The 21st century public servant

A discussion paper

June 2013
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About the discussion paper

This discussion paper is a joint publication between the Melbourne School of Government and the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet. The purpose of the paper is to generate ideas and debate about the public servant in the 21st century. The paper does not represent Victorian Government policy.
Introduction

The heritage of the 21st century public servant can be traced to 1854 when Sir Stafford Northcote and Charles Trevelyan reviewed the UK Civil Service. Their report provided the foundation for an apolitical and merit-based public service working to the elected government of the day. The Colony of Victoria established its public service in the 1850s, based on similar foundations.

The ethos of an impartial and professional public servant has endured since the 1850s. Since then, public servants have been well served by a set of foundational skills that have underpinned the core role of the public servant: providing policy advice to ministers; implementing government policy; delivering programs, services and regulation; and managing resources and infrastructure.

The impact of globalisation, changing citizen expectations and technological change is creating a different environment for the public service of the 21st century. These changes give rise to a new skill set that sits alongside the traditional skills expected from a public servant.

Following on from a project undertaken by the UK Public Leaders Academy, the Melbourne School of Government and the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet are exploring the roles, skills and characteristics of the 21st century public servant.

The purpose of this paper is to provoke discussion about the range of skills and capabilities the contemporary public servant needs to respond to new challenges and to serve the government of the day and the community. The paper draws together a number of ideas and concepts—in some cases theoretical—using both academic literature and work under way in other jurisdictions. It provides a useful starting point to ask how much the environment and nature of work is changing, and what the practical implications may be to shape the public service for the future.

External drivers of change

Change in the public service operating environment is not new. It is the pace of change that is different. Peter Ho, the former Head of the Singapore Civil service, has described the period from the mid-20th century as the great acceleration. From globalisation and the corresponding flows of people, information and capital to natural pandemics, from global financial meltdowns to the proliferation of smart devices, from rising public expectations to the ‘Asian century’, the public service is having to rapidly adapt to meet these challenges.

In Australia, the CSIRO has identified the following six global megatrends that will change the way we live:

1. More from less

Natural resources are being depleted, exacerbated by the demand pressures from population and economic growth. Science, technology and government policy will all be required to mitigate this challenge. At the same time, emerging markets represent a major opportunity for Victoria to increase food and agricultural exports and expand the energy and resources industry.

2. Going, going … gone?

Habitat damage, overexploitation, pollution and climate change are driving biodiversity loss. There is a role for government to preserve habitats while balancing the demand for resources.
3. The silk highway
Strong economic growth is expected to continue in China and India, followed by the growing economies of South America and Africa. This will create new opportunities for export markets, trade and cultural relationships, playing to Victoria’s strengths in education, food and fibre, tourism and cultural services.

4. Forever young
The ageing population creates challenges for service demands in healthcare and aged care, levels of workforce participation and the adequacy of retirement savings. Changing demographics will also have social impacts, including in the workplace. However, tapered retirement models and a greater focus on positive ageing present significant upsides.

5. Virtually here
Digital media and new technology can be both enablers and disruptors of business models, capabilities and delivery channels. They can support the creation of new connections between individuals, communities and institutions, improve access and delivery of services and enable the flow of information and access to data. Four major technology trends will impact government and the public service: the uptake of smart devices; the popularity of social media; the emergence of cloud computing; and the rise of big data and analytics.

6. Great expectations
Consumer, social and demographic trends are driving the community’s expectation for personalised services that meet people’s individual needs and that are delivered seamlessly and cheaply. This has significant implications for service delivery in health and education as well as how the public service uses technology to provide access to services, transactions and information.

Coinciding with these megatrends are some particular circumstances confronting the public service in developed countries, including Victoria. These include: significant pressures on the manufacturing sector caused by global competition; a more challenging global financial environment; and a growing recognition that at the end of a global boom, many countries can no longer afford a public service of the size they once had. While all jurisdictions’ circumstances are unique—including Victoria’s—many of the emerging challenges for the public service are similar.

Changes in the public service environment
These drivers of change are reshaping the rigid bureaucracies of the early 20th century toward a more agile and flexible public service, with a more diffuse, open and collaborative way of working (see Figure 1).
Peter Shergold, the former head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, has identified four drivers of change to public administration.

1. A market for the delivery of public goods

The public service is no longer the sole provider of policies, programs and services. Today’s public service is increasingly commissioning and contracting out service delivery to the private and community sectors. Gary Sturgess, (ANZSOG Chair of Public Service Delivery) has used the term the public sector economy to describe this mix of public, private and third sector providers supplying services to government and directly to the public. For example:

- around 95 per cent of residential aged care is provided by private and not-for-profit providers
- approximately 40 per cent of hospital admissions in any one year are made to private hospitals
- around one-third of Australian children attend a private school
- approximately 17 per cent of prisoners are held in correctional institutions managed by private providers (Sturgess 2012).

Sturgess proposes introducing greater competition into the supply side of the public sector economy through:

- choice-based models, where service users select from a range of alternatives through government vouchers
- commissioning models where services are purchased through competitive tendering and contracting
- increased contestability through benchmarking.

Victoria has a strong history of devolving service delivery to the private and community sectors, including transport and human services. Capabilities can be built further as the commissioning of services increases and becomes more sophisticated.

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**Figure 1: Comparison between 20th and 21st century public service**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>20th century public service</th>
<th>21st century public service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Management</strong></td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Networked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rigid</td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Service delivery</strong></td>
<td>One size fits all</td>
<td>Personalised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Single channel</td>
<td>Multi-channel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Performance</strong></td>
<td>Input-oriented</td>
<td>Outcome-driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>Transparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decision-making</strong></td>
<td>Public as spectator</td>
<td>Public as participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Metaphor</strong></td>
<td>Clock</td>
<td>Cloud</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Deloitte (2009)
2. Increased competition in the development of public policy

The public service no longer has a monopoly on providing policy advice to government, with growth in the contestability of policy advice provided by other advisers such as ministerial staff, think tanks, lobby groups, the media and research institutes. The UK has taken this one step further with the creation of a centrally resourced Policy Contestability Fund for ministers’ use to seek policy advice from beyond Whitehall.

3. The co-production of government services

Co-production enables citizens to design and deliver activities with government to meet their needs and deliver better results. It requires a reciprocal relationship between public servants and people using services—for example, greater patient involvement in planning their health treatment.

4. The reinvigoration of democratic engagement

Digital media provides an opportunity for increased engagement, reshaping how communities find and engage each other on political and social issues. This creates challenges for government and the public service, requiring them to reassess their structures, speed, work practices and the way in which they engage with citizens.

A fifth game changer?

Given current fiscal constraints, a fifth game changer could be added —‘transformational change’— so as to provide better services in the face of severe budget pressures. A 2009 report More than Good Ideas argued that ‘slicing existing budgets ever more thinly is not enough in today’s world’ and suggested ‘that competition and outsourcing alone will not do the trick. An altogether bolder approach is needed, focused on searching out, incubating, and sustaining much more radical and game-changing innovation’ (Parker 2009).

This is an area where we could learn from the private sector. In times of declining revenue, the private sector innovates and undertakes major re-engineering of its business to cope with cost pressures. Similarly, the public service needs to consider how it transforms its business and service delivery models and develops the accompanying implantation skills and capabilities.

The challenge of change

Two key questions arise from the preceding discussion. The first is whether the change elements outlined above are sufficient to deliver the kind of re-imagined public service outlined in Figure 1. The second is how robust that re-imagined public service will prove to be in the face of future pressures.

The change elements themselves are not new. The challenge is how to combine them in complementary ways that provide the architecture for a 21st century public service. This means actively managing the contribution of each component, for example, ensuring that a market for public services does not restrict the potential of co-production and democratic participation. It also means being attentive to the values that underpin the 21st century public service and the role of the state in instituting and embedding those values.

The advent of the ‘Asian Century’ creates new opportunities for Australia in the region but also places demands on Australian policymakers to hear different voices in debates about the role of the state, the values underpinning policy choices, and the role of public administration.
The changing nature of work

Gartner has forecast key changes to the world of work through to 2020. The public service will not be immune from these trends which include:

- the emergence of non-routine where the value that people add is in the non-routine, analytical or interactive rather than automated processes and tasks
- teamwork will be valued and rewarded and will occur more frequently
- the prevalence of spontaneous work
- simulation and experimentation, which will require engaging with the frontline or walking in the shoes of users.

Deloitte has described the changes in the workplace as a shift from the corporate ladder to the corporate lattice as outlined in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2: Shifting from the corporate ladder to corporate lattice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corporate ladder</th>
<th>Corporate lattice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchical, top down</td>
<td>Flatter, collaborative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work is where you go</td>
<td>Work is what you do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrow career paths and jobs</td>
<td>Multidimensional career paths and jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homogeneous workforce</td>
<td>Heterogeneous workforce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career versus life</td>
<td>Career and life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low workforce mobility</td>
<td>High workforce mobility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Deloitte (2011)

The public service can act to anticipate these trends. For example, the Australian Government has recognised the need to offer more flexible working options, including working remotely, and has introduced a target whereby 12 per cent of federal public servants will be regularly teleworking\(^1\) from home by 2020. A US public sector think tank has proposed GovCloud as a way of breaking down traditional public service workforce structures. In GovCloud, cloud workers reside in a central talent pool accessible by government agencies. Resources could be quickly shifted from low-need to high-need programs or problems without hiring additional staff or setting up new departments.

21st century roles and skills

Given changes in the broader environment, and the nature of work, four themes have emerged that underpin the roles of the 21st century public service:

- collaboration: relationships between people and organisations
- communication: with an emphasis on digital media modes
- commercialisation: getting the best value from public, private and community sectors
- control: ensuring legal, financial and democratic standards are met (Sullivan 2011).

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\(^1\) Teleworking is broadly defined as operating from home for one or more days a week using high-speed broadband.
These roles will need to be supported by a diverse skill set. Research by the University of Phoenix has identified ten skills for the future workforce, including:

- sense-making: getting to the deeper meaning or significance of what is being communicated
- social intelligence: relating to others deeply and directly
- adaptive thinking: thinking and generating solutions outside of the norm to respond to unexpected and unique situations
- cross-cultural competency: operating in unfamiliar cultural settings and using differences for innovation
- computational thinking: translating large amounts of data into useful concepts and understanding data-based reasoning
- new-media literacy: leveraging new-media forms to communicate persuasively
- transdisciplinary: understanding concepts across different disciplines to solve complex problems
- design mindset: designing tasks, processes and work environments to produce desired outcomes
- cognitive load management: filtering important information from the ‘noise’ and using new tools to expand mental functioning abilities
- virtual collaboration: working productively with others across virtual distances.

The UK has developed a capability plan for its entire civil service to better support the delivery of services. The plan sets out the following four priorities:

- leading and managing change
- commercial skills, including skills to undertake commercial transactions such as commissioning services from the private and voluntary sectors
- delivering projects and programs
- redesigning services and delivering them digitally.

Three approaches are proposed to improve these capability areas:

- build internal capabilities through learning and development for current civil servants
- buy in more people with missing skills, predominantly in the digital, project and commercial capabilities areas
- borrow skills through more exchanges between departments and secondments with organisations in the private sector.

Drawing on this work and other sources, a framework for future skills is proposed with three domains: design, delivery and relationships. Not all public servants will need to be equally skilled across all domains, but all should have some understanding of each area, and the public service as a whole should be confident that it has capacity across all three domains.
To attract people with the right skills into the public service, government organisations need to understand what they can offer and how they can ensure they get what they need from transitory employees. It is increasingly unlikely that future public servants will either begin or end their careers in the public service. Instead, they will choose to come in and out of the service in response to particular drivers.

New ways of working are already emerging in a number of jurisdictions, including in Victoria as outlined in Box 1.

**Box 1: Examples of new ways of working in Victoria**

**Innovation Transfer**

Innovation Transfer provides Victorian Public Service (VPS) staff with an opportunity to undertake secondments in the corporate and community sectors that address innovation challenges. Participants have brought back new perspectives and networks that can be applied to their work in the public service. An evaluation found that the overall benefits of Innovation Transfer have been significant for all parties. Perhaps most importantly, a sense of cross-sectoral understanding has developed that has confronted commonly held stereotypes about the public service, the private and community sectors.

**Agile Project Management**

The Digital Services and Strategy Unit within the Victorian Department of Health is trialling Agile Project Management for teams to support web development processes. Central to the framework are the principles of:

- rapid iteration/adaptation whereby outputs are delivered early to provide greater opportunity for continuous improvement while mitigating potential risk
- responsiveness to change where iterations and regular reviews provide opportunities for further refinement
- continuous user input to ensure deliverables meet user needs
- breaking down complex activities into smaller, more manageable components.
Governments need to be able to work with external education and other institutions to design educational and training programs for public servants to accommodate these new roles and skills and to address existing skills gaps. Education and training will need to be more cross-sectoral in appeal to ensure public servants get the breadth as well as the depth of knowledge they need.

Back to the future

HC ‘Nugget’ Coombs was one of Australia’s most influential civil servants, serving and advising seven prime ministers over a thirty-year period. Coombs was the Chair of the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration established in 1974.

In an address, Coombs described effective government as requiring a partnership between the political arm of government and the bureaucracy. In this partnership, Coombs saw the role of public administrators as that of an ‘enabler—of making it possible for the dreams of others to be achieved’. He said:

Beneath the vanities, self-interest and extravagances of any government there is, at least, potentially an element of vision about a juster and more humane society. It is the function of the administrator to recognise that vision and work to give the vision a local habitation (Coombs 1976: 52).

These words ring equally true nearly forty years later, even for the 21st century public servant.

Next steps and discussion questions

This discussion paper is the first step in the project and will be followed by workshops and consultations to test the ideas in this paper. Further research will also be undertaken examining initiatives in other jurisdictions.

A set of discussion questions are outlined below. We invite you to contribute to our understanding of what is needed to develop a strong public service for the future.

Responses to the questions or any other issues raised in the paper can be sent to strategic.initiatives@dpc.vic.gov.au by Friday July 19 2013. Responses should be a maximum of four pages and include your name. Responses are preferred in Word or PDF format files. Anonymous responses will not be accepted.

Discussion questions

1. What existing skills do we need to retain for a 21st century public service?
2. What new skills are necessary for the 21st century public servant in light of the challenges of today and tomorrow?
3. What is required to deliver a 21st century public service workforce in recruitment, training and development, and succession planning?
4. What examples of good practice already exist in the VPS?
5. How can we facilitate workforce mobility between public service departments and other sectors?
6. What are the priority areas for action that need to be addressed?
7. What are the key lessons for public servants that have emerged over the past two decades and how might these lessons be applied to current and future challenges?
Appendix 1: Profile of the Victorian Public Service

The Victorian Public Service (VPS) consists of departments, administrative offices and other bodies designated as public service employers. At June 2012, there were 35,394 people working in the VPS in a variety of roles including:

- providing policy and administrative support to Parliament and ministers;
- performing major service delivery functions such as child protection, welfare services for families, services for people with disabilities and their families, and public housing;
- providing advice to the community on public health and consumer issues;
- maintaining and managing state forests and fisheries;
- operating the courts and the corrections system, and public registries such as land titles, and births, deaths and marriages;
- funding and coordinating the delivery of services such as public health care services.

Box 2: Composition of the Victorian Public Service workforce

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Victorian Public Service workforce at June 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total employees (headcount)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Regional distribution</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total employees (FTE)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CBD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Melbourne metropolitan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment type</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North and West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixed term or casual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part time employment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barwon South Western</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gippsland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grampians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hume</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loddon Mallee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average age</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;30 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–54 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+ years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: State Services Authority Work Force Data Collection (June 2012)
References and further reading


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