Making a successful career transition from the public sector to the private sector

Government departments and agencies everywhere, in both Federal and State contexts, are facing major budget constraints currently. Many are faced with pressures to reduce headcount. What does this mean for those directly affected: those whose roles may be disappearing? Most particularly, how should a senior public servant with perhaps extensive service in the public sector, think about a move to the private sector?

Some realities, misconceptions, and prejudices

There are of course differences in the “work” of the public and private sector. Each environment also has a different language and culture and use different labels for leadership positions.

One misconception is that in the private sector, all decisions rest on financial considerations, with a relentless focus on costs and profits. In fact, of course, “…business efficiency, quality standards, customer satisfaction and employee work-life balance are just some of the issues that keep private sector executives awake at night and find their way regularly onto the agenda of company boardrooms.”

Another misconception is that life in the public sector is less pressured. At senior levels, the pressure around delivery of complex policy and strategy initiatives can be very significant, with the added burdens of meeting the changing priorities of politicians and often high levels of media interest. Senior people in both the private and public sectors face compliance pressures, controls, risk management, bureaucracy (and internal politics) and complex stakeholder management challenges. Very similar capabilities are required in both contexts.

So, whilst there are differences, of course, in the work of each sector, there are also misconceptions and prejudices. Individuals facing a transition from the public to the private sector need to understand this, and then focus on what it is their experience brings to the private sector. There is much more common ground in terms of needed capabilities than is generally understood.

Successful transition strategies

Articulating skills

It can be very useful to look back through, say, the last ten years of a career in the public sector, and to identify a series of achievements. These may have involved others, and may even have been “claimed” by a Department Secretary or a politician, but wherever the individual had major influence in the delivery of the outcome, then, this outcome (or a particular contribution to it) should be listed as a key achievement.

To return to our first point, for a senior individual, these outcomes may have involved project management, managing budgets, influencing others (including across boundaries), creating energy and commitment in others, communication, risk management and negotiation. As we have explained, this is very much the same as work undertaken in the private sector as well.

Capturing achievements

The groundwork for bridging the gap between the public and private sectors is in identifying a series of achievements that will resonate in a private sector context. This work is also the foundation for subsequently building an effective resume, of interest to the private sector – and in turn for subsequent interviews in the private sector. This work will be greatly assisted with some career transition coaching: working with a consultant with insights into the public sector, and with strong private sector experience. It is critical to undertake effective work in unpacking past experience and in drawing out capabilities likely to be valued in the private sector.

A resume likely to be of interest to recruiters and private sector businesses is all about capabilities and achievements, and the context in which these occurred. It should not work in fine detail through an array of job titles, duty statements and the past navigation of transitions across departments and up
the various layers of the public service: the broad facts of a career will be sufficient. The primary purpose of a resume is to achieve an interview. Ideally, also, there will be different resumes tailored to the particular needs and interests of each prospective employer.

In the emerging social media environment, a shorter version of this material should also be posted on LinkedIn – because this is where many employers and recruiters now start recruitment initiatives. Their process is akin to commissioning a search through LinkedIn to capture individuals with key capabilities and skills.

**Engaging with the “market”**

To use the language of business: there are various “channels” to use in drawing in information and in then becoming visible in organisations of interest. These include, of course, recruiters, search firms and then simply reading and responding to advertisements.

More effective ways to reach organisations of interest also exist. The most important of these is an activity we term “intelligence gathering interviews”. This is a guided process of researching industries and organisations, accessing databases, seeking advice, identifying needed solutions and working out how value is best added in each situation.

Work in any context, particularly at senior levels, can be very consuming. It can leave very little time to take an interest in what is going on elsewhere. This is a time however in which to learn new skills of enquiry and engagement: it is a time to take an interest in the lives of others and to build new relationships. With a bit of help, this work and the skills developed (or improved) can be both liberating and rewarding.

There is another reality as well here: careers, all careers, need a “market” – a need for the particular capabilities of the individuals within an organisation or in self-employment. So, some of this period of activity is directed at exploring needs and opportunities. There is little merit in focusing a big investment of time towards a market which does not exist, or in which opportunities are very limited. Intelligence gathering interviews can also be about getting the balance right, and doing some reality testing. Right now in Australia, for example, manufacturing is a tough market in which to be looking for employment. According to a recent Ibisworld report the ten best sectors for employment growth are organic farming, mining, child care services, veterinary services, financial planning and investment advice, accounting, general hospitals and biotechnology.

Some new entities in these sectors may, for example need insight and skills in managing their interface with the regulators…

**Summary**

There are of course differences in the work and the language of the public and private sectors. But there is much common ground in the capabilities needed in senior people in both contexts. The challenges in addressing transitions from the public to private sector include capturing and articulating what has been delivered in the past, and then engaging with organisations and individuals in markets of interest and learning what delivers success within them. A focus on the differences in cultures and language of each sector limits thinking about how to bridge the gaps and navigate new and liberating career transitions.

---