



## **Advisory Service for Executives**

**Annual Report  
2006**



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## Introduction/Purpose

1. This is the third annual report of the **Advisory Service for Executives (ASE)**. This service is provided to all executives across the federal Public Service by the Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada (APEX). This report describes the ASE for the 2006 calendar year.
2. The purpose of this report is to provide a demographic profile of clients served, the issues and concerns they raised, and their reported satisfaction with the ASE.
3. Even though the ASE was established to address the needs of **individual** executive clients, the composite data can provide a unique perspective on the **collective** needs, issues, concerns, aspirations and frustrations of a large cross-section of the senior leadership cadre of the Public Service. An analysis of this data allows one to take the pulse of this group and to identify hotspots and trends and to recommend actions that would serve to improve the job satisfaction, well-being and productivity of the Executive community as a whole.

## Background

4. Repeatedly, over many national consultations, APEX consistently found that executives were concerned about their lack of access to independent advice and support on matters of concern to them. Specifically, they felt a need for an independent and confidential ear when they found themselves in difficult work-related situations such as defending a harassment complaint, managing an employee's performance, being re-assigned, encountering an ethical "grey zone" or dealing with relationship problems with their superiors or co-workers.
5. In June 2003, the Treasury Board Secretariat Advisory Committee (TBSAC) recognized this need and approved the creation of a service to be delivered by APEX and funded by deputy ministers (one FTE) for an initial five year period.
6. Available **free of charge to all executives** and EX equivalents in the broader Public Service, the Advisory Service **provides a discreet and confidential sounding board, a safe place to discuss sensitive issues and a single window for advice and referral to specialized services** targeted to the executive community. Because of the large number of clients who use this service, the ASE cannot provide **on-going** mentoring or coaching, interview simulations and preparation, nor does it dispense legal advice or represent executives in disputes with management. (See [www.apex.gc.ca](http://www.apex.gc.ca) for a one-pager used to describe the Advisory Service and the qualifications of the Senior Advisor).

7. In December 2003, APEX appointed Colette Nault as its first Senior Advisor. Upon her retirement in early 2006, Ed DiZazzo was selected to carry on this role.

## Resource Network

8. The Advisor, with the assistance of colleagues from the APEX Secretariat, has developed **a series of networks and partnerships** to ensure that EXs are able to receive the assistance they require from expert resources both inside and outside the Public Service. The ASE works closely with the Public Service Commission's Executive Counselling Service and similar private sector firms. The ASE has also partnered with a few select legal firms with expertise in public sector labour law. These firms have agreed to offer a discount to clients referred to them by APEX. In addition, the ASE has developed a roster of experienced executive coaches who have a current and intimate understanding of the Public Service environment.
9. As required, the Advisor may also refer clients to a growing secondary support network including psychologists, psychiatrists, addiction treatment facilities, career, financial and retirement planners, language schools as well as executive learning and developmental programs. He frequently relies on the expertise and knowledge of policy and subject matter specialists at the Canada Public Service Agency (formerly the Public Service Human Resources Management Agency), the Public Service Commission, the Canada School of Public Service and the Treasury Board Secretariat. On occasion (with client permission) contacts are made with the departmental Employee Assistance Program, the Executive Services unit, or those responsible for Informal Conflict Resolution, Values and Ethics or the Ombudsman.

## Data Collection/Privacy

10. APEX collects basic information on Advisory Service clients such as their name, contact information, level, organization, gender, language, etc. In accordance with the Association's **Privacy Policy** (see [www.apex.gc.ca](http://www.apex.gc.ca)), this information is stored in a secure database that can only be accessed by the Advisor. A temporary and confidential paper file is kept on every client containing a summary of discussions with the Advisor. These files are automatically destroyed nine months after resolution of the client's presenting concern, when a file remains inactive for nine months, or at any time upon client request. This information is summarized for the client in a reader-friendly document entitled "Confidentiality and the ASE—what you can expect" available at [www.apex.gc.ca](http://www.apex.gc.ca).

## Clients Served

11. APEX counts the number of individual clients in a given calendar year and not the number of sessions or activities carried out on behalf of the client.
12. When the Advisory Service was launched in 2004, **APEX projected demand at approximately 75 to 90 clients per year.** This was based on past demand for this type of advice from the Association, adjusted for the formalisation and promotion of the new Service.
13. **Actual demand vastly exceeded this projection in 2004 (196 clients) and again in 2005 (187 clients) and has continued unabated in 2006 with 199 clients---bringing the cumulative total number of clients served by year-end to 582.**
14. **The demographic profile of the clients served in 2006 closely parallels that of the entire executive community (as of March 31, 2006):**

Dimension	ASE Clients	EX Community
Anglophone:	72%	73%
Francophone:	28%	27%
Male:	55%	61%
Female:	45%	39%
NCR:	76%	72%
Regions:	20%	21%
Outside Canada:	3%	7%
EX-01:	55%	53%
EX-02:	20%	24%
EX-03:	14%	17%
EX-04/05:	6%	6%
Other (EX equiv):	5%	

15. Over the past three years the ASE has served clients from **85 different organizations.**
16. **The 2006 demographic profile does not vary significantly from the client profile of previous years, suggesting that the cumulative population accessing the Advisory Service since its inception is representative of the Executive population as a whole.**

## Client Satisfaction

17. APEX gathers feedback on client satisfaction both informally and formally. **The results presented here were gathered through a formal questionnaire** sent by the Executive Director (to preserve impartiality) to randomly selected clients served in 2006.
18. Dimensions rated on the questionnaire's 5 point scale (which ranged from **1: strongly agree** to **5: strongly disagree**) were:
  - timeliness,
  - relevancy and helpfulness of the advice,
  - accuracy and completeness of the information provided,
  - professionalism of the Advisor,
  - ability to make the client feel at ease,
  - listening skills of the Advisor and
  - appropriateness of the expert resources to whom the client was referred.

Additional open-ended questions sought to capture the extent to which the ASE was instrumental in resolving or improving the client's situation, reasons why clients would (or would not) recommend the ASE to colleagues, and what could be done to improve the Advisory Service.

**For 2006, both response rate and satisfaction level remain consistently high, mirroring ratings from previous years.** These positive evaluations are bolstered by the increasing number of new clients referred by former clients of the service. This attests to the **growing reputation and credibility of the ASE as an impartial, confidential "safe space" where executives can tell their story to a neutral third party, be heard, and obtain factual and practical information/advice as well as access to expert resources** when needed. (For feedback as well as testimonials from former clients, consult the APEX website).

## Reasons for Referral

19. The Advisor classifies the issues raised by clients under a range of broad headings. (It should be noted that one client may consult the Advisor on more than one issue in a particular year or that a single issue can overlap several headings). **The headings are Career Management, Relationship with a Superior, Reorganizations, Official Languages, Performance Management Program, Retirement, Harassment, "Dismissal", Health, Executive Terms and Conditions, and "Other".**

20. Most of the headings are self-explanatory but some require definition. **Harassment** covers only those situations where the executive is the respondent to a complaint. If a client feels harassed by his or her superior, the Advisor would classify this under “**Relationship with a Superior**”. If the harasser is a colleague or a subordinate, it would appear under “Other”. The broad category **Career Management** covers a wide range of issues, from seeking assistance with a CV to the need to find a new position because of conflicts in the workplace to requests for assistance in preparing for a competition. “**Dismissal**” includes cases where executives derailed, were dismissed for cause from the Public Service, or situations where EXs were removed from their positions against their will. The category **Other** covers a wide range of situations including issues relating to “problem employees”, ethical dilemmas, leadership challenges, staffing and classification issues, executive interchange difficulties, etc.

## Analysis and Recommendations

For 2006, the most frequent reasons for referral to the ASE were:

- 1) **Career Management**
- 2) **Relationship with a Superior**
- 3) **Reorganizations**
- 4) **Performance Management Program**
- 5) “**Dismissal**”
- 6) **Health**
- 7) **Harassment**

**NOTE:** Many of the observations and recommendations in the two previous annual reports of the APEX Advisory Service for Executives have not been addressed and remain even more relevant and pressing today. Where appropriate, they are repeated verbatim below.

- **Career Management**

21. In 2006, 31% of clients consulted the Advisor on career management issues, a **sharp increase** over previous years (23%).
22. This change can be attributed to a number of factors, including the job market heating up (due to an increased number of career opportunities caused by actual and impending departures), and the influx of new executives proactively taking steps to establish a career plan and seeking advice on how to navigate those sometimes confusing waters. In addition, a new series of outreach presentations made by the Senior Advisor to large groups of Executives (on topics such as job search strategies and tools as well as how to avoid career derailment) raised awareness of the ASE and generated follow-up clientele.

23. Many clients came to the ASE looking for advice on how to find another position. Even though it is recognized that career management is primarily the executive's responsibility, **it remains difficult for executives to locate information and assistance in identifying positions for which they might be qualified and to access the "hidden job market"**.
24. The ability to quickly find another position is highly dependent on personal contacts and networks. This may be effective for individuals in large departments as long as the executive wishes to remain in that department. However, such is not the case for those who wish to change departments or who are in small agencies, Crown Corporations or with separate employers who wish to join the core Public Service.
25. Once again, the Advisor has been surprised by the clients' **general lack of skills in this area**. This is especially true for new executives. Many of the EXs who met with the Advisor had poor CVs, were relying exclusively on Publiservice to find out about vacancies and had little strategic job search experience.
26. The Advisor provided information on how positions are filled in the Public Service, on the resources that are available from Executive Counselling at the Public Service Commission and from the private sector, gave general advice on writing a good CV, on building and using one's network and on how to manage references.
27. Over the years, APEX has consistently raised the **need for a centralized service dedicated to assisting executives in seeking positions in the Public Service**.
28. Executives represent a major investment for the Public Service of Canada, yet they have been poorly managed as a community. In 2004, APEX produced a report called *The Montebello Consensus* outlining a series of actions to be taken to improve the management of the EX cadre; it is available at [www.apex.gc.ca](http://www.apex.gc.ca). Many of its recommendations continue to be appropriate and, therefore, the Association continues to recommend that:
  - **individual deputies spend more time getting to know their executives - their skill sets, their career aspirations;**
  - **departments put in place mechanisms to inform their executives of current and future opportunities within their organisations, thereby enabling EXs to better manage their careers;**
  - **collectively, deputies devise ways to share information about their executives and the needs of their departments for executive talent, and that the central agencies create tools and processes to facilitate this talent and opportunity exchange.**

**NOTE:** A number of significant initiatives are being planned or are already underway at the Canada Public Service Agency to remedy some of these concerns. APEX has consulted on and commits to assisting the implementation of these endeavours.

- **Relationship with a Superior**

29. Thirty executives (15%) accessed the ASE on matters related to their relationship with a superior. This percentage is virtually identical to previous years. These clients most often spoke **about being treated with disrespect, humiliated in front of others and generally bullied by superiors who lacked basic people skills.**
30. As in the past, the current Advisor helped clients to examine their situation objectively and explore various response options and action plans. **In many cases, a lack of communication seemed to be the biggest obstacle to a good working relationship.** The Advisor explained that it was as much the client's responsibility as the supervisor's to attempt to open up the lines of communication and at least understand the situation from the others' perspective. In other cases, where there were obvious and intractable personality conflicts or cases of "bad fit"; the Advisor then suggested that clients begin to look for another position or weigh other options.
31. This is an issue that APEX takes very seriously because **its members are on both sides of the coin. They are both the "bullies" and the "bullied".** Clearly there is no place for this type of disrespectful behaviour in the workplace. Not only is it deeply offensive and abusive, it is counterproductive. It leads to high stress, reduced performance and eventually prolonged sick leave. In addition, in an era when the Clerk is placing external recruitment at the top of the Public Service Renewal agenda, even admittedly isolated incidents of this sort telegraph a negative message to potential recruits. This is why the Association has reminded executives, in various fora, that they hold the key to resolving these situations. APEX believes that **every executive must take responsibility for resolving this issue. EXs have a duty to develop their skills in managing people and communications** in order to avoid these situations to the greatest extent possible. Moreover, **those in authority must place a high value on people management and take swift, concrete corrective action when they are made aware of situations of abuse.**
32. APEX has long advocated the inclusion of people skills in the assessment of the performance of executives. While the Association recognizes that the CPSA has included these skills as part of the Performance Management Program (PMP), we believe that this is not enough. This is why **APEX maintains that, in order to give greater weight to how results are achieved, "people management" should be assessed independently and a portion of at-risk pay dedicated specifically to it (as is currently being done at the Canada Revenue Agency).**

- **Reorganizations**

33. In 2006, 13% of total clients consulted the ASE regarding this issue. This is roughly the same as previous years (14%).
34. In some cases, clients told the Advisor that they believed that the **reorganization was merely an excuse to remove them from their positions**. In many cases, they felt that they were being **targeted because of their age** and many chose to leave as a consequence, though they felt they could not make a graceful exit.
35. Executives consulted the Advisor for information about their rights and the recourse mechanisms available to them. They often felt powerless and **lacked basic information about their rights and options in cases where their position was affected by reorganization**.
36. In these cases, the Advisor provided emotional support and assistance as well as information about the Executive Employment Transition Policy (EETP) and referred clients for expert assistance (psychological, financial and legal).
37. In this period of constant change and reorganizations, **APEX recommends that deputy ministers and heads of agencies:**
  - **introduce more transparency in the decision-making process and communicate all decisions promptly;**
  - **put in place the mechanisms required to allow their affected executives to understand their options and leave the Public Service with dignity, should they choose to do so, or to actively help them land suitable employment elsewhere.**

**It is gratifying to note that a number of departments do use the full range of flexibilities embedded in the EETP to negotiate a fair and reasonable resolution for executives caught in the turmoil caused by organizational changes.**

- **Performance Management Program (PMP)**

38. In 2006, the 4th most frequent issue brought to the ASE involved issues related to the annual performance appraisal process. 12% of clients (down from 15% last year) had concerns in this area, suggesting a slight improvement in this category.

39. The Advisor obviously cannot judge whether or not an individual received an appropriate rating – only the supervisor can do that. However, the ongoing concerns in this area provide a glimpse of how the program is being implemented across departments and allows comment on observable shortcomings in either process or values.
40. As in the past, clients with PMP concerns told the Advisor that **they had received no advance notice that their performance was lacking**. Indeed most had not had a single meeting with their supervisor to discuss performance over the course of the year (despite provisions in the PMP to do so). In addition, there often was no remedial action plan proposed or requested by the supervisor to help the executive redress/improve his or her performance. In some cases when the executive proposed such a plan, financial support was denied. **It is clear that many of the shortcomings and inconsistencies in the PMP brought to the attention of the Advisor do not necessarily come from shortcomings in the program itself but rather from the lack of understanding of, or the failure to properly implement, some of the provisions of the program.**
41. Clients were advised on how to properly respond to a poor appraisal, which included an honest assessment of whether the appraisal actually was accurate and how they might remedy the shortcomings identified. Referrals to performance coaches were made and advice on designing learning plans and accessing appropriate training or developmental programs was offered. **In a few cases, after exhausting internal grievance options, the Advisor recommended that the client consult with a lawyer. In most of those cases, clients were successful in obtaining a fairer rating and commensurate performance pay.**
42. APEX has long advocated a more rigorous application of the PMP, due process and a transparent and fair approach devoid of departmental quotas. Performance must be judged against clear, pre-defined and well-communicated personal and corporate objectives. In addition to the recommendation in section 32 above (regarding separate pay at risk specifically linked to how one manages people), **APEX continues to recommend that:**
- **Mid-year performance reviews should be mandatory;**
  - **In all cases where executives are rated as not having met their commitments, remedial plans be developed and supervisors held accountable for their implementation;**
  - **Executives who have been given the means and opportunity to improve their performance and still do not meet their ongoing commitments in two consecutive years should be reassigned, demoted or, as a last resort, be released from the Public Service.**

43. **APEX further recommends that training be provided to all supervisors to set and monitor performance objectives, to assist them in providing clear and meaningful feedback on performance and to develop and implement remedial plans.**
44. **In 2006, APEX conducted an extensive survey of the PMP. Survey findings are available at [www.apex.gc.ca](http://www.apex.gc.ca) and the Human Resources Management Committee of APEX has been re-established to further analyze the survey findings and propose recommendations for further action.**
  - **“Dismissal”**
45. This year, 18 executives (9% of all clients) fell into this category, down from a peak of 12% last year.
46. **In most cases, executives were abruptly told that they were being removed from their positions with no prior warning.** Many did not pick up the subtle (and not so subtle) hints that they only recognized in retrospect. In some cases they were seen as no longer being the “right fit” for the department’s new directions or new regime, in others they were told that they had lost the confidence of senior management and in a few cases for no apparent reason other than a desire for “new blood” or as a result of having incurred the displeasure of senior management.
47. Many executives appeared to be **left to fend for themselves**, receiving little or no assistance from their departments. The Advisor provided this assistance and helped them to work through emotional and practical issues related to forced job change. While a lack of respect and fair play can trigger and sustain a litigious, adversarial response, negotiated “win-win” solutions can often avert this. The Advisor was often instrumental in proposing a settlement that was satisfactory to both sides.
48. APEX recognizes that there are cases where executives must be shuffled. When this occurs, they **must be treated fairly and with dignity**. They should receive job search assistance as well as an opportunity for emotional counselling. Above all, they must be allowed some say in how their situation is communicated to staff, clients and partners.
49. It was satisfying to see a couple of departments stand out as positive role models in the generous way they attempted to mitigate the inevitable distress and dislocation experienced by their executives, but this exemplary practice was unfortunately not commonplace.
50. **APEX therefore recommends that deputy ministers and heads of agencies recognize the trauma associated with situations where executives must vacate their positions and provide all available assistance to their EXs over the course of their transition to a new position.**

- **Health**

51. This category comprised 8% of all clients, and included client support and subsequent referral to professionals in the community dealing with mental and physical health issues such as depression, substance abuse/addictions, stress, burnout, workplace reintegration following extended disability/sick leave and issues related to significant work life imbalance.
52. Previously embedded in the “Other” category, this year this reason for referral was extracted in order to more precisely gauge the extent of this problem in anticipation of the APEX Executive Health and Well-Being survey which will be launched in 2007. As a follow-up to the landmark 1997 and 2002 studies, this new study will generate a number of fact-based recommendations to enhance the health and well-being of the executive workforce.

- **Harassment**

53. Over the course of the year, the ASE assisted 14 executives (7%) formally accused of harassment by their subordinates. (These figures do not include instances where the Executive claimed to be harassed by a superior, colleague or subordinate, which makes this category more significant than it appears. The PS Employee survey documents the prevalence of harassment throughout the ranks). While APEX recognizes that it only hears one side of the story, it has nonetheless become apparent that **the Harassment Policy, as it is currently worded and applied, is not appearing to have the intended results for individuals and the system as a whole.**
54. **Executives have repeatedly told the Advisor that, once an accusation is brought against them, they feel abandoned by their organizations, left alone and unsupported.** This is having serious impacts on their health and productivity.
55. In many cases, the investigations revealed that most if not all allegations were unfounded. Nonetheless, executives were prevented from managing problem employees as a result of the accusations brought against them. Some believed that **complaints are being filed strategically as a way of deflecting managers from addressing performance or disciplinary issues in the workplace.**
56. In harassment cases, the Advisor gave information on the process and on the respondent’s rights and obligations, validated whether or not the organization was applying the policy correctly and advised what to do if this was not the case. The Advisor has often found that informal resolution is frequently the least contentious and most fruitful first avenue to pursue. While in the past the Advisor referred clients to a network of volunteers willing to assist unrepresented employees in cases of harassment, this network has virtually disappeared. **As an unfortunate result, many of these referrals have been redirected to lawyers with a specialty in labour law.**

57. APEX is committed to a harassment-free workplace and is in no way condoning inappropriate behaviour. But the Association is convinced that **complaints are not being screened adequately, that the principles of natural justice are often not applied and that there is not enough support for the accused (who should be presumed innocent until proven guilty).**
58. Harassment is an area where there are no easy solutions. As it has done in the previous two reports, **APEX continues to recommend that:**
- **deputies take measures to ensure that their HR staff are better trained to deal with harassment complaints and that due process is followed;**
  - **the CPSA finalize the current review of the existing policy and its application, and implement the necessary changes as quickly as possible;**
  - **the network of advisors to assist unrepresented employees be reactivated, supported and maintained;**
  - **beyond the limitation of the current Indemnification policy, deputies exercise their discretion to authorize the reimbursement of legal fees for executives accused of harassment, especially in cases where the complainant is supported and represented by a union. This is simply a matter of levelling the playing field.**

**NOTE:** CPSA has actively consulted stakeholders (including APEX) on this issue and the Association looks forward to pending changes to the harassment policy and the laudable efforts underway to re-establish and revitalize the volunteer support network.

## **Conclusion**

59. **The third year of operation of the Advisory Service for Executives has once again been busy and successful and transition to a new Advisor was carried out seamlessly.** It has proven itself as a credible and accessible resource to executives in distress or in need of information and advice. While it is commendable that such a service exists, conversely, it is **dispiriting that so many executives are in need of such a service and that the same issues reappear year after year. The numbers make it clear that the ASE provides a valued service that is not duplicated elsewhere.**

60. The Association hopes that this report will trigger action to resolve some of the issues identified. It is pointless to repeatedly keep “pulling bodies out of the river” without someone going upstream to see who or what is causing them to end up there in the first place!
61. Taken as a whole, the data in this report spotlights areas in our human resources management practices, our overall work environment and our corporate culture that require attention. **In an era of unprecedented competition for top talent, the manner in which we are treating and supporting the leadership talent already in our ranks is the best signal to prospective employees of how they can expect to be treated if and when they join the senior ranks of the Public Service.**
62. A special report at the end of 2007 will provide **a multi-year trend analysis** capturing the cumulative findings of four years of ASE operation and the issues raised by almost 800 Executives.
63. Finally, on behalf of the executive cadre, APEX would like to thank all of the deputy ministers who are financially supporting the ASE and contributing so palpably to improving the quality of work life and well being of their executives.