

“The APS has a critical role in assisting government manage and respond to new and emerging challenges — both in policy and implementation. But it must be best placed to harness the opportunities, with the necessary in-house capability to both develop and implement solutions.”

“The APS needs to be apolitical and professional, agile, innovative and efficient — driving both policy and implementation through coherent, collaborative, whole-of-government approaches. It must have the capability to meet core responsibilities and deliver functions, and to understand and deploy technology and data to drive improvement.”

I commenced a career in the public service following almost two decades of self-employment. My business was born during a tumultuous period of corporatisation and privatisation ideology that disrupted the very core of both public and private service delivery. Being agile was more than just a buzz word for the latest project management methodology that is currently in vogue with the APS.

My observations of the public service is a workforce that is bound by annual budgets curtailed by efficiency dividends imposed to mimic the level of competition the private sector contend with. It's an entirely artificial and blunt instrument predicated on a 1980's notion that the APS is both isolated from reality and inherently wasteful. If the APS is to demonstrate the very attributes this review seeks to resolve, the government will first need to address the budgeting artifice that has been an unseen divider and conqueror of the APS itself. The malaise that is prevalent within some branches of the Department of Human Services is directly consequential to poorly conceived budgetary measures that have ultimately stifled necessary and ongoing investment in both systems and people.

The current world we live in sees the Prime Minister sneezing, a Department Secretary catching a cold, the Senior Executive developing a flue, the APS3 service officer expiring from pneumonia, and the customer waiting for hours on the phone ([REDACTED]). We have a very downward view of how “we do things”. The public often tar the APS with the same brush as their members of parliament; well, from what I hear during my daily commute on an overcrowded tram to work. Indeed one contributor to this review has coined the phrase “Public Serpents”, and I question whether this contributor makes assumptions about the public service based on the APS3 service officer they may interact with at a customer service centre, or the Departmental Secretary, or even the respective Departmental Minister. I can assure the contributor there are no public servants at my level earning any more than a commensurate position in the private sector.

The focus of my contribution is on the emergence of an Australian Digital Government in context of the Department of Human Services, and particularly my movement between DHS programmes. Since the conglomeration of social services: Centrelink, Child Support, and Medicare into one super department, the concept of service delivery on behalf of a Government Programme has been poorly understood by the public, and the benefits have eluded many of the APS. The DHS' primary focus is on the disbursement of benefits on behalf of the Commonwealth Government. However, the larger the vessel the less agile it becomes. I also contend that the model successive governments have pursued where the DHS is the service delivery provider of other government departments, e.g. DHS-Medicare delivers payment services on behalf of the Department of Health, Aged Care, Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, and Veterans Affairs. From a healthcare provider's perspective, this may be an obvious pathway between themselves, their client, and who pays for the service. The public are oblivious, and the APS are often frustrated when the desire to meet operational challenges are constrained by the division between a Programme owner versus the Programme delivery. The most significant critique of the APS is the divide between the operational APS employee and those who have the ability to effect changes that enhance employee engagement, desirable performance, and

ultimately the customers experience with government services. I would argue that the APS already achieves the requirement to be *apolitical and professional* but is adversely bound by legacy policies and procedures at the expense of agility. I would likewise argue the APS has a significant cohort of innovative employees but organisational structures that remain in place prevents the very innovations the government seeks from being realised. The DHS has internal mechanisms to solicit “bright ideas and innovations” which is admirable yet yields very little real change. This being said, there is an executive that reacts to pressures from department ministers that often results in considerable expenditure on IT systems that dismally fail to deliver desirable efficiencies. There are two agency programmes in particular that comes to mind; the Child Support system that saw a significant investment in SAP software solutions that were incapable of interfacing with legacy systems and has ultimately been abandoned. The entire Child Support ICT spend requires a thorough and transparent review. The second is a replacement system to the processing of Age Pensions that has resulted in a backlog of four months. The expected productivity gains have not been realised. Furthermore, the relationship between minister, secretary, executives, and operational staff requires a fresh appraisal to minimise if not eliminate the reactionary outcomes that have diminished the reputation of the APS.

The DHS-Medicare Programme is on the cusp of exploring new technology from the ground up. Many of the public servants performing processing tasks can easily identify the anomalies and complexities which if addressed would yield significant performance and cost-benefit improvements. The landscape of health service delivery has substantially changed from the early 80’s where a typical healthcare provider was a sole trader and the claim and payment pathway involved three components: the doctor, patient, and the payer – in this case Medicare.

In 2018, we have an entirely different benefit claim and payment model. Now we have a medical clinic employing several healthcare professionals of differing disciplines, and while a doctor provides a service to the patient, the financial transaction is actually between a business and the payer - Medicare. Yet the functional components of a provider/patient/payer that was of service in 1985 is cumbersome and inefficient for a business to government transaction. Thankfully, there is a solution already close at hand. The Department of Health has acknowledged the use of the Healthcare Identifier (HI) Service which facilitates a business to government transaction model; there is no evidence within the APS or externally that the HI Service could be scaled for payment systems. It seems that harnessing HI as a modern solution to a legacy issue alludes those who are exploring creative and efficient pathways fit for purpose for the coming decades.

“The APS must retain the key competencies and capabilities to discharge its responsibilities.” “But it must be best placed to harness the opportunities, with the necessary in-house capability to both develop and implement solutions.”

I am currently a project officer [REDACTED] and have seen the demise of permanent full time APS employees being replaced by ICT contractors. In fact several contractors were formerly APS employees and intentionally resigned from the APS only to return as contractors at double the remuneration. This management of human resource and cost to the tax payer seems incongruous with the above statement, and diminishes the motivation to serve the Australian public from one of service to one of self-serving; the question begs that while head count caps have been imposed upon the DHS for permanent full time staff numbers may make the “books look good”, the significant employee costs of contractors versus APS employees is counter intuitive and belies the premise that government is expected to provide cost effective service delivery. I believe that the executive lack both transparency and courage to articulate the effect of a Digital Government on the existing human resource. If this means employing a person for a fixed term APS position then do so, rather than

outsourcing to an employment agency contractor at considerable cost. The increasing discontent of Australians with the casualisation and temporary nature of work based on a commercial ethos developed over the past two decades is further reinforced when the value of ongoing APS career choices is white anted by the increased outsourcing to a contracted labour force. I believe this also compromises the trust the citizens we serve to have in the public service.

For the APS to deliver an Australian Digital Government, APS employees need to see themselves as digital transformation agents with a targeted focus on the very citizens we serve. Maintaining in-house capability, the APS has a better opportunity to mitigate fragmentation and wasteful duplication when the focus on service delivery is not compromised by the attention given to external pressures associated with a contractor – customer relationship. Investment in the APS' capability to fulfill their potential is often narrow and task specific. In recent times the adoption of the latest buzz word and trending 'Agile' project management methodology has befallen the APS. It's as if the public service has suddenly experienced some kind of illumination and feels the need to jump on to the 'Agile' bandwagon that the private sector has been using for the past decade. That 'Agile' is typically used in an IT environment, and often within companies that are smaller than government organisations, and have targeted product offerings, does not necessarily translate to the APS effectively. Ultimately, my point is that while the APS must attract and retain those who possess digital excellence, they shouldn't be hampered by trendy methodologies. In conclusion, to this point, we need an executive that also values wisdom, and is able to distinguish the difference between "doing the right job and doing the job right".

"Tackling complex, multi-sectoral challenges in collaboration with the community, business and citizens"

I have been a keen observer of the original Digital 5, now Digital 7, countries that have collaborated on common projects that promote an evolving digital government. It is disappointing that Australia has chosen to remain isolated from the D7 group given commonality for most of the social needs. A significant personal focus as a public servant is *"improving citizens' experience of government and delivering fair outcomes for them"*.

I became far more aware of the disconnection between the APS and our customers while participating in customer research for a myGov project. I am a champion of a Digital Government; yet discovering a cohort of customers that have very poor experiences with the social services government is charged with delivering, when those customers are driven toward a digital channel that is difficult and convoluted to navigate. The driver of this, on the one hand, is face to face staff needing to meet KPIs, and promoting a poorly conceived message that doing things digitally is the most efficient interaction. Essentially cajoling digitally challenged customers to use self-service terminals. On the other hand, there is a failure of the APS to recognise that digital channels are not always of service to our customers. The Digital Transformation Agency (DTA) Service Standard is an excellent document that very few APS employees are aware of. APS programmes and projects must be keenly aware of the customers that require non-digital channels that are as simple as possible but no simpler. My conclusion is we see ourselves as a Department of Humans Services before we see ourselves as a Department Serving Humans.

The current digital landscape within the myGov experience is to promote myGov as a secure way to access government services with one login and password. Yet, customers also have various mobile apps at their disposal from the same government department. It seems counter intuitive for customers to be guided to a single sign-on myGov pathway, but then also have Express Plus Centrelink,

Medicare, and Child Support apps. In addition there are apps for jobactive and the ATO, and many state government derived apps.

The degree of incoherence emerging because the APS promotes the use of myGov yet has multiple access points via other websites and apps. Legislative and policy changes need to be included in the review that removes blockers to improving citizens' experience of government and provide a seamless, integrated and cohesive end to end digital service. In reshaping the Digital Government landscape we may gain greater levels of trust in the APS as well as digital Government solutions. Customers' trust in the APS delivering a Digital Government is dependent on levels of transparency thus far not demonstrated, and the messaging about Australia's digital transformation requires department ministers to better articulate the key elements of a Digital Government that the APS is currently working on and towards.

Australia could, and possibly should, be spoken of in the same conversation as Estonia when it comes to a cohesive Digital Government experience. The creation of the DTA should have resulted in an autonomous instrument to enhance political and agency adherence to digital transformation path. The DTA is not broadly known in the public domain nor is it apparent to the wider APS as a potential means to align agency's digital strategies, investment decisions, and policy development, and it should be.

If the APS were to be genuine in *improving citizens' experience of government and delivering fair outcomes for them*, then the integration of the DTA within every agency needs to be more obvious. To my knowledge the DTA does not have a Whole of Government (WofG) Chief Information Officer, where the role focuses on framing and supporting the strategic direction of a Digital Government across all agencies. In addition to this is the potential for the DTA to emphasize the need for a unified customer driven service. Anecdotal observations of the DTA is an agency that lacks the power to both harness and impose a unifying digital pathway across all government agencies where leveraging agency transformations can deliver scaled, repurposed and rationalised IT infrastructure. In my experience we have focused on what can we do for our customers rather than asking customers what do you want us to do for them. Fundamentally, the DTA should be setting the stage and providing the delivery framework based on their discovery of what Australians want and their desired outcomes.

While I have an understanding of the DTA and some of the projects the DHS is working on, I and my colleagues poorly understand how the DTA progresses a WofG outcome. I have canvassed colleagues on their knowledge of Govpass, myGovID and Exchange and its importance in providing a platform for a Digital Government that is a federal government goal to be in place by 2025. If the APS is to be in a position to offer and provide meaningful and valued services, the foundation should include the APS knowing the big picture and have a clear line of sight as to how we contribute to that delivery. It's disheartening that I learn more about my agency's direction via news and editorial content from The Mandarin publication, than I do from our own internal communications. I sincerely hope that the DTA's trajectory is exponentially visible in the very near future.

Following on from this is the most recent experience of the Opt Out of the My Health Records (MHR) service. The communications management has resulted in a messy debacle where "tin hat wearing media writers" have hijacked the message and have maligned the intent of the My Health Records value. I would contend that the APS and policy makers have poorly understood the sentiment of both healthcare professionals and the public. On the one hand, the success or failure of MHR significantly rests with healthcare professionals.

The problem began well before the conception of MHR when Medicare introduced and encouraged the use of digital channels to submit claims for Medicare Benefit payments. We have a digital landscape that includes over one thousand software products used by healthcare professionals to initiate a digital transaction with Medicare and other programmes within the Health Service Delivery branch. This has resulted in an astonishingly complex and bespoke IT system that has grown patchwork solutions over several decades. The task currently before DHS-Medicare cannot be understated, yet the political will of successive governments to provision the APS adequately has yielded an IT behemoth no one wants nor has the courage to address. Our most recent federal election was to conjure thoughts of corporatising and privatising Medicare to the horror of most Australians. That 97 percent of all Medicare transactions are digital is nothing short of miraculous.

The Australian Digital Health Agency is a very recent addition to the public service and has insurmountable challenges to somehow unify the health industries IT expectations. That the MHR system is designed to use the very same clinical software that healthcare providers use for their client records and Medicare online claims only highlights the diversity of software offerings. A comparative few are MHR compliant and this very problem compromises the support of the MHR. In the above outline the question that arises is does the responsibility of a complex health landscape reside within the public service or with successive parliamentary representatives that have prevented the 'health football' from ever reaching the try line or being converted to achieve a game winning score. It is disheartening both as a customer and an APS employee to experience the undermining of confidence in our health sector. The ADHA needs to be supported both at a political and APS level to fully research the health sector from a Digital Government perspective and drive an alignment of policy, procedures, and IT systems.

In conclusion and despite my critique of the current landscape, I have confidence that the APS does have the capacity to serve our citizens well. I am also tentatively optimistic that the transition to a Digital Government will afford the APS to be frank and fearless in addressing the issues that have thus far frustrated those whom we serve.