# Public service ideas

**The SES accountability gap**

**Issue:**Decision makers have insufficient accountability because they shift jobs before the outcomes of their major decisions can be known. Occurs at all levels, but is most problematic at the SES level, where decisions have increased consequences and there is a culture of rapid job shifting. Compounded by the SES selection process, which favours a breadth of diverse (often short) experiences over a narrow range of longer experiences. Another contributing factor is that performance management cycles (12 months) are too short to measure the outcome of key decisions.

**Consequences:**Poor decision making for major, long-term strategic issues. Bias towards superficial outcomes that are marketable in the short term, but that lack nuance and fail to stand up to long-term scrutiny.

**Research options:**Is there research indicating the average period of time for the outcome of major decisions (eg recruitment, reorganisations, large expenditures, significant policy changes) to be measurable as success or failure? How does this compare to the average time in position for SES officers?

**Potential improvements**

* Greater emphasis in job selection processes for proving ability to achieve outcomes in the 3-5 year time period.
* Performance agreements that include some KERs that have a 2-5 year delivery timeframe.

**The hobbled staff manager**

**Issue:**EL2s with insufficient autonomy and flexibility to manage the staffing profiles of their Sections. Incentives favour hoarding positions at the highest possible classification, due to fear that they won’t be ‘recoverable’ in the future if surrendered. There is little fluidity for adjusting to changes in work tempo, task complexity or the available pool of employees and skills.

**Consequences:** Inefficiency, classification creep, unnecessary ‘self-invented’ work, inability to respond to changing circumstances.

**Research options:**What is the level of flux of Section staffing profiles in the APS compared to successful parts of the private sector?

**Potential improvements**

* EL2s given the skills and autonomy to manage their staffing budget. They could be given flexibility to trade off number of positions versus classification level. Flexibility to manage budgets over multiple years (to match changing work loads or availability of suitable staff).
* Incentives built to encourage managers to identify staff savings

**Promotion to level of incompetence is endemic**

**Issue:**Too many public servants are employed at a classification that is above what their skill level and performance warrants. There is no limit to the opportunities to seek promotion in Canberra, applicants only need to ‘fool’ one panel once, and current performance management procedures and culture are not amenable to correcting mistakes.

**Consequences:** Poor value for tax payer, with too many overpaid, underperforming staff. Reputational damage of APS in the wider community. Reduced morale for high performing APS staff members, with flow on effects for recruitment and retention.

**Research options:**What data is there relating to reviews of recruitment/promotion decisions after 6-12 months in job? Is this data even collected?

**Potential improvements:**

* Improve decision-making of selection panels. Better recognition of the specialist skills required of panel members. Accountability of panels for performance outcomes of people they hire or promote. Currently, a panel could have a 50% failure rate with the potential for no one to know.
* Referees from within the APS who offer ‘export quality references’ need more accountability.
* Move away from the ‘promotion for life’ culture. All promotions to be via probation. Maintaining classification level should rely on ‘active, ongoing proof of positive performance’, as opposed to the current system, which relies on managers very occasionally recognising and addressing blatant underperformance. The ‘job for life’ attraction of the public service is a valuable tool for competing with the private sector. Removing the ‘promotion for life’ culture would be a reasonable mechanism for moderating some of the undesirable outcomes of this. Care would be required to protect employees from bully managers (who would have increased power). Those who already face disadvantages in the work place (women, part-timers, people with disabilities) would need assurances of reasonable protection.

**Managers who can’t lead**

**Issue:** The APS is rife with management who can point to their ability to deliver outcomes (some of which are hard to test or verify), but who fail to lead, motivate and inspire the work force. The tenets of successful leadership are widely available in the literature and training courses, but poorly visible within many parts of the APS. Promotion of individuals into senior management gives insufficient consideration to the opinions of those being led (ie the staff). The pool of applicants for leadership positions is too small, due to (accurate) expectations of long work hours that are unacceptable to most of the community. This means 90% of those with strong leadership potential self-select out. The APS senior leadership becomes a monoculture of individuals prepared to sacrifice their personal lives, which has no correlation with their aptitude to lead, or which could even undermine their ability to demonstrate leadership behaviours.

**Consequences:** Failure to realise the long-term organisational productivity and innovation that arises from developing, motivating and empowering staff. Disillusionment in APS managers from the rank and file.

**Research options:** How do APS staff rate their leaders compared to high performing organisations? Do the long hours put in by the senior echelons of the APS enhance or detract from organisational productivity, innovation etc? What are the underlying drivers that leads an entire cadre of intelligent SES to prioritise other criteria over leadership and work-life balance?

**Potential improvements**

* Staff feedback incorporated into the promotion selection process for senior mangers (eg on a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly would you strive to work for manager X again or seek to avoid them?).
* Developing a culture where senior leadership does not translate to long work hours.