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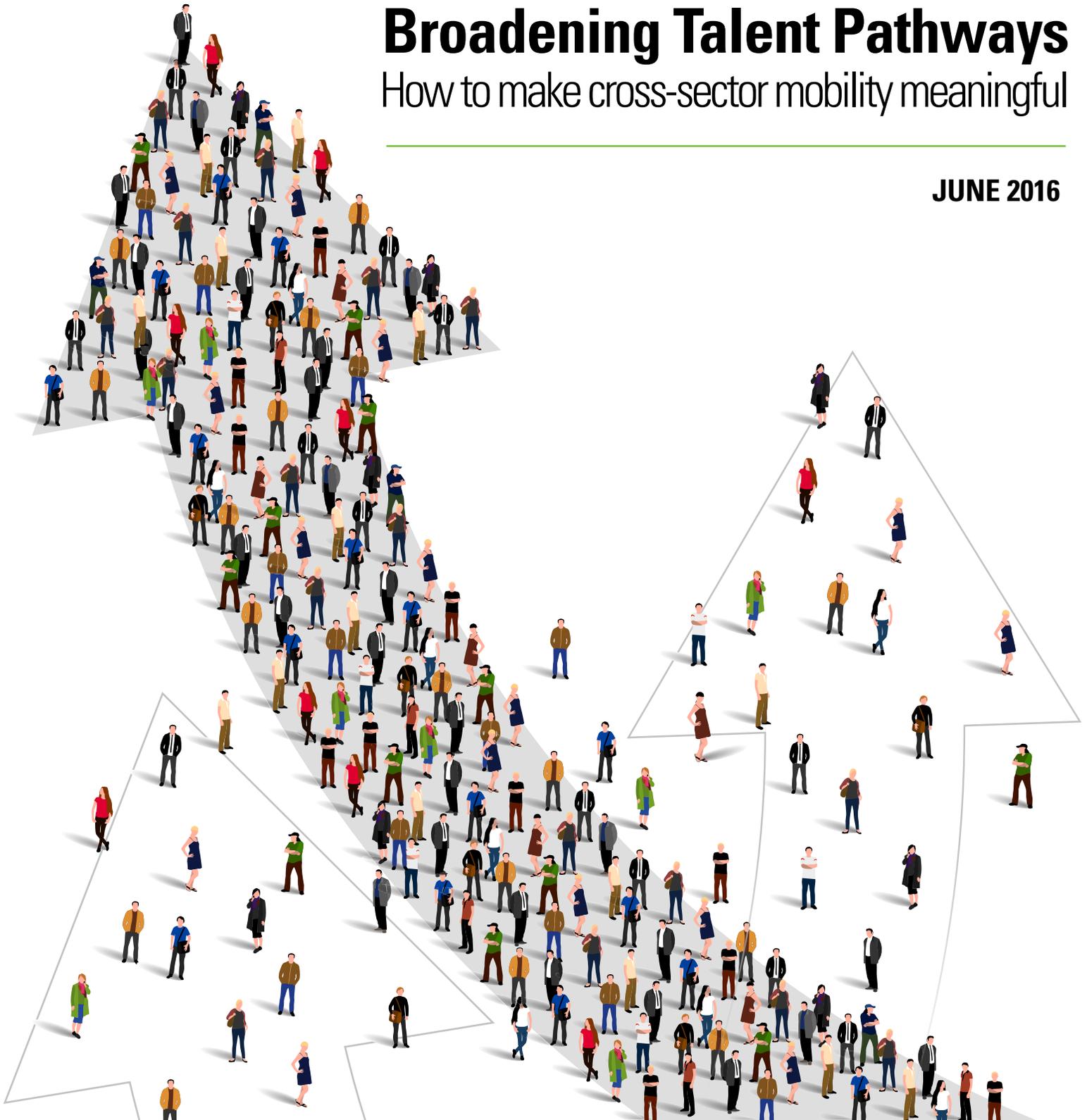
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Broadening Talent Pathways

How to make cross-sector mobility meaningful

JUNE 2016



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The Public Policy Forum works with all levels of government and the public service, the private sector, labour, post-secondary institutions, NGOs and Indigenous groups to improve policy outcomes for Canadians. As a non-partisan, member-based organization, we work from “inclusion to conclusion,” by convening discussions on fundamental policy issues and by identifying new options and paths forward. For 30 years, the Public Policy Forum has broken down barriers among sectors, contributing to meaningful change that builds a better Canada.

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Executive Summary

Greater flows of human capital across the public, private, and non-profit sectors can provide individual and organizational benefits. Exposure to different workplace environments broadens skills, networks, and perspectives at the individual level. For organizations, a well-rounded workforce is critical for collaboration and innovation. Despite the potential value of cross-sector talent mobility, current opportunities remain undervalued and underutilized in Canada. Although mobility initiatives exist across jurisdictions, our research finds that passive approaches, organizational culture, and institutional barriers have limited program uptake and impact.

The Public Policy Forum, in partnership with MNP, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, and the Government of Alberta, explored challenges and opportunities in leveraging cross-sector talent mobility to build high-performing organizations. Based on candid conversations with leaders across sectors and regions, our research identified key issues and barriers, as well as design considerations and success factors in the development of impactful mobility initiatives in Canada. Although our discussions focused primarily on the public sector context, findings in this report can help inform talent management strategies across industries.

Advancing Meaningful Mobility

Rather than simply increasing participation in existing mobility programs, organizations need to understand how to ensure successful outcomes. The leaders we engaged shared some key considerations and recommendations to enhance program design and implementation. Based on our discussions, organizations can effectively leverage cross-sector mobility to attract, retain, and develop talent by focusing on four critical components:

- **The Why – Establishing a clear purpose:** Align mobility with strategic priorities to develop a systematic approach focused on driving concrete outcomes.
- **The What – Defining the right approach:** Assess the pros and cons of employing different models based on intended outcomes, organizational resources, and potential risks.
- **The Who – Identifying suitable targets:** Select partners and participants who appreciate the value of mobility and the shared responsibility for positive outcomes.
- **The How – Ensuring effective management:** Address needs at every stage of the process, from managing potential organizational risks to supporting talent integration and reintegration.

Key Conditions for Success

A confluence of factors contributes to the development and implementation of well-designed talent strategies. Three interconnected conditions emerged in our leadership discussions as the main drivers of success:

- **Commitment from all parties:** Partner organizations must ensure mutual benefits by working together to align objectives, support participants, evaluate outcomes, and apply learnings.
- **Champions at the leadership level:** Supportive leaders have to play an active role in breaking down organizational barriers to maximizing mobility as a talent management tool.
- **Awareness across sectors:** All organizations need to invest in effective marketing to promote the value of cross-sector experience and build a critical mass for mobility initiatives.

Introduction

Like many countries around the world, Canada faces a complex set of trends, from shifting demographics and tightening budgets, to intensifying global competition and disruptive technological change. While challenging issues are not new to government, public services across the country are grappling with unprecedented conditions shaped by the pace of change, the volume of information, and the level of public scrutiny in the current environment. With multiple players and platforms to consider, public engagement and stakeholder collaboration have become integral to policymaking. Given fiscal pressures, policymakers also need to be more innovative to serve the evolving needs of citizens.

Recognizing that governments must adapt to new realities, the Public Policy Forum launched a suite of initiatives under the theme of Public Service Next to explore the impact of emerging trends across the public sector. Through [Ten Top Skills](#), the inaugural project on public sector leadership, the Forum identified talent mobility as a valuable strategy for building key competencies. More specifically, greater flows of human capital across the public, private, and non-profit sectors can help develop the necessary capacity and create the right environment for collaboration and innovation.

Encouraging cross-sector talent mobility can lead to dynamic, versatile organizations across sectors. As traditional roles and silos are being replaced by greater convergence, sharing ideas and practices through employee exchanges can provide more advantages than ever. In addition to governments, private enterprises and non-profit organizations can benefit from cross-sector talent mobility, especially with companies embracing social responsibility and community organizations adopting business principles.

Increasingly, governments and other organizations are starting to appreciate the value of mobility. Many public sector programs exist in the US, including the long-running White House Fellowship and the recent Presidential Innovation Fellows program. The UK civil service has taken a more systematic approach by integrating external experience into leadership development. Similarly, IBM's Corporate Service Corps program provides executives and high-performers with opportunities for project-based mobility. Because organizations today need to navigate complicated issues with a wide range of stakeholders, those that invest in building bridges across sectors may have a competitive edge.

Despite the potential benefits of cross-sector mobility, opportunities in Canada remain undervalued and underutilized. Although mobility initiatives exist across jurisdictions, anecdotal evidence suggests that passive approaches, as well as cultural and institutional barriers have limited program uptake and impact. In some cases, mobility has been used in lieu of addressing performance issues or creating permanent positions, which undermines program value and reputation.

To better understand how to strategically use cross-sector mobility to enhance organizational performance, the Forum launched *Broadening Talent Pathways* in partnership with MNP, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, and the Government of Alberta. The value of cross-sector career mobility was universally affirmed throughout our conversations with leaders across sectors and regions. But we heard several points of concern and cautionary tales while conducting this project. To best identify a nuanced, pragmatic path forward on this subject, we started at the beginning: whether and how to design and implement mobility initiatives to ensure meaningful outcomes. Although our research was mainly focused on enhancing opportunities in the public sector, findings in this report can help all organizations reap the rewards from a more strategic approach to mobility.



Our Approach

Broadening Talent Pathways involved one-on-one interviews with a cross-section of Canadian leaders, as well as roundtable discussions in Ottawa and Calgary. We engaged current and former public servants across the country, as well as many leaders outside the public service to gather diverse perspectives on maximizing temporary talent mobility across sectors. Most of the participants had either worked across sectors or took part in mobility programs throughout their career. Please refer to the appendices for roundtable agendas and participant lists.

The findings in this report are based on our interviews and two roundtable discussions. To ensure an open and candid exchange of views and personal observations, our discussions were not-for-attribution. To help frame the dialogue, our background paper summarized cross-sector mobility in Canada and included the following discussion questions:

- *How do you perceive cross-sectoral mobility as a talent management tool?*
- *If you were creating a new exchange program, what design elements would you incorporate and what would you avoid?*
- *In terms of effectiveness, what are some strengths and weaknesses in current public sector models?*
 - *What are some of the key factors undermining mobility initiatives in Canada?*
 - *How can host and sending organizations ensure better outcomes from exchanges?*
 - *What can individuals do to make the most of their placements?*
 - *Which programs have been particularly successful in Canada and abroad?*
 - *What are some of the key design elements that have enabled that success?*
- *Are you aware of innovative mobility initiatives in other sectors?*
- *How could cross-sectoral mobility initiatives be better aligned with broader goals and desired outcomes? Are there other talent management strategies that may complement mobility?*

Project Participants by Sector



The Value of Cross-Sector Mobility

In our interviews and roundtable discussions, participants across sectors agreed that temporary talent mobility provides both individual and organizational value. Benefits for employees can also translate into advantages for employers. Exposure to different workplace environments helps broaden skills, networks, and perspectives at the individual level. In turn, a more versatile workforce enables organizations to effectively respond to changing contexts that demand greater collaboration and innovation. As positive outcomes require time, effort, and resources, participants emphasized the need to take a long-term view to appreciate the role of mobility in building high-performing organizations across sectors.

“To be an effective leader in a changing global context, you need to consider a broader range of stakeholders and understand how decisions are made in other realms.”

Maximizing talent

As an aging population presents human capital challenges, organizations need to find creative strategies for attracting, retaining, and developing talent. Temporary talent mobility can offer diverse professional experiences that may not only appeal to younger workers, but also reinvigorate more seasoned employees. From giving back through public service and community work to enhancing skills in a fast-paced business environment, participants shared a range of personal motivations for mobility. In fact, open door policies are emerging across sectors as a response to growing demand for meaningful professional development, especially among younger generations.

“As someone moving from the private to the public sector, you learn how decisions are made, who is relevant to an issue, and how to work with government. You also appreciate the role of government and want to see it work better.”

While cross-sector experience may be appealing to highly-motivated individuals, it can also be a valuable asset for government, business, and non-profit employers. In addition to strengthening transferrable skills, working across sectors enables individuals to develop a deep understanding of different contexts, including the priorities, approaches, and constraints that drive sectoral thinking and shape organizational culture. According to participants, employees equipped with this expanded frame of reference are often better prepared to help their employers navigate the complex dynamics facing all sectors today.

Organizations can further utilize talent mobility to address competency gaps and access a broader pool of specialists as needed. For instance, private sector placements may offer insights into customer service and financial management, whereas public sector opportunities can provide exposure to policy making and regulatory processes. Employers can also temporarily bring in external advisors on specific issues and initiatives instead of investing in building diverse expertise, which can constrain organizations with limited resources and evolving priorities.

“Nothing in society will advance if only one sector is working on it. Mobility can help build the networks to achieve common objectives.”

Facilitating collaboration

In the current environment where organizations are forced to do more with less, collaboration has become a common necessity, especially with greater interdependency between sectors. Governments are dealing with complex policy issues that cut across jurisdictional and sectoral boundaries. Industries are shifting toward multiple bottom-lines to balance economic, social, and environmental priorities. Non-profit organizations are exploring alternative funding models and community partnerships in the face of shrinking public resources. To thrive in this new context characterized by fiscal constraints and interconnected dynamics, organizations can leverage talent mobility to build strategic relationships that help advance shared objectives.

As partnerships require trust and respect, increasing the flow of talent across government, industry, and the non-profit sector can serve to challenge common misconceptions and foster better working relationships. For instance, private sector employees seconded to the public sector often developed a greater appreciation of the role of government and a deeper respect for the public service. Public sector employees temporarily placed in the private sector described a similar shift in perspective that led to a more nuanced view of business. These outcomes, while difficult to measure, demonstrate that cross-sector mobility can transform employees into bridge builders with the insight and credibility to break down silos.

“Mobility brings a fresh perspective to government, provides exposure to the broader society, and builds greater mutual respect across sectors.”

In fact, some participants believe that a greater flow of talent between the public, private, and non-profit sectors has enhanced mutual understanding and strengthened working relationships in the US and Australia. Talent mobility can also foster a more collaborative environment in Canada. From working together to address climate change to finding collective solutions for sustainable healthcare, governments, industries, and community organizations can help advance common priorities by embracing opportunities to exchange knowledge and build relationships across sectors.

Catalyzing innovation

To remain relevant in the face of increasing constraints, all sectors must find creative ways of meeting changing demands. Cross-sector mobility opens up alternative channels for new ideas and practices that can benefit host and sending organizations. Whether organizations send out or bring in talent, participants agreed that mobility can provide fresh perspectives that challenge conventional approaches and contribute to better outcomes. By drawing from different sectors, organizations can also employ a broader range of tools and approaches to develop innovative strategies for improving performance.

Over time, cross-sector mobility has the potential to shift organizational culture by creating progressive environments that welcome diverse perspectives, as well as building eclectic teams that spark innovative solutions. Organizations that actively encourage cross-sector mobility may become more successful at developing and attracting agile thinkers in the long run. Rather than worry about losing talent through mobility, organizations may need to rethink employment as a relationship rather than a contract, especially as younger generations and highly-driven individuals tend to value professional growth over job security.



Key Issues and Barriers

“There is a disconnect between what we say and what we do. In practice, current programs send people out who are not a good fit or at the end of their career; we don’t maximize high performers at the right time.”

Despite the potential benefits, talent mobility remains limited in Canada as cross-sector experience is neither expected nor actively encouraged in government, business, or the non-profit community. Even in the public sector, where mobility programs have been formally established in most jurisdictions, there is surprisingly little movement across different levels of government.

While mobility across departments and ministries may be relatively common within each public service, our research suggests that the lack of mobility across governments and other sectors is due to a combination of factors, including individual and organizational risks, as well as constraints and dynamics specific to each sector.

“Without an advocate or mentor in the home organization, employees that participate in mobility programs are essentially out of sight, out of mind.”

Some issues are related to program design and implementation, but cultural and institutional barriers also exist. Although discussions covered a range of initiatives, from Interchange Canada and other secondment programs at the provincial and territorial levels, our findings revealed similar challenges across temporary mobility programs in the public sector.

Passive approaches

Participants repeatedly raised the lack of strategic focus and commitment across existing mobility programs. Ineffective internal communication and external marketing also limits awareness of opportunities and their benefits. While organizations may theoretically understand the potential value of talent mobility, in reality, most program objectives are neither clearly defined nor well-aligned with broader organizational priorities.

Many participants described federal public service programs, such as Interchange Canada, as administrative platforms rather than strategic tools. Simply identifying general goals, such as skills development and knowledge transfer, is inadequate. This haphazard approach has

placed much of the responsibility for program success onto individual participants and, in some cases, enabled the use of mobility as a substitute for addressing human resource issues, such as unproductive employees.

Participants were especially concerned about the integration of external talent and the reintegration of returning employees. Not every organization that provides opportunities for temporary mobility fully appreciates the benefits of cross-sector experience. Although organizations may agree to host outside talent, they do not always provide proper on-boarding or understand how to effectively leverage diverse skill sets. Private sector employers, for instance, are often unsure about how to utilize public sector talent. But some participants noted that all sectors face the challenge of articulating transferrable skills in a compelling manner.

“Due to the closed culture in the federal public service, it’s even hard to bring people in at the senior level from the provinces and territories, let alone the private sector.”

Reintegration is another challenge, as sending organizations may not take advantage of the competencies and networks that employees gain from working in different environments. If cross-sector experience is not valued by organizations, taking part in mobility programs can create resentment among colleagues and undermine career advancement.

In fact, some public and private sector participants encountered resistance when seeking approval for their secondment and indifference upon returning to their organization. Post-placement uncertainty is especially common in workplaces with high rates of turnover and limited support for mobility at the management level.

“Moving into government may be the most challenging because of multiple bottom-lines and an array of stakeholders – we need to prepare people for the steep learning curve.”

Cultural factors

Linear, short-term thinking can prevent organizations from embracing cross-sector mobility. With increasing competition for talent, some participants identified employee poaching as an immediate concern that can

overshadow the advantages of using mobility as a talent management tool. Many participants commented on managers being reluctant to allow their top performers to take part in temporary mobility programs.

Cultural barriers to permanent forms of career mobility can also limit temporary cross-sector opportunities. Despite the value of both specialists and generalists, hiring practices across sectors continue to limit the talent pool for roles that could benefit from broader perspectives. For the most part, employers are still following formulaic approaches to recruitment that favour individuals with linear career paths, even though many skills are transferrable. By focusing narrowly on sector-specific qualifications, organizations can inadvertently perpetuate conformity and stifle innovation.

Myths and stereotypes about each sector may also discourage some individuals from considering opportunities outside of their particular field. However, diverse workplace dynamics can make it hard to transition smoothly from one sector to another. Differentiating

“With today’s heightened skepticism, there are concerns in the private sector about the perception of having an insider advantage after a stint in government.”

government from other organizations, public sector accountability creates a highly risk-averse environment that may be a difficult adjustment for outside talent. The ‘sink-or-swim’ culture typical of the private sector can also be challenging for those coming in from government or non-profit organizations. From adopting a whole new vocabulary to embracing a different value system, cross-sector mobility can involve a steep learning curve that enables professional growth, but also presents obstacles to success, especially in the case of temporary placements.

Institutional constraints

Organizations can face talent management constraints that are unique to their particular sectoral context. In the public sector, human resource practices typically involve rigid rules and bureaucratic processes that can create obstacles for temporary and permanent forms of cross-sector mobility. Participants were especially critical of the time-consuming hiring process in government, which

can take several months to complete, especially when security clearance is necessary. Language requirements for some federal and provincial government positions can exclude external talent with other valuable competencies. Although employment classification systems across the public sector can complicate recruitment, risk aversion and limited awareness of alternative mechanisms among hiring managers may also restrict opportunities for internal and external mobility.

In addition to bureaucratic human resource regimes across the public sector, executive salary differences and pension plan restrictions can serve as further disincentives for more permanent forms of mobility across sectors. While some participants believe that fiscal pressures may eventually lead to greater uniformity in pension schemes and contract models, conflict of interest considerations will continue to complicate temporary cross-sector mobility for public sector organizations. According to some participants, the institutional mechanisms that make it advantageous to stay in government are, for the most part, indicative of a talent management system that may be incompatible with cross-sector mobility.

While private sector employers may have greater flexibility than their public sector counterparts in how they manage human resources, economic changes can redefine organizational objectives and individual career paths. For instance, it is not uncommon for employers facing an economic downturn to reconsider their investments in talent development. Such shifts in organizational priorities tend to threaten the continuity of progressive policies and programs.

“The public service tends to err on the side of caution even though there may be flexibility in managing conflict of interest.”

Resource and capacity constraints are a constant issue for smaller businesses and non-profit organizations, which often struggle to provide professional development opportunities that attract top talent. Economic uncertainty can also compel individuals to rethink career decisions. In the context of increasing layoffs and precarious employment, job security may become more important than professional growth.

Building a Framework for Meaningful Mobility

To effectively leverage talent mobility, it is not enough to simply increase participation in existing programs. Organizations need to understand how to ensure successful outcomes. Although the right approach depends on the specific goals and capacities of each organization, participants identified diverse models for consideration and shared various recommendations on public sector program design and implementation. As different approaches come with different advantages, some warned against over-engineering mobility, stressing the importance of balancing opportunistic thinking with systematic programming. Based on our discussions, we have outlined below some of the key design considerations that can help organizations develop their own framework for ensuring meaningful outcomes through cross-sector talent mobility.

The Why: Establishing a clear purpose

- *Take a systematic approach to program design by considering organizational priorities, capacity gaps, and how mobility can address those needs.*
- *Explore a range of approaches rather than relying on one mobility program to respond to diverse issues, functional gaps, or talent development objectives.*
- *Identify where cross-sector mobility may not be the appropriate mechanism for achieving intended outcomes.*

Before considering program design, organizations need to establish a clear case for pursuing talent mobility. What are the organizational priorities? Where are the capacity gaps? How can mobility address those needs to achieve broader objectives? By aligning program goals with strategic aims, organizations can develop a systematic approach focused on driving concrete outcomes. Taking an enterprise-wide view also helps employees understand the shared value of mobility, resulting in broad support and collective action. As mobility can be challenging for individuals and disruptive for organizations, all parties, whether sending or hosting talent, need to appreciate the short and long-term benefits of encouraging greater flows of human capital across sectors.

In a time of demographic change and increasing competition, organizations may be focused on succession planning, as well as attracting and retaining top talent. With greater complexity and fiscal austerity, collaboration across sectors and jurisdictions becomes critical to achieving outcomes. Diverse perspectives and technical expertise can also help organizations develop innovative solutions. In addition to long-term goals for capacity and relationship building, organizations may also have more immediate needs related to specific issues and initiatives. For instance, governments may need to build capacity, establish partnerships, or seek advice to advance particular policy objectives.

CRITICAL COMPONENTS OF PROGRAM DESIGN

- ***The Why** – Establishing a clear purpose: Align mobility with strategic priorities to develop a systematic approach focused on driving concrete outcomes.*
- ***The What** – Defining the right approach: Assess the pros and cons of employing different models based on intended outcomes, organizational resources, and potential risks.*
- ***The Who** – Identifying suitable targets: Select partners and participants who appreciate the value of mobility and the shared responsibility for positive outcomes.*
- ***The How** – Ensuring effective management: Address needs at every stage of the process, from managing potential organizational risks to supporting talent integration and reintegration.*

While not every option has to be formalized, integrating mobility with broader organizational goals instead of stand-alone arrangements may lead to greater impact. Different mobility streams can be created for different organizational priorities. Participants largely agreed that the public sector should explore a range of approaches rather than rely on one mobility program to respond to diverse issues, functional gaps, or talent development objectives. Although organizations should be open to different models, it is also important to identify where cross-sector mobility may not be the most appropriate strategy for achieving intended outcomes.

The What: Defining the right approach

- *Analyze the advantages and disadvantages of employing different models based on intended outcomes, organizational capacity, and potential risks.*
- *Consider the duration of placements, as well as the value of permanent networking platforms and other non-programmatic options for advancing cross-sector understanding.*
- *Enable a more targeted approach to leadership development through compulsory and competitive program models.*

Participants identified diverse models for consideration, ranging from secondments and project-based initiatives, to networking platforms and centres of excellence. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, organizations need to assess the advantages and disadvantages of employing different options based on intended outcomes, organizational capacity, and potential risks. For example, the organizational value of mobility may be more concrete for project-based assignments, secondments in technical fields, and two-way exchanges with mutual benefits. Project-specific mobility also enables participants to make an immediate contribution. To avoid disrupting teams and creating tension, placements should not be existing positions, but a new role specifically designed to maximize the advantages of talent mobility.

The duration of placements can also shape outcomes. For the greatest impact, short-term mobility should be focused on specific objectives, whereas longer secondments may be more conducive to broader goals of talent development and relationship building. Permanent cross-sector platforms for networking and knowledge sharing may also be worth considering. While short-term secondments and exchanges may be easier to accommodate, most participants agreed that individuals tend to be more committed to making an impact when they have the time to learn about an organization, build deep relationships, and contribute in a meaningful way.

While current mobility initiatives across the public sector are voluntary, participants explored the potential impact of compulsory and competitive models. As the misuse of programs is already an issue in some jurisdictions, introducing quotas to increase mobility can lead to more unintended consequences. Compulsory models may not be advisable for all purposes, but they may make sense for leadership development. For instance, requiring a combination of interdepartmental, intergovernmental, international, and cross-sector experience can help the public sector develop well-rounded leaders. Using a competitive model may also help organizations identify motivated and high-potential candidates who can benefit the most from cross-sector mobility.

As an alternative or complementary approach to talent mobility, public sector organizations can explore non-programmatic opportunities that may not require employees to leave their position, such as encouraging greater external networking and civic engagement. For instance, incentivizing executives to serve on boards or participate in community work may help promote cross-sector understanding and partnerships.

The Who: Identifying suitable targets

- *Target top performers at all levels, as mobility can serve different talent management objectives, from building capacity to improving engagement among employees.*
- *Look at a wide range of factors, including skill sets, character traits, personal motivations, as well as career and life stages to select the right candidates.*
- *Select appropriate partners who appreciate the value of mobility and the shared responsibility for positive outcomes.*

As cross-sector talent mobility requires a high degree of commitment from all parties, careful selection of participating individuals and organizations is critical to success. Given that employers can leverage mobility for different talent management objectives, many participants recommended targeting top performers at all levels. Although senior leaders bring extensive experience, younger talent may be more mobile and adaptable, as well as better positioned to provide the best return on investment for organizations seeking to build long-term capacity. Reinforcing the benefits of cross-sector talent mobility, some participants noted that diverse professional experiences can help combat complacency and improve engagement among middle managers, who are particularly prone to burning out and falling into a career rut.

Regardless of their level, potential candidates must be well-suited for the specific objectives and roles of each opportunity. To target the right candidates, organizations should consider a wide range of factors, including skill sets, character traits, personal motivations, as well as career and life stages. For instance, our research suggests that self-starters who are intellectually curious are more likely to seek professional growth and thrive in new environments. Thoroughly assessing traits, competencies, and interests can enable organizations to identify candidates who can make the most out of their experience, whether it is focused on developing talent, providing expertise, building relationships, or a combination of objectives.

Organizations must also be mindful of selecting appropriate partners who appreciate the value of mobility and the shared responsibility for positive outcomes. Sending and host organizations need to align their interests and establish clear expectations to ensure the greatest impact. Although some industries may be a natural fit for certain objectives, evolving trends and emerging innovations across sectors make it advantageous to consider diverse partnerships that could lead to unexpected benefits. Participants believe that organizations should consider all sectors equally and explore a range of untapped resources, including Indigenous leaders, organizations, and governments. With smaller businesses and non-profit organizations, partnering on talent mobility will require more creative mechanisms to manage resource and capacity constraints.



The How: Ensuring effective management

- *Support the integration of external talent through orientation courses, mentoring arrangements, and regular meetings to monitor results against objectives.*
- *Develop a clear process for reintegration to ensure that employees and the organization benefit from cross-sector mobility.*
- *Establish terms and conditions to address concerns related to talent poaching and raise awareness of existing mechanisms to manage potential conflicts of interest.*

Successful programs ultimately depend on effective management. Well-designed approaches to cross-sector talent mobility focus on ensuring positive outcomes at every stage of the process, which requires strong commitment from both home and host organizations. Investments in on-boarding can help support the integration of external talent. Participants recommended orientation courses that cover such key areas as terminology, culture, and ethics.

Formal support systems, including mentoring and peer networking platforms, are also valuable sources of guidance and encouragement. To ensure candid dialogue and objective advice, some participants stressed that mentors should not be direct reports. Rather than simply evaluating outcomes, host organizations can also arrange regular reviews throughout the duration of a placement to measure progress against objectives. Such an approach enables individuals and organizations to make changes if the experience is not meeting expectations.

Sending organizations have an equally important role to play in reintegrating talent. As many employers are unsure about how to leverage the cross-sector experience of returning employees, it is important to develop a clear process for reintegration to ensure meaningful outcomes for individuals and organizations. For instance, mobility can be a path to career advancement, similar to other leadership training or talent development programs. Alternatively, new competencies can lead to expanded roles or internal deployment. Organizations can also maximize the benefits of cross-sector knowledge by providing formal opportunities for returning employees to share their experiences with colleagues. Given that shifting workplace contexts can complicate reintegration, some participants see value in maintaining regular contact with seconded employees to keep them updated on organizational changes.

Managing potential risks is another component of program oversight. A common concern among employers across sectors is talent poaching. Although organizational culture often shapes perceptions of employment relationships, some participants suggested establishing conditions for mobility that ensure a commitment to return to sending organizations. In the public sector, conflict of interest concerns must also be meaningfully addressed, although not all forms of cross-sector mobility hold the same degree of risk. For instance, regulatory bodies need to be more mindful of possible conflicts of interest than other public sector organizations due to their role in overseeing different industries.

Nevertheless, mechanisms exist to address and mitigate potential conflicts, including confidentiality and non-disclosure agreements. While greater awareness of available solutions can help address risk aversion, participants underscored the importance of ensuring transparency and defining parameters for different positions, such as introducing cooling-off periods for lobbying and limiting external opportunities to advisory instead of decision-making roles.

Key Conditions for Success

Although many organizations acknowledge the value of cross-sector experience, limited flows of talent among public, private, and non-profit organizations demonstrate that action requires much more than understanding. In Canada, linear, short-term thinking still shapes talent management practices across sectors. Justifying professional development opportunities can also become more challenging in the face of increasing resource constraints. Across the public sector, bureaucratic human resource systems further undermine innovation.

A confluence of factors contributes to the development and implementation of well-designed talent strategies. In our conversations with leaders across sectors, three conditions emerged as drivers of progress on cross-sector mobility: shared responsibility, committed leadership, and broad buy-in.

Commitment from all parties

The clear message from participants was cross-sector mobility will not add value unless there is commitment at the individual and organizational levels. Currently, the success of most public sector initiatives depends largely on individual effort, as few organizations take a systematic approach that aligns objectives, supports participants, and evaluates outcomes. However, organizations only get back as much as they put into these programs. Ensuring a good return on investment requires careful planning and oversight by both home and host organizations. Rather than a one-sided approach, organizations need to work together to develop mutually beneficial arrangements. For instance, engaging partners in jointly designing programs can help promote shared responsibility for success.

Champions at the leadership level

A more deliberate approach to mobility requires champions at the top who not only understand the value of cross-sector experience, but also see mobility as a way to achieve broader strategic goals. Change is difficult, especially in large organizations where the status quo is deeply engrained into the culture. However, leadership buy-in can shift internal dynamics and address institutional barriers to create environments that effectively leverage diverse skills and perspectives. Leaders with cross-sector experience are most likely to appreciate the value of mobility as a strategic talent management tool. Given that different cultures exist within organizations and sectors, identifying such leaders and building a coalition of champions can help ensure greater internal traction for talent mobility.

Awareness across sectors

As cross-sector mobility programs depend on partnerships, organizations need to invest in an effective marketing strategy to raise awareness of potential benefits and available opportunities. Recognizing that governments can be slow to change, some participants advised gathering support in the private and non-profit sectors to create momentum for collective action that eventually builds a critical mass for talent mobility initiatives. To promote the value of cross-sector experience, organizations can create more platforms for sharing program success stories and encourage leaders to speak about their own experiences of working across sectors. Effective internal and external communications can also help challenge misconceptions about different sectors and encourage top talent to consider a broad range of career pathways.

WHAT MAKES MEANINGFUL CROSS-SECTOR TALENT MOBILITY POSSIBLE?

- **Commitment from all parties:** Partner organizations must ensure mutual benefits by working together to align objectives, support participants, evaluate outcomes, and apply learnings.
- **Champions at the leadership level:** Supportive leaders have to play an active role in breaking down organizational barriers to maximizing mobility as a talent management tool.
- **Awareness across sectors:** All organizations need to invest in effective marketing to promote the value of cross-sector experience and build a critical mass for mobility initiatives.

Recommended Next Steps: Finding Opportunities for Greater Impact

Increasing demand for greater collaboration across sectors and industries presents an opportunity to build on a wide spectrum of talent mobility programs. Rather than starting from scratch, the public sector can rethink existing initiatives to ensure better alignment with strategic goals and greater responsibility for meaningful outcomes.

- [Interchange Canada](#) can shift to a more competitive model to target high performers or a compulsory system to support leadership development.
- The federal government can explore new partnerships for executive mobility by expanding the [Public Servant-in-Residence Program](#) or reviving the *Fellows Program* to encourage two-way exchanges.
- The [Advanced Policy Analyst Program](#) (formerly known as the *Accelerated Economist Training Program*) can expand beyond the federal public service to include intergovernmental and cross-sector opportunities.
- [Recruitment of Policy Leaders](#) can better align individual and organizational objectives to ensure that recruits have an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the public policy process.

Regardless of the approach to mobility, it will be important for the federal public service to establish and clarify overarching policies and organizational objectives while continuing to allow departments the flexibility to design programs tailored to their specific needs. With alternative mechanisms emerging across the federal public service, sharing effective practices and innovative approaches through online platforms, such as GCpedia, can help expand their impact.

At the provincial and territorial level, governments have an opportunity to build on existing initiatives and to share experiences with other jurisdictions. Current programs can be expanded to support reciprocal exchanges and replicated in other jurisdictions to leverage and develop untapped talent.

- The Alberta Government manages its own interchange initiative, as well as an Indigenous internship program aimed at providing professional experience and building relationships among the provincial government, Indigenous communities, and other stakeholders.

- The Government of the Northwest Territories also supports capacity building in Indigenous communities through a three-year internship program that includes placements with the Gwich'in Tribal Council, the territorial government, and Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada.

Public services across the country are also experimenting with collaborative approaches to policy making. While these initiatives primarily focus on internal innovation, they have the potential to serve as platforms for strategic cross-sector engagement. Key examples at the federal and provincial level include:

- The Innovation Hub in the Privy Council Office
- Change labs, tiger teams, and micro missions across federal departments
- Alberta CoLab housed in Alberta Energy

Alternatively, starting fresh can create a path to greater innovation, especially when it is often easier to develop new programs than to fix existing ones in large organizations. For instance, governments can work with a small group of external organizations across sectors to pilot a multi-year cross-sector mobility initiative. Partnering with select private and non-profit organizations to jointly develop opportunities helps ensure that mobility meets the needs of all parties involved.

- Identify interested organizations to build a community of supporters and work together to define shared objectives and ensure positive outcomes.
- Engage sector associations and chambers of commerce, which are well-positioned to serve as mobility champions in their own field.
- Collaborate with embassies and intergovernmental organizations to open up international opportunities.

With an aging workforce and growing competition, organizations that remain complacent will not be able to attract and retain top talent. Cross-sector mobility can be an effective strategy for developing a versatile workforce that can respond to 21st century challenges. As cross-sector collaboration is happening in many different areas, organizations can find ways to build on the wide spectrum of vehicles that already exist.

Whether cross-sector talent mobility comes through opportunism or more formalized programming, organizations should consider untapped talent pools, such as Indigenous communities. To effectively maximize the benefits of talent mobility, leadership is needed to establish clear objectives that are consistent with the strategic direction of the organization. The challenge lies in ensuring and communicating impact effectively while also keeping an open mind about unexpected advantages and opportunities down the road.



Appendix A: Agenda

Broadening Talent Pathways *Cross-Sector Career Mobility in Canada*

Arrival and Breakfast

Introduction

Roundtable Discussion

- What are some of the strengths and weakness in current mobility initiatives across Canada and abroad?
- How can individuals and organizations ensure successful outcomes in cross-sector mobility?
- Where are some specific opportunities to improve existing approaches?
- How can well-designed initiatives contribute to broader goals, such as enhancing Canada's competitiveness?

Closing Remarks



Appendix B: Participants

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Notes





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