

Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
PO Box 6500
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Submission: Reform of Australian Government Administration

This submission is based on a decade of experience as a consultant/trainer/coach to the APS, over a decade of senior management experience in the APS, and over 20 years helping people both within and outside the APS figure out how to win a government job. The points made are most closely linked to the issues of: professional development, recruitment, selection and retention of staff.

Chapter 2: Challenges in the strategic environment

What are the key implications for how the public sector will need to operate?

Demographic changes mean:

- APS managers will need to establish and implement career management practices and processes for ‘mature age’ staff to retain them, tap their expertise, and smooth their transition from the workforce.
- The subject of ‘retirement’ and its definition needs further exploration.
- Recruitment practices need to be reformed. (see comments on Chapter 7.)

Chapter 4: A values driven culture that retains public trust

How do we ensure that APS leaders fulfil their responsibilities to promote and uphold the values?

One difficulty APS staff face in applying the APS Values relates to what they mean in practice once you get past the obvious. In the context of recruiting and selecting staff, what does ‘merit’ mean and what is ‘fairness’. Fairness is frequently interpreted to mean ‘sameness’, is confused with ‘procedural fairness’ and ‘natural justice’. The complexity of the recruitment process detracts from staff perceiving that processes are merit-based. Several APSC *State of the Service Reports* confirm this.

Chapter 5: High quality, forward looking and creative policy advice Building workforce capability

What should be done to bring the workforce development approach of the APS up to the level of the best organisations globally?

While managers are committed to learning and development, briefs for learning and development programs are often:

- vague and general;
- lacking in clear drivers and outcomes;
- lacking in clearly identified behaviours that need to change or be established;
- lacking in manager involvement pre-training;
- lacking in manager follow-up to ensure staff apply new skills.

While this is the case much time, effort and money will be wasted trying to build workforce capability.

Chapter 7: Flexibility and agility

How could recruitment practices be enhanced within Australian Government entities?

- Recruitment practices and procedures for non-ongoing recruitment need reforming. They are too complicated, impede mobility and foster perceptions that merit is not being applied.
- Remuneration disparity disadvantages smaller agencies and places an additional negotiation burden on applicants.
- Work level standards disparity results in APS levels receiving different experience depending on the agency. (For example, an APS 6 in one agency may have access to much greater levels of responsibility than in another agency, making transfers difficult.)
- While the Integrated Leadership System provides a common capability framework, its application has resulted in highly complex job specifications which are incomprehensible to non-public servants. Many public servants choose not to apply for jobs of interest if the application requirements are too onerous.
- While some agencies have moved to simplify the application process, the processes may not be applied consistently within the agency, and may generate confusion for selection panels and applicants alike as they try to determine how merit will be applied in these ‘unfamiliar’ circumstances.
- Members of selection panels continue: to hold narrow, rigid views about how selection ‘should’ be done; be unskilled in conducting interviews; and to produce selection reports based on subjective decisions. Delegates need to be more diligent in reviewing selection reports.
- Managers need to take their recruitment, selection, and retention responsibilities more seriously, and be linked to performance. While these responsibilities are seen as marginal, selection processes will continue to take too long.

Dr Ann Villiers

Mental Nutritionist®

www.mentalnutrition.com

www.selectioncriteria.com.au

avilliers@mentalnutrition.com

P: 02 6254 5023

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