

NEW PROFESSIONALS Looking Ahead



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The world is changing. It is always changing. “The only thing that is constant about the world is change” (a “quote” often misattributed to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus). Many schools of thought think the world is changing faster than ever before. It is easy to see why, given all the technological and scientific progress that has been made in the last three decades. So what will the public service and the wider public sector be like in 2025? What will it look like for current and future new professionals – people in the first 10 years of their public sector careers?

LOOKING BACK TO GO FORWARD

To look ahead at the future, it can be useful to look at the past and see how we got where we are, if only as a way to provide context that may help inform the direction we take going forward.

A little over a decade ago, back in May 2005, a little website came along called YouTube that allowed you to share videos online. A novel idea at a time when 2 megabit broadband in homes was only just launching (that’s right, it’s not a typo: two megabits per second, almost 100 times slower than what you can get now). Go back ten years before that to 1995 and broadband internet did not even exist. 2005 was also the year that saw Microsoft releasing the Xbox 360, Rupert Murdoch paid \$580m for MySpace because it was still a thing, the iPhone wasn’t in the public consciousness yet, and you could probably still

use floppy disks in most computers if you wanted to, or if you didn’t trust these flashy new USB sticks the shops were trying to sell you. If you were not working for the public service yet at the turn of the century, it is worth asking older colleagues what work was like at the time. Punch cards and computer lab booking sheets anyone?

Now these things are just a few of many events we have experienced that got us to the present reality we are familiar with. We would find it difficult to imagine a world where many of these things don’t exist, so ingrained are they in our everyday lives. But back in 1995, could anyone have even come close to imagining the 2005 to come, or the world as we know it today? Some individual predictions came close, others were wildly off. *Back to the Future II* eerily got a lot of things right 30 years ahead of its time, but there are still no hover boards (without wheels) or flying cars powered by banana peels. The point is, predicting the future as a whole is difficult as one will never have enough information to be able to do so, but one can certainly be prepared for it. Some things, though, can be predicted with some certainty, especially in the short term, and keeping these in mind can help inform us about how to be prepared for the future.

LOOKING AHEAD

Advancements in science and technology in the last three decades have been phenomenal. This has driven progress in every area of human civilisation, opening up opportunities never imagined even a mere 30 years ago. The internet alone has revolutionised modern democracy and free speech, enabled any citizen to access unprecedented volumes of human knowledge and broadcast their news and ideas to anyone willing to listen. It has changed age-old models of commerce and how businesses function. The way the public sector works has changed as a result, as has the efficiency and methods with

which it can achieve its objectives and deliver public services to citizens.

So, what does the future hold? Ten years from now, what will the public sector be like? It is a certainty that things will change, although no one can tell what with absolute certainty. 2025 will certainly be quite different from the world we know today. The public service will have evolved – possibly with new jobs, new ways of working, improved services delivered differently and integrating technology like never before. Predictions include the growth of public sector outsourcing, integrated and personalised public services, and an increasingly complex and demanding working environment compared to the siloed, departmental approach of old. An emerging trend is the use of the project-team model, establishing a new team for the lifetime of a project and shifting people and resources on to the next task when complete. The public sector will certainly be more effective and efficient than ever before, but it will also be more complex and demanding for those who work within it, whether they are new professionals or not.

The themes of the moment are big data, the investment approach, digital services, customer-focused design thinking, moving from a focus on efficiency to a focus on productivity, and replacing standardised public services with personalised ones. There is increasing demand being placed on the delivery of public services, and on public service workforce competencies and capabilities. The solutions are becoming more sophisticated and complex, while the demand from customers is for simplified services and interactions. All this is shaping how the public sector is evolving. Colin MacDonald, Chief Executive of the Department of Internal Affairs, while speaking at the IPANZ New Professionals 2016 Conference, said that the challenge for the future public service is to simplify government and remove complexity.

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WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR NEW PROFESSIONALS?

Whatever predictions can be made (demographic, economic, social, technological or otherwise) and regardless of their level of accuracy, some things remain certain. It is guaranteed that the world is going to become more complex. New professionals will therefore need support to navigate this complexity early on in their careers, now more than ever. They will also need to step up and own their continuous professional development, or risk failing to realise their potential. What do we know now about what is needed?

- What is required of people is that they have the capacity to handle the complexity of the operating environment. To develop this capacity (resilience, “getting up, dressing up, showing up” every day), we all need to understand the concept of the corporate athlete - that a career is a marathon, not a sprint, and that one cannot perform at 100% all day every day. Regular ‘training’ is required to maintain and improve performance.

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- New professionals, whether as graduates or early in career, need to be invested in at an earlier rate. As more is demanded of workers, it is no longer enough to arm them with a higher education qualification and send them out into the workforce as if they are fully prepared. All new professionals

merit a good induction process, and good people leaders to build and drive improvements in competencies and skills through structured continuous professional development. They should also receive early exposure to leadership training sooner rather than later.

- Digby Scott and other researchers on the types of work skills required for 2020 and beyond concluded that “we need to shift from a world that values Conformity, Competencies and Certainty to one that champions Curiosity, Connectedness and Courage” (go to: <https://digbyscott.com/2016/07/28/how-to-play-with-fire/>). To achieve this requires a change from current leaders in their approach in terms of how future leaders are developed.
- The ideas about leadership need to change. Leaders are no longer solely those that are at the top of the organisational hierarchy. Everyone is a leader when they take leadership on issues and bring solutions, such as taking the lead on providing free and frank advice within their role. This will require courage and an appreciation of why doing so is important. They do not need to be responsible for a team to be a leader – everyone leads on what they do. The change from having managers who manage and control, to the concept of people leaders who lead and inspire, is also a critical shift in thinking.
- Rather than invest solely in the ‘emerging leaders’, organisations should consider investing in everyone, and take a holistic approach to this investment – what lifts one person lifts us all.
- A “growth mindset” is needed (see the work

of Carol Dweck on this subject). One must always be thinking “what can I learn from this situation?”

As we move forward, the people who will make up the workforce of the future (whether current, former, or future new professionals) have a desire to work within a public sector that provides opportunities to engage in challenging, meaningful and rewarding work serving New Zealanders, with appropriate autonomy and enough resources in a supportive environment to get the job done. They would like to see a future public sector with many opportunities to learn and grow, with inspirational leaders who, rather than control with authority, choose to lead by example.

There is a reciprocal expectation on new professionals to adjust as well, to commit to actively engaging in continuous life-long learning, to adapt to and harness new technology, and to plan ahead and be well prepared for future demands. New professionals will also need to change how they measure success in this brave new world. At present, new professionals rotate in and out of roles for professional development reasons, learning a lot along the way but often not remaining long enough to see the long-term effects of their decisions or evaluate the success of projects they have worked on. In the public sector of the future, as solutions grow more complex and the structure of teams more flexible, the potential exists for the loss of institutional knowledge and misjudging true success as people move on quickly. New professionals need to consider this in how they evaluate success, even as they prepare for the next role.

As Malcolm X said, “the future belongs to those who prepare for it today.”