

# I, PUBLIC SERVANT: Getting our public sector ready for the future

***Our public service employs 348,000 people across New Zealand, nearly 14 percent of the population. All New Zealanders are affected by the work they do. As technology advances like a high-speed train and jobs, generational disparities and demographics change, is our public sector prepared? KATHY OMBLER found out.***



We asked an academic, a union leader and a millennial-age 'social entrepreneur'. Common themes they raised included overly hierarchical leadership, transparency, workforce flexibility and diversity and, of course technology: its opportunities and risks. They called for the public service career of the future to be worthy and fulfilling, and for more relational engagement with the public. In essence, how the public sector is managed might change; the ethos must remain the same.

More transparency and a leadership shakeup are critical for empowering the mission-driven public servants of the future, says Enspirial Foundation member, Silvia Zuur.



**Silvia Zuur**

She says that probing into the future workforce of the public service calls for examination of two, distinct narratives: the future of work and the future of government (in its organisational process and decision-making structures).

Much of Zuur's work focuses around organisational design, the future of work, how it's changing, and how young people are entering this new work force and the skills they need. "I don't fit in any traditional job description (but) my career might soon be considered the norm."

Future careers will continue to evolve, she says. "The jobs of the future haven't been written yet. We don't know what the one year olds of today are going to be calling themselves. Take the example of social media manager. That role didn't exist ten years ago; now it's totally normal."

## **Mission- and purpose-driven**

Zuur demurs from labelling millennials as 'the me generation'. "The people I've grown up with are actually mission- or purpose-driven. There is less organisational loyalty and more mission and fulfilment loyalty. We're no longer stepping into one career for life. If someone is trying to make an impact in a certain area, they are not going to limit themselves to one organisation or job to fulfil that. They are not going to stay in an analyst job because they've been promised a promotion in three years' time; that will not retain the young people coming into our public service."

Here enters the 'gig economy', the term to describe the trend away from stable, long-term, 9am-to-5pm employment toward temporary contracts and short-term engagements. "The gig economy enables freedom, and it moves us beyond the constraints of the one-career life," says Zuur.

She quotes Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) research that shows young people are now expected to have 17 jobs across five careers in their lifetime. As well, in 2016, an analysis of 2.7 million job advertisements revealed seven new clusters of work. New clusters are closely related and portable, so, instead of preparing for one 'dream job', young people would prepare for a 'dream cluster' based on skills and interests.

Zuur believes that young people today are far more progressive than past generations and are seeking more innovation. "Yet public sector leadership can be conservative, working within old-fashioned hierarchical structures. Young people are not going to respond to that."

"Leadership has to change. We need courage from those in positions of authority to open up power, to ask what could their organisational structures look like to allow these young people to step in, and up? Otherwise you're always going to feel, as a younger person, that you're trying to bash through this change from the bottom. The fundamental of this shift is about building trust."

Thinking about the future of government, a key question for Zuur is how does a government serve its people rather than the people serve the government?

She forecasts a shakeup in government organisation over the next 20 years. "From an organisational construct perspective, we have to redefine and reorganise the government sector because I believe the current system is not inviting for people to engage with."

***"So much is hidden and trapped within bureaucracy, and that's not a way the future wants to work."***

"I would ask: how is the government going to empower public servants to be mission-driven and fulfilled within the work they will be doing and, how is the government going to be more open and transparent to its clients, the taxpayers?"

Transparency is key, she says. "I think

public sector organisations need way more openness and transparency so that when young people are looking for work opportunities they can see what these organisations are doing. So much is hidden and trapped within bureaucracy, and that's not a way the future wants to work."

Zuur says setting the benchmark for transparency is Taiwanese software programmer, Audrey Tang, who has been appointed Taiwan's government minister for digital policy.

"Tang is a radically transparent digital minister; for example most internal meetings are transcribed and published, with surprising results," says Zuur.

Tang has noted that public officials become more innovative and risk-taking and propose new ideas thanks to this transparency, believing they are motivated by the public recognition they get when their innovations are successful.

There is a flipside, because innovation can also be shot down by public scrutiny, says Zuur. She requests a little more forgiveness from the public and the media when the public sector brings innovation and courage into the space. "The flipside of innovation is risk. So if you want innovation, along with transparency and accountability, the public service of the future will have to figure how to balance all that."

FYA research shows that since 2012 the demand for digital skills has increased by more than 200%. That said, Zuur says programmers of the future must also retain empathy with people.

"I work with a training school for web developers and we don't just teach tech skills; part of our programme is about teaching human skills. Students learn about listening, receiving feedback, working in a team, dealing with stress and the importance of diversity in the workforce. It's not just which language you can code that's important, it's about having empathy for the humans who are going to be using the applications you are coding."

And let's not forget empathy for the future public servant, she adds. "How do we bring more heart and soul into our government in how it works with its public servants? They are not just about economics and black and white metrics - they are human beings."

Zuur calls for change in the organisational structures of some government agencies to better support their employees, for example case managers who deal daily with citizens' problems. "The structure needs to support the human being to be the best public servant, without them burning out. A government of integrity needs to treat its public servants with integrity."

### Not just transactional

PSA national secretary, Glenn Barclay, is concerned that public sector leadership is not thinking enough about its future workforce planning. He says embracing technology comes with risks, and that providing relational as well as transactional engagement with the public is critical. So, too, is workforce diversity and ensuring better career development across the entire public service.



Glenn Barclay

"I think it's very easy to be passive about technology and automation; to say this is a train coming and we have to get on board. Also, too often the thinking around technology is just about efficiency. We should be asking what do we want from technology, how do we utilise it, not only to deliver better public services to the community, but also to create better jobs for workers?" asks Barclay.

Too great an emphasis on technology creates a risk of

## AI – an opportunity or a threat?

Matt Boyd, Research Director at Adapt Research Ltd and Professor Nick Wilson of the Department of Public Health at Otago University in Wellington observe that intelligent digital systems which learn from data and make decisions for humans are transforming society. Past technological change has led to adaptation, but artificial intelligence is arriving rapidly, often with unexpected results.

AI is a global opportunity, but also presents risks, including bias, prejudice and injustice in AI algorithms; domination of content production and media discourse; transformation of work, and impacts on equality, health and welfare; security risks, physical risks, and even existential risks that threaten human survival.

In this context, say Boyd and Wilson, we must as a society make highly considered decisions around AI. Organisations that adopt a risk-aware mindset around AI will create true, long-term opportunities while minimising the risks.

When AI augments decision-making, people's autonomy may be disrespected if the desired choice reflects third-party interests above the individual's. These systems may not be designed to be malicious, but may simply turn out that way.



The public sector is obliged to determine whether our present legal tools are suitable for dealing with such systems, whether we ought to take a stance on banning harmful systems (e.g. autonomous weapons), and whether we need to regulate AI systems that undermine equality and a truthfully informed public.

The public sector needs to ensure safe adoption of AI, using appropriate regulation, certification of AI design, and systematic education on algorithm ethics.

Furthermore, the public sector has an obligation to inform the public with clean data and heed the public voice about what kind of society it wants to live in. Monitoring and responsiveness are critical, as is engagement with organisations whose systems appear to be functioning against the interests of society.

Finally, note Boyd and Wilson, we need research on the social and ethical aspects of AI, policy to address risks, and a vision for New Zealand consistent with long-held core societal values.

For more on AI and the New Zealand public sector, see Boyd and Wilson's recent publication in Policy Quarterly [https://www.victoria.ac.nz/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/1175176/Boyd.pdf](https://www.victoria.ac.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1175176/Boyd.pdf).

viewing public services as purely transactional, he says. "With the Better Public Services target of improving the proportion of New Zealanders using government services online, what gets overlooked is the importance of relational engagement."

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"Most people want relational engagement with public services; they don't just want to be on the receiving end of a transaction. The human aspect of public services is absolutely critical and has to be maintained for trust in public services to be maintained."

There are also questions of job loss, and how technology encourages centralisation, adds Barclay. "Over the last nine years we've seen a number of agencies close their regional offices. Rather than using technology as a means to just cut positions, let's use it as an opportunity to rethink positions; to rethink the kind of work agencies could be doing to support the relational side of their engagement with the public."

"We don't think the public service is currently doing any good thinking about these changes and future challenges. They have done so in the past. That seems to have fallen away. There is workforce planning but I think it takes more than that; it takes some genuine thinking about what kind of public service do we want, how is it going to look, and how do we support relational engagement by the public with their public services?"

We would love that work to start up again and we would like to be part of it, says Barclay.

"For example we think, with some exceptions, there's been little development in training in the public service, and when it comes to career development there are a number of weak points in the system. One is how do we keep young people?"

"What the PSA would like to see is a future where young people can visualise a public service career not just in one agency for 40 years, but across the public service as a whole; and that the notion

of being a 'public servant' will be as powerful as that of being a social worker, or some other specific role."

Another cohort to consider is the 'middle aged' public servant (aged roughly 38 to 55) who, according to PSA's most recent Workplace Dynamics Survey, strike a career plateau. "Once they get to a certain point there are limited career opportunities, yet these are some of our most skilled and experienced people and we need to figure out ways of utilising them."

He sees a future for intergenerational mentoring and support, and strategies such as Learning Reps.

"The notion of Learning Reps has been around for a while in the UK; they advocate learning among their peers and build learning cultures in workplaces."

"Also, increasingly there are multi-generations in workplaces and we should view these as an opportunity for mentoring and support between generations. This not just about learning technology skills, it's about recognising the perspectives that different generations bring to the work place and working off those."

### Out with old stereotypes

An important consideration for the future public service workplace is diversity; ensuring workplaces are safe places for everyone, says Barclay. "(For example) our Rūnanga o Ngā Toa Āwhina has developed Ngā Kaupapa, based around Te Ao Māori concepts, setting out what a good workplace looks like for Māori workers."

Ngā kaupapa seeks inclusive workplaces with respect for diversity, and recognition of tikanga Māori and te reo Māori skills, so that Māori workers can fully contribute and be respected for that contribution.

It's a very exciting development that gives a glimpse into how the public service needs to change in the future, says Barclay. "Traditionally the public sector has done well in terms of the proportion of Māori it employs but the ongoing challenge is the number of Māori in leadership roles. That comes down, in part, to the question of is this a safe place for Māori to work?"

In conclusion, we should always remember who makes up the public

service, and the range of occupational groups involved, says Barclay.

"There still is a stereotype of the public servant as being in an office in Wellington when in fact there is a wide range of occupational groups spread across the country. We have social workers for example, the single biggest occupational group in Oranga Tamariki, case managers and frontline workers in Work and Income, in Justice we have bailiffs, we have probation officers in Corrections. If you think about these jobs in the future - technology might help or alter how people do these jobs - but in many respects the jobs may not fundamentally change. It comes back to that point about the importance of relational engagement with the public and the quality of services. People making good professional judgements are still going to be required in the future."

### Major shift required

New Zealand's government sector is exceptionally innovative. That was a first impression Professor Ian Williamson received, when he arrived here last year to take on the Pro Vice-Chancellor and Dean of Commerce roles at the Victoria Business School.



Prof. Ian Williamson

"Having worked with governments across Asia/Pacific and North America, one thing that immediately stood out for me here is that the government, in both the political and public administration environments, is willing to try new things, to take risks and consult with thought leaders about new approaches. I found that quite exciting."

That said, he believes radical differences in the future workplace, and in society, will require a major shift in the capabilities of the public sector.

"Addressing new and complex economic and social issues will require employees



with a breadth of skills, as opposed to depth in a specific skill. Historically, if you were going to work in Treasury you'd have depth in economics, but one of the innovative things that Treasury is doing right now is focusing on the wellbeing aspects of public policy. Wellbeing is inherently more than just a financial consideration; it requires an understanding of many non-financial and in some cases intangible issues. That changes the portfolio of talent that is needed in new hires. It also has implications for existing (knowledgeable and experienced) employees who are critical to the organisation's success but must develop new skills and perspectives."

Think also about the policy and regulatory environment around the financial sector, he adds. "Today, with the advent of bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies, it would be impossible to develop good financial sector policy without combining finance and economics skills with IT expertise. The practicality of developing that breadth of capability in a workforce is not trivial."

As the workplace changes so, too, must education. "Ten years ago an organisation could tell you what your career path looked like. That's changed. Now you're going to have to be 're-tooled' three or four times over five or ten years."

Micro-credentials are a new and innovative way for achieving this, he says. "The government has launched three pilots, the first being a self-driving car engineering programme. These are bite-sized pieces of education, with field-specific skills, that can provide confidence to employers that a person has gained mastery over a certain subject. The New Zealand government is open to universities doing more work in this area."

### Three big issues

Taking a step back, Professor Williamson sees three big issues that New Zealand needs to think about, and that the government sector will have to play a role in helping deal with.

"Asia/Pacific, where we happen to be, will over the next 10 or 15 years be the growth engine for the rest of the world. New Zealand has not

yet taken full advantage of this. I think New Zealand can contribute a lot to the growth of Asia/Pacific and that will help shape this country, from both an economic and quality-of-life perspective.

"It's about more than just trade it's also how we think about cultural capabilities within our society and support honest mutual engagement with our Asia/Pacific neighbours. That's going to require good government leadership."

Secondly, Williamson says the growing rural/urban divide represents social and economic issues for both communities, and he sees a need for government support to enable more small-to-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to counter these.

"People are going to Auckland because of economic opportunities and there are concerns about the social implications for Auckland and of course about the communities they're leaving. One of the advantages of technology now is that it really doesn't matter where your job is located, so I see a growing role for SMEs. You can have thriving businesses in rural communities that allow people to hang on to their heritage, and have jobs for their kids that are not dead-end jobs.

"So if government can create an environment that supports growth of SMEs across all geographical locations, that has positive implications for all aspects of New Zealand life."

Williamson's third issue is how New

Zealand embraces the current rapid shift in demography.

"The average age of the Māori and Pacific populations are substantially lower than that of the Pākehā population and the birth rates are higher. That's going to have huge implications about what this place looks like in the not-too-distant future, and that doesn't even take into consideration immigration from other countries.

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"It's going to mean different kinds of economic activity and social services, and different expectations in terms of society and government. How will government support that, how will it enable development within the Māori and Pacific communities and how will it bring all society along?

"I think government officials should be spending a lot of time thinking about these three issues, and about what expertise government agencies need to manage them. My sense is it will be radically different, so we need to consider how people are hired, how they are developed, and how to form a talent pipeline that's supportive."



28 August, 2004. Ref: DCDL-0003802. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand