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Public servants want to make a difference

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New Zealand public servants are generally satisfied with their jobs and want to make a difference to society, although they have mixed feelings about their organisations. To understand this discrepancy between what they feel about their jobs and what they feel about their employers, this article – the second of two analysing the results of a survey of almost 16,000 PSA members in 2013– looks at respondents’ characteristics, attitudes and experiences in the workplace.

OLDER WOMEN PREDOMINANT IN SECTOR

The New Zealand public sector workforce is rapidly ageing and increasingly female. According to the survey¹, the average PSA member is a 48-year-old Pakeha woman, 10 years older than the average worker. What’s more, public servants’ average age is increasing by six months every year, according to the State Services Commission (SSC).²

The SSC estimates that 57 percent of all public servants are women³, a trend towards an increasingly female public sector workforce that dates from the early 1990s. Female membership of the PSA is even higher at 70 percent, a little more than women’s response rate to the survey.

A resounding 90 percent of respondents are committed to making a difference to society. It was beyond the survey’s scope to examine the reasons behind this desire to serve the public interest. However, it is consistent with the international literature on public service motivation: that public servants are particularly altruistic and concerned about others. PSA membership – the criteria for participation in the survey – may presuppose a belief in the collective good. The predominance of women may also be a factor. Victoria University professor Dr Hilde Coffé analysed men's and women's positions on policy issues in the 2011 New Zealand general election. Her research showed that ‘women assign a greater role to government than men do, in areas such as providing a job for

¹ Plimmer, G., Wilson, J., Bryson, J., Blumenfeld, S., Donnelly, N., & Ryan, B. (2013). *Workplace Dynamics in New Zealand Public Services*. Wellington: Industrial Relations Centre, Victoria University of Wellington. <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/som/clew/research/our-publications>

² Human Resource Capability Survey, SSC, 2012

³ SSC, 2012

everyone who wants one, decent living standards for old people and the unemployed, and free health care for everyone'.⁴

International studies come to similar conclusions. An American study, *Women Give 2012*, shows women of the 'baby boom' generation donate 89 percent more to charity than their male counterparts. 'Our previous research has found that women tend to be more altruistic than men and that their giving frequently is motivated by the desire to make a difference in peoples' lives,' Women's Philanthropy Institute director Debra Mesch says. 'Additionally, women's strong networks may keep them more connected to both the needs of others and to opportunities to give.'⁵

This is borne out by PSA members. The average survey respondent wants to contribute not just at work but also in her community where she's likely to volunteer in sport, health, social support, religious or trade union activities. There's also a fifty-fifty chance she's caring for children or other family members, making her closely attuned to others' needs.

GENDER INEQUALITY PERSISTS

The dominant proportion of women in the public sector has failed to produce equal pay and conditions. Most respondents have a tertiary qualification and earn more than the average wage. However, men's average pay band is \$60,000-\$70,000, \$10,000 higher than women's. This is in line with the 13.7 percent gender pay gap identified by the SSC.⁶

Part-time and casual work do not appear to account for the gap. Ninety percent of respondents work full-time and almost all are on permanent employment agreements. However, the survey may under-represent casual, fixed-term and contract workers whose potentially weaker workforce links may make them less likely to be PSA members and/or to respond to a survey of this kind.

Career breaks for raising children may contribute to the pay gap, as may women's choice of career paths that are less well-paid. Other possible reasons are that women receive fewer rewards for good performance (and fewer sanctions for poor performance), and must negotiate differently from men in asking for pay rises in order to overcome gender stereotypes.

Female public servants not only earn less than men, but have less flexible working arrangements: just over 70 percent 'strongly disagree' that their work hours are determined entirely by themselves, compared with just under 30 per cent of men. This is disappointing, given that women's need for flexibility is arguably greater than men's. They are more than twice as likely to be the main carers of children and other family members (68 percent versus 32 percent) a dual role that relies on the ability to successfully juggle work and home obligations.

Occupational differences between genders may be one explanation. More men work as technicians and trade workers, labourers and inspection or regulation workers. All these groups with exception of labourers, report significantly higher average scores on work flexibility compared to the

⁴ 'Gender and party choice at the 2011 New Zealand general election', Dr Hilda Coffé, *Political Science* magazine. Read more at: <http://phys.org/news/2013-06-zealand-women-buck-global-voting.html#jCp>

⁵ *Women Give 2012*, a report from the Women's Philanthropy Institute at the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, USA. <http://www.philanthropy.iupui.edu/news/article/boomer-women-give-more-to-charity-new-study-finds>

⁶ SSC, 2012

occupations in which women are more likely to be found - clerical, administrative and call centre workers, social, health and educational professionals, and community and personal service workers.

Those who report having flexibility in theory, say the main constraints are time pressures and workloads. Other limits include not wanting to burden work colleagues, systemic pressures from budget rounds and reports, financial restraints and anxiety about job security.

In spite of continuing inequality, some progress is being made across the board. Even when controlling for gender, the current survey found more choice around working schedules, a higher degree of variable working hours and more autonomy in determining working hours than the PSA women's survey of 2011.⁷

Future interest in flexible work arrangements is high. Only about a quarter of respondents want parental leave, a reflection of the ageing workforce. Conversely, strong interest in flexible start-finish times and a compressed working week may be driven partly by workers looking towards retirement. Nearly half the respondents also said they want time to care for dependants, work from home and discretionary leave.

WORKFORCE COMMITTED, HARDWORKING AND STABLE DESPITE WEAK ORGANISATIONS

As well as wanting to make a difference to society, respondents have a strong commitment to public services, their occupation or profession, work team and job. Their lowest level of commitment is to their organisations, though it is still high. Most people are proud to say who they work for but fewer feel 'emotionally attached' to their organisation. This may be a problem of semantics: it is possible to have a strong connection to your workplace without seeing it in emotional terms.

Most respondents like the kind of work they do and get a feeling of personal accomplishment. This is good news for the public sector. Because people spend so much time at work, job satisfaction is vital for personal well-being and organisational performance, affecting staff turnover, absenteeism and productivity.⁸

Fewer are satisfied with their particular job, suggesting wider factors like salary or work climate may have a negative impact. Nevertheless, almost all agree or strongly agree they do their best to get the job done, 'regardless of the difficulties'.

Older workforces are more stable. Most survey respondents have been with their current employer more than five years, and a third more than 11 years.⁹ Only 16 percent are actively looking for a new job with a different employer, about the same proportion who think they might lose their job in the next six months. Loyalty may be one reason for staying in the same job, fear of change another. Most respondents said, although they have developed or maintained transferable skills in their current jobs, it would not be easy to get a similar job and salary elsewhere.

While a stable workforce is useful for retaining skills and institutional knowledge, it also requires constant upskilling in an environment where 'the key to doing more with less lies in productivity,

⁷ Proctor-Thomson, S., Donnelly, N. and Plimmer G. (2011) *Constructing Workplace Democracy: Women's Voice in the New Zealand Public Services*. Wellington, Industrial Relations Centre and Victoria Management School, Victoria University of Wellington.

⁸ Eurofound, 2012

⁹ This mirrors SSC findings that the average length of service in the public sector is 9.2 years.

innovation, and increased agility to provide services', to quote the SSC's *Better Public Services* website.¹⁰ Raising public sector productivity is likely to emerging as an issue. The Productivity Commission has announced a review and, as seen in the preceding quote, productivity is embedded in the SSC's 'Better Public Services' programme¹¹. This revitalised interest in productivity also extends to the private sector with Productivity Commission reviews on transport, housing and the service sectors. Its recent review of regulatory management (which drew on the same survey discussed in this article) makes a strong and compelling case for better management of, and better cultures in, regulatory agencies. An excessive focus on avoiding risks to the agency (compared to risks to the community), weak internal feedback loops, discouragement of staff challenging poor practices, and poor organisational learning generally are some of the recognised problems facing regulatory organisations. They commonly apply to other public agencies too. The challenge will be for employees and their unions to share in discussions about raising productivity, and for the benefits and costs of productivity improvement to be shared.

JOB SATISFACTION AND WORKLOAD

Respondents are generally clear about the responsibilities and expectations of their jobs. Most find their work intellectually demanding, in spite of a substantial number of repetitive tasks, and have considerable control over the way they work. This is encouraging because unchallenging jobs with low autonomy are known to increase frustration and reduce motivation.¹²

On the other hand, unpaid work is reportedly widespread, a practice known to adversely affect workers' health and psychological wellbeing.¹³ Just over half the respondents say they work more than their contracted hours – six hours a week extra on average.¹⁴ Of these, only one worker in five is financially compensated and half cannot take time in lieu. This amounts to a staggering one million hours a year of overtime worked by respondents which is uncompensated in any way. Extrapolated across the public sector, this suggests a worrying reliance on unpaid labour as a way of dealing with the situation described on the *Better Public Services* website of 'increasing expectations for better public services in the context of prolonged financial constraints compounded by the global financial crisis'.¹⁵ Subjective reports of things like work hours are not always accurate – but the findings do indicate pressure points with workloads.

Given the high rate of overtime, it is not surprising that almost half the respondents say they have 'too much work for one person to do'. At the same time, about the same proportion agree their workload is 'fair'. These statements may not be contradictory. If everyone else is overworked too, you might reasonably conclude that your own excessive workload is comparatively 'fair', or it might be that work is unevenly distributed in organisations.

¹⁰ <http://www.ssc.govt.nz/better-public-services>

¹¹ New Zealand Productivity Commission (June, 2014). Regulatory Institutions and Practices.

¹² Eurofound, 2012

¹³ Robone, Jones and Rice, 2011

¹⁴ These findings closely match the PSA women's survey of 2011.

¹⁵ <http://www.ssc.govt.nz/better-public-services>

BULLYING ENDEMIC

The high rate of workplace bullying in the public sector is also of concern. Almost a third of respondents said they had experienced bullying in the previous six months, a figure which is generally consistent with other research¹⁶. One in four people also reported having been bullied 'now and then', twice as many as in other New Zealand research using the same method.¹⁷ Reported rates of discrimination were similar. Employment status (part-time, casual or permanent) and age topped the causes of discrimination, followed by ethnicity and gender.

Bullying behaviour can come from peers or subordinates, but commonly stems from managers, who often find victimisation effective in the short term to get things done. Other research has found bullying occurs where management is laissez-faire: managers do not have or uphold effective behaviours, and do not intervene to deal with injustice or unfairness.

Many organisations with a high rate of bullying have poor human resources practices and poor management, and are places where employees feel they have little voice. Bad managers do not know how to deal with complaints because bad management tolerates bad systems.

Our analysis has found that high-bullying organisations actually report higher motivation overall, but lower organisational performance. This finding, and the high rate of bullying generally in the public sector, suggest there is a lot of pressure and ineffective busyness without much really getting done.

International research indicates that women seem to be less protected by hierarchy than men from victimisation and bullying behaviour. Nevertheless, bullying is not gender-specific. The most high-profile case in a New Zealand government agency in recent times involved a female chief executive who manhandled and abused a junior staff member.¹⁸ Subsequent investigations found a culture of bullying within the organisation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the New Zealand public sector is dominated by an ageing, increasingly female workforce motivated by a desire to serve the public. Gender equality in pay and working conditions remains elusive, although some progress is being made. Public servants are generally satisfied with their work and want to do a good job. To this end, half contribute almost an extra day a week in unpaid labour. The high reported rates of bullying and discrimination are of concern, and probably relate to other reported findings from this survey (and others) that management practices and skills are low.

¹⁶ The 2010 State Services Commission Integrity and Conduct Survey found 38 percent of staff had witnessed abusive or intimidating behaviour toward other staff, improper use of the internet or email, or lying to other employees in the previous year.

¹⁷ O'Driscoll et al., 2011

¹⁸ Francis, 2011