

FUTURE FOCUS: the public service in 2025



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What will the public service - and the wider public sector - look like in 2025? What are the main trends and challenges, and what is being done to meet them? CARL BILLINGTON found out.

“The future public service is a collaborative one, in which relevant agencies co-ordinate to provide joined-up services that are organised around the needs of the customers or citizens they serve,” Peter Hughes, State Services Commissioner, suggests.

“We’re still going to have government departments, but a lot of the customer service is going to be joined up virtually around individual customers through IT. People expect to be able to go onto their device and for us to be a one-stop shop, not a series of individual agencies.

“I joined the public service in the 1980s, starting out as a basic grade clerk in the Department of Social Welfare, but wanting to make a bit of difference. However, what we had back then really was a Gliding On-style bureaucracy.

“The reforms of the 90s began to address that with the focus on quality services and products and customers; and the current reforms are taking us to the next level.

“However the challenge of the future is to organise ourselves and our resources around our customers and focus on the social, economic, health and education outcomes New Zealanders need us to deliver together. That’s something you can’t do by yourself.”

“Considering the public service of the future, we’re still going to have government departments with distinct responsibilities, but we’ll see lots of customer services being joined up virtually around individual customers, and government agencies collaborating around common outcomes for particular groups of customers.”

Still, this collaborative vision of the future is not without its challenges.

WORKING HORIZONTALLY

“The public sector is organised vertically, but we will increasingly need to work horizontally. That requires some very different ways of thinking and some markedly different approaches to leadership than those that have been at the fore in the past,” Hughes says.



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Ethos, leadership, public sector design and promoting a sense of ‘agency’ are all areas of particular passion for Brad Jackson, Professor of Public and Community Leadership and Head of Victoria University of Wellington’s School of Government.

“The conventional wisdom used to be that a typical career begins in the private sector, moves to the public sector and eventually migrates to the not-for-profit sector in the latter years. Now, all of that can happen in just three years.”

“With a more fluid approach to careers, I think the answer lies in building a stronger cross-sector ethos, focused on the issues we want to contribute to and the difference we can make, not which agency we work for. In the future I suspect we may well lose sight of where the work gets done at times, but we’ll still have a clear view of the core role each agency and each sector brings to the table,” Jackson says.

“Increasingly I think we’ll see people focusing on the problems they

want to tackle in their life and their work, rather than which agency they want to work for.”

Thinking in terms of the issues and opportunities that are emerging, retention and diversity are two key areas Jackson immediately highlights:

“Somewhat ironically, we have an ageing population and an ageing workforce and one of our biggest challenges is the ongoing loss of institutional knowledge and experience. What if ageing was seen as a resource not a burden?”

“There are some wicked problems we’re going to face that will require all the energy, enthusiasm, and savvy of our digital natives - but we’re also going to need the wisdom and sound judgement of those with experience.

“Twenty five year olds and 70 year olds have a lot in common,” Jackson adds, “they both want to contribute and they both want to change specific things.”

Another key area where Jackson sees the potential for some quite significant shifts in the future of the public sector is in our leadership models.

“For as long as we can remember, we’ve operated with Anglo-Saxon leadership models that tend to focus on the individual. In itself that’s not a bad thing, but we need to recognise its limits.

“The wicked problems we can expect to face will quite possibly require different models and concepts of leadership than we’re currently used to, or comfortable with in the public sector,” Jackson adds.

“As our ethnic base continues to diversify, we have the opportunity to draw on some very different models and concepts of leadership. In a future that rests heavily on collaboration and co-operation, drawing on the leadership perspectives of more collectivist cultures will be a real strength.

“Authority is important – I’m not advocating a shift towards ‘anything goes.’ There’s a healthy tension between providing vision and direction and leaving room for creativity. The healthy organisations I’ve seen all find ways to connect these aspects,” Jackson notes.

While Jackson observes that systems, processes, authority and structure are important, he is quick to point out that they are there to enable, to serve.

“The challenge is how to connect healthy government processes with healthy leadership and healthy management processes across the system. None of these can be the dominant force, though - they are processes, not people,” Jackson adds.

THE ART OF FOLLOWING

“Leadership creates identity, purpose and direction. We talk a lot about that but following is equally important. We need to be more active in our following; we need to start talking about agency.”

As we look to the future, especially one that looks set to be built on collaboration and collective endeavour, the concept of agency quickly becomes central. It speaks to our capacity to, and our desire to, influence the situations around us.

“There’s an opportunity for the public sector to show real leadership here – building the future with others, not doing it to them. Inviting others to exercise their agency. Part of that leadership ethos we need to adopt is the idea that if you want to influence, you also must first be willing to be influenced,” Jackson argues.

“If we think of where we invest our time and energy as being like dropping a stone in a pond, we each need to consider where best to drop that stone so its ripples have the greatest effect in the areas that really matter to us.

“Increasingly I think we’ll see people focusing on the problems they want to tackle in their life and their work, rather than which agency they want to work for.”

“When it comes to the future and change, we tend to focus our energy on the top leaders across the sector, but we need to emphasise the active role we need everyone to play in creating sustainable leadership. It isn’t just about the big grand gesture; it’s a sense of intention in each moment, in each meeting: what can I take from this moment and what am I adding to it?”

Colin MacDonald, Chief Executive for Internal Affairs, picks up on a number of these threads and themes as he considers what is shaping the future of the public sector.

“Predicting the future is nigh on impossible. Any analysis starts from what has happened, and tries to determine what appears likely if the future is based on that.

“That approach can only take us so far - the real key lies in seeing opportunities early enough to be able to leverage them. That’s the challenge we face.

“There’s a danger that we focus on technology as being the thing. Technology is simply a tool we use – it just happens to be a very powerful one,” MacDonald argues.

“We need to deploy to achieve something more important: improving citizens’ experiences and making New Zealand better for New Zealanders. If it’s harnessed well, technology is one of the tools that can really help us to do that.”

The other challenge MacDonald signals is that of how to organise ourselves around a future we can’t fully envision from here: “Government is organised around an industrial age model, not an information age model. We need to continue learning and



being open to evolve. And, as we do so, it's really important we take our Ministers on that journey with us.

"There are some things we can anticipate however. In the old world, policy drove operational delivery. In the new world, the direct feedback of where our operational delivery has been successful or not can help drive our policy thinking.

"The explosion of information around the world is eye watering. This will continue to increase and so will our ability to assimilate, to process, and synthesise information. This offers enormous potential when it comes to using that information to shape sound policy advice to Ministers," MacDonald says.

DOING THINGS BETTER - OR DOING BETTER THINGS?

Considering the question of to what degree the future will see us doing the same functions in different, better ways, as opposed to actually doing different things, Colin argues the future will be filled with both.

"There are some consistent things we will always need to do, but how we go about them is likely to change. For example, in 1910 we were out and about teaching square dancing to communities as a way of encouraging social ties and connecting neighbourhoods.

"While it's unlikely you'll see us out teaching square dancing in the future, we'll continue to have a strong focus on the services we provide to communities. What we're here for and why we do things tends to remain the same; it's how we go about it that changes.

"Additionally, I expect that there will also be some things we simply can't do today. The systems, tools, and structures don't exist yet, but in 20 to 30 years' time they will and that will enable new functions to emerge," MacDonald explains.

The other obvious trend MacDonald sees continuing is the way technology increasingly enables the automation of an increasing range of transactions and tasks.

"The power and the capability of technology continues to grow. Technology is able to automate and standardise even more complex tasks than it used to. The long-run trend will continue and we will see more complex things being automated – this being made possible by the introduction of machines and algorithms.

"Some of those tasks will become completely automated, and in some cases information and options will be presented to humans – because the thing that humans are really good at doing is making judgements," MacDonald adds.

"Although artificial intelligence will make big inroads into that, it's hard to automate judgement. Anything that involves a leap of logic, a leap of faith or joining two disparate ideas together – any form of creativity – is still very much in the bailiwick of people.

"What we also see is that, as certain tasks are automated, the space which this creates will get filled by more and more creative activity.

"One of the earliest applications of this was the way the invention of the spreadsheet allowed people to shift the time they spent on record-keeping to focus on analysis – it enabled a much more creative level of

work. We should expect this to continue.

"Bureaucracy is very good at delivering to 80% of the population – but we have an increasingly diverse population and one-size-fits-all approaches aren't going to work," MacDonald says.

"In the past we've gained better services by taking a bespoke approach. However, in the world we're entering now – with increasing diversity, multi-agency partnerships and processes – we'll succeed by creating more streamlined, standardised platforms.

"We're grappling with how to provide a more complex and more tailored service to customers. We're seeing a number of the large multinationals doing that by deploying much more standardised platforms and then building on top of these as needed, using a shared, reliable infrastructure that's being maintained by other parties.

"It enables design from a customer perspective – which, I think, will be one of the core principles of the future public service.

HOPPING OUT OF OUR AGENCY SHOES

"The key is not to try to second-guess which technology is going to be the winner. The real challenge is going to be our ability to hop out of our agency shoes – to break down our organisational barriers – and redesign the things we do from a customer or citizen perspective."

The potential in these developments, and the emphasis on more creative work for staff and others in the future of the public sector is certainly inspiring – but what might this mean for the employment environment of the future; and what challenges and opportunities does that bring?

Listening to the commentary so far, it's clear that a world of possibility appears to be looming on the horizon for the future public service in New Zealand. However, it depends greatly on an environment of collaboration – collaboration with citizens as well as collaboration across government agencies.

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This may not be as straightforward as it seems. Glenn Barclay, National Secretary for the Public Service Association, highlights some of the challenges and barriers we currently face from an employment perspective.

"We're increasingly going to need to move our talent around, yet our legislation reinforces each agency operating as an isolated employer. It's hard to encourage a whole-of-government mentality, when our legal and policy structure rigidly treats each agency in its silo.

"The current terms of the State Sector Act that reinforce siloed employment arrangements will need to change – in order to think of ourselves as public servants, we need a common set of employment terms and conditions," Barclay argues. "In addition, there are several additional challenges that we need to address.

“The last Workplace Dynamics survey¹ clearly indicated that our members have a strong commitment to their jobs, but not to the agencies they work for. The good news is there’s a strong commitment to contribute which is a really good platform for us to build a strong public sector ethos on.

“However, the alienation from the specific organisation that employs them could become an issue. It highlights the importance of investing in workplace culture if we are to retain and engage our people,” Barclay says.

Retention is another key challenge that Barclay sees in the future for the public sector, and it’s a challenge that strikes at both ends of the age and experience spectrum.

“The public sector recruits a lot of younger workers, frequently on fixed term agreements. Yet, based on our findings, only one in five graduates remain in their employment after four years.

“Those in their 40s and 50s were the most dissatisfied in terms of training and development opportunities, and we also need to do more to retain the knowledge and expertise of our older workers,” Barclay adds.

“Add these dynamics to the continued presence of restructures and the future trends of even greater automation, and security of work becomes a significant issue. Where the work is more transactional, we’re likely to see decreasing jobs in the future.”

“It highlights the importance of investing in workplace culture if we are to retain and engage our people.”

RETRAIN, RESKILL, REDEPLOY

“If we’re going to maintain a public sector ethos and promote retention, then agencies need to do two things. Firstly, wherever possible retrain and reskill people for work elsewhere in the agency – the role they filled may disappear but many of them carry a large amount of sector knowledge and context that takes time to rebuild.

“Secondly, consider the next stage for workers affected by restructures and organisational change, and help prepare them for that. There may be other parts of the sector they can contribute to.

“We are looking ahead with cautious excitement. The shifts in technology mean that the services citizens seek are being accessed in increasingly convenient ways and are further improving the interactions citizens have with the State. This is all good,” Barclay adds.

“People come to work with a strong commitment to serve and to make a difference. In terms of a starting point for the future employment environment, that’s a strong platform to build on.”

In Peter Hughes’ experience of public servants, there are two key things that they’re typically looking for: firstly, to contribute to

¹ *Workplace Dynamics in New Zealand Public Services, September 2013. Available through www.victoria.ac.nz.*

something that will make a difference, something that counts; and secondly, development opportunities.

“With the 90s focus on products and services and customers, we split policy and delivery away from each other. This still gave many public servants very rich, fulfilling careers but within very narrow fields of activity. That approach isn’t going to work for where we need to go in the future.

“I’d like to think we can start addressing that now, especially at a leadership level. That’s one of the things I’ve always done, in all of the big organisations I’ve led. Moving people across roles unlocks the organisation – it broadens people’s horizons, it brings fresh eyes to bear on established areas of work, and it creates a really rich environment for staff development.

“It’s not about going back. The pre-90s public service was a single, integrated service but it was heavily over-engineered. The post-90s public service went in the other direction. This is about bringing the best of these aspects together, not a wholesale return to the 80s.

“We’ve already begun identifying our leaders across the public service and working with them as a cohort. The next steps are perhaps to introduce some common leadership expectations, explore opportunities to move them around across the public service, and to treat every vacancy as a development opportunity.

“I don’t think we have to over-engineer it and it isn’t collaboration for collaboration’s sake. It’s simply about taking the learnings of the last few years and putting them in place to enable us to put these ‘horizontal’ ways of thinking and being into practice.”

LEADING WITHOUT AUTHORITY

According to Hughes, one thing we’re going to have to get really good at is leading without authority. “People are used to line authority, but if you’re leading a team of people or a project across multiple agencies, you’re going to have to find other ways of working.

“We need to get really sophisticated in our leadership approach - leading through influence and persuasion, not just authority, and building really strong, coherent, and diverse teams that work well across agencies.

“Whatever the future brings, our success will continue to depend on skilled leadership, passionate staff, and increasing collaboration across the sector and with our customers.

“In some ways, I ended up in the public service by accident. Yet, I can’t think of any other work I could have done that would have been more meaningful. You don’t want to be sitting in a retirement village at the end of your working life regretting how you spent it.”

One thing Hughes, Jackson, MacDonald and Barclay all seem to emphasise in common is that, no matter where technology takes us, the central focus of the public service will always be on people and the difference it can make to their lives.

“It’s a huge privilege to serve in the public sector and, as has always been the case, its future belongs to those passionate people who care enough to make a difference,” Hughes says.

“Everything else is just the set of tools we use to achieve this.”