

Civil Service Capability

These are some interesting comments made in late 2017 by Jeremy Moore - a perceptive former senior civil servant. **(Emphasis added.)**

1) I agree a lot has happened – and at pace - in recent years and much of it has led to higher standards in many of the professions. The professionalization of Finance, HR, IT, audit and commercial (in addition to longstanding professions like legal) in particular has changed those areas out of all recognition. These areas are also attracting good people from outside as they are able to offer more competitive salaries – see for example the recent experience of the commercial profession restructuring - in addition to fascinating problems on which to work. It will be interesting to see how the ‘centralisation’ of these functions works out over time. I am reasonably confident that the service will be much the stronger for these changes as they settle down. But there is danger that we are creating impermeable barriers between these professions.

2) However, **I still worry that we have thrown out the idea of the generalist without having replaced it with a compelling alternative. Personally I am not convinced of the case for creating separate pseudo professions like “delivery management” and “policy”.** The LSE masters for example is good as far as it goes but, I fear, won’t achieve what is hoped for it i.e. to become an MBA equivalent and a requirement for director level appointments. And it is already painfully obvious from sitting on remuneration committees that the policy SCS (and, to some extent operational delivery folk in places like DWP and HMRC) are the most poorly paid at each grade partly because they generally have no exit route or external benchmark. I think this is only going to get worse if policy people are herded into a profession that only exists in Whitehall. Over time that will impact on quality too. I am also concerned about the creation of a project management profession if it develops strong guild tendencies which restrict barriers to entry and has a pipeline of people who have not done any policy or ops jobs. Some of our best programme directors and senior responsible owners (SROs) of big projects in DWP are not PPM professionals but have long experience of operational delivery or policy or both (although many have gained much from attending the Oxford major programmes academy for SROs/DMs.

3) **The answer in my view is to unify the policy, delivery and programme management areas into one - or to develop a way of joining them up explicitly if we must retain the ‘professions’ model.** I would be much more inclined to make more explicit a model in which you either:

a) develop a strong professional anchor like law or finance or commercial; or

b) you become part of the new generalist profession (new term needed!)- and build up expertise in all three areas of:

i) policy analysis and delivery;

ii) project and programme management/delivery;

iii) operational delivery.

Over time candidates for non-specialist Whitehall director and DG posts would have demonstrated achievement in all three of these areas and attended demanding residential academy courses in at least one and preferably two areas. Staff aspiring to reach these posts would then have a clearer road map to follow. I believe these posts will then look more like their counterparts in other areas of the public sector.

4) I also agree with some of the concerns about staff moving around too quickly. Thoughtful ministers with private sector backgrounds would understandably express their dismay to me on being told that yet another individual who they have just got to know and trust was moving on to be replaced by someone who knew even less than they do about something that is a key priority for them. This has got much worse post Brexit with staff moving at a dizzying pace both upwards and sideways.

5) I think there are three things going on here as people respond to conflicting signals from HR, line managers and the remuneration system:

- a) No-one knows what a career path is supposed to look like any more so people follow their nose and are headhunted by people they worked for previously - wherever they happen to have ended up;
- b) There is, as you say, an obsession with breadth over depth, and also conflicting messages about whether people are working for the civil service or for a department and whether they should therefore aim to work in many departments or build up deep expertise in clusters e.g. international, economic or social, or become a professional of some sort;
- c) The pay and performance management system is a terrible mess (and incentivises both excessive movement and also more grade levels than are necessary – for example we really don't need all these grade 6 posts which depress the quality of g7 jobs but they enable someone to get two promotion increments en route to deputy director for example). Attempts via eg pivotal post allowances haven't worked but we need to find a way of addressing this systematically with rewards for people to stay put.