

Careers in Government; the Honorable Profession

By: John Riddle

The great work of public servants is to build a country. They, with their political leaders, are in the business of nation building where the clarion call and guiding principal is the common good. For generations of job seekers a career in the public service, with its diversity of interests from policy to service delivery represented an honorable profession where the work outcomes were tangible, societal respect acceptable and the work environment/benefits adequate to good. Is this still true? Have bureaucratic lapses, media disinformation, politicization, the proliferation of rules and processes and the demographic exodus of "baby boomers" caused significant damage?

This paper will explore a number of themes and threads, broader than IT, that will impact the public service of the future, which is to say in the next 5-7 years. It is neither possible nor reasonable to discuss the public service as some composite international entity which it is clearly not. What is possible is to set out discernable trends in public service, particularly for those nations who are members of ICA, and to speculate about their weight and consequence going forward. Interestingly, in seeking the input of ICA colleagues on this subject the reaction varied from "outside the ICA agenda" to "definitely on the Executive agenda". It is my hope to convince the reader that the positive branding of the public service and the world wide competition for talent are real issues worthy of our consideration. Yes, there are country specific differences based on history, culture, traditions but so too there are similarities. It is these elements this paper will now address.

As a form of backdrop or context for these deliberations it is useful to take a wide view of the challenges and perspectives required of those who would work in the public service. One such dimension has been referenced already, that of nation building. Thus, careers in public service are attached to the great work of

the common good. This is not the domain of small minds but the arena of vision, potential, of leadership. Even the lowliest of tasks is rooted in this conviction. With this base of understanding there are two particular skill requirements of government employees, at the executive level, which often go unrecognized. They are skills frequently not as evident in the private sector.

First, there is the ability to deal with complexity -not see things in black and white- but to perceive the full palette of colors that make up the world. Government leaders do not have the luxury of focusing on a few critical outcomes and metrics (profit) but have an agenda that is forever changing. One might take as an illustration a public servant with an economic portfolio who in furthering the common good of regional or industry specific development must grapple with international agreements, competition from India/China, the politics of protectionism, labor market skills, supportive technology, grants and subsidies, etc. Social portfolios are equally complex.

Secondly, another key skill often not acknowledged is the ability to reconcile conflicting needs and wants of multiple stakeholders. This is not mere politics but rather the management of expectations by senior public servants of diverse and legitimate constituencies. Navigating and negotiating in this domain requires patience, a visceral understanding of ambiguity and the realization that decision making establishes precedence or policy which endure for good or bad.

So in summary, beyond the frequently identified management skills required of executives (in Canada a list of 14 competencies from interpersonal ability to stamina) the work environment is one that is complex, replete with competing interests and held together by a passion to further the national common good, in itself, a volatile concept. I foresee no marked change in this environmental description going forward and, I believe, it represents a generic description of public services internationally.

I want to now turn to the matter of career trends and projections. There are 5 substantive issues, each with their own subsidiary threads, which will be developed. The reader is asked to consider the reasonableness of the trend and reflect on what, if any, meaning it has in their jurisdiction.

1. Outsourcing and Devolution

Both these terms are concerned with the role of national governments and how they determine what functions/services should be delivered by third party agents. The motivation for having either the private sector under contract or another level of government (state or municipal) bound by an agreement to perform such activities as staff payroll, airport management, health delivery, business registration, call centre interventions, etc. is dependent on how individual governments answer whether a function is strategic and/or a core responsibility. How central governments answer this question is particularized by the history, culture and political realities of each country, however, there are several general pressures that, I believe, will cause a positive reassessment by governments. This will result in a smaller more specialized public service going forward.

Beyond what can be termed political ideology or a predisposition to outsource/devolve as evidenced in the UK under Prime Minister Thatcher, other influences are at play. The private sector is in the business of wealth generation for a country, thus, when they develop a competency in, for example, data centre operations or telecommunications they leverage this expertise by selling the service into the broader marketplace both national and international. Governments traditionally do not sell their expertise in a given function other than potentially to a different level of government where effectiveness and economy justifies this devolution. In summary, political determination about the key strategic roles of the central government, the wealth generation potential of

the private sector, efficiency coupled with the political attractiveness of a smaller public service will all contribute to this general trend.

Two other influences round out the argument that outsourcing/devolution are elements affecting careers in national governments which will, by 2012, become more policy oriented and necessitate professional qualifications. First, these contractual or devolution agreements will encourage a flow of talent between different levels of government and the private sector. The well rounded public servant of the future will increasingly have had varied work experience and be less likely to have worked uniquely in a single department/agency.

Outsourcing/devolution arrangements will facilitate this kind of movement and exchange. Secondly, there is the depressing reality that government procurement and personnel processes are frequently so arcane and laborious that departmental/agency executives may make the determination that it is better to get out of operational delivery wherever possible or buy the service from the private sector who have greater administrative flexibility. Australia is an example of this thinking where Manpower, a world leader in employment services, performs all hiring from advertising, screening, assessment and selection for its defense force approximately 9000 persons annually at all levels.

Interestingly, the determination by governments about where/by whom service delivery should be performed is partially informed by the "copycat" pressure of seeing other nations do this or that function via an intermediary. The rationale being, if country A or B can do it, why can't we? Why indeed.

2. Managerialism

This term encompasses the fashionable belief that government is similar to industry and that the practices and processes of the private sector can/should be introduced into public service operations. In western governments this movement is well established and has largely centered on the maxim "if you can't measure it, then you can't manage it". Managerialism and

measurement go hand in hand. It is now commonplace to have multi-year business plans, management performance contracts, glossy annual reports, service delivery indicators from website hits to client satisfaction. While the specific private sector objective of profit has not infiltrated most government operations, modest to full revenue generation targets are a reality as are delivery measurements in the areas of time, cost and quality. The practice of measurement is well entrenched, and these opening remarks are intended to position two specific observations that will further effect the work environment by 2012-15.

Reliance on objective measurement techniques in the staffing and promotion of personnel, such as independent assessments, simulation exercises, psychological testing, will supercede the traditional dependence on personal interviews and reference checks by the hiring manager to adjudicate competency and fit within his/her organization. Empirical measurement treats everyone the same and assumes that the instrument is sufficiently proven and sensitive to conclusively give an accurate picture of a person's ability/suitability for a given position. It's so much easier to rely on a mechanistic numeric score than to actually exercise judgment in making a decision, witness the exhaustive attempts to objectify government procurement. In the world of staffing and promotion the next 5-7 years will witness entry to government jobs via mass/country-wide competitions, individual promotional opportunities that will have rigorous aptitude and competency testing, security checks at the secret level which will necessitate polygraphs and movement into the executive ranks that will require specialized training with successful performance in standardized simulation exercises. These empirical testing influences are also prevalent in industry but with more latitude permitted in evaluating "fit" or "group chemistry" than is the case in government. The implicit reverence given to measurement by government is rooted in the conundrum of sameness/fairness and the need to publicly defend decisions. But it also assumes that a prototype model of the ideal public servant exists against which candidates can be measured. This

latter pre-requisite is actually more of a conundrum since it competes with the often voiced public good of diversity, a subject to which I shall return.

The second element of managerialism that will be increasingly evident in the government environment of 2012-2015 is greater pressure for public accountability. Annual stockholder meetings are de rigeur in the private sector as are annual accountability sessions by departments and agencies with their respective parliament, congress, national assembly normally during budget approval. Increasingly in the future, these public account interventions will entail the participation of officials far below the executive ranks and be occasioned by a variety of reasons, such as, Access to Information Requests by the media or political parties seeking advantage, by internal/external Audit Reports, by government initiated Boards of Enquiry, by single issue stakeholder groups, by web enabled performance indicator reports, by on-going oversight committees, etc. Thus, beyond the happy notion of more public accountability and transparency which reaches further and further into organizations, will be the high likelihood of increased politicization of these interventions, with the "name, shame and blame" objective. All public servants understand the special stewardship relationship that exists between them and the tax paying public, but the enflamed accountability environment I am describing has the high potential to discourage risk taking and innovation. The era of the invisible and behind the scene public servant is at an end.

3. Workplace Balance

Consistent with my end of an era observation above, is the provocation that the public service in the future will spend less and less time trying to accommodate the balancing act that individuals maintain between work and their respective personal lives. In recent years, many employers have fashionably adopted variable work weeks, job sharing practices, daycare arrangement on site, working at home, part time work, etc. so as to aid employees in the pursuit of

equilibrium. While retaining the above measures, it is my belief that governments will no longer be disingenuous about their objective; they want everyone to work as long and as hard as possible. Effectively the balance sought by individuals varies and is driven by one's own priorities and ambitions. Governments will conclude, as have industry, that if you are not prepared to work hard and be accessible 24/7 then someone else is, and they may be in the next cubical or across the world in India. Government is not a sheltered workshop. This picture may appear a bit harsh and it will tend to disadvantage men/women involved in child rearing but the workplace balancing act will be the responsibility of each employee and not the principal concern of the employer.

In making this assertion, I have also concluded that the role of unions or employee associations in this aspect of the work environment will diminish. Doubtless they will continue their efforts for better salaries, benefits, job protection, workplace safety, and the resolution of new issues such as the significant growth of temporary workers, often from the ranks of the recently retired, who will not be eligible for union membership. But on the matter of workplace balance, they too will conclude that it is variable and largely up to the individual to manage.

4. Representationalism

This descriptive non word is meant to encompass a movement within the public service, fostered by liberal democracies, to mirror the ethnic, gender and cultural diversity found in society at large. This politically directed agenda works from the quite reasonable hypothesis that the public service will be richer and better able to serve its citizens if persons of similar background are available within its ranks. It remains unexplained how having a Sikh employee in one side of the country better serves another Sikh many hundreds of miles away in another locale. Nonetheless, most countries have in recent years embarked on programs that favored the advancement of women in the public service or tried

to address the special needs of the disabled or those of indigenous persons. These programs often came with explicit targets and rather imperfect measurement requirements to record progress.

The representationalism in the public service to which I refer in thinking about the next 5-7 years is an aspect of social engineering that will be intrusive, will potentially minimize competency in order to achieve targets and be open to abuse as it is employed to address societal issues within a country, for example, disaffected youth with poor job skills seeking employment. This not a right wing rant against the public service being a microcosm of the society it wishes to serve, but it is an alert that as one pursues one admirable public objective, e.g. maintaining a professional, competent, politically neutral organization, that these qualities are not pushed aside in the stampede to be politically correct. Fortunately, one can often find both and hopefully this will be the result in the majority of cases. The problem I foresee in a national public service that is smaller and more specialized is that when complexion and competency do not align, then what?

5. Competition for Skills

The competition for skills in the future public service is a most obvious area of change. This is being spawned by the departure of countless baby boomers and the reduced numbers of qualified persons available in the national/international work force. The often overlooked aspect of demography when reflecting on the public service is compression. In Canada the executive cadre is made up of 5 levels where currently the age spread between the highest to the lowest level is 4 years; when they go, they go together and create a huge gap. Furtive attempts at succession planning have tended to be too narrow in casting for talent and naïve in terms of understanding the extent to which executives need to be “seasoned” before extraordinary work demands are made of them.

In the battle to attract talent, the public service will have to conscientiously plan for the skill mix required to support their service offerings. At one level this should be self evident but in an era of richness of choice, where talent was available, departments have paid precious little attention to what they will need. How does one maintain social programs without social workers, health programs without laboratory/medical doctors, infrastructure without engineers, major IT projects without computer scientists, etc? It will not be good enough to identify generalized competencies and attributes but rather this planning must be specific and aimed at educational attainment. The Business Plans of public service institutions are absolutely vital to identifying the skill mix for the future because it is the business lines that ensure their existence.

We can lament the passing of a generation of experienced workers to the joys of retirement, we can query the “collapse of loyalty” apparent in new recruits, we can fret about competitive pay scales/benefits and whether there will be the necessary flexibility to reward and motivate talent but first, and foremost, we need to identify the skills required. In many national governments this strategic thinking and planning is not evident. Manpower Inc in 2005 surveyed 32000 companies in 26 countries and 29% could not find the skills they were looking for: the marketplace for talent is going to get very crowded. Let me add another rather worrisome addendum to these thoughts on attracting talent, we must also be creative in retaining talent. The US government estimates that 40% of its talent pool, that is persons specifically sought from universities or other public/private enterprises, leave after 3 years. That's today's challenge, what about tomorrow?

It is very hard to put a value on institutional continuity. Some would argue that public service “lifers” choke off innovation and change while others see it as an advantage given their tacit knowledge of what works and what to avoid in the machinations of getting things done inside government. I suspect in the near future that continuity will come from staying within a specific skill domain and not from staying with any one organization. The public service needs to accept this

reality, plan for within sector poaching, frequent turnover, industry exchanges, and political appointments. Thoughtful public service ministries and departments will work with this more fluid workforce environment by demanding short term outcomes rather than multi year deliverables, attempt to “grow their own talent” either through challenging assignments or selective arrangements with appropriate universities and colleges perhaps with an apprenticeship program, and finally, remain in a constant state of talent recruitment within and beyond national borders.

Linked to the challenge of recruiting talent is the aspect of public service culture, What is the esprit de corps that binds? I think it is passé to refer to public service as a calling or a vocation since it is no longer (if it ever were) a closed fraternity or secret society. It is a workplace with a special relationship to government and citizens. The advent of Schools of Public Service, - France long in advance with its Ecole Nationale d'Administration- are an interesting harbinger of inculcating a corporate culture into a workforce that in the future will be more transient. This observation leads me to conclude that in the future departmental/agency culture will breakdown and morph into a more generalized whole of government culture as yet only faintly discernable where common values and ethics will constitute the binding glue. To the extent this “corporacy” sentiment is occurring, one should expect it to take many years to fully evidence itself.

It may appear self-evident but knowing with some precision what skills are needed in the future coupled with an aggressive and broadly based strategy for responding to a work environment characterized by turnover is an immediate priority.

Conclusion

Careers in government is such a wide subject that there are inevitably important issues that have not been discussed, such as the decentralization of functions,

compensation/regional pay rates, the demands of continuous learning, the role of employee unions, etc., or subjects mentioned but for which insufficient attention was paid. This is the limitation of any overview document. The intent has been to provoke and stimulate new thinking. Let me conclude, based on the deliberations above, with three future musings on persons working in information technology.

- IT will be a target for outsourcing or in sourcing, notably base infrastructure functions which a competent private sector can provide. The upside of this conjecture is that there will be a growth in information management skills and much closer integration with departmental/agency business lines, conceivably, to the point where the central IT organization is much reduced.
- Professionalism, meaning academic credentials and technical specialization will characterize the IT skills sought by government even though this will mean competing in a difficult marketplace. There will be little tolerance for runaway projects or amateur business cases that understate costs and overstate benefits.
- The power of the horizontal, across governments thinking, will be evident resulting in inter jurisdictional alliances and reach, new comprehensive service offerings, job opportunities and a sense of community; a breed of public servant without borders. In some respects, members of IT will constitute a lateral network that mimics the very technology for which they are responsible.

Outsourcing and devolution, managerialism, workplace balance, representationalism, competition for skills and the tangential issues that arise from each will make discussion on Careers in Government vitally important and urgent. It should be remembered that the reputation of any public service is linked directly to execution. Delivery is everything. The service experience of a

citizen in dealing with his/her government is what endures whether across a counter or from a website. The obvious truism, competent public servants make this happen.

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