The 21st Century Public Servant

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Research design

The research was undertaken in three phases:

**Rapid evidence appraisal:** A desk-based review of the peer reviewed and grey literatures identified the state of knowledge about public service professionals, the competencies and capacities that they are thought to require and information about how they are currently developed. This literature review is available here. ([http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/public-service-academy/twenty-first-century-public-servant--eight-lessons.pdf](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/public-service-academy/twenty-first-century-public-servant--eight-lessons.pdf))

**Exploratory research:** Interviews were conducted with a range of people working in the public sector (e.g. local authority, health, fire, police), private sector (service providers, commissioning support functions) and third sector (service providers, service user and carer advocacy bodies). These 40 interviews were used to gather perspectives of current public servants on how this role is changing, the types of roles, skills and competencies that will be important in the future and a sense of how these might most effectively be developed. We also conducted a focus group of officers and members in one local authority and undertook a survey with recent graduate entrants into local government. The interviews and focus group drew on a purposive sample of people working in public services in the West Midlands region and in national stakeholder organisations. We used semi-structured interviews, based on a standardised topic guide. Interviews were audio recorded. The survey was undertaken online, with a link sent to recent recruits to the National Graduate Development Programme for local government. Ethical approval for the project was granted by the University of Birmingham.

**Disseminating the research:** Bringing these different streams together we are now sharing the findings of these earlier stages in this report, at events and on our project blog ([http://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/](http://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/)). We are encouraging debate about topics such as the range of different public servant roles, the competencies required in these roles, the options available in developing these skills and competencies, plus a range of more general themes around accountability, risk, and knowledge sharing as indicated by the research process. We are not presenting this report as an end to the work, but rather as an ongoing discussion where we invite responses to the work, and in particular encourage people working in public services to reflect on what some of the next steps might be to realise the principles of 21st Century public service.

The following **research questions** have run through the different phases of the work:

- What is the range of different roles of the 21st century public servant?
- What are the competencies and skills that public servants require to achieve these roles?
- What are the support and training requirements of these roles?
- How might central and local government better support and promote public service careers?

In this report we present the findings of the project as a series of descriptors of the characteristics of the 21st Century public servant. The literature review led to the identification of 8 characteristics which were discussed with and evolved in conversation, by interview or questionnaire, with practitioners, into the ten themes presented here.

For updates and discussion about the themes of the research, go to the 21st Century Public Servant blog at [http://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/](http://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/) and contribute to the debate on Twitter #21cps.
Summary of Findings

The research has identified a series of characteristics which are associated with the 21st Century Public Servant. These are described in summary below and later in the full body of the report.

The 21st Century Public Servant ...

1....is a municipal entrepreneur, undertaking a wide range of roles
Future public services require a set of workforce roles which may be different from those of the past. As one interviewee put it, ‘In the future you will need to be a municipal entrepreneur, a steward of scarce public resources.’ New roles that may be performed by the public servants of the future include story-teller, resource weaver, systems architect and navigator.

2....engages with citizens in a way that expresses their shared humanity and pooled expertise
The notion of working co-productively, or in partnership, with citizens was the preferred approach of most interviewees: ‘Valued outcomes in public services are not things that can be delivered, they are always co-produced’, as one put it. One of the suggested approaches was alluringly simple: ‘It’s about being human, that’s what we need to do’. One clear finding from the research was that the widespread calls for whole person approaches to care and support necessitate working practices in which staff are also able to be ‘whole people’.

3....is recruited and rewarded for generic skills as well as technical expertise
Generic skills are becoming as important as professional skills, with ‘soft skills’ around communication, organisation and caring becoming more highly prized. One interviewee said: ‘We need people who are really good with people and can form relationships, who are able to learn quickly.’ According to another, ‘engaging with citizens and the use, analysis and interpretation of data to understand your local populations, they are quite newish sets of skills for people who work in local authorities’.

4....builds a career which is fluid across sectors and services
People are unlikely to stay in one sector or service area for life and require portable skills that are valued in different settings. People need opportunities to learn and reflect on new skills, which may be through action learning, mentoring, job shadowing and sabbaticals rather than formal training:

‘People will have portfolio careers, working in different sectors, working for different people at the same time, not just sequentially. It’s not a job for life, or even for 5 years’, said one interviewee.

5....combines an ethos of publicness with an understanding of commerciality
Ethics and values are changing as the boundaries of public service shift, with notions of the public sector ethos being eclipsed by an increased push towards commercialism, along with a wider focus on social value. One interviewee said, ‘Local government will need more private sector skills, more crossover of skills and people. If staff in local government don’t have the commercial skills they won’t be employable. We have to help them get them.’ Another interviewee said: ‘I think there will be a fight between altruism and commercialism. We need managers who still care.’

6....is rethinking public services to enable them to survive an era of perma-austerity
Perma-austerity is inhibiting and catalysing change, as organisations struggle to balance shorter cost-cutting and redundancies with a strategic vision for change. Some interviewees expressed this in very negative terms: ‘There’s a narrative of doom…..it’s all about survival’. For others there was a potentially positive aspect to the financial context: ‘The cuts are forcing us to confront change. In public service, change doesn’t necessarily happen unless there is a crisis or a disaster, or it happens very slowly.’

7....needs organisations which are fluid and supportive rather than silo-ed and controlling
Many of the organisations where our interviewees were located had been through recent restructuring and there was little appetite for more structural change. Nevertheless there was a feeling that the organisations were not necessarily fit for purpose: ‘We are trying to be 21st Century public servants in 19th Century organisations. There’s that constant struggle. Not only how do we change what the people are but also how do we change the organisations to allow the people to be what they need to be?’ This can be about addressing issues of organisational culture, rather than assuming that new structures will be the solution.

8....rejects heroic leadership in favour of distributed and collaborative models of leading
Hero leaders aren’t the answer. Rather than emphasising the charisma and control of an individual, new approaches focus on leadership as dispersed throughout the organisation. This could be about thinking about leadership at the front line in a way that traverses traditional service sectors: ‘We should offer a career in community leadership. The 21st century public servant should be able to cross organisational boundaries.’

9....is rooted in a locality which frames a sense of loyalty and identity
The role of place in public service needs to be recognised: public service workers often have a strong loyalty to the neighbourhoods and towns/cities in which they work as well as an organisational loyalty. For some interviewees this was about staff being based in the locality: ‘Above a certain grade you should be required to live in [the council area], because you are making huge decisions on how people will live, work and spend their recreational time.’ For others it was about putting professional knowledge into an appropriate context for the locality: ‘Professionalism will be the death of local government. It’s that lack of ability to soften and shape stuff according to locality.’

10....reflects on practice and learns from that of others
The public service changes that we have set out here in which structures are fragmenting, citizens require authentic interactions, careers require much greater self-management, commerciality and publicness must be reconciled and expectations of leadership are dispersed across the organisation, require time and space for public servants to reflect: ‘You need spaces where you take yourself apart and sort it out with the fact that the organisation is expecting you to glide along like a swan looking serenely happy with no mistakes whatsoever.’
Getting from here to there

The challenges to current practice encompassed in these ten themes are wide-ranging, and require personal reflection, internal organisational dialogue, external networking and peer learning. Here are some questions to stimulate further thinking:

1. **Roles**: how can people be trained and supported into the broader range of roles that we have identified here?
2. **Engaging with citizens**: how can staff engage with citizens in a way that feels human, and supports people’s assets rather than highlighting their deficiencies?
3. **Do recruitment practices** get the right balance between generic and technical skills? How can people be recruited on the basis of values as well as skills?
4. **Career development** What opportunities can be created to encourage sabbaticals and secondments, into and out of the organisation?
5. Is there a strong **ethos of publicness** and do staff know what it means to combine this with more commerciality?
6. **Perma-austerity**: are honest conversations going on about what the organisation can and can’t do in an era of austerity, and do people understand their own role in that future?
7. **Organisational redesign**: are systems-based approaches being considered as an alternative to repeated cycles of organisational restructuring?
8. **Leadership**: what is being done to develop leadership at all levels of the organisation, and how is that being facilitated through incentives such as the appraisals system?
9. **Place**: how are feelings of identity and loyalty to place supported so that public servants feel like citizens of the place not just officers in an organisation?
10. Do appraisal, mentoring and peer support give people scope for **reflective practice**, to share and learn from mistakes and to take on new challenges (such as using social media) in effective ways?

The remainder of the report sets out the ten research themes in more detail. The themes have been presented on our blog, with guest responders identifying key challenges, controversies and next steps in what we have found. Join the debate at #21cps.