



Report on the
2005 Annual Consultations

of the

*Association of Professional Executives
of the Public Service of Canada*

December 2005

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INTRODUCTION

APEX's national consultations are an essential element of its annual cycle of activities. These consultations have two basic components. First, the Association's Board of Directors seeks executives' views on the proposed orientation and content of its next action plan as well as on policy positions being developed by the Association. In addition, the Board moderates discussion on central agency policies and programs that will be of particular concern or interest to executives in the coming year.

In 2005, we sounded executives out on:

- i.* their state of readiness for implementation of the new PSEA (Public Service Employment Act);
- ii.* the need for a required learning policy for executives and what such a policy should contain;
- iii.* the introduction of a proposed EX Qualification Standard;
- iv.* the priorities APEX should choose for 2005-06.

During September and October 2005, about **350 executives** took part in **17 consultation sessions** across the country. They provided comments and recommendations which greatly influenced preparation of the Association's own action plan for 2005-06 and were useful to central agencies preparing to submit policy proposals to their Minister.

Consultation Locations

National Capital Region (3 sessions)	Ontario-region
Vancouver	Montreal
Edmonton	Quebec City
Calgary	Moncton
Iqaluit	Halifax
Yellowknife	Charlottetown
Saskatoon	St. John's
Winnipeg	

THE MOOD OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMUNITY

Executives who took part in our Fall 2005 consultations are dedicated public servants who serve the public as best they can and whose commitment to creating a better country and a better public service remains high. However, set against this high level of commitment is a quasi-permanent fatigue which stems from the cumulative effect of a number of workplace factors. These include workload demands which outweigh available resources, the system's lack of tolerance for risk-taking and in some cases, the absence of the tools needed to adjust to changing demands and realities. Executives worry that fundamental management reform – which they believe to be

absolutely essential – could easily fall victim to the system’s strong aversion to error and the vastly increased controls that characterize the current environment. The chill engendered by the sponsorship enquiry as well as memories of problems at the Privacy Commissioner and in the grants and contributions programs is felt throughout the public service.

There is a faint hint of cynicism among executives – not about the job they do every day, but about the chance that real change will be effected. Many of these executives are within 4 to 5 years of their retirement. Their desire to leave behind a significantly better organization has not waned, but they feel their opportunities to effect real change are dwindling.

For the most part, executives are content with their compensation and benefits package, with their careers generally and with the nature of their work. APEX believes many of the messages it has communicated to “the centre” on behalf of the EX community have been heard and it was encouraging to hear executives express their appreciation for the work the Association does.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE EMPLOYMENT ACT (PSEA)

Based on the reports submitted to the Public Service Commission, most departments had already completed plans to implement the new Act. However, outside the National Capital Region, many consultation participants said they were not yet fully equipped to handle this responsibility. Other executives believe that given all the other demands to which they are responding, they would not have enough time to prepare for PSEA implementation, especially given the investment that is required in doing up-front, strategic HR planning.

However, APEX noted a definite improvement in terms of the general level of awareness and preparedness over its June 2005 consultations. Many departments had at least started across-the-board, mandatory training for employees (including managers and executives).

Executives fully subscribe to the need to engage in good HR planning. However, many were concerned that their organizations would put too much emphasis on the actual document, to the detriment of the reflection and strategic thinking necessary for effective human resources planning.

Executives felt that the principal challenge around implementation was not the adequacy of the tools, but ensuring that organizations seriously address the need for culture change. It would be very easy for everyone concerned just to slip back into the old way of doing things – letting human resource professionals make the critical decisions about staffing, for instance. It will take some real determination for managers and executives to overcome this tendency – specifically, to do the strategic thinking and planning necessary to take the greatest advantage of the flexibility offered by the new Act. Also, while it is crucial for managers and executives to understand the new terms of formal accountability, it is equally important to instil transparency in the decision-making framework. For that reason, executives said that supervisors at all levels need to take the time to explain the implications of the legislation to their employees, so that they know what to expect once the PSEA comes into effect.

Managers and executives in small regional organizations are worried about getting support to manage the implementation, when their HR experts are back in Ottawa and therefore not easily accessible.

A REQUIRED LEARNING POLICY FOR EXECUTIVES

Executives across the country support the concept of required core learning for all public servants. However, both the Association and the executive community had concerns about certain elements of the early drafts of the proposed policy.

The Association had an opportunity to review a more recent draft policy just prior to Minister Alcock's October 24th announcement on learning, training and development. We were pleased to see that many of executives' concerns had been taken into consideration, especially including:

- i. the responsibility of individual public servants to develop and pursue their own learning plans;
- ii. the tie-in of required training to the granting of delegated authorities, including the time limits placed on acquiring this learning for new appointees and the obligation for current managers and executives to have their knowledge validated;
- iii. the mention of consequences for supervisors who do not provide appropriate time and resources for employees to take required training;
- iv. the link to the Performance Management Program.

APEX has additional comments and recommendations to make with regard to the policy:

- Although we understand that this new policy applies only to employees of the core Public Service, the Association has long had concerns about the **readiness of GIC appointees** to take up their new positions. During the 18 months our Advisory Service for Executives has been in operation, the Senior Advisor has dealt with a number of cases in which career executives have been at odds with their supervisor or head of organization with regard to the rules and regulations pertaining to financial and human resource management. In most instances, these organizations were headed by GIC appointees who were not aware of how things work in the Public Service, including the values and ethics that underpin its operations. **For this reason, APEX recommends that the Government insist that GIC appointees complete orientation and training before taking up their duties.**
- Many executives have mentioned that their departments' record-keeping on employees' training is spotty. **APEX therefore recommends that an electronic "learning passport" or similar tracking method be adopted.** This will allow employees to have a record of the training they have completed and this record will follow them throughout their careers.

- **APEX recommends that the central place of Public Service values and ethics in all learning be more strongly stated in the policy.**
- PSMA and the new PS Management Agenda demand culture change in the Public Service, hence **core learning should also include communications skills for employees and managers.**
- Executives stressed that a required learning policy must recognize that skills and knowledge can fade with time or become outdated. **APEX recommends that the policy require “refresher training” at appropriate intervals.**
- **APEX recommends that the learning policy make a stronger link with the suite of official languages policies.**
- How best to **validate learning** is a matter of some concern for executives. While we understand that this is an issue which will be addressed in directives, **the Association recommends that provision be made for consultation with the executive community before any directives are finalized.**
- Finally, our colleagues outside the National Capital Region expect that central agencies will make a serious effort to provide **required training/orientation in their regions**, whether through the Canada School of Public Service or through partnerships with learning institutions *in situ*. Further, executives think that the **costs associated with required learning** – including travel and accommodation where that arises – should be covered by central agencies.

AN EX QUALIFICATION STANDARD

Establishing an EX qualification standard

Executives agree on the principle. In an increasingly complex world – and given the major shift to a knowledge economy and workforce, a qualification standard would allow the government to defend the professionalism of the cadre – thus building public confidence – and enrich its recruitment efforts. This would also help to reinforce the distinctiveness of the EX Group.

It was agreed during discussions that the standard **MUST** include the new executive competency profile.

Further, it was suggested that this same standard be used for hiring from outside the Public Service, by the Privy Council Office in considering senior appointments, and in the context of performance evaluation for all executives.

University Degree

APEX notes that according to its last health survey (2002), very few executives currently do not have at least a college or undergraduate university degree. Given the level of education of the next generation of public servants, the holding of a degree may cease to be much of an issue within a very few years.

That being the case, executives do not think there is any reason to establish a hard and fast rule that could prevent the Public Service from hiring or promoting excellent leaders simply because they do not hold a university degree. They would be comfortable with having the Public Service set a university or college degree as the minimum requirement for becoming an EX *only if* there were sufficient flexibility in the policy to allow deputy heads to make exceptions based on an individual's skills, experience and demonstrated track record. Nothing prevents a deputy head from setting more stringent educational requirements for specific functional positions or specialty areas.

APEX urges the Public Service not to disadvantage competent people who for various reasons have not had the benefit of a university/college education. As an institution, we have to be aware of our objectives to bring more Aboriginal peoples and new Canadians into the Public Service, people whose access to recognized higher education may have been limited in some cases, but who may have demonstrated leadership capacity and a contribution to make.

Executives point out that there is a very tenuous link between leadership capacity and a decades-old degree in a completely unrelated field.

It will be important under this new policy to establish equivalency through a "prior learning assessment" by educational institutions (colleges and universities) mandated by the Public Service to carry out such evaluations. Further, the expectations around what constitutes equivalency have to be very transparent so that people can manage their learning plans accordingly.

The bottom line is that we should not be focussing only on an individual's educational achievements, but rather looking to their leadership, their values and their management performance.

Advancement

Executives strongly object to the idea of freezing promotion opportunities for executives who have consistently demonstrated leadership and excellence but who are without a university or college degree. We should not deprive ourselves of the leadership skills of these public servants especially not at a time when demographic trends point to a looming shortage of skills.

Should this go ahead, executives urge that at the very least, there should be a 5-year transition period, during which those aspiring to EX positions can obtain a degree or demonstrate equivalency.