**APS Review Submission**

I have worked for the Department of Defence for a little over a decade in a technical role. Over this time I have witnessed workplace capability eroded through the reduction of staff number, poor workplace enterprise bargaining practices and a lack of strategic management regarding skill development and retention, resulting in the hollowing out of expertise, which further compounds the problem by loss of the ability to recognise the shortfalls. These issues have led to the situation of decreasing Defence’s capacity to be innovative and efficient in delivering outcomes.

Defence is no longer an ‘Employer of choice’ (and I understand that the rest of the APS is probably not that different). The most recent round of Enterprise Bargaining was a fiasco that demonstrated contempt for the APS staff. The shortcoming are well documented by commentators such as Paddy Gourley, however I would like to particularly highlight the lack of fairness associated with Defence employees being forced to wait almost a year (through no fault of their own) before being provided with an initial offer to vote on, being told that this did not constitute ‘exceptional circumstances’ and that no financial recognition of the delay would be allowed. Things only got worse from there.

While perhaps people outside of the APS would have differing viewpoints on the term ‘employer of choice’, I doubt that few would disagree that it could only be considered as poor form to be provided with a take it or leave it ultimatum of a real pay cut (i.e. below inflation pay increase) with a mandatory reduction in conditions, linked to productivity improvements that didn’t exist, while utterly ignoring any the real productivity gains associated with slashing staff numbers while maintaining overall outputs.

An example of the impact of being no longer being an ‘employer of choice’ is highlighted by my Division’s experience in trying to recruit technical employees. It is very hard to recruit and engage skilled technical people and one example is an attempt by my work area which recently advertised a technical position and received only two suitable applications and the successful applicant then declined the position.

I understand this to be partly related to the overly simplistic classification system, which leaves no room for differentiation or recognition of areas requiring specialist skills in order to compete with market rates. The one scheme within Defence that is intended to cater for this need is so difficult to access, and requires annual re-justification, creating further administrative burden, that it has become effectively unworkable.

This in turn has led to a hollowing out of technical skills within the APS, which are essential for delivering Defence’s technical projects and procurements. Skilled, capable engineers and technicians are necessary to determine the technical requirements and oversee industry contractors to ensure the delivery of projects that are fit for purpose and provide value for money to the Commonwealth. Without Commonwealth employees skilled in these and other areas, the risk increases significantly of contractors misunderstanding or failing to fully deliver Defence’s requirements (or Defence failing to accurately identify the requirements), resulting in poor value for money, or delayed delivery / implementation, which in some cases can have direct impact to serving men and women in harm’s way.

I believe the APS to be significantly understaffed across all levels. At the EL1 level, I rarely see or hear from senior staff, including the occasional mass briefing – I believe that this is because they are stretched too thinly, across too broad of a scope of work, resulting in an inability to engage in a meaningful way with anyone but their managers and direct reports. This makes it harder to provide quality briefing materials or and very difficult to inform decisions about complex matters. Strategic leadership appears to have been put on hold in the perpetual struggle to deal with today’s crisis with too few resources.

APS staff numbers are too few. I don’t have access to anyone that I can delegate simple work to, so I find myself (as an EL1) doing process work (such as data processing) better suited to an APS 4-5. This type of work is more straightforward but time consuming, and is often essential for analytical information and other purposes. It is not however an effective use of my time, which could be spent more productively on complex and strategic work to progress outcomes. Given that the APSC Work Level Standards states that EL1 staff are expected to manage staff, perform a leadership role and engage in complex problem solving, it is ironic that I have never had much needed staff due to caps on staffing levels and have a broad role in doing everything from simple process tasks through to complex, sensitive work.

Innovation requires time to consider and investigate alternative solutions to processes or problems – and the APS is no different. It also requires an environment that understands risk and has the appetite and resources to trial innovations and understand that not all innovations can succeed. Without the acceptance of some failure, innovation will not look for great leaps forward but only ever tinker at the edges. For success in new approaches, the workplace needs to accept that time and resources are required to consider, create and assess innovative options as well as to work with stakeholders to create whole of government approaches.

Being innovative requires spare capacity in order to experiment and do things differently. I think it was in the excellent book ‘Slack: Getting Past Burnout, Busywork, and the Myth of Total Efficiency by [Tom DeMarco](https://www.amazon.com/Tom-DeMarco/e/B000AP7OPO/ref%3Ddp_byline_cont_book_1)’.

Additionally, without some slack (i.e. spare resources) in the system, it isn’t possible to be agile and take on new projects/tasks/directions quickly. If your resources are 100% dedicated to doing the current tasks, there is no capacity available to do something else at short notice. If always playing catch-up in an environment that does not tolerate risk then being agile an innovative is unlikely to be successful.

I once saw Risk Management defined (I think it was in ‘Slack’) as “doing things that might ultimately prove to be unnecessary, otherwise it’s not risk management, it’s just business as usual”. The APS engages in risk minimisation significantly more than risk management, partly because there is a very low appetite for risk, and partly because we do not have the resources, particularly people and budget to do things that might prove to have been unnecessary in hindsight. This could be assisted by actively engaging the public in understanding what is involved in achieving ‘value for money’ – that is isn’t simply going with the lowest bidder or cheapest product. All too often the response to media claims of excessive spending is to apologise and reduce budgets (or increase red tape in the form of requiring additional approvals), rather than attempt to explain what might well have been a reasonable and intelligent decision.

Travel is a particularly pertinent example of this issue. Current travel restrictions are excessive, short sighted and arbitrarily applied – frequently being based on a (reduced) proportion of the previous year’s budget, irrespective of the actual business needs or cost benefit analysis. The niggardliness of current policies has created an excessive amount of administration to justify and approve necessary travel – international trips can require more time spent obtaining approval than is spent on the trip. I prefer not to travel (internationally or domestically) due to the impact on my family responsibilities, associated red-tape and the perception that travelling for work is in itself always a junket. I am aware however that while much can be done through electronic communication, there is a very real need for travel in order to establish cooperative and productive relationships with stakeholders face-to-face. In my experience, sometimes it is what is said outside meetings that can make the biggest difference.

Finally, the obsession with making the APS ‘more business-like’ needs a rethink. While there is always value in trying to do better, and learning from other sectors, the APS is not a business, nor should it attempt to operate as one.

There is more that I would like to add and elaborate on, but unfortunately the submission cut-off is looming. I trust that my perspectives and contributions will prove useful in designing the APS of the future.

Regards.