To attract and retain more millennials in the public sector, it's not enough to reform slow, complex hiring processes and replace “archaic” technology, according to the head of the Canadian Public Service Commission.

Both those things will help but the biggest barrier to workforce renewal is an insular, risk-averse culture, in the view of Canada’s PSC president Patrick Borbey.

The Canadian government’s human resources head and his Australian counterpart, John Lloyd, both noted striking similarities between the two public services in terms of demography, physical location and culture. Both are dominated by baby boomers.

About a quarter of Canadian federal public servants are eligible to retire in the next five years and about 12% could hang up their cardigans right now, Borbey explained at a recent forum (https://www.act.ipaa.org.au/pastevent-canadainsights) hosted by Crawford School of Public Policy director Helen Sullivan and the Institute of Public Administration Australia.

“This drives home the urgent need to focus on renewal and recruitment,” he said.

“And when I say recruitment, I mean the hiring of new employees from outside of our existing public service. For too long our public service has merely been moving people around – in other words, filling vacant positions with employees from other departments.”

This isn’t entirely negative – the preference for poaching employees from elsewhere in the same government or across the federation reflects the value of the unique type of experience that comes from a long public service career.

Borbey also pointed out that this game of musical chairs can foster informal collaboration between governments and ministerial silos – another challenge that is common to both nations – but there clearly needs to be a lot more new blood coming in.
Internal “churn” is obviously an issue that can only be viewed from the perspective of a workforce commission, not from an individual agency's perspective.

“It’s not very productive or sustainable as a staffing model and certainly does not lead to the kind of renewal we need to meet the expectations of our citizens today and in the future,” Borbey said.

The statistics show grad programs alone won’t cut it; hiring managers essentially need to bet on newcomers more often, instead of taking the safer route of an experienced public servant.

“This is a problem, however, it’s not one that can be merely fixed by policy or legislative change, but rather through culture and practice, particularly in reducing risk aversion on the part of our hiring managers,” Borbey said.

In Canada, only 32% of public service jobs were open to the public last year and there are plans to open up more positions to all-comers. But the experience in Australia clearly shows his comment about policy versus culture is spot-on; here, people outside the public service have a lot of chances but find it very hard to compete with those who already have a Coat-of-Arms lanyard.

Lloyd said he thought the APS had become less risk averse since he first became public service commissioner about three years ago.

“I think I don't see that as such a large issue now,” he said. “I think we’re attempting to give more confidence in the public service to try things, to try new ways of going about it, and to tolerate a bit of failure to do that.

“If you’re going to try and innovate, you have to have a tolerance of failure, which often the public service and sometimes our masters don’t appreciate ...”

**Millennials come and go**

Retaining younger people is probably a bigger challenge than attracting them, Borbey suggested.

His research shows younger “millennials” typically see the public service as “an employer of choice” in Canada but they generally don’t stick around very long.

Twenty-one per cent of Canadian public servants are under 35, but they make up 34% of the total labour force, showing the public sector hasn’t got its fair share of young people.

“We have, in our public service, only 6000 people under the age of 25,” the APS commissioner said later. “And we have 70,000 people aged over 45, out of 155,000, so we’ve got some real challenges there with young people as well.”

By 2025, millennials will be 75% of the national workforce in Canada, said Borbey, and he has worked out that to get a roughly equal proportion, the federal public service he oversees would need to hire more than 10,000 per year for the next decade.
One initiative mentioned by Borbey that interested Lloyd was more pathways for university students into APS jobs – in Canada, they have a summer work experience program, for example – and perhaps more marketing to school leavers.

"It might be something for us to think about as a public service, to engage more creatively with our student population through internships or whatever it might be, cadetships, to get a better representation of those younger people," said Lloyd.

**Times change**

Borbey listed some of his other initiatives to get more young applicants, most of which are broadly mirrored in Australia to some extent. These include improvements to induction processes and a move away from overly demanding initial applications.

"The average time to complete an application went from 60 to six minutes, and the number of pages in the application has gone from 10 to four," he said, adding that he also encouraged more use of social media and the incorporation of "nudge theory" in re-designing applications.

"These changes went hand in hand with a push from the most senior levels of the public service to improve their onboarding experience, and provide focused learning activities. They included a pledge from deputy ministers to create a work environment that attracts, retains and develops young talent."

"The result – after years of decline and stagnation in student employment, last summer we saw an increase in the number of hires of over 25%." That's a "good start", in Borbey's view.

"Our bureaucratic language and approach to candidate assessment certainly does not help, as well," he said. "And when they join we provide them with technology that is completely archaic and inadequate."

This elicited a round of knowing laughter from the Australian audience.

The use of psychology and behavioural science was also part of a push to continue attracting a diverse field of applicants in other ways – by making applications as gender-neutral, culturally appropriate and accessible as possible, Borbey said.

He suggested it might also help to adapt the most successful marketing approaches used by leading tech firms for recruitment.

He reiterated throughout his talk, however, that these kinds of approaches won’t work very well on their own. As always, it’s the culture – specifically, "the culture around public service staffing" in this case – that needs to change.

"By this I mean breaking down internal barriers, focusing on the user experience, accepting to take risks and learning from our partners," Borbey said.

**Diversity and inclusion**

Canada’s public service commissioner has responsibility for various diversity and inclusion policies like his Australian counterpart and was firm about the Canadian government's support for affirmative action.

There are the same general target groups – women, people with disabilities, Indigenous people and “visible minorities” (http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3Var.pl?Function=DEC&Id=45152) who are known as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people in Australia.
The prevailing view is much the same as it is here, that "employment equity means more than treating people in the same way; it also requires special measures and the accommodation of differences" — but Borbey said efforts to put this idea into action were still challenging.

He was also very open about the "serious mistakes" made in the past.

"We have violated fundamental rights, and we have ruined countless lives through our past policies, laws and activities," he said. “We are currently engaged in reconciliation efforts for the past discriminatory policies and practices related to Canada’s Indigenous people."

Efforts to hire more people from many of the above-mentioned groups aren’t working well. Currently, the Canadian public service has more Indigenous staff than this group’s representation in the general labour market – but they are leaving more quickly than they are being replaced.

Borbey said better opportunities elsewhere as well as "harassment and discrimination, lack of advancement and tokenism" were some possible reasons.

“And we also get negative feedback [from the visible minority group] with respect to the same issues faced by our Indigenous employees, including concerns that our hiring practices are biased,” Borbey said. There is a similar trend with applications from ethnic minority groups and people with disabilities declining.

“Young Canadians with disabilities are concerned that we are not a welcoming employer, and particularly that they will not be offered the accommodation they need to succeed within our organisations,” Borbey said.

“Sadly, they are right.”

On gender equity, Canada is first in the G20 nations on the promotion of women to senior public service jobs, ahead of Australia. But there is still a “significant gender pay gap” and women are over-represented in administrative roles and under-represented in science, technology, engineering and maths roles, according to Borbey.

While perceptions of bias against people from minority groups and Indigenous backgrounds are on the rise, a pilot study of blind recruiting in Canada found that so-called positive discrimination was common. This is similar to results of a study by the Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian Government (https://www.themandarin.com.au/80790-positive-discrimination-so-common-in-the-aps-that-blind-recruiting-reduces-diversity/) (BETA) that inspired the Canadian pilot.

The Canadian commissioner later added that “some people were not happy with those outcomes because they started with the premise that there is bias in the system” and said more work would be done to look for bias elsewhere.

Diversity and inclusion should go beyond the four designated groups, he added. To that end, a broader definition is being considered in Canada, based on a report (https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/values-ethics/diversity-equity/task-force-diversity-inclusion.html) from a diversity taskforce made up of union and management representatives.

Opening up to bigger pools of candidates through more public job advertisements should help increase diversity in terms of age and other characteristics, and various modernisation efforts are likely to improve retention.
But at the end of the day, it still comes down to individuals being more open-minded in thousands of individual hiring decisions that, overall, add up to a change in the public service mindset.

*Top image: L-R: Helen Sullivan, John Lloyd, Jenet Connell and Patrick Borbey. All images: RLDI/IPAA ACT.*

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