

Building a competitive civil service: key issues for the public sector

South Africa is in the midst of a deep political crisis. With allegations of state capture blending with a deepening erosion of accountability and slowing economic growth, the institutions of state and those that rely on them are under immense pressure. In moments like this, it is important to realise how utterly essential a functional civil service can be. Momentary political crises are commonplace across the world. One of the key ways that a country can ameliorate and prepare for such crises is the development of a robust civil service, which can prevent political instability from undoing the functioning of government. The civil service needs to play a difficult dual role: empowering politicians in enacting their agenda, while constraining that agenda when it becomes destructive.

Building a competitive public service capable of facing these challenging moments is a massive endeavour, and requires a commitment to continuous improvements, underpinned by ongoing discussions on how we can make things better. Maintaining that discussion is essential, and the list of possible interventions is extensive. As a starting point, consider four initial interventions.

First, is the development of a graduate recruitment programme for the civil services. Recruitment to the public service generally takes place in a highly decentralised way, with individual departments hiring on an ad hoc basis according to the needs of the moment. Such a disaggregated system is likely necessary to assure a level of flexibility in hiring decisions, but it undermines efforts to implement cross-cutting initiatives that can attract talented workers to the civil service. A graduate recruitment system would complement the current hiring model, while also building a system that allows for the targeting of talented graduates, and institutionalized a process of hiring the country's future civil servants. Similar systems are employed by virtually every leading private sector firm and certain SOEs and public sector agencies, and without a similar initiative the public service risks falling behind. Institutionalising graduate recruitment would also allow for more comprehensive training systems, including on fundamental pieces of legislation like the PFMA, and would allow greater flexibility in how young graduates are assigned, as young civil servants could be guided to specific permanent positions once they've gone through the graduate recruitment process.

Second, is the creation of a specialist stream within the public services. On the other end of a civil servant's career, is the issue of career progression, and what work you end up doing as you gain experience in the civil service. Currently, the route for progress is relatively linear. For those in government departments, it is focused on moving from positions like assistant director to director and so on. That differs for core functions like teachers or the police service, or for SOEs, but generally speaking a uniform rule applies: as you progress, you take on more and more managerial responsibilities. This has two impacts. First, it squeezes the space for progression. By having a narrow career path, there is extensive competition for more senior spots. And, by conflating seniority and management control, it means senior officials can quickly hit the 'political glass ceiling', after which political appointments control more senior positions, and the next step in their career is to leave government. Second, it means that technically specialised people get pushed out of their technical competency, and into more managerial roles, even if that means losing their technical knowledge at an operational levels.

Both problems could be alleviated by the introduction of a dual-stream in the public service, one that leads on the current path towards greater managerial responsibility, and another that leads on a technical path towards positions like specialist, senior specialist, and so on. Introducing a specialist stream would better equip the civil service to retain its scarcest skills, by keeping talented technicians in operations level work in which their skills can still be used. This would better capacitate managers, and allow for a more useful distribution of work between the two functions. In the long-term, better retention of technical skills could help improve effectiveness and avoid the costly current pattern in which crucial work is outsourced to consultants.

Third, is centralising training, research, and public outreach (among others). The work of the civil service needs to be foremost aimed at delivering high quality core services. That means targeting the actual work that impacts people on a day to day basis: filling potholes, providing quality healthcare, supporting firm upgrading, or whatever the core mandate of the unit in question may be. A range of supporting functions - such as the three mentioned above - are essential to achieving these core functions, but in practise have sat in a problematic position relative to the core work of government. On one end of the extreme, scarce resources and time can prevent this essential work from being completed. On the other end, supporting work can be overperformed, as it offers a relatively easy set of tasks in order to spend budget or meet KPIs. While numerous government departments try to centralise some of this work - through the use of central research divisions, for example - this rarely receives the commitment it deserves, resulting in a duplication of functions within each given division.

A more concerted effort to provide strong central service centres for these supporting functions is badly needed. Such a change has a history of working, notably with the centralisation of financial management within departments. Renewing focus on building dedicated capabilities in these other areas would allow for more specialised focus on essential support tasks, while freeing up operational departments to concentrate on the core functions that should be the focus of their work.

Fourth, is dealing with the politicisation of the civil service. This recommendation differs from the others in that it is far less concrete, and arguably far more difficult. Politics and the civil service are always deeply intertwined, and rightful so. The political head should assure the civil service is guided by the democratic will of the people, while the civil service assures the operational instruments needed to apply policy remain strong and capable. But the status quo in South Africa doesn't get this balance right. The increasing politicisation of senior positions risks destabilising the administrative core of the civil service, and undermining institution-building. Again, this is difficult to stop, and ideally change would come from the top, and be led by political parties. In the absence of this, some structural rules could be beneficial. One option would be to legally prevent those who have worked in the civil service from taking up political positions. For example, a recent Director-General would be prevented from taking up a Ministerial position for a set period. This may discourage politically-motivated individuals from seeking administrative positions, and thus deepen the divide between the two. But this policy, like others, is a messy and imperfect approach. In the short term, the only viable way forward is

constant ongoing attempts by people on the ground to combat political capture of the institutions of state, by whatever means may be best appropriate to the given scenario.

None of these are necessarily the answers the civil service is looking for, and all have challenges. A specialist stream in government may create clashing authority with the management stream, while a central recruitment point may slow the recruitment process and exacerbate vacancy rates. But debates on how the public service can be strengthened are essential. Given the current instability in government, action needs to be taken that makes for a more solid base upon which the civil service can function. Finding ways to make improvements now can assure government is ready for any future instability.