



BUILDING A  
DYNAMIC FUTURE:

# THE NEXT GENERATION OF PUBLIC SERVICE TALENT

FINAL REPORT

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The Public Policy Forum works with all levels of government and the public service, the private sector, labour, post-secondary institutions, NGOs and Indigenous groups to improve policy outcomes for Canadians. As a non-partisan, member-based organization, we work from "inclusion to conclusion," by convening discussions on fundamental policy issues and by identifying new options and paths forward. For 30 years, the Public Policy Forum has broken down barriers among sectors, contributing to meaningful change that builds a better Canada.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between September 2016 and March 2017, the Public Policy Forum explored perceptions of public service careers among young Canadians today to find opportunities to modernize recruitment and retention strategies in the public sector. Informed by interviews and roundtable discussions with 80 students and young professionals across the country, this national study was launched in part as a response to demographic trends facing public services, as well as new workplace realities shaped by evolving contexts, competencies and career expectations.

## TALENT RECRUITMENT

Millennial perspectives on public service vary depending on roles, jurisdictions and regional contexts. In particular, our research reveals contrasting views about the meaningful impact, financial security and enriching experience of public service careers. Compared to the private sector, public services continue to fall short of increasing expectations for better information and engagement, as well as greater efficiency and flexibility in recruitment. Specific opportunities to improve outreach efforts, selection criteria, application processes and orientation practices across public services include the following:

- Develop marketing content that presents a comprehensive picture of the public service and compelling reasons why a public service career is worth pursuing.
- Organize more frequent on-campus events where emerging and established public service leaders can share their own experiences with students.
- Strengthen talent pipelines by identifying and building relationships with promising candidates in the early stages of their post-secondary studies or sooner.

- Broaden outreach efforts to include non-traditional faculties, such as science, business and engineering, as well as campuses outside major cities.
- Launch interdisciplinary case competitions where students from different programs work together to tackle public policy challenges.
- Review selection criteria to ensure accessible language, consider transferrable skills, and rationalize mandatory requirements to remove unnecessary barriers to entry.
- Modernize online recruitment systems by allowing applicants to track the status of their application throughout the entire process.
- Ensure that orientation for all new employees includes a comprehensive welcome package and standardized practices, such as team building and mentoring.

## EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Organizational culture shapes the public service experience. Drawn to opportunities for social impact, many students and young professionals choose to join public services but often encounter complacent attitudes and hierarchical barriers that undermine productivity. Although corporate vision and individual initiative matter, most millennials (those who were between the ages of 18 and 34 in 2015) believe that managers play a pivotal role in creating an engaging workplace and a learning environment. Included below are key recommendations for building progressive public services that enable managers to fully maximize talent:

- Allow for flexible work arrangements that support employee productivity without undermining workplace culture and departmental outcomes.
- Find opportunities to integrate new technologies that foster workplace collaboration and improve operational efficiency.

- Create mechanisms that help codify corporate memory to ensure continuity and ongoing progress as public servants retire or change positions.
- Take a systematic approach to management training that promotes consistent standards and supports capacity building.
- Incorporate talent management as a key criterion in manager performance reviews to enhance accountability and promote a culture of continuous improvement.
- Enhance feedback loops by connecting public servants with departmental leaders and stakeholder communities.
- Empower talented young public servants through enriching opportunities for professional growth and leadership development.

## REBRANDING PUBLIC SERVICES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

Through our conversations across the country, we have also identified organizational values that seem to resonate most with students and young professionals. Public service employers need to recognize that it is the quality of the everyday workplace experience that ultimately attracts new talent and keeps top performers. Taken together, these five guiding principles define the type of public service that aligns with the priorities of the next generation of talent:

- ***Put people first*** by recognizing employee contributions, investing in their development and caring about their well-being.
- ***Embrace shared responsibility*** as talent development benefits the employee and the employer, from identifying individual aspirations to creating learning organizations.
- ***Foster enterprise thinking*** to develop a dynamic workplace where internal collaboration is the norm rather than the exception.

- ***Facilitate intergenerational learning*** through dialogue, knowledge exchange, collaboration and informal networking to support continuity and harness diversity.
- ***Champion efficient accountability*** by balancing risk management and innovative spirit to ensure that processes contribute to meaningful outcomes for citizens.



# INTRODUCTION

Successful talent management is a moving target. Contexts change, organizational priorities shift and workplace expectations evolve. Today, public services across the country face an aging workforce and increasing competition for talent. In addition to succession planning, they must also prepare for emerging policy challenges by building capacity and ensuring productivity. The federal public service, for instance, has put forth a vision to develop a “Capable, confident and high-performing workforce that embraces new ways of working and mobilizing the diversity of talent to serve the country’s evolving needs.”<sup>1</sup> Making similar commitments, municipal and provincial public services are also thinking about the best way to recruit and retain the next generation of talent.

According to “The Boomer Shift” series in *The Globe and Mail*, Canada now has more people over the age of 65 than under 15, with baby boomers making up over a quarter of the population.<sup>2</sup> The demographic shift is even starker in the federal public service, where over 47,000 civil servants are eligible for retirement in the next five years.<sup>3</sup> Between 2000 and 2013, there was a 32 percent increase in employees aged 50 – 59 and a 161 percent increase in those aged 60 and over.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, millennials make up an increasingly large portion of the Canadian workforce. Based on Statistics Canada and Environics Analytics data, millennials comprised 37 percent of the Canadian workforce in 2015, the largest of all generational cohorts.<sup>5</sup> While highly educated, millennials face potential risks of underemployment as older

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.clerk.gc.ca/eng/feature.asp?pagelid=400>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-investor/retirement/the-boomer-shift-how-canadas-economy-is-headed-for-majorchange/article27159892/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-service-commission/services/publications/public-service-commission-canada-2015-2016-annual-report.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/the-federal-public-services-baby-boomer-problem/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.environicsanalytics.ca/docs/default-source/eauc2015-presentations/dougnorris-afternoonplenary.pdf?sfvrsn=6%20>

workers delay retirement and new technologies reduce labour demand across sectors. Nevertheless, public services still have to compete for talent in an ever-expanding employment landscape. The rise of social entrepreneurship, for instance, provides new avenues for making a difference beyond public service.

Another factor to keep in mind is that young professionals face unique career pressures in today's hyper-connected society. Online exposure to millennial success stories can create a sense of optimism about endless opportunities to change the world. Greater awareness, however, can lead to competitiveness and career anxiety, with students and young professionals constantly comparing themselves to others. Though a potential source of rewarding work, the public sector cannot be complacent in this new reality, where young professionals want to make an immediate impact and seek diverse challenges to keep up with their peers.

Public services must also reconsider competency needs in light of changing demands and increasing uncertainties. As highlighted in the Public Policy Forum report [Flat, Flexible and Forward-Thinking: Public Service Next](#), "The role of the public service is becoming more ambiguous given the degree of global interdependency, the pace of change, the ever increasing volume of information and new levels of public scrutiny." Succeeding in this new environment will require public services to reflect on the types of skills they need and the best way to leverage talent to ensure better outcomes for Canadians.

# PROJECT OVERVIEW AND APPROACH

In partnership with the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, the Government of Alberta and the Government of Nova Scotia (Public Service Commission), the Public Policy Forum launched a national initiative in September 2016 to explore opportunities for improving public sector recruitment and retention. What does public service mean to young people today? How can public sector employers stay competitive amid changing career trends? How can public services enable new talent to thrive? By engaging a diversity of students and young professionals across the country, our aim is to identify practical strategies for building the next generation of public service talent.

The project began with a review of current research on public service talent management, in the broader context of changing career and workplace trends. To provide a basis for more focused conversations with students and young professionals, we synthesized this research in a discussion paper focused on key pressures facing public sector employers, Canadian perceptions of public service careers and common approaches to talent recruitment and workplace engagement.

With input from our partners on research questions and project participants, we conducted phone interviews with students and young professionals across every region in Canada, as well as public service talent development leaders. In February 2017, we also held a series of six roundtable discussions in Edmonton, Halifax and Ottawa to target a similar mix of young Canadians employed by our project partners or who are considering public service careers. The Ottawa roundtables took place in the Public Policy Forum boardroom, while other discussions were hosted by the Peter Lougheed Leadership College at the University of Alberta in Edmonton and the School of Public Administration at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. (Interview questions and roundtable agendas are included in Appendices A and B.)

In each city, we convened one roundtable with young public servants from all three levels of government and another with post-secondary students from various programs. Considering potential differences in life stage and work experience, we held separate roundtables to focus the discussion on issues that were particularly relevant to each group. Combining interviews and roundtables, we engaged 80 young Canadians on their personal views and experiences of working in the public service. (See Appendix C for a complete list of project participants.)

# THE PUBLIC SERVICE BRAND

Recruiting top talent requires a strong employer brand. As part of our research, we asked millennials about their perceptions of the public sector and what compels some of them to pursue public service careers. While misconceptions about public services exist, our discussions revealed contrasting views regarding three overarching themes: the ability to contribute to broad impact, the desire for financial security and the opportunity for professional growth. In some cases, perspectives varied depending on organizational roles, government levels and regional contexts.

## BROAD IMPACT

On the whole, students and young professionals view public services as unique organizations where ambitious, talented and conscientious people can work collectively for the public good. Most participants agreed that public service work can be “challenging and rewarding – an opportunity to contribute to something bigger than yourself.” Although private and non-profit sectors may share elements of social purpose, both the aim and scope of the public sector, in this respect, are unique.

The opportunity to tackle issues from multiple angles was particularly appealing to the millennials we engaged. As noted by an interviewee, “One cannot view problems from just one sector,” with the public service playing an important role in bringing a wide range of perspectives to the table. Interested in making lasting change on a broad spectrum, many students choose to pursue public service careers because of the opportunities to examine a wide range of complex challenges and help create policy solutions that can have a positive impact on many communities.

According to one participant, “We are in a society where things need to be immediate,” which means that young, ambitious talent seek “a balance between speed and scale.” Compared to private and non-profit employers, however, the public service, regardless of the jurisdiction, is often characterized as a “slow-moving beast.” Young professionals who

have worked across multiple sectors recognize that layers of bureaucracy can exist in any large organization, yet timeframes tend to be more ambiguous in the public sector. Government policies and programs can take years, if not decades, to develop and implement successfully.

A number of young public servants see a contrast between policy work and program or service delivery roles, where outcomes can be more concrete and immediate. Public service jobs that involve interacting with citizens and stakeholders on a regular basis provide the type of direct feedback that is less common for those employed in policy areas. An important exception seems to be public servants working for cities, who emphasize that their impact tends to be more obvious at the municipal level. Due to differences in scope and scale, federal and provincial public servants may not easily see how their everyday work translates into public value.

## FINANCIAL SECURITY

With job security becoming scarcer in society, many millennials recognize the financial benefits that public service employment can provide. With the federal public service, in particular, concerns have been raised about the increasing prevalence of temporary or casual contracts, as well as roll-out issues with the Phoenix pay system. Still, students and young professionals alike continue to see public services as one of the few large employers that are able to offer secure employment in an increasingly uncertain economy.

Across every region, financial security was an important consideration for young professionals making major life decisions, from purchasing a home to starting a family. This finding seems to run contrary to generalizations about the priorities of millennials, such as the desire for career mobility, the need to continually expand social networks and an aversion to settling down in a given place. While our discussions in Ottawa and Edmonton reinforced the impact of life stages on career decisions, roundtable participants in Halifax expressed greater uncertainty about their economic prospects overall, highlighting limited

job opportunities, especially outside city limits, and the challenges of making ends meet through entry-level public service jobs in the region.

Although the perception of low earnings in the public sector is not uncommon, the reality is more nuanced as pay scales differ across roles and jurisdictions. In general, entry-level salaries in the public service are often higher than those in the private sector, whereas the opposite can be true for more senior-level positions. In fact, private sector opportunities tend to be more appealing to PhD students who seek a better return on their educational investment. With fewer employers providing pensions and benefits, many participants appreciate the comparative advantages of public service employment, including the work-life balance that may be more difficult to achieve in the private sector.

## PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

Many students begin to consider public service careers as early as their first and second years of university. Knowing someone with public sector experience, whether it is a parent or a mentor, provides exposure to public service opportunities and often shapes the decision to follow similar trajectories. As millennials are interested in building a career rather than pursuing just any job, public services continue to appeal to those who are aware of the plethora of opportunities that exist for continuous learning and development.

In addition to employment that contributes to the public good, students and young professionals are drawn to organizations that can provide enriching work experience. The size and scope of public services present an array of professional opportunities, from playing different roles to addressing different issues. Many participants are especially interested in rotational programs that enable them to work in multiple departments, trying out different roles to expand their skill set and discover what they enjoy most.

Public services, however, are frequently perceived as singular entities – you are basically working for *the* government. Many people lack

understanding of what public service work entails and the career options available. Some participants also believe that the view of public service as a career for life may not be inspiring for millennials. A discrepancy, therefore, exists between common perceptions of public service and actual public service experiences, which are often diverse and dynamic. Participants believe more can be done to showcase public service careers as varying widely across and within departments and ministries.



# TALENT RECRUITMENT: STANDING OUT AS A COMPETITIVE EMPLOYER

Shaping first impressions of a poorly understood institution, public service recruitment is a critical component of talent management. Public services continue to receive a vast number of job applications. Yet the question remains whether recruitment strategies are resulting in the quality and diversity of talent that is necessary to respond to changing demands. Compared to employers in other sectors, public services continue to fall short of millennial expectations for better information and engagement, as well as greater efficiency and flexibility in recruitment. Though many positive developments have been made in these areas, our research suggests that opportunities exist to further strengthen public service marketing, modernize selection criteria, streamline application processes and improve orientation practices.

## PROMOTING THE PUBLIC SERVICE

On the whole, participants feel that public services can strengthen their marketing strategies through deeper engagement and broader outreach. Relative to private sector employers, public services lack consistent presence on college and university campuses, as current recruitment activities are usually limited to career fairs. It is also common for public services to begin connecting with students as they complete their degrees, a point at which many of the top students have already decided on an initial career path following graduation. Being bombarded nowadays with constant information, students appreciate employers who take the time to connect with them as people, learning about their career aspirations and articulating how they align with organizational priorities.

Another gap identified by participants is the lack of investment in developing strategic relationships with post-secondary institutions to advance shared interests. Even with more targeted initiatives, such as the [Deputy Minister University Champions](#) at the federal level, efforts

to raise awareness of public service opportunities continue to be sporadic. In comparison, private sector employers are often more deliberate in building relationships with career centers on campuses, working together to identify and connect with potential recruits. Some participants also emphasize that public services are not effectively leveraging their young leaders as ambassadors who can help showcase the diversity of career paths in the public sector.

Currently, public service recruitment seems to be limited to a small number of social science disciplines. Although public services rely on applied research and technical expertise in various fields, students in science, business and engineering programs, among others, are rarely exposed to public service as a career path. Public services can take better advantage of global talent as well by engaging the growing number of international students at Canadian post-secondary institutions. To further diversify recruitment, participants see opportunities to broaden the geographic scope of public service campaigns beyond major cities.

## RETHINKING SELECTION CRITERIA

Some students and young professionals face entry barriers to public service careers. French language requirements, particularly at the federal level, can limit the talent pool to specific regions where bilingualism is more common. Greater concentration of federal public service positions in the National Capital Region also limits opportunities for less mobile millennials. However, participants across every region believe that it is difficult to enter the public service as a young professional from other sectors due to limited recognition of transferrable skills. Public service jobs often require previous government experience, favouring those who begin their public sector careers early and, in many cases, during their post-secondary studies through co-op education or other student recruitment programs. In fact, many participants note that it is easier for public service managers to bridge students into permanent employment than to hire them after graduation through external mechanisms.

Public services undoubtedly require an efficient way to sort through the thousands of applications that they receive for any given position; nevertheless, there is room for improvement – a more balanced approach that redefines competencies without overcomplicating recruitment. As articulated by one interviewee, “Finding talent is more art than science,” but public services continue to follow rigid criteria. Participants also believe that post-secondary institutions can help students better understand and articulate the competencies they have gained through their education, as well as expose them to a broader range of career paths beyond academia or traditional professions in law, medicine and engineering. Although organizational fit is critical to success, reducing unnecessary barriers to entry will ensure that public services continue to be representative of and responsive to the changing communities they serve.

## STREAMLINING THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Many students and young professionals expressed frustrations with public service application processes. The lack of transparency is a common criticism, as applicants in today’s digital era expect immediate feedback and greater clarity on where their application stands. As public service recruitment tends to take much longer than hiring processes in other sectors, applicants often accept other job offers before receiving a response from public service employers. Reinforcing this point, one participant added that “You need money in order to sustain a living during the hiring process.” To avoid losing top talent, more public services need to adopt online systems that allow applicants to track their application status, a feature that is increasingly the norm rather than the exception among other large employers.

In our discussions, participants also commented on the robotic nature of application screening processes. To pass the first computer-based round of selections, applicants are required to demonstrate competencies by matching specific words and phrases used in public service job postings. Those without previous public service experience or prior knowledge of government language can, therefore, be

disadvantaged in the application process. It is worth noting that young public servants expressed concerns with similarly mechanical processes for internal competitions that do not effectively assess the qualifications or determine the overall suitability of candidates. To meet changing needs, public services are working toward greater flexibility for hiring managers, as demonstrated by the [New Direction in Staffing](#) at the federal level.

## STANDARDIZING EMPLOYEE ORIENTATION

Successful recruitment does not end with hiring decisions. Many participants emphasized that it also includes the transition into public service, from office logistics to training resources for new employees. The quality of onboarding processes varies widely across departments and ministries, demonstrating a need for greater systematization of public service orientation. Furthermore, participants working in different public services have indicated that onboarding tends to be an afterthought, with some managers actually delegating the responsibility to new recruits.

This lack of proper orientation can set a negative impression and potentially undermine team building. Participants have noted extreme cases where new hires were not even introduced to their colleagues upon arrival. To improve public service orientation, participants feel that materials, such as transition binders, would be helpful in developing a better understanding of their particular department, including roles and responsibilities, as well as policies and programs. When orientation materials do exist, they are not always provided by managers or easy for employees to find. In addition to standardized resources, basic logistical arrangements, such as setting up workspaces, must be made in advance to ensure new employees can participate immediately as team members.

## ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Develop marketing content that presents a comprehensive picture of the public service and compelling reasons why a public service career is worth pursuing.** Few online marketing materials effectively communicate what makes public service distinct from other careers. A notable exception is the Government of Canada’s [“Top 10 Reasons to Join Canada’s Public Service.”](#) Create a more engaging narrative by providing opportunities for young professionals to contribute to promotional content, such as sharing their experiences online through articles, interviews and testimonials. Customizing online recruitment information for targeted groups may also help public services diversify their talent pool. The Bank of England’s [PhD and Experienced Researchers website](#) is one model to consider.
- **Organize more frequent on-campus events where emerging and established public service leaders can share their own experiences with students.** Public service recruitment campaigns can become more dynamic by involving inspiring leaders and high-potential young professionals. Such in-person opportunities help challenge misconceptions and add personality to the so-called “faceless bureaucrat.” Recruitment events can go beyond traditional career fairs to include panel discussions, interactive workshops as well as more informal gatherings led by young public service leaders. Through the federal [Public Servant-in-Residence program](#), for instance, Memorial University and the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency have been strengthening public service presence on campus to build relationships with students and connect them to career opportunities.
- **Strengthen talent pipelines by identifying and building relationships with promising candidates in the early stages of their post-secondary studies or sooner.** To increase awareness and interest in government careers, start building relationships with students in high school and in their first two years of post-secondary studies, when many have yet to commit to a specific program of

study. These relationships can then be deepened over the years to help students better understand and prepare for public service careers. The Canadian Pension Plan Investment Board is one organization that has benefitted from this proactive approach of identifying and building relationships with high-potential students in the early stages of their post-secondary studies.

- **Broaden outreach efforts to include non-traditional faculties, such as science, business and engineering, as well as campuses outside major cities.** Build relationships with post-secondary leaders (administrators and instructors) across a broader range of disciplines to increase and diversify public service recruitment beyond arts and social science students. Some public services are already employing young professionals as ambassadors to expand relationships across faculties, institutions and communities. [Carleton University's Kroeger Policy Connect program](#), which exposes first-year students to diverse career paths, is another strategy for public services to explore with other faculties.
- **Launch interdisciplinary case competitions where students from different programs work together to tackle public policy challenges.** To capture the attention of students and demonstrate the multidisciplinary nature of policymaking, organize case competitions focused on solving real-world problems. These challenges can be a part of broader recruitment campaigns to engage students from various disciplines. The [Alberta Not-for-Profit Case Competition](#) is a cross-sector initiative involving not only private sector employers, but public sector organizations such as TEC Edmonton. In Nova Scotia, the provincial government employee network GoverNext, the federal government's Future Leaders Network of Nova Scotia and the regional chapter of the Institute of Public Administration of Canada recently created [Policy Hack 2.0](#), a public administration case competition open to all public servants in Nova Scotia. A similar approach can be used on campuses to build a more dynamic approach to recruitment.

- **Review selection criteria to ensure accessible language, consider transferrable skills, and rationalize mandatory requirements to remove unnecessary barriers to entry.** Create more accessible marketing materials by employing language that applicants external to the public service can understand. Job criteria can also include skills and competencies applicable across sectors. Rather than maintaining the status quo, ensure that requirements for language proficiency and years of experience are actually relevant to the job at hand. For instance, the Government of Nova Scotia has made an effort to reduce employment barriers for youth by reconsidering experience requirements for entry-level positions.
- **Modernize online recruitment systems by allowing applicants to track the status of their application throughout the entire process.** Improve online recruitment systems by introducing an application-tracking feature that clearly lays out the entire application process and provides regular updates on the status of applications. While tightened timeframes may be more difficult to achieve, such feedback can, at the very least, give applicants a better sense of the whole recruitment process and allow them to make informed decisions.
- **Ensure that orientation for all new employees includes a comprehensive welcome package and standardized practices, such as team building and mentoring.** For consistency in onboarding, departmental leaders, human resources staff and team managers can work together to develop and update orientation packages for all new employees. In addition to logistical arrangements, such as preparing workspaces, create opportunities for new recruits to engage with colleagues and consider mentoring to help them adapt to a new workplace culture.

# EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: INSTILLING PRIDE IN THE WORKPLACE

While organizational culture can shape the workplace experience, employee engagement and retention ultimately depends on talent management. Just as young professionals have different expectations as employees, public service leaders have different styles as managers. However, our discussions suggest a lack of consistency in the quality of management across public services. Even though organizational priorities and baseline standards for talent management may exist on paper, young public servants across jurisdictions have witnessed a different reality on the ground. All motivated employees want to make a contribution and continue to develop as professionals. To effectively maximize talent, public services need to support managers in fostering a workplace environment that empowers employees and invests in their growth.

## BUILDING A PROGRESSIVE CULTURE

Organizational culture came up repeatedly in our conversations with young public servants, specifically the impact of complacent attitudes, silo approaches and hierarchical relationships on employee engagement. Complacency was a pervasive theme across all our roundtables, with participants sharing examples of blatant defeatism and underperformance. A telling metaphor commonly heard in our roundtables was one's "fire burning out" as a public servant. In particular, students and young professionals remarked on the illusion of productivity, where some managers underutilize new talent and advise ambitious young professionals to scale back their efforts. Hearing comments such as simply working to fulfill "another pensionable day" serve to further erode morale. Though culture change is difficult, participants believe that progress can happen on a smaller scale with dedicated leaders who continue to challenge the status quo.



Common in large organizations, silos and hierarchies can create barriers to internal communication and collaboration. Across public services, departments tend to function as separate organizations, from policy development to talent management. Whereas senior leaders may meet more regularly, few opportunities exist for interdepartmental dialogue at more junior levels. Hierarchical layers create further internal divisions and inefficiencies that often overcomplicate work and undermine trust. One interviewee describes the dynamic as follows:

*“I used to brief directly on my files to my ADM. When a new senior advisor and ADM joined my team, this process was changed. So now, for example, I provide my docket to an advisor who has never been involved in the file. She reviews, asks questions and then provides it to her ADM, who asks her to ask me questions. If we think about our time as taxpayer dollars, this is not a very productive approach and only creates wasted time.”*

Working in such fragmented organizations can make young public servants feel disconnected from their peers and the collective purpose of public service. While some public services have established formal and informal networks, little cross-pollination seems to happen across these platforms. Better communication channels, both within and across departments, can help create a more collaborative atmosphere where public servants are encouraged to share ideas and practices.

In addition to high-performing organizations where collaboration is the norm, young professionals seek workplaces that accommodate changing needs and embrace new technologies. Specifically, many desire flexible work arrangements, both in terms of where and how they work. The option to work remotely or customize schedules can be particularly helpful for employees who make long daily commutes to the office or have to juggle multiple obligations. Technology can serve as a means to greater flexibility and productivity; however, public services are usually slow to adopt new tools. In our Edmonton and Halifax roundtables, participants noted that some departments do not provide laptops, while others still use floppy disks. Despite pockets of

workplace innovation, our research suggests there are many opportunities for improvement across public services.

## PRIORITIZING TALENT MANAGEMENT

The consensus among participants is that managers can make or break the public service experience. Management quality, however, varies from one leader to the next. Even though talent development is an essential part of effective management, not all public service managers treat it as such. Some public services actually promote a culture of self-motivation, which only works well if employers are willing to meet their employees halfway. As noted by one participant, it is far from inspiring when a manager says, “You have to make your work interesting.”

In many cases, learning plans are developed, but not always implemented. Some managers are reluctant to approve professional development activities, seeing time spent in the office as more important. According to one interviewee, “The public service tends to measure performance based on how work is done rather than what outcomes are achieved.” While managers have to oversee administrative duties and departmental priorities, their impact, and that of the public service more broadly, is ultimately tied to their ability to draw out the best from the people around them.

According to the young public servants we engaged, good managers are interested in your professional development and actively connect you to learning opportunities, such as challenging assignments, training courses, external conferences and networking events. With many public service initiatives marketed through different platforms and word of mouth, managers can play an important role in helping young professionals access new opportunities. To ensure that talent management is not left to chance, participants believe there is a need for a more systematic and rigorous approach to training public service managers. Performance reviews for managers can also include supervisee feedback to incentivize continuous improvement.

## RECOGNIZING EMPLOYEE CONTRIBUTIONS

Employees stay engaged if they can make a meaningful impact and their contributions are recognized. For many young public servants, especially those in policy roles, it is not always easy to see a clear link between their everyday work and government decisions. One roundtable participant likened the policy process to watching a balloon float away into the air – policies are drafted without their original writers ever knowing where they go. While most public servants understand that it is unlikely their ideas will ever be implemented as originally proposed, they value feedback throughout the process, including how their work fits into the bigger picture.

Our findings also suggest a lack of vision across many public services, where employees get bogged down with bureaucratic details and lose sight of the meaning of their work. Civic-minded young professionals often enter the non-profit sector for its explicit focus on social purpose and the concrete impact on specific communities. Conversely, participants believe that public services address social issues on a broader scale, but that public servants are often disconnected from those they supposedly serve, especially at the federal level. To give more meaning to their work, participants see value in going out into the community to spend time with citizens and stakeholders. Opportunities for public engagement can also inform the development of more effective public policies and programs.

## SUPPORTING CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Young professionals seek opportunities for professional growth, which can take many forms. The purported advantages of a public service career include the training and development provided. Many participants, however, have experienced the contrary, with tight budgets and limited information serving as common barriers. Navigating the wide range of career pathways can also be overwhelming. To effectively meet expectations for talent development, public services need to consistently provide employees with career information, guidance and support. A unique example is the

Government of Nova Scotia, where public servants have access to a Career Development Specialist who provides tailored advice on professional growth.

Attractive career development options for many young public servants include rotational programs and project-based secondments, where individuals are deployed to other teams, departments, governments and even sectors for a set period of time. Lateral mobility can be an appealing alternative when rigid classification schemes and long approval processes slow advancement. Although public service leaders should not hesitate to promote high-performing young professionals, some participants caution that other avenues for growth must be available for those who may not be well suited for or interested in managerial roles.

## ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Allow for flexible work arrangements that support employee productivity without undermining workplace culture and departmental outcomes.** Greater workplace flexibility, where young public servants are able to work remotely and customize their schedules when necessary, can increase employee productivity and enable public services to keep up with best practices in other sectors. This flexibility can be a selling point to young professionals seeking progressive workplaces that respond to employee needs and value engagement in other areas.
- **Find opportunities to integrate new technologies that foster workplace collaboration and improve operational efficiency.** While managing security and privacy risks, experiment with new technologies that can facilitate better collaboration in the workplace, such as Slack and Google Hangouts. Opportunities also exist to leverage technology for more effective policy development and service delivery. At the very least, public services can replace outdated forms of technology where appropriate alternatives are available.

- **Create mechanisms that help codify corporate memory to ensure continuity and ongoing progress as public servants retire or change positions.** With many public servants retiring in the coming years, prioritizing knowledge transfer within teams and departments will help public services preserve valuable information and build on effective practices. Potential mechanisms for consideration include open communication channels within and across departments, intergenerational mentorships, internal speaker sessions as well as exit interviews with public service leaders.
- **Take a systematic approach to management training that promotes consistent standards and supports capacity building.** Ensure all employees entering management roles receive standardized training that clarifies expectations and includes ongoing learning opportunities for public service managers. In particular, providing new managers with multiple cases studies of effective approaches and common challenges can help inform management styles. In addition to creating networks, such as the National Managers' Community, consolidating professional development information can improve access to tools and resources that enable managers to become better talent leaders.
- **Incorporate talent management as a key criterion in manager performance reviews to enhance accountability and promote a culture of continuous improvement.** Integrating talent management, including employee development, into performance evaluations for managers can help promote better practices and contribute to more productive workplaces. Complementing the effective use of learning plans, public service managers can benefit from consistent employee feedback. A promising example is the upward feedback mechanism piloted by the Canada Revenue Agency.
- **Enhance feedback loops by connecting public servants with departmental leaders and stakeholder communities.** To stay engaged, young public servants need to feel that they are making a meaningful contribution. Public services can help employees

understand their role and see their impact within broader strategic priorities by strengthening feedback loops. Departments can create open channels of communication between employees and senior leaders. To help make policy work more tangible, they can also provide more opportunities for public servants to engage with citizens and other stakeholders.

- **Empower talented young public servants through enriching opportunities for professional growth and leadership development.** As young professionals demonstrate their potential, public services can provide additional learning opportunities, such as assignments, secondments and rotational programs. Rather than serving as make-work for highly productive employees, special projects must be meaningful, in that they contribute to actual program or policy objectives. Notable best practices include employee-coaching innovations at the Edmonton Economic Development Corporation.

# REBRANDING PUBLIC SERVICES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

While our research uncovered a number of specific areas for improvement, overarching themes emerged around the organizational values that matter most to young public servants today. To attract top talent, public services need to recognize that the best recruitment strategy is creating an engaging, productive workplace. In other words, motivated employees and positive experiences serve as the most effective marketing for all employers. Based on our conversations with students and young professionals in every region across the country, the following guiding principles encapsulate the kind of public service that will attract and engage the next generation of talent:

- **Putting people first:** The success of any organization rests on its people. Effective public policies, programs and services depend on a competent, dedicated public service. To effectively meet the changing needs of citizens, all public servants need to feel that they work in an environment where their contributions, their development and their well-being matter.
- **Embracing shared responsibility:** As talent development benefits the employee and the employer, both parties have mutual responsibilities. Public servants must be proactive about their own careers, identifying their interests and aspirations. Public services, down to each department and manager, need to create learning organizations where employee career development is a corporate priority.
- **Fostering enterprise thinking:** Open communication and genuine collaboration characterize dynamic workplaces that maximize employees and attract talent eager to make an impact. Building a responsive public service involves sharing talent, information and

innovation within and across departments, as well as aligning networks to achieve better results together.

- **Facilitating intergenerational learning:** Whereas young professionals bring new energy and fresh perspectives, long-standing employees possess valuable experience and corporate memory. By bringing all generations together, through dialogue, knowledge exchange, collaboration and informal networking, public services will not only improve workplace continuity, but also harness diverse perspectives.
- **Championing efficient accountability:** Despite the need for accountability, public services must continually reflect on their processes to ensure that they contribute to meaningful outcomes for citizens. From corporate administration to policy development, balancing risk management and innovative spirit can help limit bureaucratic inefficiencies that erode internal productivity and external impact.



# APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

## GRADUATE STUDENTS AND YOUNG PROFESSIONALS:

1. Can you tell us about yourself and your current studies/work?
2. Does a career in the public service interest you? Why or why not?
3. Have you been exposed to job opportunities in the public sector?
4. How can public service careers be better promoted?
5. What type of partnerships can support public sector recruitment?
6. How can public services align with your definition of an ideal workplace?

## YOUNG PUBLIC SERVANTS:

1. Can you tell us about yourself and your current role in the public service?
2. What led you to join the public service?
3. Do you feel your education has prepared you for your current role?
4. How can the public service improve their recruitment efforts?
5. How satisfied are you with development and advancement opportunities in the public service?
6. What can the public service do to enhance employee engagement?
7. Do you plan to have a long career in the public service? Why or why not?

## PUBLIC SERVICE TALENT DEVELOPMENT LEADERS:

1. Can you tell us about yourself and your current role in the public service?
2. What are the main channels of recruitment?

3. Where do you see opportunities to address talent gaps?
4. How can public services leverage partnerships to enhance recruitment?
5. How is your organization creating an engaging workplace?
6. What could the public service do to further enhance talent management?
7. What are some potential barriers to implementing your suggestions?

## UNIVERSITY CAREER DEVELOPMENT LEADERS:

1. Can you tell us about yourself and your current role with the university?
2. How are jobs promoted on campus?
3. Have you noticed any new recruitment trends among employers?
4. Have you seen any significant changes in career planning among students?
5. Where do you see opportunities to improve public service recruitment?
6. How can universities play a greater role in building public sector capacity?

# APPENDIX B: ROUNDTABLE AGENDAS

## ROUNDTABLE WITH YOUNG PROFESSIONALS

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- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| 8:30 – 8:45  | <b>Introductions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tour de table</li><li>• Opening remarks by Winnie Wong, Policy Lead and Emerson Csorba, Fellow, Public Policy Forum</li></ul>  |
| 8:45 – 9:50  | <b>Roundtable Discussion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What motivated you to join the public service, and to what extent has your experience matched up to your expectations?</li><li>• How can public service employers maximize existing talent and engage new recruits more effectively?</li><li>• Where do you see opportunities to improve learning and advancement for young public servants?</li></ul> |
| 9:50 – 10:00 | <b>Wrap-Up</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Closing thoughts from participants</li><li>• Next steps</li></ul>  |

## STUDENT ROUNDTABLE

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- |               |  |
|---------------|--|
| 10:30 – 10:45 | <b>Introductions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tour de table</li><li>• Opening remarks by Winnie Wong, Policy Lead and Emerson Csorba, Fellow, Public Policy Forum</li></ul>   |
| 10:45 – 11:50 | <b>Roundtable Discussion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What do you find appealing/unappealing about a career in the public service?</li><li>• How could public services improve recruitment efforts to broaden their talent pool?</li><li>• How can public service employers meet your workplace expectations?</li></ul> |
| 11:50 – 12:00 | <b>Wrap-Up</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Closing thoughts from participants</li><li>• Next steps</li></ul>   |

# APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANTS

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