

Government can work smarter

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Is innovation in government an oxymoron? We don't think so, but we understand why others might. The best examples of government innovation are often well-kept secrets, known only by a few.

Recently, the Public Policy Forum and Deloitte conducted one-on-one conversations with 100 public sector leaders from all jurisdictions across Canada - cabinet secretaries, deputy ministers and city managers - about the challenges facing Canada's public service. We wanted to gauge the state of government innovation and understand the barriers preventing successful innovation.

There is good news and bad news. Many public servants interviewed expressed frustration at the disconnect between the level of public discourse that is taking place and the magnitude of the challenges we face as a country. They identified a need for an important policy discussion and full engagement of the public regarding the changing mandate of government. But they also recognized that this won't happen without elected leaders initiating the charge for change. The good news is that more can be done to state the case for change and build the foundation for innovation.

The 24/7 social media age is changing the role of senior public service leaders. They expressed concern that innovation is being limited to operations at a time when policy reforms are also needed. While the focus on near-term results - emergency room wait times and average test scores - is prompting public service leaders to be more attuned to service delivery, strategic challenges in our economy and our overall competitiveness don't receive adequate attention. The demand for medium-to long-term policy setting seems to have almost disappeared. As a result, the organizational capacity for policy development has been eroded and the analytic tools being used are often outdated. Leaders are facing the dual challenge of modernizing policy (such as addressing a culture of entitlement) and also improving the effectiveness of service delivery and implementation.

The lack of a defined innovation process or strategy that effectively engages the executive levels has most leaders expressing uncertainty about whether the right things are being done. Most do not have enterprise-wide strategies and action plans for innovation. Yet, they could point to areas where innovation is happening, although these were sometimes viewed as too narrow and disconnected from each other to have a broader impact.

A few examples: Edmonton transit staff are working with Google to effect better transit planning for commuters; British Columbia has developed an innovative online mineral titles system for the mining industry; the federal government, through Service Canada, has developed an efficient single-window access to a range of programs for citizens through more than 600 points of service across the country.

The problem is our public service leaders are operating largely in isolation and so we're not realizing the potential benefits and savings of replicating innovations across jurisdictions. Even though there is agreement on the need for more sharing, there is little evidence of actual collaboration. To change this culture, we need to consider more collaborative, inter-jurisdictional strategies that support the exchange of best practices, processes and innovations.

A shortage of qualified change leaders is another critical constraint stemming from a number of factors: lack of executive development programs on transformation or innovation leadership in the public service; rotation of senior managers out of project management roles before they achieve success; a limited number of innovative projects to lead; and a reliance on external consultants to assume project management roles.

Despite these gloomy observations, there is, in fact, a lot of scope for innovation in government. We identified the pressing need for more open dialogue and recognition of innovation as a strategic imperative at both the policy and delivery levels, as well as the necessity of developing new skills and talent.

Canada has earned an enviable reputation as a model for public service excellence. Maintaining this competitive advantage now requires innovation to move to the forefront of all public service strategies and discussion of the changing role of government.

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The PPF and Deloitte recently released their joint report: Innovation in government? Conversations with Canada's public service leaders at <http://www.ppforum.ca/sites/default/files/11-916G%20PS%20PPF-Innovation-Strategy-report-EN-WEB.pdf>

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