



Forging a career in the civil service

Keynote speech from Rupert McNeil

Stronger Human Resources is at the core of the civil service's efforts to become more diverse and make its careers more rewarding.

Rupert McNeil, Government Chief People Officer and Head of the Civil Service Human Resources Function, gave a keynote speech at the Institute for Government on 22 November, describing the progress government is making by improving its HR.

A new role for HR, enabled by technology

Introducing the event, Yazad Dalal, Head of Strategy, HCM Cloud Applications, EMEA at Oracle, said that the role of HR in organisations had transformed over the last 30 years. Previously HR – including in government, as we have argued – was considered an 'administrative back-office' function, confined to an operational role with little influence on the thinking of executives. Now top organisations have strategic HR at the core of their senior management, ensuring they have the right people in place to meet current and future needs.

McNeil said that the civil service was on this 'journey' and was changing the way it thinks about capability and manages its people. He argued that new technologies, including new HR systems, are making a substantial difference to what it is possible to do. For instance, giving line managers access to information about their staff's skills, performance and objectives enables better line management.

Becoming ‘the UK’s most inclusive employer’

McNeil started his speech with an update on the progress the Government had made on improving diversity and inclusion – with the aim of becoming “the UK’s most inclusive employer by 2020”.

Gender diversity has improved significantly: in 2010, 35% of Senior Civil Servants were women, now the figure is 43%. And the number of BAME civil servants has also increased since 2010, although change has been more incremental and there is still some way to go.

The civil service is using targets to help drive improvements more quickly in certain areas. For instance, it has set targets to tackle the underrepresentation of disabled and ethnic minority staff in senior roles.

The Civil Service’s Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, published in October 2017, sets out the Government’s plan for improving inclusion in these areas – as well as others that are often less discussed. For instance, in November the civil service appointed its first Permanent Secretary with responsibility for faith and belief, Claire Moriarty from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. McNeil said this will help to ensure that people are able to talk about their whole identities at work.

‘A quiet revolution in recruitment’

The shift in the make-up of the civil service is being supported by changes in how it recruits staff. The civil service is phasing out ‘competency-based’ recruitment – a system for assessing candidates against a prescribed set of civil service competencies such as ‘leading and communicating’ and ‘delivering at pace’. While this system had helped the civil service to raise the consistency and quality of people it hired, over time it had become too narrow. The civil service had fallen behind other organisations in the way it assessed technical skills and experience – and the approach failed to put trust in line managers to pick the right people.

In its place the civil service is introducing ‘Success Profiles’ – a new framework which incorporates strengths, ability, experience, technical skills and natural talents into the assessment of candidates. The idea is that candidates are able to present their ‘full selves’ during interviews. So far, two departments have piloted the framework and the initial feedback from both hiring managers and candidates was extremely positive. The new system will be rolled out across the civil service by April 2019.

Building careers through cross-government functions

McNeil said that progress in improving how the civil service manages its people was also being driven by government functions – cross-departmental groups covering key professional activities such as finance, digital, commercial, and HR.

The 12 government functions* now play a key role in recruiting people into their areas of work – and providing them with training to ensure they stay motivated and keep learning in their roles. The functions have developed ‘career pathways’ to help specialists to view their career development through the lens of the specialism as a whole and across the civil service, rather than simply their home department. And they are also improving learning and development opportunities for staff: the Government Digital Service Academy now offers training in core digital skills to all civil servants; and the civil service is working with partners to put more training materials online, so civil servants can access them at their convenience.

‘Take the robot out of the human’

Looking ahead, McNeil said that government will need to respond to artificial intelligence and automated technologies – and use them to drive improvements in public service delivery. He emphasised that technological advances will provide an opportunity to make jobs more rewarding by ‘taking the robot out of the human’ – automating more repetitive tasks to enable people to spend more time doing rewarding work. This complements the ‘human-centred’ approach organisations like the civil service are increasingly taking to people management – recognising people’s identities and skills to help them thrive in the workplace.

This event was part of a series sponsored by Oracle: to find out more about future events in the series, please visit the [Institute for Government’s website](#).

* The functions are as follows: analysis; commercial; communications; corporate finance; digital; finance; fraud, error, debts and grants; human resources; internal audit; legal; project delivery; and property.

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January 2019

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