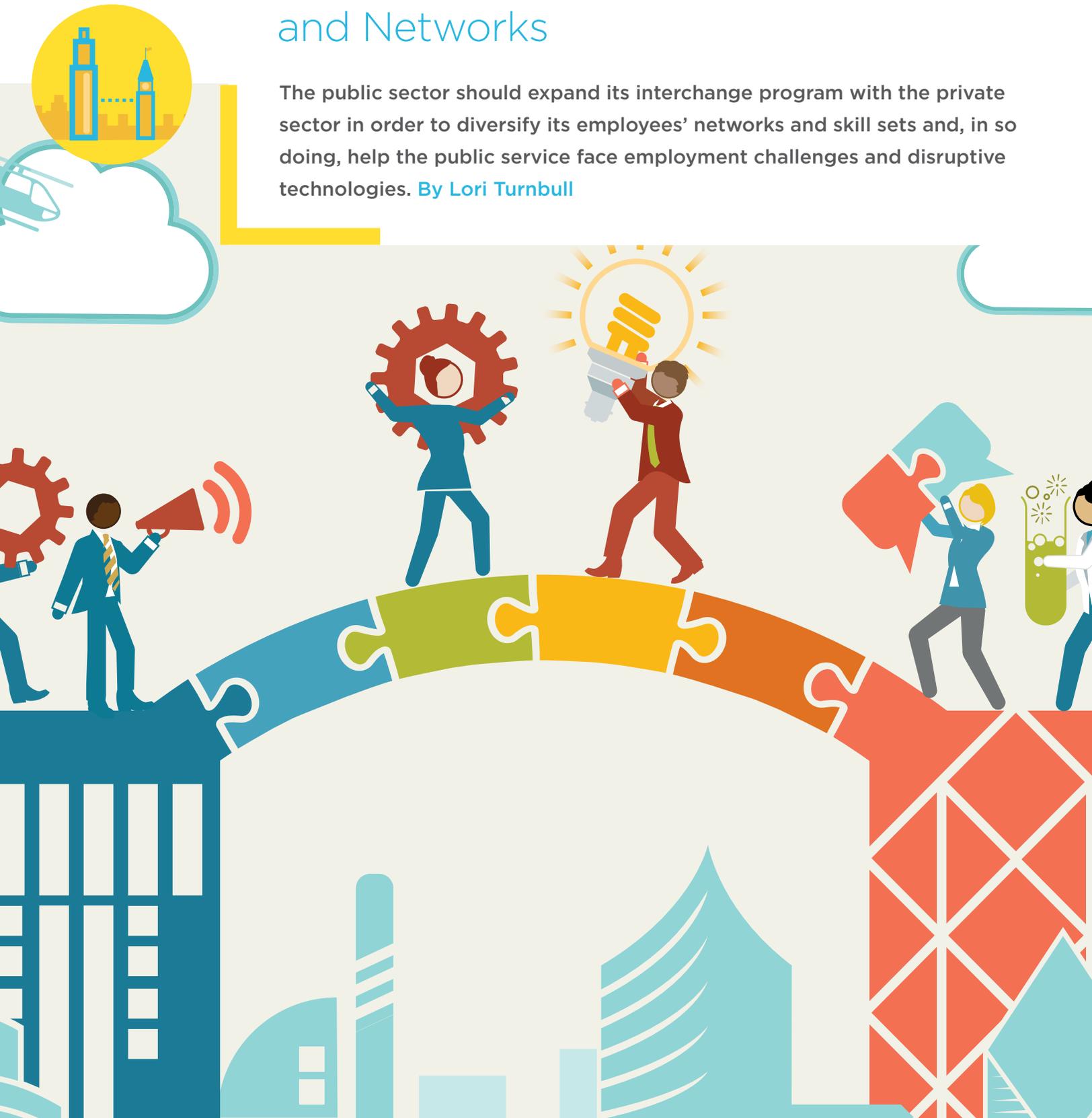


# **SKILLS AT SPEED:** Why Canada's Public Service Should Grow Its Interchange Program to Build Skills and Networks

The public sector should expand its interchange program with the private sector in order to diversify its employees' networks and skill sets and, in so doing, help the public service face employment challenges and disruptive technologies. [By Lori Turnbull](#)



## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The public service is at present too insular and isolated from the rest of the economy and from labour markets. This prevents well-educated, smart, dedicated, ambitious public servants from acquiring and developing critical skills, such as strategic thinking and planning, tactical management (in particular, project management), and subject-matter expertise.

There are ways for the public service to harness the benefits of the new economy and maximize opportunities for public servants to build new skills and networks. Michael Wernick, Clerk of the Privy Council, has spoken publicly about his intention to build the skills capacity of the public service. Wernick's position stems from a widely acknowledged need for skills renewal in the public sector as well as in the private sector. Public servants need to acquire up-to-date competencies in the areas of data analytics, cybersecurity, infrastructure planning, ethics and privacy, and other sectors that are proving essential to navigating future

As the labour market shifts from full-time work toward short-term and part-time contracts, workers and organizations are experiencing benefits and drawbacks. While many individuals worry about a lack of job security, others appreciate the flexibility and opportunity that “gig” work provides.

Employment in the public service and gig work are at opposite ends of a spectrum: the public service offers job security and a sense of vocation, while the gig economy offers flexibility and opportunity. Job security within the government is seen to be integral to the specific role that the public service plays within Canada's Westminster system and its capacity to speak truth to power regardless of political realities and government transitions. However, government employment is also seen as rigid, hard to penetrate, hard to leave, regimented; this is the price public servants pay for protected, secure employment. The private sector, meanwhile, falls somewhere in the middle: formal employment contracts exist, but people move freely between jobs. Private sector employment is less risky than the gig economy and provides some opportunities for self-reinvention.

The public sector should strike a balance between these extremes by creating a bridge to the private sector that encourages interchange experiences among employees. Such experiences could diversify public service employees' networks and skill sets and, in so doing, help equip the public service for the employment challenges that lie ahead.

To this end, the federal government should more actively promote and encourage regular use of Interchange Canada, a program of the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBS) that facilitates exchanges in and out of the public service. Specifically, government should:

- expand the use of Interchange Canada by creating the administrative infrastructure and financial incentives needed for significant uptake of the program
- require TBS to work with interchange partners to develop a competency-based approach to interchange arrangements
- advertise targeted interchange assignment opportunities on the Canada-wide online Interchange database
- focus on securing interchange arrangements for a critical mass of public servants in key sectors, including artificial intelligence, big data and disruptive technologies

challenges.

To limit the vulnerability of the public service in a rapidly changing world, the individuals within it need to acquire these increasingly in-demand competencies. Though the public sector values and normalizes lifelong, full-time employment, as a workplace it can and should be more inclusive of short-term placements that promote skills diversity and network-building.

### **The Government of Canada has a role to play**

TBS administers a program called Interchange Canada, designed to facilitate temporary work assignments in and out of the Core Public Administration. The primary goals of the program are to enhance knowledge transfer, network building and professional development for public servants and workers in the private sector. The idea is that someone who does an interchange grows as an employee, leader, worker and colleague by being exposed to a new environment; at the same time, the institution gains from the knowledge, skills and networks that the person on interchange brings to the table. The interchange is mutually transformative and beneficial.

Interchange Canada is a good model and, with improvements, could provide the infrastructure for an effective bridge between the public and private sectors. Unfortunately, we lack global numbers on how many people use the program, for how long, and what experiences they gain—information that would be useful to judge and maximize the effectiveness of the program.

To promote Interchange Canada and support public servants as they build their skillsets, the Government of Canada should do the following:

## **1 Expand the use of Interchange Canada by creating the administrative infrastructure and financial incentives government departments, private sector partners, universities and think tanks require to offer rotating interchanges of various durations.**

The current program sets up interchanges for up to three years; this duration might be suitable in some cases but the objectives of the interchange can often be met within shorter periods. Also, more frequent use of briefer interchange periods would allow more people to take advantage of the program, and with greater frequency. Interchanges should become a normal part of full-time employment in the public service and should be valued and incentivized in the performance-management process. For example, a public servant motivated to climb the ranks to the executive level should see an interchange as a pivotal step toward promotion.

## **2 Require TBS to work with prospective interchange partners to develop a universal, competency-based approach to interchange arrangements in which individuals register their credentials or certificates.**

Such a registry would verify that individuals have developed new skills and competencies, such as leadership, strategic communication, risk management and financial planning. This skills-based approach would give structure and purpose to the interchange beyond the general goals of the program, and would help make participants more competitive for future jobs, both within and outside the public service. The skills individuals learn would be applicable across jobs and sectors.



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**3** **Advertise targeted interchange assignment opportunities on the Canada-wide online Interchange database**

This would help prospective participants become aware of opportunities and apply for interchange arrangements that fit with their strategic professional priorities. To maximize benefits, it would be prudent to target individuals at critical points in their careers—for instance, young professionals with a long runway ahead, as well as seasoned executives in leadership positions. Young professionals exiting their degree programs in search of employment would benefit from a program that facilitates short-term placements, both in the public and private sectors. Government and private sector partners could work together to arrange these opportunities.

**4** **Build partnerships in Canada and elsewhere to secure interchange arrangements for a critical mass of public servants in the following sectors: cybersecurity, data management, artificial intelligence, ethics and privacy, infrastructure planning and blockchain technology.**

This would be a quick and affordable way to build the public service's capacity in the fastest-growing industries, in relation to emerging and disruptive technologies, and in response to the most pressing public priorities. Interchange Canada stated that 400 assignments were started in Fiscal Year 2017-2018 and that this has been increasing over the last five years. To be effective, the interchange program needs to continue to grow and be effectively utilized as a key talent development tool within government. Further, the partnerships that result would help calibrate public and private sector efforts in coping with challenges presented by advancements in technology, including security threats.

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