

Review of the Australian Public Service: Submission from *Interaction Consulting Group*



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Interaction Consulting Group (*Interaction*) is a management consulting firm based in the ACT that has provided HR consulting, training, facilitation, coaching and qualification services to the Australian and state/territory governments for over 24-years. Having worked in and with the majority of APS agencies for many years, we have gained a unique perspective and an intimate understanding of the issues and trends affecting staff at all levels, their teams and leadership. We provide our observations and recommendations in this submission to help inform the review and contribute to the capability development of APS staff, so they are well-placed to meet future challenges. Our submission is focused on our core area of expertise: development of capability in the APS.

Not only do our consultants comprehend the public sector because they have worked in government at executive and senior executive levels, we have undertaken the following to inform our response: analysed current research and similar reviews of governments in Canada and the United Kingdom; spoken with several high-level APS staff to obtain their perceptions; and collaborated internally to develop a diverse understanding of the issues facing the future of the APS.

We welcome the independent review of the APS's capability, culture and operating model and the opportunity to provide input. Much has changed since Coombs' report was released in 1976 - economically, socially, technologically and globally. Australia's population has nearly doubled, citizen's expectations of what government should do have dramatically increased and the scope and remit of the public service has expanded significantly. This review provides an important opportunity to confirm the future role and direction of the APS. This will not only provide clarity, purpose and confidence to the APS, but also to those external organisations, like *Interaction*, that support the provision of public services.

This submission includes our proposed concept as to the future capability development needs of the APS. It also articulates our observations of the challenges that the APS will face in general, and L&D teams specifically, as a new style of Government is implemented in the future. Lastly, we provide our recommendations to address the issues identified in our observations.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

We have identified recommendations relating to the following key areas:

- strategy and cultural shift to capability development
- leadership
- learning and development (L&D) lifecycle and return on investment (ROI)
- graduate programs
- resilience and wellbeing
- procurement.



THE PROMISE FOR A NEW APS CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT

It is our proposal that Learning and Development (L&D), as a professional function, has been struggling to deliver productive outcomes that maximise the utilisation of current resources for a synergistic benefit. The current government has enacted expansive and far-reaching alterations to the APS employment landscape, affecting recruitment, retention, workforce planning, mixed employment conditions, all of which require large scale redesign of L&D services.

The APS L&D functions are entering a phase of reinvention. The shift is primarily manifesting in practices such as:

- an expansion of online activities, initially driven by the introduction of the Learnhub Learning Management Solution that provides staff efficient access to online resources such as APS Information e-modules, and commercial short course providers such as SkillSoft, Lynda.com and Good Practice. This also includes the adoption of phone-based apps particularly for monitoring and reminder purposes
- the wider adaption of Blended Learning approaches based on the 70:20:10 principle. Face to face training sessions are becoming less frequent and shorter. Blended packages seek to provide staff with more self-directed and on the job activity, such as academic reading, online courses and information, coaching and mentoring, participatory learning meetings such as Communities of Practice, Learning Circles and Action Learning
- a shift toward adapting agile and lean approaches to the design and delivery of L&D products. This shift includes moving to prototyping new approaches, delivering micro-learning pieces, and participant centred design
- micro-learning pieces are typically raw and realistic, highly informal in style, with minimal structure, and tend to be produced in a fast, efficient manner. These pieces, be they live videos, short games and/or online courses, have low production costs and provide a constant drip feed of content
- L&D content is being available 'on-demand' for staff primarily through online mechanisms and the L&D function is becoming invisible to the staff member. This function is acting more as a curator of resources from which staff self-select as and when each individual requires
- the rising demand for training in skills that support activity-based work structures. Such new skills include managing virtual and dispersed teams; managing people on and off project teams swiftly; conducting and capturing frequent, micro 'performance' and progress conversations; and re-designing work flows and delivery techniques
- 'partnership' is replacing traditional leadership approaches and we have seen an increase in skills required to manage teams containing varied employment contracts and conditions.

The APS L&D field is also seeing investigations underway to push further into the use of information technology in delivery of products. Some agencies are still quite limited in their use of ITC, while a few with resources are developing artificial intelligence capability and adopting virtual reality technology to professional situations.

IMPLEMENTING A NEW STYLE OF GOVERNMENT: OUR OBSERVATIONS OF THE CHALLENGES FOR THE APS

The following key observations have been made through: our engagement with leaders across the Australian Government; via our in-depth relationships and interactions with APS staff during consulting and coaching engagements; our analysis of media reporting on the APS; and our analysis of research of Government operations and L&D in other countries.

Changing core services, decentralisation and regionalisation

We suggest that the future APS will follow the current trend to outsourcing/externalising the provision of services to the Australian public. The perception of the APS will change as core functions, policy areas and expertise are contracted and more service orientated, transactional activity is outsourced and automated. If this occurs in the future, the role of many APS staff will change from being service providers to performance managers of the service delivery under contract. Knowledge and experience will need to be expanded as the working environment shifts. This will require staff to build their commercial/business capability in the areas of purchasing outcomes, contract management, analysing performance against standards, quality control and compliance. Specific subject matter expertise will also be required to manage contracts relating to areas such as information technology, human resource, engineering and other technical streams. Leaders will need business acumen and commercial nous to manage decentralisation of external service provision and manage performance of outsourced service delivery contracts. They will also require understanding of how their leadership styles need to vary depending on circumstance and context and have the ability to adapt as appropriate.

As the Government decentralises and regionalises, training and L&D needs to be delivered to regional centres across dispersed and diverse workforces. Research indicates the “70:20:10” approach and micro training is best practice, not simply training via online systems. The APS will need to build capability across a dynamic and agile workforce using flexible and tailored models of delivery.

Although the traditional role of the APS has been to provide frank and fearless advice to government, this has shifted with the increase in ministerial advisers and the use of external consultants. This contestable policy environment has seen the dilution of policy capability within the APS. Although policy advice will remain a core to the APS role, the ability to undertake analysis, build a case, cost and present a robust policy proposal based on solid evidence needs to be increased. In addition, the traditional ideal of a stable job-for-life is no longer the norm, with less mobility within the APS and contract staff covering the resource shortfall. This has significant impact on attracting and retaining people with the right skills and capabilities, staff morale and on corporate memory, stewardship, and risk appetite.

Best practice L&D

A recurring theme presented to us by executives in the Australian Public Service, via numerous coaching sessions we provide, is that they do not have the time, nor the effective skills, required to build capability within their teams. Executives are concerned that they are often undertaking transactional activity not necessarily aligned with the strategic vision. The culture they describe is

one of being reactionary and risk adverse and needing to “do more with less”. They describe a 24/7 media cycle and current political environment which has influenced a reactionary, risk-adverse environment with little time for strategy, planning and innovation.

Our understanding is that APS leaders find it challenging to conduct face to face interventions and guide on-the-job coaching to build staff capability. This aspect of learning and development has been termed micro-training and the theory is that it is the most effective way to develop skills and knowledge in contemporary workforces (Anon, 2018). Micro-training involves provision of ‘on the spot’ lessons learned, time for reflective discussion, and specific, personal, job skill guidance as well as use of technology to ensure interaction, engagement and currency.

There is a thirst for capability development evident within the APS, particularly among APS level staff. It is our observation that formal training, supported by on-the-job experiences, collaboration and feedback, developed in a partnership with the client, achieves enduring outcomes. Although we build a blend of different learning approaches into our training and development programs, it is our experience that staff are often not given the opportunity to practice and embed their learning when back in the workplace.

We see the Government and media ‘24/7 cycle’ and the drive for policy and program outcomes pushing the APS which reduces prioritisation of L&D and often leads to cuts when seeking efficiency gains. This is leading to managers not being trained in how to develop people using best practice (70:20:10) with very few “coaching on the job” and implementing micro-learning.

The approach to delivering an L&D strategy is often focussed on providing bulk, generic “compliance” training, delivered didactically that informs on “issues” as opposed to building skill. As such, core skills are delivered out of context with limited understanding of application which reduces impact, knowledge and skill development.

In addition, with the release of Learnhub, some agencies are shifting from face to face delivery to online e-modules to conduct this information dump. These approaches save costs but do not enhance the learning and development experience or outcome.

To summarise, what we have observed as the manifestation of the approaches described above is that, although the APSC is espousing “70:20:10”, it is not being practised and embedded well and the model receives a negative reputation due to poor implementation. For instance, Communities of Practice become a lecture or a presentation on an individual project rather than an engaged, collaborative environment. In addition, eLearning, which does not follow best practice principles especially when it is complex training, does not provide quality outcomes. A risk adverse approach to L&D, by both participants and L&D units, is starting to develop (goal is high participant rate with no complaints and a positive evaluation at the expense of effectiveness and impact). This leads to training facilitators designing passive sessions which allow participants to be disengaged and staff are learning that linear, lecturing, passive style approaches are how L&D is delivered.

Resilience and wellbeing

Australia’s population has nearly doubled, citizen’s expectations have dramatically increased and the scope and remit of the public service has expanded significantly since the mid-1970s, however, APS staffing levels have remained almost the same. The APS has operated in an environment of small and reducing resources since the efficiency dividend was introduced nearly 30-years ago. This has resulted in a smaller, efficient government, but placed an enormous strain on staff who are committed to providing expert advice to government and high-quality services to the Australian community.

In its annual survey on national stress and wellbeing in Australia, the Australian Psychological Society showed that results are declining since the survey began in 2011, (Psychology.org.au, 2018) with respondents reporting lower levels of wellbeing (and workplace wellbeing) and higher levels of stress, depression and anxiety. Only this week, former Prime Minister and current Chair of Beyond

Blue, Julia Gillard (The Mandarin, 2018) called for Australian employers to increase their focus on employee wellbeing. She is quoted “If we could create mentally healthy workplaces free of such stigma, “the benefits would be enormous”, “Work can be incredibly good — or incredibly bad — for our mental health.” “Three years ago, Beyondblue surveyed more than a thousand employees from all kinds of workplaces, sectors and industries across Australia,” she said. “We found 71% of CEOs and senior leaders believed they were committed to promoting the mental health of their staff. But only 37% of their staff agreed.” In addition, Comcare publicly states the importance of creating mentally healthy workplaces (Comcare.gov.au, 2018). “Creating mentally healthy workplaces delivers improved productivity and workforce participation. The benefits go beyond simply reducing the costs associated with negative outcomes (for example, absenteeism, mental health disorders, and psychological injury compensation claims). Organisational practices that improve employee psychological health and wellbeing (and reduce the incidence and duration of mental health symptoms) also result in improved performance for people with or without a mental health condition.” Comcare recommends that this is achieved through the following mechanisms:

- raising mental health awareness
- assessing risks
- managing risks
- supporting ability to work
- providing rehabilitation.

In reality, Comcare reports that psychological injury accounts for 11% of claims and over 30% of the cost of claims; results in a slow and delayed return to work, with 55% of psychological injury claims reaching between four and 13 weeks lost time; and is therefore a major source of lost time and compensation under the Comcare scheme. According to the Medicare 24/7 Health Advice Line (Hica.com.au, 2018):

- more than 20 million sick days each year are taken by Australian workers suffering from stress-related illnesses, costing the Australian economy \$14.8 billion annually.
- severe stress in the workplace is hindering 85 per cent of working Australians and 15 per cent of affected employees are taking at least one sick day a month.
- presenteeism is also coming at a cost of more than \$25 billion annually.

As the APS is asked to deliver more for less there will undoubtedly be an increased impact on the resilience and wellbeing of staff. It is imperative that these two important mental health issues are addressed through appropriate and applicable training of leaders, managers and all staff.

The following anecdotal observations have been made through our privileged position working closely with thousands of APS staff, across all levels, for over 24 years, across thousands of interventions. In particular, staff perceptions regarding the objectivity, independence and expertise of our company consultants often permits them to feel comfortable expressing their vulnerability regarding wellbeing. Our observations are:

- APS staff are consistently being asked to deliver more with less. For over 25 years, Commonwealth entities have been subject to an annual efficiency dividend that reduces entity budgets each year in anticipation of efficiencies being found (Finance.gov.au, 2018). This places additional stress on employees, beyond the achievement of core outcomes
- the regular expansion and contraction of the APS puts pressure on leaders and staff to adjust their styles and to manage broader and more complex remits.
- these coupled with the heightened and constant media cycle has resulted in high levels of stress, impacting on the resilience and wellbeing of staff
- there is a stigma associated with asking for wellbeing support. Vulnerability in the workplace is perceived to be highly discouraged

- staff are being led by people who have limited experience and capability in managing complex wellbeing issues and who may also be struggling with their own wellbeing issues. Leaders need to be resilient and well, in order to help others
- there is a lack of focus on building the wellbeing of teams and individuals in the workplace
- where wellbeing and resilience interventions do exist, they are generally one-off and highly limited, short interventions.

Graduate development

We have also been made aware of issues the APS is having retaining graduates who are “stolen” by industry one to two years after completing APS programs. We frequently hear anecdotal reports from our clients that young graduates use the graduate program as a “gap year” style experience. Given the current APS staffing level cap seeking to reduce employee numbers, Departments are increasing their dependency on Graduate Programs as a key recruitment mechanism. The high time effort and cost expense of running these programs may not be offset by the retention level of enough high-potential people. Furthermore, staff are learning iteratively on the job, with little support, gleaning what they can in the rush to deliver outcomes. The unintended consequences include areas of departments with a high part-time workforce being starved of resources that are highly trained and experienced. The loss of graduates leads to the depth of knowledge and policy capability being eroded as well as the reduction of new and diverse ideas and techniques.

Maximising return on investment and value-add from external suppliers

It is evident to us that the lifecycle of learning and development could be improved. For instance, L&D teams struggle to recognise and measure return on investment as they are expected to drive outcomes yet, in reality, only drive the process and have no control over the resultant behaviour or appetite for change and improvement. This view that L&D teams are responsible for return on investment leads to leaders, and staff being trained, who do not accept accountability for their own learning or the culture around maximising benefits. Research indicates that leadership, mentoring and supervision are critical to successful delivery of learning outcomes. Furthermore, when the staff and leaders are responsible for the L&D outcomes, not simply L&D teams, the “doorway effect” (being unable to recall information once a training experience has completed) will be limited. This improves the return on investment.

We have experienced a few agencies which undertake a learning needs analysis against the demands of their strategic plans; have a holistic view of the learning needs requirements and/or the development pathway for their staff; and/or have a people strategy with defined outcomes. Specialist L&D providers are generally only engaged to deliver a strategy roadmap or facilitate an L&D program. Rarely are L&D staff invited to have a role in problem solving for the front-line area and subsequently external service providers engaged throughout the entire L&D program. Additionally, Human Resource Teams, and L&D in particular, are rarely skilled in evaluation methodologies, including undertaking performance indicator calculation and monitoring.

Not understanding the full L&D lifecycle limits the ability to maximise return on investment. When the 70-20-10 model is not incorporated it is proven that L&D outcomes are not as successful (Institute, 2018). In addition, return on investment links to recruitment. Recruitment processes take an inordinate amount of time and often prevent organisations from being able to respond quickly to L&D needs. We are seeing an increasing trend in requests for proposals for what could be classified as commoditised training, coaching and facilitation. This is overly arduous and resource intensive on small business and on the Commonwealth.

Our recommendations for future APS L&D

It is our recommendation that building capability for future needs, requires the following.

Strategy and cultural shift to capability development

L&D programs need to be purposefully and specifically linked to future strategy and the requirements for capability growth. Leaders and participants need to ensure a micro-training culture is implemented as part of a holistic development approach. There needs to be a systematic and cultural change which rewards, and provides opportunity for, managers to undertake 70-20-10 L&D. Providers should be engaged throughout the entire L&D lifecycle such that:

- removes the existing view that the success of a L&D program is the responsibility of the Corporate L&D team and the provider. Instead, treating the L&D team, provider, procurement and recruitment as enablers
- critically, making the staff and leaders responsible for the L&D outcomes
- ensuring agencies put in place an L&D strategy, linked to the business strategy and all training programs are in the context of those two elements
- ensuring all L&D is student focused and tailored to deliver the required outcome and return on investment
- all agencies undertake a regular (at least annual) learning needs analysis.

Leadership

It is recommended that the Government define, document and communicate the ideal lifecycle for a learning and development intervention strategy. The entire continuum of the learning and development process must be defined and articulated.

Leadership is required as the APS transforms at the pace of cultural change in the community. To prepare for what leaders need, pathways to leadership need to be identified and leadership skills need to be developed through L&D programs early and incrementally. Leaders need to understand that their styles need to vary, and their knowledge base and experience broaden. This includes, but is not limited to, areas such as contract management, leadership, corporate nous and strategic management.

L&D lifecycle and return on investment (ROI)

We recommend a study into ROI and evaluation of L&D programs which develops an approved and consistently applied whole of Government ROI model. Agencies need to work with a range of stakeholders to develop, design and implement the model which must require proof of return on investment and be consistently applied across agencies. ROI on investment needs to be articulated from the outset of an L&D program. This includes defining what success looks like; what measurements will be used; what the monitoring approach will be; and evaluation pre and post-delivery including recurring themes reports. The lifecycle of an L&D intervention should have a holistic view. This includes front ending programs and projects to think specifically about the capability building requirements and defining the learning needs and associated development programs in the project initiation stages.

In addition, each agency should be assessed against a 70-20-10 maturity model (see example at Appendix A: Interaction Consulting Group 70:20:10 maturity model ©) to determine how their L&D program is addressing best practice. If technology is used then outcomes need to be carefully articulated, measured and managed.

An understanding of the lifecycle of L&D is required. As such, we recommend that a model of the L&D lifecycle be utilised to inform the people and L&D strategies which incorporates the procurement process; recruitment; L&D strategy; planning and implementation; delivery; maturity assessment; evaluation and return on investment analysis. The model should identify the key drivers in the L&D process and thus provide the ability to measure and maximise the return on investment.

Graduate programs

Retention of graduates requires a growth mindset focused on the individual pathways to career development and incentives and/or contractual commitments to ensure retention.

Resilience and wellbeing

The APS needs support to cope with the expansion and contraction that it experiences which puts pressure on leaders to adjust their styles and to manage broader and more complex remits. Succinctly, leaders need to be resilient and well in order to help others.

There is a rapidly growing body of evidence for mindfulness based interventions in supporting individuals to manage wellbeing. The evidence is clear that these types of therapeutic programs do have a beneficial impact on psychological wellbeing (Carmody, 2014; Newsome, Waldo & Gruszka, 2012; Turnbull, Lwin & McNab, 2012). Particularly in regard to promoting self-care (Raab, 2014) and managing depressive rumination and emotional regulation (Maxwell & Duff, 2016). Overall mindfulness-based and mindfulness-informed therapies play an important role in promoting psychological wellbeing, reducing stress, increasing performance, managing depressive and suicidal symptoms and reducing anxiety. In fact, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy could be more effective than psychoeducation and as effective in antidepressant treatment in major depression (Maxwell & Duff, 2016).

It is our recommendation that:

- the APS seeks to become the leader in workplace wellness
- the APS prepares a wellness strategy that requires all agencies to implement longitudinal wellness interventions focused on building resilience and maintaining wellbeing
- that the interventions are grounded in mindfulness-based approaches.

Procurement

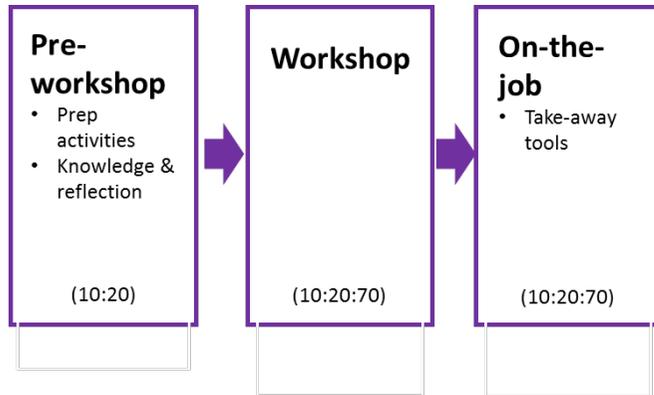
L&D areas must engage with providers in the initial stages of procurement, so they can add value by understanding context, the links to strategy and the program, and the risks of not obtaining the required outcomes.

Removal of the inefficient and costly process of agencies obtaining piecemeal, distinct delivery of training (for example, regularly requesting a request for quote for the same training program at less than \$10,000 every few months) and instead look at longer term contracts and master agreements whereby the product and price is set and utilise the panel arrangements more efficiently.



Appendix A: Interaction Consulting Group 70:20:10 maturity model ©

LEVEL 1: WORKSHOP WITH 70:20:10 ELEMENTS



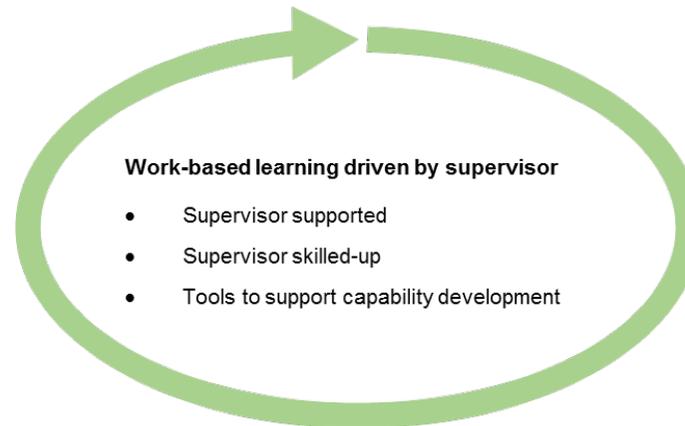
LEVEL 3: LEARNING JOURNEY



LEVEL 2: INTEGRATED/BLENDED PROGRAM

Initial learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge • Reflection on application to job • Supervisor/coach <p>(10:20:70)</p>	Facilitated workshop <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deepening knowledge • Skill development through practice/practical application • Reflection on application to job <p>(10:20:70)</p>	Workplace application and learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guides/structured process • Supervisor/coach • Take-away tools <p>(10:20:70)</p>
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LEVEL 4: LEARNING WORK



70:20:10 MATURITY MODEL©

STAGE	DESCRIPTION	ROLE OF PARTICIPANTS	ROLE OF SUPERVISORS/COACHES	ROLE OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT TEAM	ROLE OF CONSULTANTS/FACILITATORS
Level 1: Workshop with 70:20:10 elements	Pre-workshop activities/reading to engage participant in the topic. Workshop that focuses on content and skill development. Tools to support application in the workplace.	Complete all program elements. Responsible for application of learning in the workplace.	None unless initiated by the participant.	Administration.	Design and development of programme materials. Distribution of pre-workshop activities Delivery of workshop.
Level 2: Integrated/blended program	Generally several phases. Upfront reflection and learning activities to engage participant and supervisor/coach in the learning process. Workshop builds on learning by focusing on deeper level of learning and skill development.	Complete all program elements. Engage with supervisor/coach to support application of learning in the workplace.	Engage with and support participant to develop capabilities and apply learning in the workplace.	Administration. Engagement of supervisor/coaches.	Design and development of programme materials. Briefing participants and supervisors about the program and their roles. Implementation of each program phase.
Level 3: Learning journey	One or more complementary learning activities that together support learning and capability development. May not be a facilitated component.	Self-direct and actively participate in activities Build relationships to support learning (including with supervisor/coach). Drive workplace application of learning (look for, create and implement opportunities).	Engage with and support participant to drive their learning journey and apply learning in the workplace.	Administration. Engagement of supervisor/coaches. Set-up of structured learning activities/events. Build learning and coaching culture.	Design and development of programme materials including guides and tools. Brief and support participants and supervisors/coaches. Facilitation of some program elements Encourage establishment of ongoing self-managed learning activities (eg CoPs).
Level 4: Learning work	Supervisor/staff member develop and implement structured approach to learning in the workplace.	Drive and manage their own learning in the workplace Co-develop structured approach to learning with supervisor	Co-develop structured approach to learning with staff member. Facilitate learning and provide workplace coaching.	Establishment of learning and coaching culture. Provide development opportunities for supervisor/coaches.	Development of guides and tools for supervisors and staff. Design, develop and facilitate activities to build supervisor/coach capabilities.

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