

SUBMISSION

Reform of Australian Government Administration: Building the World's Best Public Service.

Brian O'Donnell

Personal Background:

I worked for the APS for 20 years from 1976 to 1996 in positions from Clerk Class 1 in the Murray St CES in Perth, to an EL1 in the National Office in Canberra. I took a voluntary redundancy in 1996, when my Department, Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) was effectively demolished.

Since 1996 I have worked in my own business contracting my services – mostly to APS Departments in Canberra.

In total I had close personal experience of APS operations for 33 years.

Focus of Submission:

Improving efficiency through:

- a) better use of desktop software
- b) managing the software environment
- c) enforcing the use of Plain English

Better use of desktop software – the problem.

In 1994 I worked on DEETYA's Halstead Review. There were about 40 people working on the review, drawn from all around Australia – mostly at the EL1 and EL2 levels. I ended up compiling the final report as this cross-section of staff from across the department had very little idea how to use Microsoft Word effectively. They did not understand the use of Styles, couldn't generate a Table of Contents, and had never heard of a template.

Sadly, in the 15 years since then, things have not improved very much in the level of knowledge most members of the APS have of mainstream software. Over the last eight years I have worked with various Defence organisations and while some members of staff have a very advanced knowledge of mainstream software, most still MS Word as if they were using an electronic typewriter. While this is bad enough, the agencies as a whole are even worse, as they seem to have no idea how to obtain efficiencies from using software wisely.

Better use of desktop software – the solutions

This problem needs to be tackled from the top down and the bottom up. From the top down, each agency should have suites of standard templates that all staff are required to use for the various documents they produce. Most departments have a few templates, but often they are only for very simple documents like Minutes and Faxes and in some cases even those are only documents, not templates at

all. Even after years of using applications like MS Word, hardly any of the staff understand the profound distinction between a document and a template.

A properly developed suite of enterprise level templates could provide a department with substantial efficiency gains. (I have developed templates for departments in which I have worked, and could demonstrate the benefits they provide).

From the bottom up, departments and agencies need to provide more training for their staff in how to use desktop software efficiently. Vast sums are spent on hardware and software and relatively little on training staff in how to use this expensive technology. This training should be built around using each department's suite of templates.

Managing The Software Environment

Some departments made the unwise decision to deploy Microsoft Vista as their operating system. They should rectify this mistake by replacing Vista with Windows 7 as soon as practical.

Some departments have even more unwisely decided to 'upgrade' to Microsoft Office 2007. This should be vigorously discouraged, as it dramatically increases the difficulty of introducing enterprise level template-based efficiencies and delivers no worthwhile benefits.

Enforcing The Use Of Plain English

Departments have, in the past, given lip-service to using Plain English, but as Don Watson's books clearly show, no real progress has been made.

Last month I attended a Plain English Conference in Sydney and heard the Premier of NSW, the Hon. Nathan Rees MP, give the opening address. In that speech he undertook to implement a range of measures designed to greatly improve the use of Plain English within the NSW Public Service. He was obviously very conscious of the significant efficiencies this would provide. Similar measures should be introduced within the APS; and the National Audit Office should be required to report to Parliament on the departmental performance in producing plain English documents. These reports should highlight examples of good and bad performance. Public embarrassment is a great teacher.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. If you would like me to provide any further information, or examples, I would be happy to do so.

Yours sincerely,
Brian O'Donnell