



Issue 2 | April 2017

# EXECUTIVE RECRUITMENT, ONBOARDING, AND RETENTION

A BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

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# NEW DIRECTIONS



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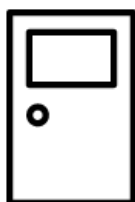
# Introduction

In the 21st century, both public and private organizations face important challenges in the area of recruitment and retention. Critical demographic shifts, a changing labor market, generational differences, and new patterns of personnel retention will form the bases for a series of new dynamics in human resource management. In practice, these generally stated pressures are and will continue to materialize in very real terms, which will include:

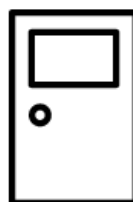
- A significant executive retirement eligibility emerging in the short to medium term;
- A connected executive recruitment activity that will be needed to fill vacated positions;
- The 'churn' experienced by personnel shifting positions very rapidly within the organization;
- The shortened period of time entrants will experience as they move into executive positions;
- A set of 'generational' differences as new executives enter the organization affecting its organizational culture;
- Assessing whether there is a need for more 'porous' organizational boundaries that would allow a different flow between external and internal human resources;
- Assessing the relative importance of 'generalists' versus 'specialists' in various areas of organizational focus;
- Positioning the organization adequately in terms of the increased value of human capital both in terms of internal alignment with this shift and in terms of competition with other organizations.

In short, many organizations will face what some call a Talent Tsunami determined by the converging pressures of demographic shifts and increased value of human capital to most organizations. Furthermore, for public service specifically, from an operational standpoint a complex human resource renewal means critically shifting process and procedures that range from strategic leadership to hiring regulations, to reviewing the roles of networks in the organization, passing from performance management, leadership styles and onboarding.

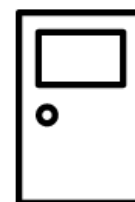
## Culture



## Leadership



## Networks



# TALENT TSUNAMI

Percent Increase in World's  
Working Age Population



As the working age population increasingly ages multiple challenges emerge in terms of leadership, planning, hiring, communication and approaches to managing just to mention a few.

## Millennials in the Workforce

Millennials will increasingly become the driving force behind the human resource strategy of any organization. By 2030 they will represent three quarters of the workforce and will dramatically change its landscape.



The new workplace will depend on social networks and digital approaches.

The hierarchy of goals and motivations will change dramatically in tomorrow's leaders

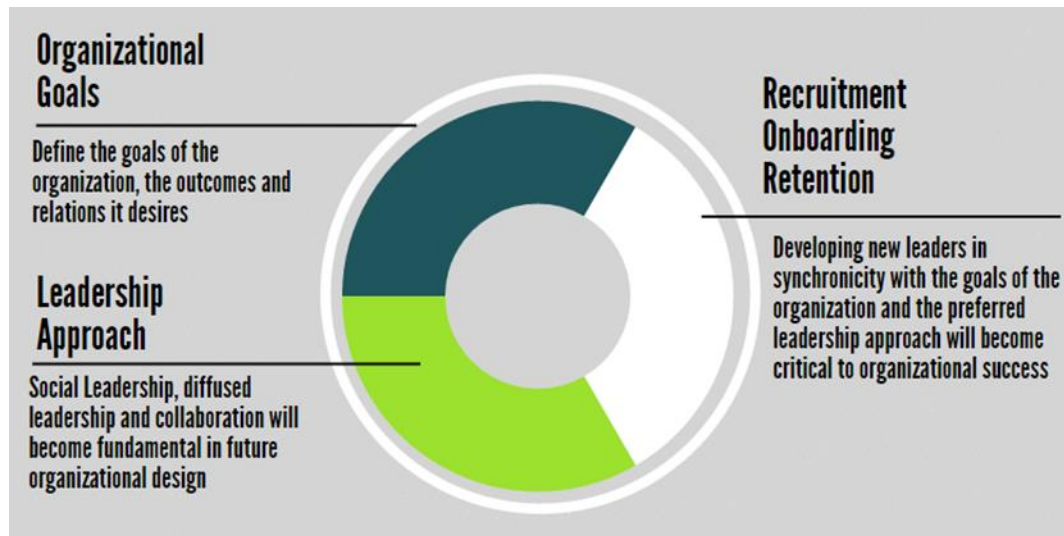


# Recruitment, Onboarding and Retention

Recently organizations have paid heightened attention to both recruitment and retention processes and onboarding. This is not surprising considering that at the broadest level the management of human capital is a key concern in every organization (Deloitte 2011; 2016; Conference Board of Canada 2014). Executive onboarding has its own specific challenges since, as Ann Fisher (2012) noted, “about 40% of executives who change jobs or get promoted fail in the first 18 months.” Research in the private sector shows that significant direct and indirect costs are involved when replacing employees. Estimated direct replacement costs for employees range between 50% and 60% of their annual salary and overall turnover costs in the range of 90% to 200% (Allen 2008), with peak estimates of 213% of their salary (Boushey and Glynn 2012). This is forcing organizations to risk manage what are often referred to as the “monumental costs” of executive transition failure (Ciampa and Dotlich 2015) and to address the multiple causes of this failure (Gaeddert et al. 2012). As a result, orientation is increasingly being blended into an onboarding approach that includes stronger involvement from management and a process-approach rather than treating it as an event (–Top Employers Institute 2016). Managing executive onboarding differently is critical because

- New executives are often hired or promoted to implement strategic initiatives that require changing the status quo rather than fitting into it;
- They must navigate among widely competing stakeholder agendas and pressures to accomplish work for the organization;
- New executives are often confronted with a “sink-or-swim” expectation based on having already acquired a high-level of experience and expertise. (County of Los Angeles ND: 15).

Furthermore, within the public sector onboarding is considered to be fundamental (County of Los Angeles ND; Government of Saskatchewan ND; Office of Personnel Management 2011), especially for senior executives; a category that is recognized as critical in public service (Mukherjee 2004). Hence, it seems logical to try and understand the processes of recruitment, onboarding and retention as part of a larger organizational focus, which includes organizational goals and a leadership approach.



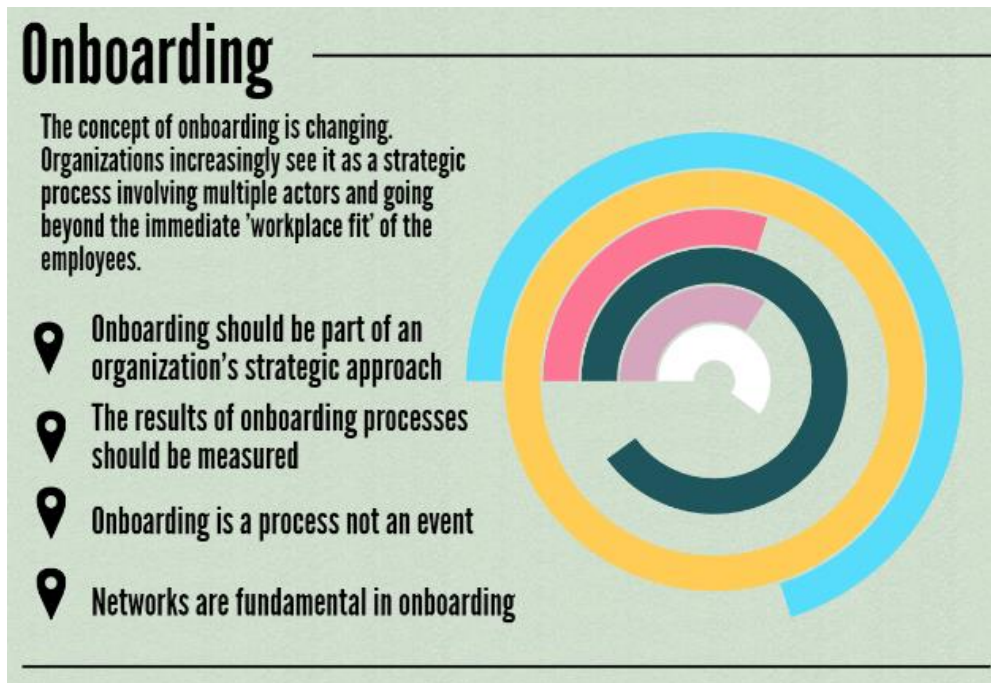
While various definitions exist for executive onboarding, we believe that those focusing on a more strategic approach better reflect the current reality. Among the organizations that take this approach are the US Office of Personnel Management (2012: 25), which defines executive onboarding as “the acquiring, accommodating, assimilating and accelerating of new leaders into the organizational culture and business” and Korn Ferry (2015), which positions it as a strategic process located between selection and development “on the talent management continuum.” When onboarding is seen through a strategic lens, which is generally not the case for orientation, it is often considered to be about establishing and ensuring the ‘fit’ of new executives within the organization, therefore establishing a difference between the two.

Onboarding	Orientation
Strategic with an impact on bottom-line results	Operational
Evolving and progressive	Traditional
An ongoing process	An event
Used for transferred and promoted employees, as well as new hires	Is most often limited to new employees
Delivers information that is unique and customized to the individual employee and is generally handed out on an as-needed basis	Delivers information that is common to all new hires usually within a classroom setting
Has a long-term focus, and can last up to a year or more	Is a short term program, typically lasting from one day to two weeks

Source: US Office of Personnel Management <https://www.opm.gov/wiki/training/New-Employee-Orientation.ashx>

The concept of onboarding therefore has undergone some significant readjustment recently in terms of new needs for organizations and in terms of changes in the workforce. More changes

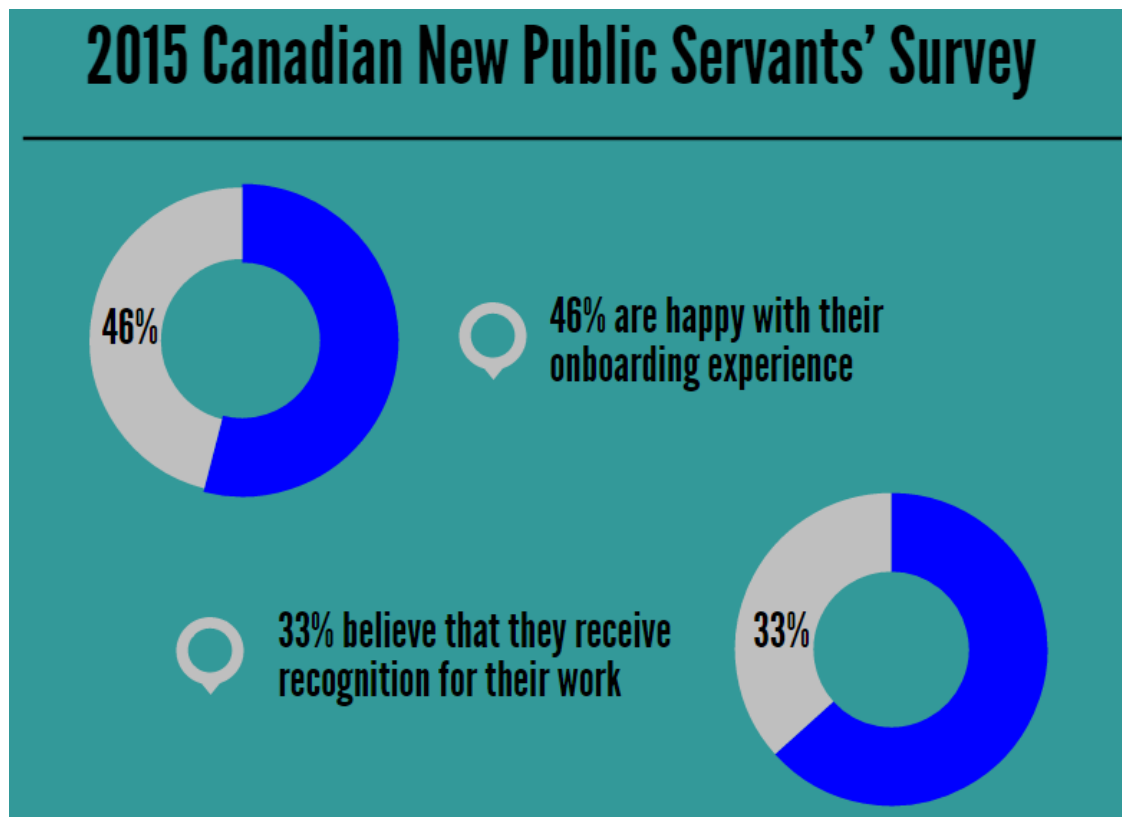
are likely as demographic shifts establish themselves in the near future, but four points can be highlighted as of now.





## New Public Servants and Onboarding Future Leaders

This report focuses on executive onboarding, but there are indications that onboarding in government is not well structured even for non-executives. In 2015, the Institute of Public Administration of Canada conducted a survey of Canadian New Public Servants, which are defined as persons who have been in government employment for less than 5 years. An analysis of over 4,600 answers from across the country found underwhelming responses for two key indicators of human resource management.



While the majority of the group that was surveyed is currently not part of the executive cadre, there should be an effort made to recruit from within the future leadership of the public service. These numbers appear to indicate that these efforts are not yielding adequate results. While often perceived as stable, public service is often unable to compete with the private sector in terms of top salaries, flexibility and innovation. New public servants are attracted to government because of deep-seated preferences in terms of making a difference in the world around them. If

they find their first contact with it slow, unresponsive, conventional and unduly complex, it is likely to leave a lasting negative impression.

## Organizational and Culture Fit

A critical task for onboarding is to build a connection between individuals and the new organizational culture in which they are introduced. Organizational cultures can be organized on the bases of whether they are internally or externally focused and of how they approach the stability/change continuum.

### *The Competing Values Framework*

	Stability / Control	Change / Flexibility
Internal focus / Integration	<i>Hierarchy</i> (A structured and formal workplace where leaders are coordinators)	<i>Clan</i> (A friendly workplace where leaders act like father figures)
External focus / Differentiation	<i>Market</i> (A competitive workplace with tough and demanding leaders)	<i>Adhocracy</i> (A dynamic workplace with leaders that stimulate innovation)

Source: Cameron and Quinn 2011.

Public services often have rather different organizational cultures from private companies or NGOs (Schraeder et al 2005; O’Riordan 2015), and this can cause new hires to feel like ‘fish out of water.’

DeSeve’s (2009) survey of members of the American Presidential Appointments with Senate Confirmation group yielded six observations about fit with their new position:

- Knowledge of ethics standards and financial disclosure rules is needed to be rapidly effective;
- Performance and results matter;
- Policy development and implementation depend on understanding processes (which included political acuity elements and technical understanding of the mechanics of government);
- Managing relationships matters;
- Leadership is the key competency;

→ The support of career executives is critical.

If onboarding is about organizational culture fit, a key element of ensuring that fit is the involvement of individuals from within the onboarding organizations who will be able to support the new hire. This includes both peers and senior executives but it is likely to be a broader set.

# Executive Onboarding Goals and Desired Outcomes

The most commonly quoted ultimate outcome of an executive onboarding process is the capacity of new executives to reach their full performance as soon as possible. Supporting this are a series of intermediate outcomes among which are providing support and direction to the new executives, helping them to create a network within which they can embed themselves, providing appropriate knowledge and feedback about the organization, creating the conditions for executives to exercise and develop their leadership skills, help the new hires to fit within the new organization's culture, and so forth. In general, our research found that often intermediate outcomes would overlap, that multiple groups may be responsible for providing support to the new executive but that they may not be sufficiently integrated to provide a comprehensive, strategic overview, and that onboarding efforts may – at times – fall short of what was needed.

As will become clearer in the next sections, while most jurisdictions and many organizations have begun in earnest to consider onboarding in general and executive onboarding in particular as a critical portion of their organizational strategy, the actual strategic and organization-wide implementation of executive onboarding processes is far from being broadly actualized. There are various variables that explain this situation. On the one hand, and perhaps more at a general level, not all onboardings are the same. For example, a minority of senior executives are selected to act as change agents. However, sometimes the rest of the organization is not prepared for the shift, therefore limiting the synergy that could be achieved by synchronizing the new executive with the organization's expectations.

Because of the complex and multi-level nature of executive onboarding with a variety of actors being involved, a shift towards the ideal model of onboarding will take time, resources and a willingness to change some long-standing approaches.

# A Brief Overview of International Executive Onboarding Efforts

In our analysis we have looked at a variety of OECD countries that are currently dealing with the issue of executive onboarding in the public sector. Across the various jurisdictions there is a clear sense that onboarding will be a key focus for the near future. The reasons that were noted throughout are familiar ones and include

- the broadening of the talent pool in government is seen as a necessary step in building a better public service (PPF 2016);
- the need to tackle upcoming leadership and human resource challenges (GoC 2016) and generally ‘hiring for the future’ (Wernick 2016; UK Civil Service 2015);
- the existence of challenges regarding the retention of external hires charged with implementing change (Wright 2015);
- the need to address current challenges of governance, leadership and independence from the political sphere (Willis 2016);
- the need to ensure “the timely fulfillment of developmental requirements, continuous monitoring of performance and conduct, and meaningful engagement of the executive and his/her supervisor” (OPM 2016: 8);
- the attempt to improve existing onboarding results (OPM 2012a);
- the need to distinguish between executive and non-executive onboarding processes (GoC 2016)
- the relatively high rate of senior executive rotation (Watermark Search International 2016);
- the objective differences within individual jurisdictions in terms of approaches, best practices and tools relating to onboarding (Partnership for Public Service and McKinsey and Co. 2016).

Most of the entries in this list can be found throughout our research as key reasons for the renewed interest in the recruitment, onboarding and retention focus. However, they combine in different way and with different ‘weights’ in different jurisdictions.

In some cases, as with the Government of Canada (GoC 2016) or the UK Civil Service, the goal is to design an onboarding approach for the organization in view of a general lack of good extant approaches. At the federal level in Canada there are clear trends about the turnover at the

Deputy Minister level (Ross 2016a) and questions are being raised about the quality of Assistant Deputy Ministers (Lahey and Goldenberg 2014). Other jurisdictions have already in place various approaches and tools and are looking to either diffuse their use to more layers of their organization or to build on what is in place.

In Canada the Federal Clerk of the Privy Council expressly mentioned it as a critical component of the 'hiring for the future' approach of the Canadian government (Wernick 2016). Background analysis and research into the process are being conducted across the country and they seem to generally be diverse and tailored to the specific needs of the administration that is undertaking them. For example, the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) links the executive onboarding process and competency model together and focuses on tailoring an appropriate learning model for the new executives. Different approaches are followed whether the onboarding is for internal or external hires for example. Increasingly, time constraints for executives led to replacing classroom-based learning with e-learning. The Government of Saskatchewan has a one-year onboarding plan for its new employees laid out online with both a manual for managers and resources for new employees but there is no specific module for executives. In Alberta the Executive Development and Succession (EDS), which was launched in November 2015, to develop an effective recruitment, onboarding and retention model embedding it in the behavioural competencies. In this Province, there is a layering of orientation, onboarding tools (like a Deputy Minister Handbook), mentorship, and professional development tools.

No matter what the level of development of these approaches, though, there always are margins for improvement. Recently the White House called for better onboarding processes across the federal public service. One of the triggers was a 2011 survey where only 56.6% of new senior executives answered that they were satisfied with their onboarding experience (OPM 2012a).

Data on the general turnover rates are also an important driver for onboarding. In Canadian jurisdictions turnover rates in the 1987 to 2007 period were around 30% of the senior executive cadre (Bourgault and Dunn 2014; Bierling et al 2014). A recent exit survey based on responses by 221 exiting American SES executives showed that only in 40% of cases there was a formal succession planning effort in place and only 53% of leaving executives were involved in formally preparing their successor (OPM 2015b: 7).

Since 2011, the SES shrank by 2.9% of its 2011 size in the 2015 Fiscal Year, with a very small reduction of career executives (-2.0%) in favor of a small increase in non-career personnel (+7.3%) (OPM 2015a: 3).

Appointment	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2013	FY 2014	FY 2015
Unspecified	96	10	4	8	6
Career (SES Permanent)	7,126	7,199	7,190	7,014	6,985
Non-Career (SES Permanent)	669	675	625	682	718
Limited Term (SES Non-Permanent)	126	117	93	96	81
Limited Emergency (SES Non-Permanent)	5	3	2	2	1
All	8,022	8,004	7,914	7,802	7,791
New Hires (SES Appointment)	388	277	300	358	385

Source: OPM 2015a: 3; 11

The United States SES experiences a significant yearly turnover averaging over 200 executives quitting every year since 2011 and around 600 retiring during the same period (OPM 2015a: 11). The most common reasons for the turnover are noted as

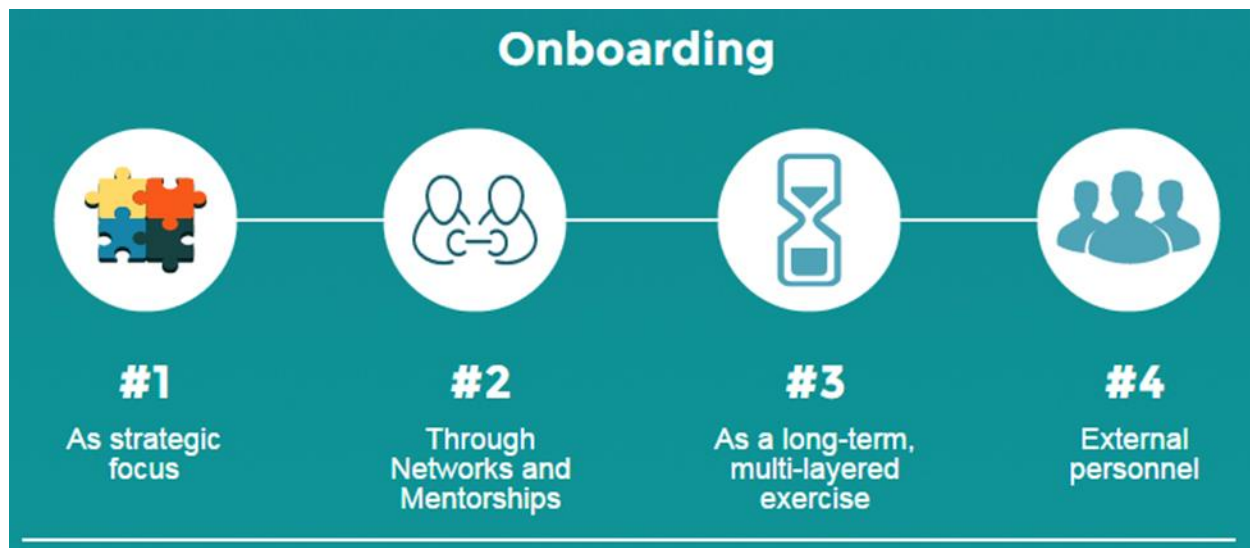
*the political environment (42%); senior leadership (38%); organizational culture (38%); and a desire to enjoy life without work commitments (38%). Executives also cited the following factors: lack of recognition for accomplishments (34%); stress on the job (30%); a more attractive job elsewhere (30%); insufficient pay (29%); lack of rewards (27%); and a lack of autonomy in decision-making (26%). Additionally, executives cited the following factors to somewhat lesser extent: relationship with the supervisor (24%); lack of opportunity for advancement (22%); performance evaluations (20%); and relocation (20%). (OPM 2015b: 9).*

Increasingly, the US Federal public administration has focused on developing a stronger, more flexible and more performance oriented senior executive (US Government 2015) even in the midst of increasing issues with the training and development of the SES (USMSPB 2015) and limits to the ability of providing increased financial incentives.

We found no clear indication that formal executive onboarding programs are in place as a matter of course in most of these public services. However, all of the jurisdictions we analyzed present a relatively standardized orientation/onboarding program online that new employees can take advantage of. What is evident is that onboarding at all levels will be an important focus for governments across the country.

# Four Key Onboarding Themes

From our analysis four key themes emerged in the approach to onboarding. Most organizations we analyzed and experts we interviewed, agreed that **onboarding should be seen as a strategic**



**focus.** Second, we found an increased reliance on and interest in **using networks and mentorships** to develop an embedded and successful onboarding approach. The third theme that we saw has been a recognition of the importance of understanding onboarding as **a long-term and multi-layered exercise** that should permeate the organizational approach to talent management. Finally, all jurisdictions noted that **the onboarding of personnel external to the public service was complex and prone to higher rates of failure** than internal promotions.

In this section we address each of these four themes in turn. It should be noted from the onset that while there is a fair convergence as far as the general themes are concerned, specific differences exist both among the various jurisdictions and within individual jurisdictions in the way in which different organizations tackle the same challenge. For example, the internal mechanics of political-administrative relations can deeply change the type of barriers that external personnel can face when first joining the organization.

The notion and scope of what is considered strategic focus are also likely to be different depending on the setting. Jurisdiction-wide approaches may seem like a logical outcome but how to arrive at them may be less of a foregone conclusion.

We should note that these four key themes are often discussed as overlapping and inherently synergic. Hence, in many cases the strategic focus matches the alignment of executive onboarding programs with key leadership competencies (GoC 2016), which in turn is often



connected to a behavioural understanding of these leadership competencies and supported, the active participation of senior leaders. It is also often the case that a need for transformation drives these areas of activity so that onboarding is brought into the discussion as part of a change approach.

## Onboarding as Strategic Focus

Our analysis shows that onboarding has taken on a strategic dimension. This is certainly reflected in the way in which internal and public reports are framed and in most of our interviews (GoC 2016; UK Civil Service 2014; OPM 2016). The difference among jurisdictions is found not so much in how important they think a strategic orientation is in this area, but rather in how much of a strategic orientation is actually in place at this point. Even the leading organizations in the sector like the US Office of Personnel Management note that they do not have in place a government-wide strategic approach to onboarding (UK Civil Service 2014; OPM 2015b: 7; Ross 2016c). Also note that often, when strategic reflections are part of the analysis, there is a tendency to find the onboarding process connected to notions like executive competencies and for onboarding to be aligned explicitly or tacitly with a vision for the public service.

The best example of this approach is probably the one embedded in the activity of the US Federal Office of Personnel Management (OPM). Here onboarding is seen as a critical tool in the development of the skills that are required of senior executives. The OPM (2016) suggests embedding senior executive onboarding directly into the organizational structure and philosophy by articulating the need for it in a business case and by securing support from top leadership. It also describes the onboarding program as a learning and development program. This means that it will likely bring together training, experiential learning, mentoring, coaching, 360° feedback, and performance feedback. Hence, in the vision of the OPM, the executive onboarding process can be used to help ensure “the timely fulfillment of developmental requirements, continuous monitoring of performance and conduct, and meaningful engagement of the executive and his/her supervisor” (OPM 2016: 8). The approach is therefore designed to fit both the needs of the organization and those of the senior executives being brought in.

If the US federal approach is a good example of strategic focus in action – even if it is not applied across the federal public service – other jurisdictions have more of an aspirational approach at this point. A good example is the Canadian federal public administration, which is working to develop an onboarding process.

In the latter context, the Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer recently drafted an analysis of onboarding best practices to create a strategically focused onboarding approach (GoC 2016). Two of the best practices highlighted are worthwhile noting in this context. The first calls for the establishment of program objectives that are tailored specifically to the executives including tracking their performance expectations and learning curves to enable executives to become successful in their new roles as soon as possible. The second aims at ensuring that the objectives of an executive onboarding program be aligned with key leadership competencies to define the behaviours expected of leaders in Canada’s Public Service. In particular, these include

the ability to collaborate with partners and stakeholders, create vision and strategy, mobilize people, and achieve results. The same office also noted that moving the federal public service towards a concrete onboarding strategy is a priority, given the lack of such a framework. Part of the approach will look at developing surveys of recently appointed executives to assess their experience with onboarding practices.

A similar approach, but at a more advanced level exists in the Canadian Province of Alberta. Here formal onboarding for the top three executive levels is embedded in the Executive Development and Succession (EDS) approach and is based on the Alberta Public Service executive competencies.

The focus on behavioural competencies becomes an important premise to thinking about onboarding as a 'strategic fit' exercise that is built around the networks and capacity of the organization. As part of talent assessment, the Corporate Human Resources unit in the Alberta government, defined key leadership capabilities and aligned them to behaviours in the Province's competency model. Furthermore, competencies are explicitly linked to the process of succession by using them to identify what employees need to succeed in both current and future roles within the APS.

## APS Competencies



The first group of executives that was exposed to this new approach were Assistant Deputy Ministers (ADMs). As a first step, all provincial ADMs completed a talent profile, which contained information on their recent work experience, their education, and specific experience in areas considered fundamental for success in an executive role. The results of the questionnaire were used as a basic analytical tool allowing the development of an initial assessment of the candidates. The second step in the onboarding exercise was to complete a competency self-assessment and then ADMs met with their Deputy Ministers and completed a talent assessment. The latter was subsequently reviewed by a smaller Deputy Ministers review committee chaired by Alberta's Public Service Commissioner and the Deputy Minister of Executive Council. The process' final outcomes were an assessment of an executive's willingness and readiness for advancement to a more complex role, and a professional development plan. ADM professional development plans were received in August 2016, and Alberta is currently applying the process to its Executive Manager 1 level staff – one step below Assistant Deputy Ministers.

A strategic focus is also present the UK Civil Service and it is clearly reflected in the implementation of important structural reforms<sup>1</sup> and in the appointment of executives that did not hail from the Civil Service, like CEO John Manzoni, have triggered an important series of changes, such as the new leadership strategy, the new Civil Service vision and the modernization strategy. Recent regulatory changes, such as publicly posting executive jobs and the proviso that Permanent Secretaries will need to have spent part of their career outside of the Civil Service, all hint at a strong desire to change the status quo. At the same time, the culture of the Civil Service, the power diffusion that exists within it and the importance of political support in securing that an initiative succeeds still weigh on the ultimate results (Ross 2016c).



The new vision for the Civil Service, called **A Brilliant Civil Service**, promises to reshape and improve the way in which business is done within the UK public administration. From more inclusivity, to transformational leaders and an outcome-based focus, this new vision is designed to bring a modern flare to the Civil Service.

A strategy to reshape the Civil Service's workforce (UK Civil Service 2015) flanks this vision. Rupert McNeil, the first Chief People Officer of the UK Civil Service talked about the four-point workforce strategy:

- **Permeability and Porosity**: making it much easier for people to come in and out of the Civil Service at different points of their career through a reform of how secondments are handled;
- **Strengthening career paths** within the Civil Service by enabling a higher degree of depth of experience;
- **Developing better leadership skills** especially through the new Leadership Academy;
- **Develop a more inclusive Civil Service** (Ross 2016b).

Of these four initiatives the most advanced remains the inclusivity one as in late 2016 political focus in the United Kingdoms has shifted towards the Brexit negotiations. However, the issue of

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<sup>1</sup> In 2014 the position of Head of the Home Civil Service was – for the first time – split. Traditionally this post folded three critical positions: Head of the Home Civil Service, the incumbent Cabinet Secretary, and the Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Office. The Civil Service has now broadly restructured its organizational chart. Aside from the appointment of a chief executive of the civil service (John Manzoni), in 2015 Rupert McNeil (another hire from the private sector) was appointed as Chief People Officer for the Civil Service.

a comprehensive reform of the British Civil Service still remains very much on the table. In late October 2016, Bernard Jenkin, the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC), called for comprehensive reforms to the public administration to address current challenges of governance, leadership and independence from the political sphere (Willis 2016).

While the role of onboarding is not often explicitly mention in the approach highlighted above, there is an obvious part it will have to play in terms of securing seamless transitions in what promises to be a much more open approach to hiring external talent.

## Onboarding through Networks and Mentorship

Often, discussion of onboarding tends to be supported by complementary research on the challenges faced by leaders joining new organizations. The Office of Personnel Management often quotes in its literature the results of a Corporate Leadership Council survey, identifying five reasons for new executives' failure:

- They fail to establish a cultural fit;
- They fail to build teamwork with staff and peers;
- They are unclear about the performance expected of them;
- They lack political savvy; and
- Their organizations do not have a strategic, formal process to assimilate executives into the organization (Moore 2008)

In these analyses the role of the 'social and human' side of organizations – teams, networks and mentors – is considered very important. More and more the onboarding of new executives and other employees is understood as an organic effort to establish durable links between the cultural and functional elements of an organization and the new employee. The most evident effect is the role that networks and mentors play in current approaches to onboarding. Both of these are considered key tools in developing the correct level of knowledge of both formal and informal organizational patterns, cultures and activities. Flanking these tools there is a strong suggestion that the senior leadership should be invested and committed to the onboarding process, effectively becoming the recognizable face of the program to provide necessary encouragement for new executives to successfully complete the onboarding program (GoC 2016: 4).

There are various ways in which an organization can focus on networks and mentorships for its onboarding effort. For example, the Alberta Public Service Executive Development and Succession approach stresses the practice of inserting the new executives in the existing

networks of the provincial government and this does reflect the new APS competency model and its focus on relationships and the integration of these competencies in a broader discourse about 'fit' and strategic direction.

Peer advisors are one way in which the onboarding process can be developed and sustained (County of Los Angeles ND). Executives will need to receive support in a variety of activities, which include being introduced to the nuances of the organization so they can begin early to make correct strategic decisions, they need support in building relationships with key stakeholders, often through the use of a mentor, and finally they need clear performance goals (County of Los Angeles ND: 15).

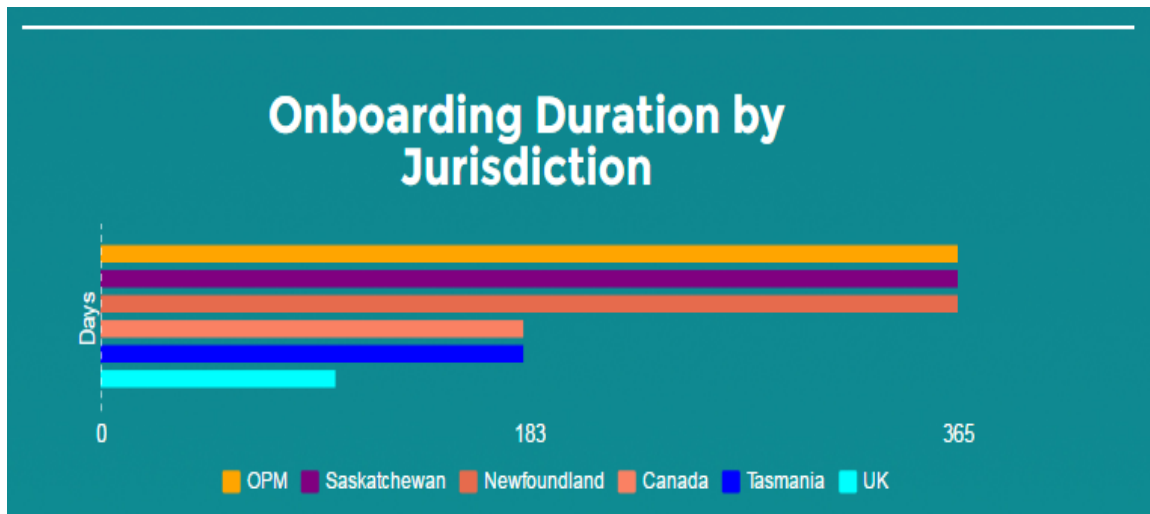
In the UK Civil Service, while there is not a common approach to onboarding for senior executives, we find excellent coaching and mentoring models such as a women executive network, networks based on diversity and high potential junior executive programs at the departmental level. Mentorship relations were also suggested for external senior hires; these mentors would be chosen among personnel who successfully transitioned into the Civil Service from the outside (UK Civil Service 2014: 19). In response to this report increased efforts to build strong 'alumni network' for the Civil Service have been pledged.

This presence of non-official but effective networks appears in line with a variety of other examples in public services across the globe. It is often the case that while these groups are not expressly tasked with onboarding they serve very important socialization and induction roles in an organization. This is the case, for example, with the Quebec's Circle of Young Leaders in Public Administration, a 20 months program that was designed to both prepare high potential public servants for leadership positions and embed them in a mentorship relation with seasoned leaders. The program has the expressed goal of using mentorship to both develop leadership skills and to transfer knowledge about the way in which the public service operates (Rinfret and Vandal 2015).

## Onboarding as a Long-Term, Multilayered Process

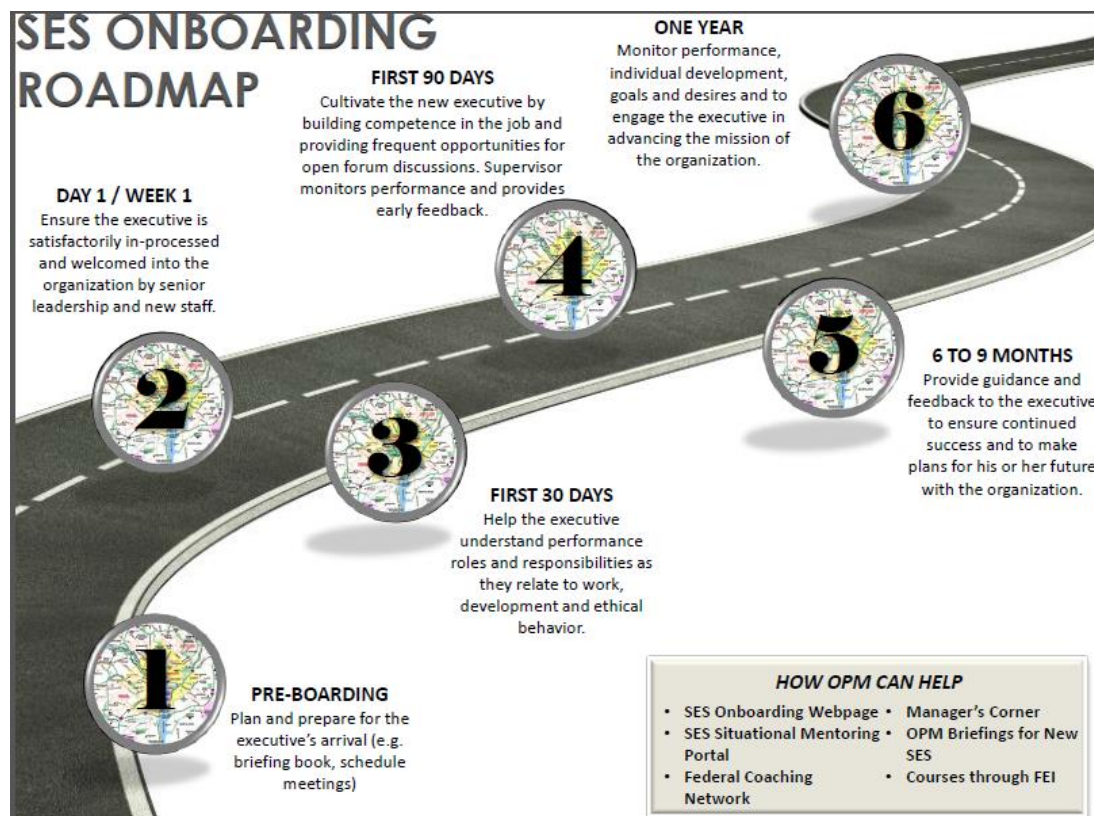
A third theme that has emerged from our analysis has been the notion of onboarding as a long-term process that involves the participation and input of a variety of different actors and stakeholders. This approach is shared by all jurisdictions at least in the theoretical framing of onboarding. Different jurisdictions have different approaches in terms of how long the onboarding process should be and we should note that the bulk of the activity occurs in the first three months of the process in all models.





On the one hand we have the process designed by the US Office of Personnel Management with a roadmap for senior executive onboarding that delineates a one year process. While the early stages of the process do include a classic orientation, the onboarding map almost immediately provides for the strategic embedding and development of the executives.

Executive onboarding for the OPM needs to be embedded within the organization. When this 'full implementation' is achieved, the focus shifts to maintaining and improving the program using very high quality monitoring, evaluation and purposeful improvement.



Source: OPM

This program began in 2011 as the OPM implemented a pilot project in eight US Federal agencies for the onboarding of all Senior Executive Service personnel, whether they came from within the Federal public service or not. In 2012, onboarding was embedded in the executive development best practices manual (OPM 2012b). The OPM has a unique position in the US federal public service as it offers a suite of services from a ‘turnkey’ hiring process to advice to Federal organizations in the area of executive recruitment.

The Canadian Federal Chief Human Resources Officer considers part of an ideal executive onboarding program the creation of a strategic and clearly defined program that is at least six months long, since it is estimated that executives take up to six months to demonstrate productivity and become fully functional (GoC 2016: 4). At the federal level a formal onboarding process is currently being developed.

In the United Kingdom a focus on the first 100 days to embed both training and coaching especially to help external recruits transition into the civil service is being considered. Coaching would be performed both for the administrative and political sides involving current and former Permanent Secretaries, and Ministers (UK Civil Service 2014: 19). Also, there have been discussions about revamping the existing two and a half day UK Senior Civil Service Base Camp induction process. The current Base Camp provides an undifferentiated onboarding/orientation process for all new entrants (Public Administration Select Committee 2010: 20) and a differentiated and more sophisticated approach is being considered. The concept of “official launch pad areas” was also floated. These would not be central function areas, which tend to be very high pressure, but safer spaces where new senior hires are enabled to transition into the Civil Service’s organizational culture and practices more effectively (UK Civil Service 2014: 19). The UK Civil Service has also taken a variety of steps in response to the Baxendale Report (UK Civil Service 2014) including the introduction of exit interviews with all Senior Civil Service personnel who leave the service and have embedded a report by HR Directors on the feedback that is gained through these interviews. Alongside this is also the focus on improving the information and data that are available about hires.

## Onboarding External Appointees

In public service, external appointments take place both at the political and administrative levels. A good example of the former is with the Government of All Talents project launched in the United Kingdom by Prime Minister Gordon Brown and which met with mixed success (Yong and Hazell 2011). Here we focus on the onboarding of administrative personnel. Across jurisdictions, different approaches to the appointment of senior public servants into the public administration are followed.



*Appointment of Senior Public Servants*

<i>Jurisdiction</i>	<i>DM Equivalent</i>	<i>ADM Equivalent</i>
<i>United States</i>	Political	Political
<i>Sweden</i>	Political	Political
<i>France</i>	Political	Hybrid
<i>European Commission</i>	Hybrid	Hybrid
<i>Canada</i>	Hybrid	Hybrid
<i>Australia</i>	Hybrid	Administrative
<i>Ireland</i>	Hybrid	Administrative
<i>New Zealand</i>	Administrative	Administrative
<i>United Kingdom</i>	Administrative	Administrative
<i>Netherlands</i>	Administrative	Administrative

Source: DeBuitelir 2014:10

Our research highlights two sets of challenges in this area: the lack of fit between government and non-government organizational cultures, and getting up to speed with the process and tempos of government organizations. In both cases, these can be seen as ‘fit’ issues and, therefore, should be addressed through the onboarding process especially for senior executive. For example, during our interviews with Canadian Federal officials we were told that it is rarely the case that external hires are given the time to embed themselves properly in the culture and pace of the administration. In the United Kingdom’s Civil Service, onboarding and retention of external hires tasked with implementing change is particularly problematic (Wright 2015).

The choice of hiring external executives is often made to increase the pace of change or to inject novel ideas in the organization. These are excellent reasons but, unless they are backed by a good onboarding process, new executives are likely to fail at a higher rate than internal candidates. The hiring organization and the new hire must develop a high level of understanding of three key elements:

- Unique aspects of the organizational culture;
- Dynamics of the teams the executive is entering (whether as a leader or colleague);
- Personality, knowledge and leadership skills of the incoming executive (Wolinski 2010).

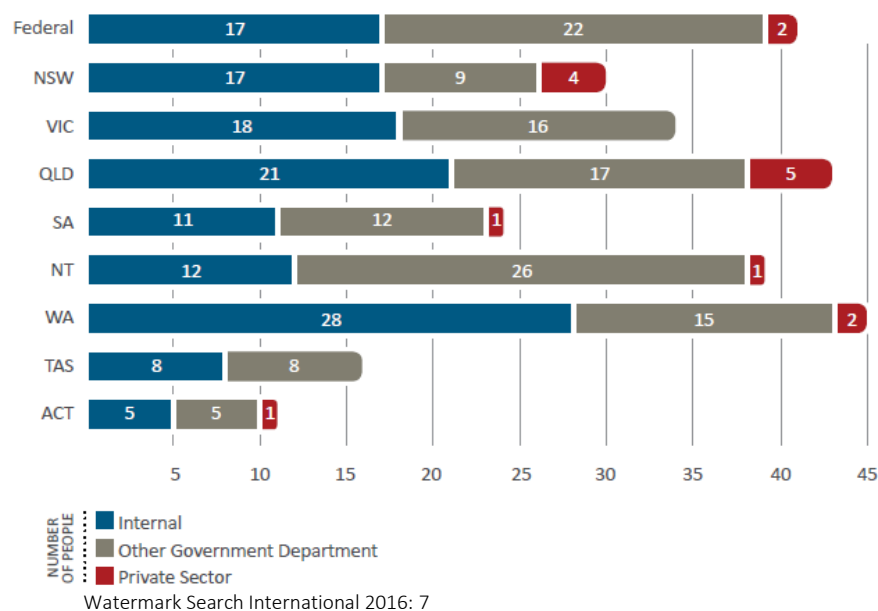
In 2009, the Office of Personnel Management, the Partnership for Public Service, and the Senior Executives Association organized a panel on executive onboarding during which the following recommendations were heard:

- Continuous engagement is important for new executives to learn their new agencies;

- Agencies should give senior executives "permission" to take time to ask questions and learn the organization;
- Agencies should help new executives obtain agency-wide perspective by supporting their participation in cross-agency events (Ndunguru 2012).

Another complexity stems from limited hard data about from which sector top executives are recruited into the public service. An exception is the data collected in Australian public administrations, where between 2014 and 2015 all jurisdictions have experienced **significant senior executive personnel turnover** with 283 new Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries appointed (Watermark Search International 2016). Queensland and Western Australia appointed 43 and 45 new senior executives.

*Source of Appointments (Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries)*



Among those appointed 48% were internal candidates, 46% came from other government departments and the private sector accounted for 6% with hires mostly in Finance and Treasury. Between the fiscal year 2012 and 2015, 68.8% of new hires for the United States' SES came from the same agency/same subcomponent pool, 20.2% from a different federal agency, 5.9% from outside the federal public service and 5.1% from the same agency but a different subcomponent (Partnership for Public Service and McKinsey and Co. 2016: 7). However, considerable variation exists in terms of agencies when considering how many new hires are external to the US Federal government.

Top		Bottom	
Department of the Air Force	20.0%	National Aeronautics and Space Administration	1.4%
Small Business Administration	18.5%	Department of Justice	1.0%
General Services Administration	14.3%	Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Office of Personnel Management, Social Security Administration, U.S. Agency for International Development	0.0%

Source: Partnership for Public Service and McKinsey and Co. 2016: 7

We should note that there are undeniable benefits – such as knowledge transfer, increased management capacity, opportunity to innovate, and so forth – involved in executives moving across positions during their career both within an organization and among different ones. However, there are issues related to how these career transitions can best be organized. Various approaches are in place. For example, we mentioned above that UK Permanent Secretaries will need to have spent part of their career outside of the Civil Service. In response to the Baxendale Report (UK Civil Service 2014), a pledge to maximise the mechanisms in place for internal and external secondments in the Civil Service has also been made. Historically, relatively few private sector executives have been brought into the UK Civil Service at the top administrative level. It is more common to onboard them at an earlier stage – often at the Director level – and then rely on their capacity to learn to successfully navigate the system and move up the hierarchy (Ross 2016c). Of particular interest for the leadership approach is the idea of external secondments. According to recent research from the global government forum 56% of interviewed senior executives in the UK Civil Service would like to explore the opportunity of secondment in the private sector (Ross 2016c).

The Interchange Canada program is designed to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and expertise between the Canadian federal public administration and other sectors. Assignments are temporary and include transfer of executives both in and out of the public service. This learning opportunity however has faced challenges in attracting external candidates into the federal administration and when it does often these external candidates belong to other public sector organizations.

The Canadian federal public service has recently been very active in this area and two recent changes are worth mentioning. The first is the recent tender notice with which the Privy Council Office advertised a contract to “establish and maintain on an ongoing basis an inventory of diverse, qualified and interested individuals from outside the federal public service for the Government of Canada to consider for the Deputy Minister cadre” [Tender reference number: PW-16-00735487]. The second is the reform of the Governor in Council appointment process that will be open, transparent and merit-based. This will include publicizing on government websites the positions, opening these posts to all Canadians to apply and focusing on diversity

and gender balance among other things. Both of these initiatives are likely to affect some changes in the federal public service as the Governor in Council appointments cover about 1,300 positions and the Deputy Minister cadre which, while much smaller, does have substantive relevance in the administrative process.

## Getting up to Speed with Government Processes and Political Acuity

A key element of onboarding senior executives from outside of the public sector is ensuring that the processes that make government work are appropriately explained to them and the new executives are helped to transition as seamlessly as possible (DeSeve 2009). In other words, some of the competencies senior executives will need to be successful in their new positions can only be developed by learning the tacit rules of the new organization and by becoming part of the existing networks and teams that increasingly are recognized as critical in successful organizations (Edmonson 2012).

In many of the reports and research documents highlighting senior executive onboarding and hiring in public services, a key challenge is developing a sufficient political acuity. In public services across the world there is a recognition that external candidates face nontrivial complexities in understanding government culture, adapting to the rhythm of the public administration and so forth. As most failures of onboarding relate to misalignment in organizational fit and expectations, this becomes an important task.

But how can political acuity be developed? A recent Canadian Government Executive (CGE 2016) article stresses five dimensions of political acuity:

- **Understanding formal structures and processes:** this is an awareness of what we could call the 'playing field' of government. Party platforms, formal power relations, and the way in which decisions are made must be understood;
- **Understanding informal processes:** individuals with highly developed political acuity understand and have mapped informal networks, can point out influencers and have a good understanding of how to use these parallel structures;
- **Environmental factors – climate and culture:** contextual behaviour and organizational culture often shape what is possible. They must be understood to function at a high level of efficiency;

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*Political Acuity is the ability to appreciate, understand and utilize the power of relationships, both formal and informal, with organizations one is working with or as it relates to the formal political structure of government(s).*  
*Guide to Competencies in the Ontario Public Service*

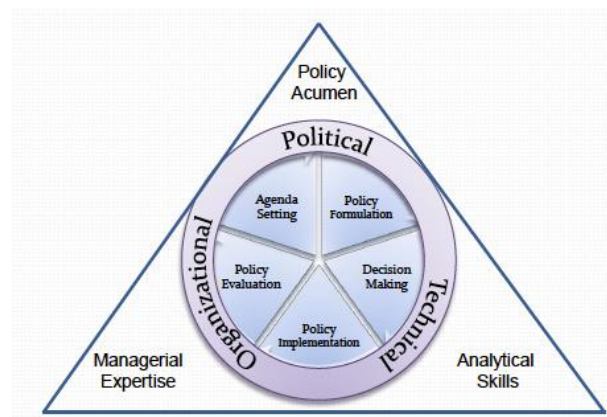
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- **Personalities and organizational politics:** individual personalities and agenda also affect the nature of an organization's activities. Political acuity enables actors to understand others and engage them strategically along those lines;
- **Political factors and underlying issues:** this facet refers to the ability of understanding underlying motivations and mechanics driving trends and choices.

The point is that political acuity is certainly an individual skill, but it needs to be developed as part of an organizational approach. This competency generally is about understanding the needs and positions of different stakeholders, involves making choices about political feasibility and having good communication skills (Wu et al 2010).

Policy acumen also supports two other policy competencies: the analytical skills and the managerial expertise. These competencies form the 'outer' layer of capacity for an executive. They are built and shaped by the capacity executives have developed in three policy perspectives, which cover the political, technical and organizational spheres. These are in turn are linked to policy functions like agenda setting and policy implementation.

*Policy Roles of Public Managers*



*Source: Wu et al. 2010.*

The political acumen of a government senior executive is critical. In the Canadian context the two key rules of public service activity are providing authentic advice and ensuring loyal implementation. They have a deep effect upon the extant system of accountabilities, differentiating it sharply from academia or the private sector. Usually a traditional onboarding process generally is designed to ensure the fit of the new executive within the organization. However, issues may be compounded by the fact that external hires, especially in the field of policy innovation and change management may be selected to 'disrupt' government processes and some of the practices that are easiest to disrupt are based on these rules. So, when the organization recruits a 'star executive' or a 'change maker' the underlining assumption is that it should be prepared to enable them to replicate the success obtained in other contexts. Within the scope of political acumen 'change maker' senior executives require a delicate touch when onboarded as the process is likely to involve much more than simply those individuals.

While there is no scientific analysis available regarding the challenges of imparting political acuity across public services some anecdotal evidence can be put forward.

- First of all we can say that **the lack of political acuity is a common issue across all public services** and that seems to be related to deep differences in organizational culture. However these differences are not homogenous across jurisdictions. For example, one common narrative in Canada is that executives coming from the private sector are overly

focused on the financial bottom line while long-time government employees are focused on the common good. However, in the UK a key narrative highlights the dispersed nature of power in the Civil Service decision-making process and the importance of political support. This process is at great odds with more executive decision-making patterns and undermines – albeit in different degrees – both appointees from the private sector and internal employees with a specialist formation, favoring generalists.

- **There is no clear and tested model to instil political acuity outside of a mentorship model.** Everyone we interviewed bemoaned the issue, noting that the only successful instances they could recall where political acuity was developed were based on mentorship. As a corollary we found that anecdotally this was more likely to happen for employees who are onboarded at junior levels.
- **It is often sink-or-swim for senior executives.** Notwithstanding the potentially high costs of senior executive failure much anecdotal evidence suggests that top executives lacking expertise in this skill are often left to fend for themselves.

# Conclusions

The process of onboarding varies across the globe but some key common concepts emerged in our study.

- **There is no dominant model of executive onboarding and none has an across-government approach:** the most common situation seen in our analysis is that each jurisdiction has some excellences but that no jurisdiction is very good at sharing them without a top-down political decision and none of the jurisdictions we looked at has a functioning across-government approach.
- **Onboarding is seen a strategic process:** this is a commonplace enough statement in the literature and when speaking to practitioners. Many jurisdictions are in a 'discovery phase' at this juncture where they need more and better information both from within their own jurisdictions and from others who are tackling the issues.
- **Onboarding as organizational fit:** this approach is directly linked to the concept of strategic alignment of human resources and organizational priorities.
- **Linking onboarding and executive competencies:** increasingly we see jurisdictions explicitly making a connection between executive competencies (which are generally behavioural competencies) and onboarding.
- **Onboarding is a long-term and multifaceted task impacting organizational and individual areas:** onboarding is part of suite of tools and approaches organizations can use to optimize their performance. "Onboarding is more than just a checklist – it's an opportunity to immerse employees in the company culture, while simultaneously equipping them with the right tools, the right context and the right connections to get started on the right foot" (Lahey 2016: 9). Therefore, onboarding should be connected to areas such as employee engagement and performance measurement.
- **Senior executives from outside the public service are often left to their own devices to figure out the tacit rules of public service culture:** this is a relatively common complaint from Human Resource professionals and subject matter specialists.
- **Increasingly networks and mentorship appear as critical steps in securing appropriate onboarding.** This shift is evident both in the private and government fields.

We have also noted some commonalities in areas that can be improved upon.

- For example, while they are generally seen as very effective tools in developing and onboarding new executives, **mentors are usually not very common in the public service** (OPM 2012a: 29).
- **There are very few cases where we find a well-established, common strategic onboarding plan,** even among the leading public services.
- Perhaps most importantly our research found that there are **very few if any quantitative analyses of senior executive onboarding.** Onboarding surveys of new executives tend to

either not exist or be perfunctory and we were unable to find good statistical data for a variety of demographic characteristics but tend to have less than good data on which jurisdiction the executives come from. In a very real sense most of what is being said today about the onboarding of senior government executives is based on anecdotal evidence, not robust science.



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