance for upward mobility. Their alumni networks are perceived as a value resource if one should choose to leave for a period of time and then want to re-enter.

Other public servants expressed a desire for in-house "lunch and learn" programs to aid in developing and strengthening employee/management relationships and communication, much along the same lines as what is offered by the AEP program. The Public Service could introduce the idea of "coaching"—an informal process where managers have lunch with employees once a month to explore and cultivate in-house talent to replace consultants that are currently hired in.

While supporting bilingualism, it was suggested that this program is also flawed, impeding effectiveness and have led to serious dissatisfaction among some senior public servants. There is a serious cost in morale when language training is required of resistant learners. Such people are unlikely to become truly bilingual and obliging them to "time serve" through language training courses introduces a negative atmosphere in the classes that lingers in their workplace. A possible option would be a policy that has different application for different classes of workers. Entry level persons who are not already competent in the other official language should be brought up to speed, and this should be applied across the board. However among existing staff, a clear distinction can be drawn between the policy persons, especially those who are tracked for promotion (all of whom must become bilingual) and those who have been hired for their special technical skills (scientific experts, accountants, etc.) where bilingual language training should be optional.

The 25 year old federal classification system has become outdated. Executive work is executive work—research is research. Currently, to pay a scientist working in a

government research lab his/her worth equivalent to private sector compensation rates, this employee must be classified as an executive, and are expected to fulfill the role of an executive in the bureaucracy instead of spending time in the lab. Making a scientist an executive is nonsensical.

While encouraging mobility for those who desire it, deputy ministers need to stay put! The mobility of assistant deputy ministers was described as “a merry-go-round that’s spinning out of control” in both the federal and provincial departments (an Ontario ministry told us that they had three different DMs in two years). Essentially, no one is managing the senior talent stock and the significant revolving door eliminates political stability and institutional memory. If viewed and valued as the corporate resource that it is, an ADM should remain in the same department to develop the skills to become an expert while creating value for the institution.

### Human Resources

The personal experiences of roundtable participants corresponded with the survey for the most part—greater instability and shifting priorities are bad news for employees at virtually all levels. Managers are ill equipped to handle HR issues and as a result often abdicate their responsibility in this area to focus on other duties. Issues seem to get lost in the shuffle and attention is paid to newer employees only if they threaten to leave their job or if they are causing a large ‘kafuffle’ that needs attention.

Even in an established recruitment program, there are management issues. The integration of AEP recruits apparently varies from department to department. A few experienced a lack of management support for the position—‘why spend energy on people who won’t be staying?’ On this last point there was a strong sense of frustration because AEP managers self select.

New employees told us that they are not getting feedback and have little idea if they are doing well or not. This was a very salient point for the contract employees on a probationary term. Apparently, for many, the onus was on them to ask their manager how they are doing – which can be uncomfortable. Managers are under-utilizing feedback as effective tool because they feel that it is a hassle, or are undermining it by walking through the exercise with little care or concern. It is a lost opportunity to cultivate talent.

Even when performance appraisals are executed a glaring problem arises. Apparently, there is a freeze on what score can be awarded. Managers know that on a scale of 1-5, they can only give a 3 (even if you are a “0” or a “1” you will still be marked a “3”) because anything other than a 3 requires proof, which is difficult for

the managers. It appears as though there an attempt at standardizing everyone, which is disincentive for a keen employee. This undermines confidence and the perception of openness in the system.

The issue of the role of unions and how they affect the performance and experience of public servants was also discussed. Employees are able to refuse to do certain tasks if it is not explicitly outlined in their job description and that this hampers a manager's efforts for change. OPS employees said that it seems that managers are reluctant to reprimand poor performance because of possible grievance hassles even though people rarely go to their union for support, as filing grievances is such a lengthy process and that the fear of being blacklisted is very real.

Suggestions made to improve this situation included the development of a HR performance measurement structure which would help identify employees best suited to be managers and those with a knowledge-base more suited to operations. The opportunity to be a manager should be based on more than just seniority—managers require a special skill set that must include the talent of motivating and working well with people.

Having both superb management and leadership skills are important to managers and executives in the Canadian public service. The results of the CSD survey indicate, and the roundtable discussions reinforce, that while there are some effective managers, there is room for improvement in both the areas of management and leadership. Often the two terms are used interchangeably. However, by definition, they are very different. John Kotter from the Business School of Harvard University offers this distinction between management and leadership:

*"Management is basically a process, the function of which is to produce consistent results on an important dimension.... Leadership by contrast, is a process whose function is change. Usually, leadership involves creating a vision of the future and a strategy for achieving this vision. It involves communicating that direction to all relevant parties so that they understand it and believe it. It also involves providing an environment that will inspire and motivate people to overcome any obstacles that may rise along the way. In this way, leadership produces change; effective leadership produces useful, adaptive changes for organizations."*

This distinction was discussed at the December 2009 by several adjunct professors of the Masters of Public Administration program and by the School's Director. It was suggested that a stronger emphasis on leadership training and ethics be integrated into their program.

## Improvements to Accountability Design

All of the roundtable discussions shared a common concern that focus on accountability as the only debated public service issue is making a career in public service less attractive than it once was. The Gomery Commission concentrated almost entirely on accountability, with little debate on the role of the public service as an institution. The larger issues (e.g. how to attract and retain employees with enthusiasm to meaningful careers in public service) have been missing from the debate and CSD wants to make a contribution to the elements that should be included in and beyond the public service.

Framing government around accountability sends the message that public servants are primarily concerned with covering their butts or protecting those who individuals work for. This is an ineffective frame for shaping the public service because it is difficult to determine what accountability means to them. To be useful, the concept needs to be presented in conjunction with suggestions and recommendations that can be translated into tangible targets—specific behaviour steps driven by the task you have to do and individual requirements, instead of conceptually fluffy ideals.

Previously there was a sense that civil servants were DOING something instead of avoiding risk. The current conception of accountability seems to mean zero risks and all the blame. The context and focus is negative. The important question is whether accountability can be positive? With evaluation, when done properly, there's an opportunity to show employees the positive effects of their work when such outcomes are the result.

While the rhetoric points to a more open culture (technology; e-government; accountability) it seems that the same old model remains in play, except that it is now moving faster and departments are tripping over each other to comply. The sense that the type and amount of red tape required is not conducive to actually promoting the accountability that is intended has considerable value as an explanation of the relationship a task area.

Many roundtable participants commented on the data from the CSD survey that clearly demonstrates how uneasy many public servants are about the expanding role of political assistants. There is a role for wisdom and memory, but also an equal role for youth and idealism. We need good political advisors, just as we need good public servants.

Many were adamant the function of political advisors be more accurately reflected in their job titles—they are assistants, not decision-makers. Today’s designation of chief of staff implies an executive authority that such a position should not possess.

The “old guard” believes that people used to be more dedicated and professional, and that corporate memory has disappeared—but is this nostalgia or truth? Findings from interviews have shown that there is a belief that in the past, public servants made their careers in areas of personal expertise, while many of the current crop of senior bureaucrats do not have as wide an understanding of their areas. Where there were elite departments comprised of specialists in the past, the present trend is to favour mobility and inter-departmental mobility. Everything is run by committee and consultants are being brought in to compensate for a lack of specialization in departments.

We heard that the constant shuffle today of senior public servants compared to the stability and acquired expertise evident in the 1960s era of civil service leaders is causing instability in the organization and constantly changing priorities that leave

There is a belief that the “old guard” is reacting to the change in the demographic of the public servant—they see a sense of entitlement in the young people coming out of school who do not expect or want to start at an entry level job; who see moving and changing positions as a desirable thing; and that longevity and security are less important than challenge and variety. There is also an expectation issue occurring. Young people face a disconnect between what is being taught about the public service in the academic world and the reality of a junior position. Former MPA students expressed that public policy programs courses lacked the courses to prepare students for management: instruction regarding entrepreneurship; project management; leadership programs for change; and ethics training.

Questions about the impact of the size of governments on accountability highlighted by the example that Trudeau’s government was much smaller than the government of today were raised. Is there a correlation between personal efficacy in an organization and the size of an organization? There may be the issue of scale, but values have also changed over time. Has anyone looked at how values have changed, not just which values have changed? Such questions need to be examined.

### **Concluding remarks**

There appears to be problematic interactions between the periphery and the center, and a “dialogue of the deaf” between the public service and the political parties, that

needs to be explored further. The comments and suggestions from the roundtables raised excellent points that were considered in the recommendations made in “Closing the Implementation Gap.”

***Participants:***

Saaqib Ahmad	Sylvia Adamcik	Gerald Butts
Jennifer Carter	Sean Conway	Julia Danos
Paul Duffy	Winter Fedyk	Glenda Fisk
Lara Fitzgerald Husek	C.E.S. Franks	Alison Fraser
Laurel Gascho	Murray Glow	Andy Graham
Choulgere (Guru) Guruprasad	Marc Gurstein	Peter Harrison
Rick Johal	Mike Joyce	Donald Lemaire
Peter MacLeod	Martin Medeiros	Arthur Milnes
Vic Pakalnis	Bob Pananikolaou	Lara Peters
Jacqueline Smith-Anglin	William Richard	Sharon Sutherland
W. Gerry Robinson	Melissa Thomson	Hugh Thorburn
Ron Watts		