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Optimizing Government

A White Paper on Public Sector Modernization

JANUARY 2016

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The Public Policy Forum is an independent, not-for-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of government in Canada through enhanced dialogue among the public, private and voluntary sectors. The Forum's members, drawn from business, federal, provincial and territorial governments, the voluntary sector and organized labour, share a belief that an efficient and effective public service is important in ensuring Canada's competitiveness abroad and quality of life at home.

Established in 1987, the Forum has earned a reputation as a trusted, nonpartisan facilitator, capable of bringing together a wide range of stakeholders in productive dialogue. Its research program provides a neutral base to inform collective decision making. By promoting information sharing and greater links between governments and other sectors, the Forum helps ensure public policy in our country is dynamic, coordinated and responsive to future challenges and opportunities.

© 2016, Public Policy Forum
1405-130 Albert St.
Ottawa, ON K1P 5G4
Tel: (613) 238-7160
Fax: (613) 238-7990

www.ppforum.ca |  @ppforumca

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WITH THANKS TO OUR PROJECT PARTNER:



AND TO OUR HOSTS:



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PREFACE

Canada's long-term prosperity depends on responsive governments that can help build thriving communities in increasingly uncertain times. As governments face unprecedented challenges, a high-performing public service becomes even more critical to driving better outcomes for Canadians. From financial and demographic constraints, to technological and social trends, the public sector operates in an increasingly complex environment that demands greater adaptability, innovation, and collaboration. In response to wider trends, political dynamics are also redefining the role of public institutions.

Over the past 30 years, Canada's Public Policy Forum has established a strong reputation as a leader in public policy research and dialogue. To better understand the changing public sector context, the Forum has undertaken many initiatives under the theme of [Public Service Next](#) and recently published [Time for a Reboot](#), which identifies opportunities to restore good governance in the context of new political realities.

Building on the theme of Public Service Next, the Forum launched *Optimizing Government* to explore what public sector modernization means today, where changes are needed, and how to ensure successful transformation. Through roundtable discussions with leaders across sectors and regions, we learned that government performance has everything to do with organizational culture and talent management. Even though modernization efforts often focus on adopting new technology and enabling innovation, the leaders we spoke to believe that people and culture create the conditions for success.

Recent changes in government at the provincial and federal levels present opportunities for revisiting organizational priorities and improving working relationships across the public sector. Across jurisdictions, newfound commitment to collaborative governance, citizen-centred service, and evidence-based policy signals a positive shift toward more responsive government. It is our aim that the recommendations in this white paper will help inform efforts to build the type of public service that will help governments achieve better outcomes for Canadians.

On behalf of the Forum and our partners, I wish to thank all the leaders who participated in the roundtable discussions for *Optimizing Government*. I would also like to recognize the contribution of our lead partner Microsoft Canada, as well as the in-kind support provided by EY Canada, Gowlings Toronto, the University of Alberta, and the University of Victoria.

Finally, a special thanks goes to our project team, which consisted of Winnie Wong, Project Lead and Dianne Gravel Normand, Senior Project Administrator. Communications support was provided by Sara Caverley and Mathias Schoemer. We are also grateful to our colleagues Julie Cafley and Isabelle Couture for their assistance on this project.



Larry Murray
Acting President and CEO
Public Policy Forum

Executive Summary

Shifting dynamics continue to redefine public sector modernization. Governments are operating in an increasingly complex, rapidly changing landscape that is transforming service delivery, policy making, and organizational management. Fiscal constraints, shifting demographics, and new technologies further complicate public sector dynamics. To ensure positive outcomes for Canadians, governments need the support of high-performing public services with the capacity to keep up with emerging trends and evolving expectations. Building on a broader suite of initiatives under the theme of [Public Service Next](#), the Public Policy Forum launched the project *Optimizing Government* to explore challenges and opportunities for public sector modernization. Based on a series of roundtable discussions across the country, this white paper presents key issues and recommendations for improving government efficiency and effectiveness.

Across jurisdictions, work is underway to address growing demands for greater collaboration and innovation in government. From citizen-centred approaches, to open government initiatives, public services are striving to enhance organizational performance. However, roundtable participants identified ongoing systemic issues related to organizational culture and talent management. Increasing politicization has contributed to greater risk-aversion, short-termism, and inefficiency across public services. Other cultural barriers to government responsiveness have more to do with internal silos and hierarchical structures. Bureaucratic approaches to talent management also undermine employee morale and productivity. Despite diminishing public service capacity, government investments in talent development remain limited.

Key Recommendations

While political pressures can have an impact on government modernization, public services may have more control over organizational culture than they realize or wish to accept. Although the current context may be rife with disincentives, participants believe public services have an opportunity to take the lead in challenging the status quo. Regardless of the particular approach to optimizing government performance, key determinants of success in overcoming cultural barriers to change include:

- **Establishing a clear purpose** that identifies where change is needed and how to make it happen
- **Demonstrating commitment** to action through positive reinforcements and dedicated resources
- **Ensuring a return on investment** by carefully weighing costs against benefits
- **Maintaining openness to experimentation** to leverage innovations across regions and sectors

Given demographic change and increasing competition for talent, effective recruitment and retention strategies are imperative to high-performing public services. Confronted with fiscal constraints, governments need to rethink talent management to maximize existing capacity. More specifically, roundtable participants recommended:

- **Broadening talent pools** to bring diverse skills, expertise, and perspectives to the public sector
- **Aligning performance management with organizational goals** to incentivize productivity
- **Prioritizing learning and development** as governments must adapt to evolving demands

Across the country, public services have made strides toward more responsive and collaborative government, but cultural and institutional challenges persist. Participants believe meaningful change requires bold leadership guided by a broader vision for the future. Greater citizen awareness can also help challenge public sector complacency and compel governments to adapt to changing needs.

Introduction

National prosperity depends on effective government at the municipal, provincial, territorial, and federal levels. Public policies, regulations, programs, and services all play a central role in shaping the conditions that enable citizens and organizations to thrive. Responsible for supporting and implementing the decisions of the elected government, a high-performing public service is vital to building vibrant communities and maintaining a competitive advantage in the global economy.

Modernizing the public service is an ongoing exercise. Today, governments face complex, rapidly changing contexts that demand more collaboration and innovation than ever before. Shrinking budgets, shifting demographics, and technological changes also create additional pressures for the public sector. To ensure that Canada remains competitive, governments must keep up with emerging trends and evolving expectations. However, new challenges also present new opportunities for continuous improvement.

How are governments meeting growing demands for innovation, collaboration, and accountability? What type of transformation is needed to drive better outcomes for Canadians? Where should governments target their efforts for the greatest impact? These are some of the questions that need to be considered as governments at all levels strive to balance budgets while achieving good outcomes for all Canadians. Based on a series of roundtable discussions across the country, this white paper presents current barriers and key recommendations that will help advance efforts to drive better performance and greater impact across the public sector.

Our Approach

In partnership with Microsoft Canada and with in-kind contributions from Gowlings, EY Canada, the University of Victoria, and the University of Alberta, the Public Policy Forum convened five leadership roundtables across the country. The project began with two roundtables that brought together leaders across sectors to discuss what it means to modernize government. In Toronto, the focus was primarily on the provincial context, whereas the discussion in Ottawa centred on the federal public service. To gather a more comprehensive view of the public sector in Canada, the Forum convened additional sessions in Montreal, Victoria, and Edmonton. The outcomes of these roundtables provided further insights into different provincial dynamics and reinforced some of the themes that emerged in previous discussions.

To ensure a candid exchange of cross-sector dialogue, the roundtables were convened on a not-for-attribution basis. Participants discussed the challenges and opportunities in public sector modernization, including promising practices and key priorities for optimizing performance across jurisdictions. Through this project, the Forum aims to develop a better understanding of what government modernization means today, where changes are needed, and how to ensure successful transformation. Please refer to the appendices for the roundtable agenda and a complete list of participants. Summaries of the roundtable discussions are available on the Forum's [website](#).

Adapting to a Changing Context

Complex issues are not new to government, but the public sector is operating in an increasingly challenging landscape that is transforming service delivery, policy making, and organizational management. Amid rapid change and greater ambiguity, public services across the country need to adapt their practices to remain relevant and resilient. Across the country, work is underway to modernize the public sector to meet growing demands for innovative, responsive, and collaborative government. From citizen-centred services and open government, to talent management and new technology, public services are refocusing their efforts on improving performance and increasing public value.

Redefining good government

As part of the *Ten Top Skills* project, the Forum explored the changing role of government and the implications for public sector leadership. Based on insights from leaders across the country, the report [*Flat, Flexible, and Forward-Thinking: Public Service Next*](#), outlines some of the key trends that are redefining what it means to govern effectively in the 21st century.

More than ever, good government depends on a public service that can navigate complexity and align diverse interests. Succeeding in today's globalized world requires a breadth of knowledge and an understanding of interconnectedness. With many issues overlapping departmental mandates, jurisdictional divisions, and sectoral interests, effective public policy requires greater collaboration among governments, as well as across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

To adapt to an aging workforce and growing competition for talent, governments must invest in attracting and retaining top performers. Faced with rising demands and shrinking budgets, the public sector needs to do more with less by maximizing talent to enhance productivity and drive innovation. With increasing diversity in the workplace, accommodating a range of expectations and creating a culture of collaboration have become critical factors in organizational performance.

New technologies and social media platforms are also transforming public expectations around service delivery and government transparency. As technology has redefined customer service across industries, citizens expect the same level of efficiency from government. While social media has expanded opportunities for public engagement, greater access to information and a 24/7 media cycle have increased public scrutiny. The emergence

of big data analytics is another challenge. Given the speed and volume of information, governments are struggling not only to follow the range of relevant platforms, but also to separate quality data from the rest.

To keep up with changing demands, public sector organizations must become more open, networked, and horizontal. Streamlining processes for information sharing, decision making, and resource deployment can help enhance responsiveness. As shifting dynamics continue to redefine what it means to modernize government, the public sector needs to adapt quickly by leveraging new tools, strategies, and partnerships. With tighter budgets, governments also have to maximize talent and empower their public services to find innovative ways to meet the changing needs of citizens.

Redesigning the public service

Government modernization encompasses a wide variety of issues and strategies. Some of the key areas of focus include accountability, fiscal responsibility, open government, talent management, and citizen-centred service. Advancing innovation is another common theme as all governments are seeking creative ways to overcome constraints.

In Canada, reforms at the federal level are being driven by [*Destination 2020*](#), which sets out a vision for an open, networked public service; a consistent, organization-wide approach; a tech-enabled workplace; and a high-performing workforce. A similar multi-pronged approach to public sector modernization is taking place at the provincial level. For instance, the 2012 Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services proposed a set of overarching guidelines that included balancing accountability with efficiency, exploring cross-sector collaboration, and ensuring smart workforce deployment.

Based on the roundtable discussions, common trends in public sector modernization are emerging across jurisdictions. In particular, participants highlighted a renewed emphasis on principles traditionally found in the private sector, such as client-centred service, business consolidation, and financial management. As many of the challenges facing government are also reshaping business practices, solutions in the private sector may provide valuable lessons for the public sector. Other areas of focus include government transparency, collaboration, as well as innovation.

Private sector principles

To ensure value for money, innovative governments are redesigning services around citizens' needs through public engagement, organizational efficiency, and new technology. In fact, public services are increasingly adopting lean management strategies to move from process-driven to outcomes-focused organizations. Consolidation is another common business practice that has been adopted by the public sector to simplify processes and eliminate redundancies.

Service Ontario and Service Canada are examples of whole-of-government approaches that streamline service delivery for citizens. Shared Services Canada consolidates and standardizes information technology platforms across the federal government. In Alberta, the provincial government amalgamated multiple regional health authorities under Alberta Health Services in an effort to provide sustainable access to quality health services across the province. The introduction of audit committees across federal departments is another example of the cross-pollination of ideas from the private to the public sector.

Transparency, collaboration, and innovation

The demand for open government is growing as technology continues to transform public expectations around transparency and collaboration. Demonstrating a commitment to open data and dialogue, the Government of Canada launched a public portal where citizens can access datasets across departments. Other jurisdictions have also launched open government initiatives, including Ontario and Alberta, as well as the cities of Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto, and Ottawa.

As part of Blueprint 2020, work is underway in various departments and agencies to foster a collaborative approach to government innovation. Specific initiatives include crowd sourcing employee ideas through web platforms and using social media to support inclusive policy dialogue with Canadians.

Innovative governance approaches are also emerging at the provincial and municipal level. The British Columbia First Nations Health Authority is a unique model of governance aimed at addressing jurisdictional barriers to health services. Replacing annual planning with multi-year budgets is helping some municipalities, such as the City of Ottawa, to shift the focus from short-term to long-term outcomes that provide greater value for money.



Barriers to Modernization

A dominant theme throughout all the roundtable discussions was the need for systemic change across public services as current structures and processes are undermining government responsiveness in the face of new demands. Although upgrading technology and strengthening fiscal management can contribute to better outcomes, participants identified issues related to organizational culture and talent management as fundamental barriers to improving public sector performance.

Organizational culture

A complex interplay of factors has contributed to greater risk-aversion, short-termism, and inefficiency across the public sector. Some cultural barriers to change may be attributed to the increasing politicization of the public service. Other obstacles have more to do with organizational structures and processes that are incompatible with growing demands for collaboration and innovation.

Politicized dynamics

As governments face greater volatility, the role of the public service appears to be shifting from non-partisan advisor to politicized administrator, largely focused on managing immediate risks and short-term priorities. Ambiguity regarding how policy is developed, who engages the public, and where accountability lies has also created tensions between the political class and the public service.

With new technology and the changing media landscape, heightened public scrutiny has become the new normal for government. Faced with a greater risk of criticism and controversy, civil servants are constrained by a culture of fear, especially when every misstep or failure can quickly escalate into a public relations issue for government. This risk-averse culture has led to organizational inertia and greater bureaucratization across many public services.

To avoid political backlash, public servants tend to stick with the status quo or take an overly cautious approach to action, which can be counterproductive in a time of rapid change. As a response to increasing accountability pressures, some governments have introduced excessive rules and regulations. For instance, program management has become more burdensome in some jurisdictions where governments have added accountability requirements without considering the impact on program delivery.

With growing demands exacerbated by the new media landscape, planning for the future has become more challenging. Although balancing immediate and long-term

priorities is a common struggle across sectors, short-sighted public policy can have broad, lasting implications for all of society. Coupled with risk aversion, short-termism in government can favour reactive approaches that tend to overlook long-term consequences and opportunities for innovation. Reliance on short-term analysis and funding models can be especially problematic for social policy, where results often take time.

As governments face greater volatility, the role of the public service appears to be shifting from non-partisan advisor to politicized administrator, largely focused on managing immediate risks and short-term priorities.

Siloed, hierarchical structures

As structures and processes can shape organizational behaviour, another barrier to improving public sector performance is the siloed system common to many large organizations. Many of the issues raised by participants were related to the lack of coordination across departments and ministries, as well as different levels of government. Rather than taking a whole-of-government approach, public sector organizations continue to function in silos, perpetuating inefficiency and preventing collaboration. Silos make it difficult to align policy objectives, pool talent and resources, work with external stakeholders, and provide the type of seamless service that benefits citizens. Social service delivery is one area where government silos can create unintended barriers. For instance, departmental and jurisdictional divisions tend to complicate access to funding and services for Indigenous communities.

Hierarchical structures common across the public sector also create cumbersome approval processes that prevent governments from being more responsive. With the emphasis on risk management, public servants have little room to act without going through multiple layers of authority. In this hierarchical environment, innovative ideas often get lost in bureaucratic processes or dismissed due to risk aversion. Furthermore, limited channels of communication between executives and junior staff or front-line workers can undermine modernization efforts as effective change management requires organization-wide input and support.

Talent management

With an aging workforce and increasing competition for talent, the need to rethink people management was a common theme in all the roundtable discussions. More specifically, bureaucratic processes continue to have a negative impact on public sector productivity. While participants identified capacity issues across public services, investments in building high-performing organizations remain limited.

Rigid systems

Bureaucratic approaches to recruiting, promoting, and dismissing employees make effective talent management a challenge across the public sector. Rather than incentivize high performance, current human resource regimes seem to protect underperformers and disadvantage productive employees. More specifically, an overemphasis on the merit principle has turned staffing into a labourious exercise as multiple rules and steps complicate processes without always improving outcomes. In some jurisdiction, incentives to fill employment boxes rather than question their necessity have contributed to redundancies, such as the growing number of managers without direct reports.

Rather than incentivize high performance, current human resource regimes seem to protect underperformers and disadvantage productive employees.

Capacity gaps

Budget cuts have contributed to diminishing capacity in policy research, analysis, and development. This erosion of in-house expertise may have a significant impact on the quality of public service advice and government performance. Effective talent management requires a long-term strategy that balances present needs with future priorities for building a high-performing organization. However, current approaches continue to reflect shortsighted thinking across the public sector. For example, leadership training tends to be targeted at senior officials even though developing middle management and emerging talent is important for succession planning. Increasing reliance on external consultants can also limit capacity building within the public service. Uncompetitive executive remuneration is another obstacle to attracting a broader pool of leaders who can bring diverse expertise to government.



Key Recommendations

While political dynamics can have an impact on modernization, public services may have more control over organizational culture than they realize or wish to accept. In fact, some participants believe that organizational inertia and inefficiency largely exist in areas overseen by the public service, but risk aversion has provided an excuse for not taking the initiative to improve performance.

Stifled by a deeply ingrained bureaucratic culture, public services across the country need to take a proactive approach to modernization if they want to ensure better outcomes for Canadians. Although the current context is rife with disincentives, public services have an opportunity to take the lead in challenging cultural and institutional incentives to maintain the status quo.

Overcoming cultural barriers in a complex environment

Despite common challenges across jurisdictions, every context has its own nuances that may render specific recommendations irrelevant. To help public services across the country advance solutions appropriate for their particular circumstances, participants identified a number of key determinants of success applicable regardless of the modernization strategies involved.

Establish a clear purpose

Most governments realize that changing demands require a new type of organizational culture that values customer service and continuous improvement. While many public services seem to be focused on driving better outcomes for citizens, it is important for each organization to clearly identify where exactly change is needed and how to make it happen. All too often, organizations do not conduct the necessary analysis to identify root causes of internal dysfunctions, relying instead on superficial solutions to deeper issues for the sake of expediency. In other cases, organizations may simply feel pressured to innovate without questioning if change is needed in the first place. To develop an effective modernization strategy, it is not enough to establish a broad vision for change. Organizations need well-defined objectives that serve as the starting point for exploring the best path forward.

Although the current context is rife with disincentives, public services have an opportunity to take the lead in challenging cultural and institutional incentives to maintain the status quo.

Demonstrate commitment to action

With governments managing multiple priorities, modernization requires a strong commitment to tangible action. To begin to shift mindsets, employees need to see visible changes and receive positive reinforcements. Emphasizing a whole-of-government approach may be an effective way to demonstrate that change is not optional. But more importantly, all employees need to understand that it takes collective effort to change the siloed, hierarchical dynamics that prevent government from being more responsive. Public services also need to recognize that successful transformation and continual progress cannot be achieved without dedicated resources.

Ensure a return on investment

Spending in the private sector must be clearly justified, whereas government expenditures often rely on the public interest argument rather than value for money. As governments need to manage multiple priorities with shrinking budgets, the cost of any type of modernization initiative needs to be carefully weighed against its benefits to ensure a clear return on public investment. Accountability measures are critical to success, but they must balance risk management with organizational agility to avoid creating a process-laden system that hinders innovation. Public sector organizations also need to be responsive by pivoting quickly when strategies result in failure or unintended consequences.

Maintain openness to experimentation

Given the diversity of contexts and approaches across jurisdictions, there is an opportunity to share what is working and not working in public sector modernization. In addition to other levels of government, the private sector may offer alternative strategies as businesses need to continue to innovate to stay competitive. Learning how to leverage technology will also help public services support operational excellence in a time of fiscal constraint. From social media and mobile technology, to big data and cloud computing, a range of new platforms and services are expanding possibilities for communication and collaboration. However, most participants stressed that technology is not a solution in itself but an enabling tool that can help support efforts to improve organizational performance.

Maximizing talent for greater organizational impact

Complacency in the public service will continue to perpetuate a demoralizing culture, decrease organizational productivity, and diminish the value of government. Given demographic change and increasing competition for talent, effective recruitment and retention strategies are imperative to high-performing public services. Confronted with fiscal constraints, governments need to rethink talent management to better leverage existing capacity. As contexts continue to change, investing in the development of competencies will also help governments thrive in the face of emerging challenges.

Broaden talent pools

To ensure that governments are responsive to changing demands, public services will need to align recruitment strategies, compensation frameworks, and workplace arrangements to attract and retain top talent. More diverse recruitment, for instance, can bring different skills, expertise, and perspectives to the public sector. Competitive remuneration, particularly at the executive level, may help attract top performers to the public service. Some participants suggested exploring more flexible compensation models, including a two-tiered system with a predetermined budget that would enable government to adjust salaries as needed.

Align performance management with organizational goals

Forced to do more with less, governments need to take a deliberate approach to maximizing, instead of simply attracting, talent. While some participants identified constraints in a unionized environment, others highlighted the need to rethink performance management altogether. Key priorities include stronger incentives to drive productivity, greater alignment between performance measures and organizational objectives, and better talent utilization to avoid redundancies. For example, it may be useful to consider a group model for performance management that encourages efficiencies rather than penalizing them. Striving toward flexible and strategic talent deployment across the public service may also help to improve responsiveness in government.

Forced to do more with less, governments need to take a deliberate approach to maximizing, instead of simply attracting, talent.

Prioritize learning and development

As public sector challenges and pressures do not remain static, ongoing investment in professional development is critical to maintaining a high-performing public service. While reassessing competency models is important, governments must also recognize the value in investing in all employees rather than focusing narrowly on leadership or looking elsewhere for expertise. To foster a more productive workplace culture, some participants recommended improving training for elected officials, political staffers, and public servants to ensure greater clarity on their respective roles and responsibilities.

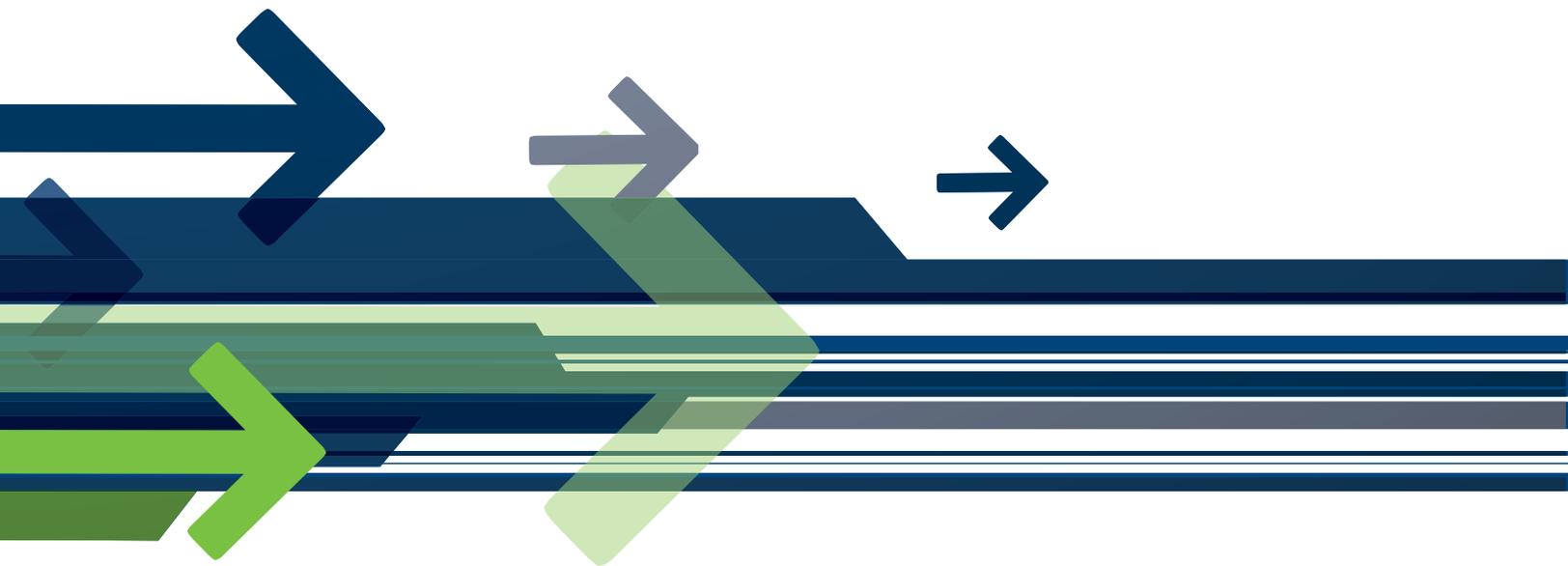
Sustaining Momentum for Change

Across the country, public services have made strides in adapting to growing demands for more responsive and collaborative government, but cultural and institutional challenges persist. Considering the entrenched barriers to improving public sector performance, meaningful change requires bold leadership that looks beyond what needs to be done, to focus on how to make change a reality.

To maintain the momentum for building high-performing public services, leaders need to be guided by a broader vision for the future as they manage current issues. Successful change management also requires leaders with specific competencies. Effective champions of change have the courage to push for better outcomes in the face of obstacles. Empathy is vital to understanding how to inspire collective action. Political acumen is another important attribute as the support of elected officials can help ensure organization-wide commitment and mobilize the necessary resources for action.

Considering the entrenched barriers to improving public sector performance, meaningful change requires bold leadership that looks beyond what needs to be done, to focus on how to make change a reality.

Moving forward with fundamental change requires an honest dialogue about the real issues facing the public sector. Limited public awareness of the degree of dysfunction and the potential implications for long-term prosperity has served to perpetuate a culture of complacency inside government. To create a greater sense of urgency around public sector modernization, collective effort is needed to educate citizens about the role of the public service in supporting effective government. A broader understanding of the need for change can start to compel the public sector to redesign outdated systems for new times.



APPENDIX A

Roundtable Agenda

Optimizing Government

Roundtable on Public Sector Modernization

AGENDA*

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| 11:30am – 12:00pm | Arrival and Lunch |
| 12:00pm – 12:25pm | Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Welcoming remarks by the Public Policy Forum, the host organization, and Microsoft Canada |
| 12:25pm – 1:55pm | Roundtable Discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the key barriers to improving public sector performance?• How can government modernize its structures and processes to meet changing needs?• Where should government target its efforts and investments? |
| 1:55pm – 2:00pm | Closing Remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wrap-up by Microsoft Canada and the Public Policy Forum |

**Although the same format was used for all five roundtables, note that discussions in Edmonton and Victoria took place in the afternoon, while sessions in Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto were held in the morning.*



APPENDIX B

Participant List

Scott Anderson

Senior Program Manager
Microsoft Canada

Darren Baccus

Chief Client Relations and Legal Officer
Alberta Investment Management Corporation

Kim Baird

Consultant, Government Administration
Kim Baird Strategic Consulting

Glenn Berg

Public Sector Market Development Manager
Microsoft Canada

Michel Bergeron

Senior Vice President, Marketing and Public Affairs
Business Development Bank of Canada

Gini Bethell

Special Advisor on IM/IT Transformation and
A/Chief Information Officer
Canada School of Public Service

Eric Bosco

Chief Business Development and Partnerships Officer
Mitacs

Jocelyne Bourgon

President Emeritus
Canada School of Public Service

Terry Anne Boyles

Vice President, Public Policy and Canadian Partnerships
Association of Canadian Community Colleges

Roger Butcher

Regional Director, Vancouver Island Region
BC Housing

Allan Cahoon

President and Vice-Chancellor
Royal Roads University

Heather Caltigirone

Assistant Deputy Minister, Leadership and Talent
Development
Government of Alberta

Michael Capus

Senior Manager, Advisory Services
KPMG

Renaud Caron

Principal Vice President
CGI Group

Jamie Cassels

President
University of Victoria

Corinne Charette

Chief Information Officer
Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat

Alexandra Clark

Corporate Affairs Director
Microsoft Canada

Ian Clark

Professor, School of Public Policy and Governance
University of Toronto

Ken Cochrane

Partner, IT Advisory Services
KPMG Canada

Angela Coke

Associate Deputy Minister, Ontario Shared Services
Government of Ontario

Denise Cole

Assistant Deputy Minister, Ministry of Community and
Social Services
Government of Ontario

Rob Collins

Consultant
Collins Consultants

Wendy Cukier

Vice President, Research and Innovation
Ryerson University

Elizabeth Denham

Commissioner
Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner
for British Columbia

Jason Ducharme

Partner, Leader of Regional Public Service Practice
MNP LLP

Peter Edwards

Executive Director, Public Service Engagement
Blueprint 2020 National Secretariat

Graham Flack

Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet
Privy Council Office

Liseanne Forand

President
Shared Services Canada

Giles Gherson

Deputy Minister, Ministry of Consumer Services
Government of Ontario

Sylvie Giguère

Industry Director – Government, Quebec and Atlantic
Microsoft Canada

David Good

Professor, Public Administration
University of Victoria

Michael Hilliard

Senior Corporate Counsel
Microsoft Canada

Anne-Marie Hubert

Managing Director, Advisory
EY Canada

Bette-Jo Hughes

Associate Deputy Minister, Ministry of Technology,
Innovation and Citizens' Services
Government of British Columbia

John Jacobson

Deputy Minister, Ministry of Technology, Innovation and
Citizens' Services
Government of British Columbia

Shelly Jamieson

Chief Executive Officer
Canadian Partnership Against Cancer

Paul Jeakins

Commissioner and CEO
BC Oil and Gas Commission

Monique Jérôme-Forget

Special Advisor
Osler

Jason Johnson

City Manager
City of Victoria

Lisanne Lacroix

Chief Executive Officer
Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service
of Canada

Michelynn Lafèche

Director, Research, Public Policy and Evaluation
University of Toronto

Evert Lindquist

Director, School of Public Administration
University of Victoria

Shannon Marchand

Deputy Chief, Policy Coordination Office
Government of Alberta

Lara McClelland

Chief Strategy Officer
Northern Alberta Institute of Technology

David McGown

Vice President, Corporate Development and Community
Relations
CIBC

Elaine McKnight

Deputy Minister, Public Service Agency
Government of British Columbia

Matthew Mendelsohn

Director
The Mowat Centre

Howie Millard

Associate Vice President, Government Relations
TD Bank Group

Philippe Morel

Regional Director General
Environment Canada

Bill Morris

National Director
United Way - Centraide Canada

Laura Nashman

Chief Executive Officer
BC Pension Corporation

Roseann O'Reilly Runte

President and Vice-Chancellor
Carleton University

Steve Orsini

Deputy Minister, Ministry of Finance
Government of Ontario

Filip Palasz

Director, Alberta Government Relations
Alberta Energy Regulator

Maria Papadopoulos

Director, Government Relations
Wilfrid Laurier University

Sarah Paquet

Assistant Deputy Minister
Public Works and Government Services Canada

Susan Pigott

Executive in Residence
Ashoka Canada

Debra Pozega Osburn

Vice-President, University Relations
University of Alberta

Dave Ralph

Director of Sales, Public Sector
Microsoft Canada

Bill Reid

Senior Director, Public Sector and Evaluation Consulting
MNP LLP

Bill Rice

Chair and CEO
Alberta Securities Commission

Lisa Sadownik

Executive Director, Program Design and Policy
Development, Human Services
Government of Alberta

Jim Sauderson

Assistant Deputy Minister
Western Economic Diversification Canada

Susan Scotti

Senior Vice President, Planning and Operations
Canadian Council of Chief Executives

Marny Scully

Assistant Vice President
Government, Institutional and Community Relations
University of Toronto

Marc Seaman

National Director, Corporate and Public Affairs
Microsoft Canada

Andrew Sharman

Assistant Deputy Minister, Health and Government
Facilities
Government of Alberta

Glenn Sparkes

Director, Federal Public Sector
Microsoft Canada

Adam Sweet

Senior Advisor to the President
Edmonton Economic Development Corporation

John Szekula

Director, Strategic Services Directorate, Quebec
Service Canada

Cathy Taylor

Executive Director
Ontario Nonprofit Network

Mike Tremblay

Vice President, Public Sector
Microsoft Canada

Rick Valdemarca

Associate Partner, Advisory Services
EY Canada

Joeri van den Steenhoven

Director
MaRS Solutions Lab

Cheryl Wenezenki-Yolland

Associate Deputy Minister, Ministry of Finance
Government of British Columbia

Howie West

Work Reorganization Officer
Public Service Alliance of Canada

David Zussman

Jarislowsky Chair in Public Sector Management
University of Ottawa





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