

20 November 2009

## **SUBMISSION**

### **Reform of Australian Government Administration: Building the world's best public service**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the reform of the Australian Government Administration. This report is timely and I congratulate the Advisory Group for seeking opinions from members of the Australian Public Service (APS).

#### Outline and Context

Comments on the discussion paper centre on younger members of the APS and in particular, Generation Y – how to attract and retain them. It seeks to provide recommendations and answers to the following:

- *What are the most important challenges facing the public sector over the next ten years?* (Chapter 2, point 3).
- *What practical mechanisms could be used to foster a more unified public service culture?* (Chapter 7, point 22)
- *What are your top three ideas to encourage the pursuit of continuous improvement across the public service?* (Chapter 7 point 24).
- *How can Australian Government agencies improve their own efficiency?* (Chapter 8, points 25 and 26).

Discussions outlined below are not to be used exclusively, but in conjunction with other mechanisms. However I do feel it is necessary to provide a voice for those younger APS members and hence have concentrated comments in this area.

#### About the author

I am a young engineer, aged 26 and a Director (Executive Level 2) employee of the APS. I have been a Director for 15 months and have the unique perspective of perhaps being one of the youngest director's in the Australian Government.

I have been an active member of young professional committees (generally representing young professionals under the age of 35) for approximately eight years. More notably I was the 2008 Chair for Young Engineers Australia, representing over 40,000 young engineers and currently an international ambassador for Young Engineers International. I have presented on young professional issues to more than 2,500 people in Australia and in approximately 10 countries in the past three years. I am the 2009 ACT Young Professional Engineer of the Year and recipient of the Australian Institute of Energy prestigious scholarship. I was also instrumental in the establishment of the Young Water Professionals and regularly approached by organisations to provide comment on young professional issues.

### Attracting and retaining young professionals

The discussion paper identifies correctly that the workforce is aging and the percentage of younger members (those under 35) is also decreasing. Attracting and retaining young professionals is a significant challenge to the public sector. The follow-on challenge is then inspiring young professionals to become the future leaders of the public service.

There are numerous experts in this space (GenY), however the public service have experts that are free and willing to contribute to discussions. Utilise the young professionals in the agency to provide input.

This section provides some ideas on attracting and retaining young professionals.

When I recently asked a number of young professionals in Government what are some methods that employers can implement to retain them, some of the answers were the same as the ‘experts’:

- Make them feel like they are integral to the organisation – that is, the more senior people know them, converse with them, the more likely they feel are important to the organisation. The public service can be so hierarchal, that SES need to be ‘ordered’ from the Secretary to make time (eg for graduates). This is not a comfortable position, SES and ELs need to genuinely see young professionals as important.
- ‘New’ learning and development – that is, be prepared to invest in different types of development. In the past conferences were seen as a privilege ‘booze’ time for senior executives, however many young professionals see them as an opportunity to learn new information, understand professional behaviour, learn to network (and build their own contacts). I have learnt more by attending conferences, then I have in agency based training.
- Consider more than the standard 4-weeks leave. Young professionals would see 5 weeks of annual leave as a significant incentive. They volunteer and participate in so many activities that their annual leave gets quickly filled. I have used all my annual leave towards professional development that my supervisor won’t give me. And yet I have used limited training and development funds that are assigned to me.

Whilst this discussion paper has the intention to reform the Australian Government Administration – how much it would engage young professionals is limited. The discussion paper is bureaucratic in tone is presented in a style that would be difficult to capture young professional thoughts and input. Considering they are the future leaders, it would be an important cohort to capture input from.

**Recommendation:** Take a proactive approach to ask the young professionals in the public service what would make the public sector attractive. They should form an integral role in the reform of the APS.

If we view some of the leading businesses, those listed in Business Review Weekly for being ‘employers of choice’, one of the things they have in common is the ability to harness young professionals and their ideas. Department’s support ‘social clubs’ and sporting clubs – but they have limited support for ‘young professional committees’. Having tried to establish a young professional committee in my own Department, providing support and opportunities for networking by younger members of the workforce, there has been little interest. Little interest by senior members. Department’s have great networking for graduates, but the moment you are no longer a graduate you

are lost to the ether that is the public service. It's a daunting place for a young professional with less than 10 years experience.

I have sat on many industry association young professional committees and it is through my experience in these groups that I managed to gain leadership skills not usually on offer for people my age. I learnt how to run events (planning, negotiating and sometimes crisis management); learnt how to run meetings (professionalism, agenda's, minutes, note taking) and also how to motivate and encourage others to take on leadership roles. These are opportunities for young professionals to have the opportunity to 'lead' and be the 'chief', gaining invaluable experience.

**Recommendation:** Support the development of young professional committees in Government Departments.

*Case study: professional development*

Since joining the public service, I have used more than my four weeks of annual leave. This is how it has been used:

- One week at half pay – to attend the World Engineering Convention in Brazil. A conference that maintains my skills as an engineer, showcased leading innovations in sustainability (relevant to my employment).
- Two weeks – around the world ticket to view energy and water structures and to have informal meetings with international organisations relevant to my position. This was coupled with meeting of young professionals where I led discussions and negotiations for young engineers.
- One week – to attend an energy conference in Kuwait (relevant to my career), I was also a significant organiser of the conference and learnt more about diversity and cultural appreciation than any course could give.
- One week – to complete my thesis. I could not get approval from my supervisor to use it towards professional development or training.

As can be seen, I have had to use my leave towards professional development as my supervisor does not see any of it as useful. Leave is important, especially when it is to do activities that improve the professional development of employees. It is because my Department is so rigid in its approach to professional development that I have to leave. Many other young professionals seek experiences to improve themselves – it is a pity that Government doesn't support them as they are classified as annoyances, as opposed to opportunities to harness talent.

**Recommendation:** Be willing to consider unique professional development opportunities – no one person is the same and guidelines should be there, but as a guide and not a hindrance. A bold public sector needs not limit their prowess by categories and rigid guidelines but offer opportunities for flexibility.

It is apparently clear that the public sector is not prepared and slow to 'keep-up' with technologies and ideas that are driven by young professionals.

Since every generation is a product of the times and less so of their parents, it is important to consult and embrace young professionals, particularly when it comes to technologies. The public sector of the future will need to embrace these technologies.

*Case study: Facebook and other internet technologies*

Viewing a meeting of senior executive service members, it was decided in one meeting, that Facebook and other social mediums would be banned. As I looked around the room, it was clear that none of the SES members in the room had utilised these mediums and they most certainly did not take into account 'new' ways of thinking and doing business. As an interested Director, who likes to stay informed, I have found that our politicians, stakeholders and active members of the community use these mediums. I thus use them to stay ahead.

In the 'olden' days people would keep address books. Today, young professionals keep their contacts through social mediums. I use my Facebook account to store my professionals contacts, I use facebook to register for professional workshops and networking events and I use facebook to keep up to date with the big stories. When I meet people, I don't provide a business card, I give them my facebook account profile or my Linked-in account. I like to know when someone has changed organisations (and still be able to contact them) and I find it worthwhile to know who's who in the game. Facebook allows me that privilege.

Yes, I look at facebook for social news as well, but when status's are limited to 50 characters or less, it's a very quick mechanism to view. We can monitor people's use of facebook, but in the 'older' days, it was harder to monitor the non essential phone calls or the non-essential emails.

Whilst googlewave has not been official released at the time of writing, it is a medium that is set to revolutionise the corporate world. It would be disappointing if agencies refuse to address or consider its use. Already agencies are behind the times, failing to use blogs and wiki's. In ten years time, I predict that leading corporations of the world will have a facebook-style intranet. The public service leader of the world will need to consider this.

And I still do not understand why agencies have not utilised internet solutions such as skype. It's free to download and free to call other skype users. Imagine the reduction in phone bills, if we utilised skype (and it allows for face-to-face meetings).

**Recommendation:** A bold public service needs to embrace new internet mediums and see them as opportunities to enhance performance and connectivity.

Mentoring is often over-used and mis-understood word. Some organisations spend considerable amounts of money for the perfect consultant tailored mentoring package. The Australian Government is inherently hierarchal (some Department's more than others), there is this undisclosed law that prohibits intermingling between classification bands. This makes it harder for informal mentoring opportunities to arise.

Those that enter Department's as part of a graduate program get set up with a mentor for one year and then it is up to them to maintain the relationships. What about the young APS 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, EL 1 and EL2 young professionals who are recruited outside the graduate program? I have asked my supervisor on a number of occasions to suggest an SES officer to act as a mentor. There is enthusiasm for it, but nothing eventuates. Because of the hierarchal structure, it becomes difficult to meet potential mentors.

I am not surprised that young professionals leave the public sector, there is no sense of ‘being important’ when you cannot get guidance. Thankfully there are ‘shining angels’ in HR that are willing to listen, but it doesn’t remove the real need for mentors.

I see that EL staff members get leadership training – but nothing about mentoring. Do SES officers get training in this area? (I wouldn’t know the answer).

**Recommendation:** Create a shift in culture by actively encouraging informal mentoring opportunities.

### Final comments

If we support young professionals when they first enter the Australian Government, provide mentoring and opportunities for personal and professional development, current leaders can then mould future leaders.

Culture change and positive growth can really be driven from ground up (young professionals) with leadership, support and guidance from senior executives. The recommendations outlined in this report will go a long way to attracting and retaining young professionals today.

If I am 26 now, I can probably expect another seven reviews into the Australian Public Service during my career. Will the lessons of today be learnt? Or will the absence of grooming future leader’s mean that the learning’s are forgotten and never passed on? In 2050, I will be 67 and potentially at the height of my career. Hopefully I will not be reading a submission from a young professional outlining the same recommendations.

### Summary of recommendations

A summary of recommendations is outlined below. Recommendation are clear and fairly simple to implement and act as the starting point to engage with the younger professionals of the APS.

1. Take a proactive approach to ask the young professionals in the public service what would make the public sector attractive. They should form an integral role in the reform of the APS.
2. Support the development of young professional committees in Government Departments.
3. Be willing to consider unique professional development opportunities – no one person is the same and guidelines should be there, but as a guide and not a hindrance. A bold public sector needs not limit their prowess by categories and rigid guidelines but offer opportunities for flexibility.
4. A bold public service needs to embrace new internet mediums and see them as opportunities to enhance performance and connectivity.
5. Create a shift in culture by actively encouraging informal mentoring opportunities. SES and ELs should be seen as the leaders in this area.