

Communications Function Review 2009

A report to the State Services Commissioner

Context

New Zealand government agencies are operating in an increasingly complex communications environment. Agencies are delivering public communications programmes at a time when:

- Public and Ministers' expectations of government service delivery are growing;
- The government communications function is not clearly defined or understood, both within agencies and by the broader public;
- Government communications are delivered in different ways by different agencies, leading to inconsistency in quality, style and approach; and
- Demonstrating value for money is increasingly important.

Comparisons with other jurisdictions also suggest New Zealand government agency communications could be improved. In particular, a recent visit by a United Kingdom government official suggested that efforts there have increased the public's understanding of government communications and, most importantly, have enhanced the quality (and quantity) of the public's engagement with government overall. These efforts have focused on better defining and consistently structuring the communications function across government, better co-ordinating communications activities between government agencies, and delivering public communications consistently and professionally

Reflecting on this visit by the Permanent Secretary for Communications, UK Cabinet Office the communications managers, facilitated by the State Services Commission, decided to investigate to what extent changes could be made to improve New Zealand public service agency communications delivery.

Background to Review

The heads of the communications function in the Public and Non-Public Service departments have been meeting monthly since 2004 to share their views, promote best practice and provide collective leadership for the function. Over this time, the variability of the practice, and of the capability of the public servants employed in communications roles across the public and non-public service, has been a recurring theme in the managers' discussions.

As well as this shared concern around the health of the practice, there were a number of other factors that precipitated the formation of the Review. For much of the five years that the managers had been meeting, the tight labour market had made it difficult, and expensive, to recruit and retain communications professionals, particularly at the intermediate and senior levels. This had led to an overly buoyant contracting market where contractors' expectations were often inflated above both their abilities and experience.

The second factor was related to an assessment of the approach that the managers took to the practice. In late 2007 a small subgroup of the managers met to discuss their individual approaches to measurement and reporting of the communications function in their agencies. Again, the variability of approaches and lack of any sense of what would

constitute a consistent set of expectations that chief executives and other senior managers would have of the function was identified as something that should be addressed.

The third factor was consideration of other jurisdictions' approach to the communications function, particularly the United Kingdom and Canadian governments. Both these Westminster-style governments had adopted policies and practices designed to address some of the same issues that we had identified here in New Zealand.

Finally, as was the case with the Phillis Review into government communications in the United Kingdom in 2004, there were also questions around the integrity of the profession and in particular an undermining in trust in the role of communications due to a perception that the function's primary focus is on 'spin,' or the cynical manipulation of the media. This perception is not without some basis. There have been several regrettable incidents that have contributed to politicians, the media and the public viewing public sector communicators as people whose primary occupation is 'spin doctoring.'

The similarities with findings of the UK Phillis Review here are instructive. The authors noted that:

“What we found was a narrow view of communications which is often limited to media handling, rather than an ability to communicate effectively with many different audiences, which is integral to modern government.”¹

In August 2008, an establishment group of the communications managers approved a terms of reference for the Review (Appendix 1). A working group, comprising a different set of managers was set up and the review sponsor, State Services Commissioner Iain Rennie, agreed the terms of reference and directed the group, under the oversight of a steering group, to produce a report on its findings.

Approach

The terms of reference set out the purpose of the review, which is to provide a view of the current state of New Zealand public sector government agency communications and provide some guidance as to where improvements could be made.

It will do this by:

- Defining government agency communications
- Providing a brief history of the function
- Describing the current state of communications across New Zealand government agencies
- Developing principles for the delivery of government agency communications.

¹ <http://archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/gcreview/News/index.htm> p.9

- Providing an approach to improving government communications delivery in the short, medium and long term.

The working group developed a project plan (Appendix 2) which was subsequently approved by the Steering Group and the Sponsor, which set out a programme designed to support these objectives.

Why communications?

Communication is such a common and pervasive element in all human interactions. We all communicate one way or another. A lack of communication about a position on a policy or the non-provision of information about a service still communicates a message, but is neither good communication nor an appropriate approach for a government agency.

Communication is now commonly recognised as a core management function critical to an organisation's ability to successfully execute strategy and, in the case of government communications, deliver outcomes for Government. Yet –based on the interviews we have conducted with chief executives and the experience of the working group- surprisingly little management time is spent considering how and why communications contributes to organisational success. Appendix 3 therefore looks at the applicability of intervention logic to communications activities and concludes that clarity around communications issues could be better achieved by the use of intervention logic. Wider use of this form of analysis in Statements of Intent and other documentation dealing with communication issues may improve understanding and the quality of communication investment decisions.

Recommendation

Reference documentation is prepared which clearly articulates the rationale for the communications function as a critical component in the development of policy and delivery of services in the public sector.

Proposed Definition

There are many standard definitions of communications in professional literature going back many years. There are fewer definitions that fully encompass the unique role of the public sector in society. Drawing on research and collective knowledge the reviewers recommend the following as a suitable definition for public sector communications in New Zealand:

“Public sector communications is the management function that enables agency outcomes by providing the strategic direction and delivery of two-way communications with internal and external publics. Such communications should be accurate, timely and in accordance with the policies of the Government of the day and consistent with the Standards of Integrity and Conduct for State servants.”

Recommendation

That a short, memorable but all encompassing function definition be agreed and provided to public service departments for incorporation in appropriate documentation relating to the communications function.

History

Communications as a recognised role in Central Government gradually evolved from the late 1940s on when an Information Section was formed in the Prime Minister's Department. On 7 July 1950 the Publicity Division of the Department of Tourist and Health Resorts was established by Cabinet decision.

Moves to formalise and institutionalise the function occurred with the creation of Treasury Instruction M18 'Control of Government Advertising and Public Relations Programmes' which stated that Cabinet had directed that the Publicity Division was to be charged with the carrying out of the advertising and publicity work of departments. Instruction M18 also referred to the fact that Cabinet had agreed to the introduction of a positive public relations programme for each department.

In 1963 the passing of the Tourist and Publicity Department Act set out the following:

7. Functions of Department - The principal functions of the Department, under the control of the Minister, shall be -
 - (b) To establish, maintain, develop and operate publicity, information and public relations services, and to charge for those services where appropriate.
8. Powers of the Minister, etc. - (1) The Minister may from time to time, on behalf of the Crown,-
 - (f) Make inquiries, investigations and surveys for the purpose of obtaining information of use to the Department in the exercise of its functions
 - (g) Arrange advertising on behalf of the Government
 - (h) Arrange for the production, sale, and distribution of publicity material and films.

In June 1964, the Chairman of the State Services Commission sent a circular to all Permanent Heads entitled *Public Relations in the Public Service*. The circular conveyed Cabinet's decision to require each Permanent Head to prepare an annual public relations programme. The programme was required to define the relationships with publicity media, the type of announcements reserved to the Minister and the type of announcements that could be made at various levels in the department.

The circular quoted the Royal Commission on the State Services' statement that:

“A positive approach to public relations be encouraged to keep the public informed and to raise the prestige of the State Services.”

The 1964 approach was reviewed in 1973 and the State Services Commission again issued a circular which largely repeated the principles of the 1960s approach but which included the requirement that:

“Departmental announcements are to be attributed to named and designated officers. There should be no references to departmental spokesmen in announcements reported in public media.”

Until 1971 the Publicity Division comprised five sections. In that year it was reorganised as the Information and Publicity Services Branch, comprising the Information and Press Section, the Overseas Information and Publicity Section, the Advertising Section, the National Publicity Studios and the National Film Unit.

Between the mid 1970s and the late 1980s the role and influence of the Tourist and Publicity Department waned as departments continued to build up internal communication units and Ministers began hiring both private secretaries and press secretaries via Parliamentary Services, rather than the Department of Internal Affairs and the Tourist and Publicity department.

Legislative reform by way of the State Sector Act 1988 cemented the pre-eminent role of chief executives of individual agencies to hire staff to meet the functional and operational needs of the organisation. Employment contracts for other than the chief executives themselves came under the chief executive of the department concerned or someone acting under the delegated authority of the chief executive.

In keeping with the public service reforms of the late 1980s the National Film Unit, Communicate New Zealand (formerly the National Publicity Studio), Government Tourist Bureaux and Tourist Hotel Corporation were all sold by the Government to private enterprise. The handful of remaining press officers were reassigned and the Department was renamed the New Zealand Tourism Department in 1990.

Limited central guidance on public relations and communications matters was provided during the mid 1990s by the appointment of a senior practitioner to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC).

The role was not particularly well defined with the incumbent's duties spanning the provision of communication services to DPMC, the chairing of ‘whole of government’ communications forums and the facilitation of some professional development forums for communications practitioners across the sector.

The DPMC position was disestablished around the year 2000. Since that time the role of maintaining communication and coordination, in a ‘light handed’ sense, has been undertaken by the State Services Commission’s Communications Manager.

Current state

The assessment of the current state of public sector communications is based on analysis of the material from work streams identified in the project plan. (For further detailed information see Appendices 3-8.)

Variability of performance

The Review Group's assessment is that the overall performance of the function is variable. The breadth and depth of the function is not widely understood (or appreciated) beyond the practitioners involved and their principal clients within the organisations in which they serve. Given the nature of the State Sector Act, much of this is to be expected. However, there is an opportunity to establish some fundamental standards, common definitions and procedural guidelines that support consistency of the function, while allowing for the variability that is central to New Zealand's public management system.

Perceived increases in numbers

Much has been made by a variety of commentators and stakeholders about the apparent burgeoning numbers of communications professionals in recent years. Adding to perception issues about increased communication staff is the fact that many staff with an element of community engagement in their statements of accountability have often been counted by human resource departments as communications personnel. Yet heads of communications would rule many of such staff as 'out of scope' in terms of exercising core communications competencies.

State Services Commission data shows the total number of people working in communications related positions represent .07 percent of the public service, up from .06 in 2000². In terms of the size of unit, the survey (Appendix 4) showed the average public service communications unit contained 7.75 staff compared with a Public Relations Institute survey in 2008 of both public service and private sector communications which came out with an average of 4.2 staff. However, the large size of many government departments and their mandate to communicate with citizens could account for this disparity.

A presentation by two acknowledged experts on the Wellington recruitment market, Lyndsay Jackson and Dave Hollander to the Working Group, confirmed that the labour market for public sector communicators was much less buoyant than was the case 12 months ago. They noted that there was a shift away from contracting towards people looking for permanent roles. They also reported seeing an increase in the number of people with marketing skills (primarily from Auckland) looking to move into the market in Wellington. Given the marketing focus, many Auckland candidates were struggling to secure permanent roles in the quite complex and specialist field of government communications. They also noted agencies moving away from using PR consultancies, with their larger overheads, towards contractors, when it came to project work.

While this all points to a contraction of the market and more affordable skills for agencies, the Review Group nevertheless accepts the Government's expectation that there will be fewer communications positions and recommends an examination and recategorisation of what constitutes 'core communications' professionals.

Recommendation

² Human Resource Capability Survey (HRC), State Services Commission, 2000 – 2008.

That further work is undertaken, in conjunction with the SSC's Human Resource Capability survey team, to identify what constitutes a core communications practitioner according to ANZCO codes, and distributed to the HR teams that input the survey data.

Negative perceptions of profession

Of more concern is the question of perceptions of the profession. In the context of this Review, it bears recounting some of the incidents that have given rise to concerns about the impartiality or trustworthiness of some public sector communicators.

In 2003, a spokesperson for the New Zealand Immigration Service in response to an Official Information Request was found to have not provided information sought by the requester, including a note circulated widely in the department as part of a media log. The note said:

“I was let down badly ... Everyone had agreed to lie in unison, but all the others caved in and I was the only one left singing the original song.”³

The Ombudsman, in a subsequent investigation, formed the view that the spokesperson “knew or believed that unedited versions of his media logs were sought by the Ombudsman for the purposes of an investigation, and deliberately dissembled”.

In 2008 there was much public debate around the politicization of the communications function when the Ministry for the Environment made a number of poor judgements around the employment of two individuals in the communications function. The first was where a conflict of interest was properly identified, and then managed poorly. The second was where the Ministry did not handle the engagement of a contractor with sufficient care, which subsequently contributed to public questioning of the appropriateness of the Minister's involvement, created unnecessary and unfair doubts about the contractor's professionalism and renewed debate about the political neutrality of the Ministry.

Finally, in March 2009 a spokesperson for the Department of Internal Affairs was accused of obfuscation followed by comments in internal communications which were subsequently released under the Official Information Act.

An editorial writer in the Dominion Post concluded that the actions of this spokesperson, although not in the same order as the Immigration case, “are indicative of an unhealthy culture that has developed within some, but not all, parts of the public service as the number of spin doctors employed by government agencies has mushroomed.”⁴

³ <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO0402/S00161.htm>

⁴ <http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/opinion/editorials/2252970/Editorial-Truth-goes-with-the-Territory>

The Working Group recommends that a training module for public sector communicators be developed and issued to agencies (see Recommendation 7).

Survey of the heads of function

The results of the survey, completed by 31 of the 36 heads of communication from Public and Non-Public Service departments, provided an aggregated picture of what activities constitute the communications function across government agencies. Apart from communications advice and planning, which 100 percent of respondents identified as being a critical part of their responsibilities, some of the other areas that at least 75 percent of the managers described as critical included:

- change management communications
- research and management reporting
- crisis and issues management
- external and internal communications
- media management
- reputation management.

When asked to select a maximum of ten activities from a list that they considered took up most of their unit's time, the majority identified communications advice and planning, internal communications, media management, external communications and crisis and issues management.

By comparison, when asked which activities on the list made the most important contribution to the performance of their agency they chose reputation management, communications advice and planning, crisis and issues management, stakeholder relations and external and internal communications.

The language around dealing with the media is difficult. To suggest that the media can or should be 'managed' immediately raises, to some, ethical issues around the objectives of communicators and their clients. But there is a clear process of management involved, working towards public service outputs and outcomes. Media can not be 'managed' in the sense that public sector communicators take over the proper role of editors, or attempt to direct or control the media. But it is legitimate to work with the media to achieve accurate coverage that is fair to the public service and government, and includes appropriate context.

The key functions in this are to proactively explain and inform and to reactively answer questions and facilitate access for journalists to topic experts and managers responsible for public services. In addition, communications staff provide assistance to managers dealing with the media. This support allows managers to communicate within media conventions, increasing the likelihood that the message they give will be the one heard by the media, and transmitted to the public.

Public Service chief executives

As part of the Review, eight Public Service chief executives were interviewed for their views on the function more broadly and their understanding of communications within their own agencies (full report Appendix 5).

The majority of chief executives in the interview group commented that they had learned the need for communications on the job. In the main, as they rose through the ranks to senior manager and chief executive, they became clearer on the importance of good communications. They came to understand the importance of both a planned approach when there was a good communication's function, and the impact of not having access to any. One chief executive noted that as he had "more and more senior jobs, it's become really clear that this function has got to work properly."

All chief executives felt communications was fundamental to the organisation and the way it carried out its business. As one said, "Bottom line, you probably won't be very successful in anything unless you communicate well". They saw communications as a key element in getting the business done day-to-day. This included both internal and external communications.

Most of the heads of the communications functions do not have a direct reporting line to the chief executive. However, the majority of those surveyed had either an indirect reporting line or were *ex officio* members of the senior management team. As reflected in the comments of chief executives, senior management rely on communications to help shape and deliver both the positioning of the organization externally and its internal culture.

Suppliers

A series of qualitative interviews were completed with a small number of communications suppliers. The suppliers were from across the advertising, public relations and strategic communications industries.

All of them had varying experiences in their engagement with public sector communicators. These experiences were largely shaped by the skills and expertise of the individuals they were working with. One issue cited by suppliers was the lack of understanding of the full range of communications tools. In particular, the lack of marketing experience was highlighted as a general deficiency amongst government communicators.

Suppliers also noted that heads of communication often lacked the ability to make decisions because of their position within the organisational hierarchy. This resulted in frustrations with sign-off processes and numerous change requests late in the design process.

Suppliers had some concerns about the inconsistent procurement processes used across government. In some cases agencies used highly bureaucratic tender templates which contained information of little relevance to the job at hand. Briefs were not always well prescribed and there was great variation of practice in terms of open or closed tenders for even small contracts.

Once jobs were assigned, government agency contracts were usually well managed in terms of clarity of objectives, work in progress reporting and relationship management. Most contracts were run out of national offices based in Wellington. Given the relatively small scale of the overall public sector market, practitioners quickly acquired expertise and knowledge about the operating style and culture of various agencies. The value of the supplier to an agency increased over time with familiarity of that agency's business. Nevertheless all contractors and consultants were well aware of the necessity for transparency in appointment processes and of regular reviews and re-tendering within appropriate timeframes. Supply of services such as design and print should be on a longer time-frame than short term project contracts, but even physical supply services such as media monitoring should be re-tendered every 3 to 5 years.

Recommendation

A set of standard guideline procurement documents be prepared, drawing on pre-existing material and in conjunction with the Ministry of Economic Development's Procurement Group, tailored for the communications function. The templates to be made available to all procurement sections of all government agencies.

Other jurisdictions

In recent years senior communications practitioners in the New Zealand public sector have forged useful contacts with peers in other Westminster jurisdictions, particularly the United Kingdom and Canada (see Appendix 6).

In the early 2000s the Canadian government developed a highly prescriptive communication policy to be applied across the public service departments. The policy defined the communication function and provided for the development of a set of guidelines (covering the full range of communication activities) to be used by government communicators in the execution of their work. This policy has been supported by a high-level of centralised infrastructure, with communications procurement, government branding and web communications all being led from the central agencies.

Of interest, in the Canadian system, the head of the communication function is required to report directly to the departmental chief executive although, in many cases, the communication head may be the equivalent of a level 3 manager (but no lower).

Within the last year or so there has been a further refinement of the Canadian approach, focussing on a more centralised approach to departmental messaging. The Canadian equivalent of DPMC is seeking greater involvement in the development of departmental communications strategy. This approach is to be reflected in a rewrite of the government's communications policy due later this year.

The United Kingdom's approach to government communication has largely been shaped by the implementation of recommendations from the Phyllis review. This review, commissioned in 2003, resulted from a high-profile incident involving a special adviser within a government press office. The review called for a redefinition of government communication into a more customer-focussed dialogue with the public based on a strategic pan-media approach. Amongst its recommendations was the recruitment of a

Permanent Secretary for Government Communication and a new network for all government communicators – the Government Communication Network.

The office of the Permanent Secretary for Government Communication's initial focus has been to establish a more formal communication structure to ensure application of common minimum standards and greater coordination between the various arms of the public service. By way of illustration, the rapid proliferation of government websites in the United Kingdom created a situation whereby many such sites were established but not kept up to date or enhanced with fresh content. The government is now aiming to support just three websites across government – one to support government services to the public, another for services to business and the final site in support of the National Health Service. This policy was monitored and enforced by the Cabinet Office of Communications and has led to a rationalisation of public sector websites, which are easy to find and navigate for members of the public seeking access to services.

In another development, the Office has created the Government Communicators Network, a comprehensive web based resource service to which all government communications people can belong to access and share best practice. The State Services Commission has access to this network and a stocktake has been initiated as part of this review to see how content might be utilised and adapted for the New Zealand setting (see Appendix 7).

Review of existing research data on outcome measurement

Despite communications (or public relations) being recognised as an important management function for more than 60 years, measurement of the value of communications is still more of an art than a science. Yet increasingly there is a desire by practitioners, and a demand by the businesses they serve, to demonstrate value for money in more measurable ways.

Twenty, or even ten years ago, it was common for the only measurement of communications activity to be a voluminous digest of press clippings, accompanied by a statement about the number of published column inches achieved per media release and sometimes an analysis of media mentions as positive, negative or neutral.

Today a much wider range of tools is used to measure the impacts of public sector communications (or things the communications function influences, including staff engagement or the public's trust and confidence in the organisation).

Tools that are regularly used in the public sector include:

- Attitudinal surveys measuring trust, confidence and satisfaction with an organisation e.g. *Kiwis Count*⁵.
- Surveys that establish baselines and then measure changes in awareness, or attitudes, or behaviour associated with social marketing or public information campaigns – e.g. changes in attitudes to drink-driving.

⁵ <http://www.ssc.govt.nz/nzers-experience>

- Staff engagement surveys – e.g. the Gallup poll undertaken by most government agencies in 2008.
- Stakeholder surveys or reviews (usually one-off research to inform communications or relationship management strategies).
- Counting unique visitor page visits for internet communications, or public counter queries versus website FAQ hits.
- 0800 and 0900 phone call data analysis, and complaint and complaint resolution analysis.
- Focus group research to provide deeper understanding of policies, practices and services.
- Volume and content analysis of media coverage.
- User pre-testing for websites and other significant new communications.

However, while the range of tools used is now wider, few government agencies routinely measure the impacts of their corporate communications programmes in any significant way.

Those that do tend to be large agencies with significant service delivery to the public or to industry. Significant public information or social marketing campaigns now also routinely have both baseline research and measurement of campaign results at key milestones – though such campaigns are frequently managed by project teams rather corporate communications.

Small policy agencies may use one-off research (e.g. a stakeholder survey), but tend not to routinely monitor communications results, except web hits.

With the exception of *Kiwis Count* and the Gallup staff engagement survey (neither of which directly measure the results of the corporate communications function alone), performance is also not comparable between agencies, because the measures and questions used vary.

In the view of the Review Team:

- Public sector communicators need to be more aware of the need to measure the effectiveness of their programmes.
- Given the high cost of regular research, there is potential to do more to share resources through standardisation of research methods and questions and multi-agency negotiation of service contracts.

Proposed Principles for public sector communications

The Review Group acknowledge that the overriding principles for all State servants are the Standards of Integrity and Conduct; that State servants should at all times be fair, impartial, responsible and trustworthy.

The group believes there is merit in clarifying the relationship between all of the other guiding principles which already exist in statute and convention, bringing them together in one place and promoting them to new and incumbent communications staff in agencies.

In addition to the Standards of Integrity and Conduct, the principles should, for instance, include the following:

- 1 Adherence to the purpose of the Official Information Act namely –
 - (a) To increase progressively the availability of official information to the people of New Zealand in order -
 - (i) To enable their more effective participation in the making and administration of laws and policies; and
 - (ii) To promote accountability of Ministers of the Crown and officials and thereby to enhance respect for the law and to promote the good Government of New Zealand.
- 2 Compliance with individual agency codes of conduct.
- 3 Acting in conformance to the Cabinet Manual Appendix B direction on advertising and publicity i.e. to explain policies, and to inform the public of government services available to them and of their rights and responsibilities. Government advertising should be: accurate, factual, truthful, fair, honest, impartial, lawful and proper.
- 4 Acknowledgement and behaviour in keeping with the spirit of professional communicator codes of ethics, e.g. the PRINZ of Code of Ethics which says:
 - i. Provide independent, objective counsel for clients or employers
 - ii. Promote the ethical, well-founded views of clients or employers
 - iii. Be honest and accurate in all communications - and act promptly to correct erroneous communications.
 - iv. Avoid deceptive practices

Recommendation

Heads of Communications to develop a training module for all communications practitioners in the public service agencies reinforcing their responsibilities to uphold and espouse the values set down in the code of conduct for public servants namely to be fair, impartial, responsible and trustworthy.

Short and medium term interventions

The working group identifies the following activities that would provide immediate or medium term improvements in the practice and contribute to the achievement of the future state described below.

Development of a common set of competencies for communicators

Developing and issuing a set of common base competencies for communicators (at the junior, intermediate, senior and manager levels) would provide the following benefits:

- Clarity for professionals about their career path and what demonstrated competencies are required to advance to the next stage in their career.
- Consistent expectations for chief executives about the abilities that communications staff will bring to their roles in the organisation.
- Consistency for contractors and recruitment agencies in terms of what experience and behaviours are suitable for a role and the value of those attributes in the market.

There has already been preliminary work done by the State Services Commission on using the Lominger framework to develop behavioural competencies for communicators. It would not be difficult to accelerate this work and deliver a draft set of competencies for consultation within the next 6 months.

In addition, the UK has established a set of technical competencies for the full range of government communications positions. This technical competency framework is supported by a series of technically-based training modules, making the framework useful for improving both recruitment and retention outcomes.

Aligned to the competency work, as an intervention to address concerns about the variability of the practice, the group also recommends that a specific part of the competency work be targeted at lifting the capability of the heads of the function. Increasing the performance of communications heads in specific areas, for example, managing public finances, performance measurement and reporting, and governance would be the most effective way to drive significant performance improvements across the function.

Recommendation

Work is completed, in consultation with SSC, on a set of competencies for communicators. These competencies will be both technical and behavioural, using the Lominger and UK GCN frameworks and include a component for senior managers.

Structure, resourcing & reporting lines

The Review Group were aware of the views of the Chief Executives surveyed that a 'one size fits all' communications structure was not appropriate for application across the public sector agencies, given the speciality nature of many agencies. The Group believes, however, that there is a paucity of reference information available to Chief Executives and other Senior Managers on what constitutes a modern, efficient and effective communications unit. We believe there would be some merit in the development of reference material describing a typical 'model' unit utilising a matrix approach along the lines of the following:

	Internal comms	Media	Social marketing	Web content	Ministerial comms support	OIAs, PQs etc	Etc...
Small policy							
Medium policy							
Large policy							
Small operational							
Medium operational							
Large operational							

Accompanying documentation would describe indicative baseline resources to run such a unit.

There was also discussion of reporting lines. While industry best practice is that the head of communications should report directly to the Chief Executive as a Tier 2 manager we noted that this was a relative rarity in the New Zealand public sector. We were not so much concerned about tier status as access to senior management and participation in senior management forums. We observed that agencies with communicators providing direct strategic advice to the senior management team were likely to be agencies that had a high profile and regular direct interface with the public.

Recommendation

Research is undertaken into best practice communications units from which guideline information is produced on the makeup of ‘model’ units for agencies of varying size and type. Guideline material to be included as a component of the Chief Executives Induction packs.

Redevelop GCN resources for the New Zealand context

The Government Communications Network (GCN) is one of the outcomes of the Phillis Review in the United Kingdom. Run by the Cabinet Office, it is an online resource for government communications professionals. It includes a professional development section and a resource section.

As part of the working group, we have assessed the bulk of the material on the site and made an initial determination of material that would be relevant for New Zealand (see Appendix 7). This is mostly in the form of templates and other practical material. It would be relatively straightforward to consult on the final material and make it available to government communicators here, on the Network of Public Sector Communicators website (see below).

Recommendation

Final consultation is undertaken on the stock-take of the UK GCN web resources and arrangements are made with the Network of Public Sector Communicators to make available information to all as an ongoing source of guidance on best practice.

Develop common approaches to measurement and reporting

The Review Group believe the GCN resources on measurement and reporting could easily be adopted for use as a standard for the New Zealand public sector. It is recommended that a new small working group comprising representatives of heads of communication be tasked with assessing the appropriate GCN and any other reputable measurement and reporting material with a view to promoting a best practice model within 12 months of the date of this report.

Recommendation

Drawing on GCN web resources a set of best practice measurement reporting tools be developed and made available to all core public sector agencies. Such tools be trialled for one fiscal year and then incorporated as agreed measurements in departmental statements of service performance.

Network of Public Sector Communicators

The Network is a professional body of communications professionals either employed in the public sector or regularly contracting to it. The Network has, since 2000, run professional development and networking events for its members, typically at a cost significantly lower than the other professional groups or associations.

We have had preliminary discussions with the Network committee, two of whom are part of this review project, and the committee and the reviewers see value in ensuring that, at a minimum, there is alignment between our endeavours, and intend to explore closer ties so that the outcomes of this review are integrated into the business planning of the Network. Ultimately, the potential is there for the Network to operationalize the recommendations of the review and drive the change necessary for the profession.

Guidelines for dealing with Ministerial offices

While this report has confined its research and analysis to communications professionals within the core public sector, it is acknowledged that for the most part agencies are servants of Ministers holding portfolios. Ministers too are equipped with highly professional communicators who serve many of the same target audiences as those of the agencies. It is important that both ministerial and agency communications are complementary to avoid public confusion.

Following the change of Government last year, the Department of Internal Affairs produced an information document for ministers' communications and media staff which set out some guidance for new staff on the nature of the relationship between agency communications professionals and those working in Ministers offices (see Appendix 8).

It was acknowledged that such a document should be a 'living document' and that it should be reviewed after the incoming Government and its team of advisers has been in office for some months. To that end the Review Group believes that feedback and amendment of the initial DIA document should be sought and achieved within the next 4 – 6 months.

As the State Services Commission is currently producing guidance for Ministerial advisors, the Review Group also recommend that SSC officials be consulted on this work.

Recommendation

The existing DIA guideline document relating to relationships between agency communicators and communicators in ministers officers be consulted with Ministerial advisors and SSC officials for refinement and preparation of a formal ongoing document circulated before the end of 2009.

Develop a communications module for Public Service chief executive inductions

Establishing a set of consistent expectations and a shared understanding of the function among chief executives is a critical part of building a foundation for the profession. While the Review Group was heartened by obvious depth of understanding of the communications function by the representative group of Chief Executives surveyed, we are also of the view that such knowledge and appreciation may not be shared or well known in tiers of management immediately below Chief Executives. We believe preparation of an induction pack for incoming managers across all agencies would help to build a common understanding of how communicators might assist senior managers with the development and delivery of efficient and effective public services.

This module could also be made available to other public service professional groups and the Australian and New Zealand School of Government to improve understanding and expectations of the profession.

Recommendation

An induction package on the communications function be prepared and piloted for all newly appointed Public Service Chief Executives, in conjunction with the State Services Commission's Manager, CE Services and Agency Performance Improvement.

Head of Profession

The Review Group debated whether or not a designated 'Head of Profession' would be a useful intermediate to long term measure to improve the oversight and coordination of communications in the public sector.

While this has worked well in the United Kingdom, the Review Group believes that it does not sit terribly comfortably with the way the New Zealand Public Service is structured under the State Sector Act 1988. That Act gives Chief Executives considerable power to run their agencies and appoint specialist managers and staff in accordance with the particular requirements of their department or agency.

Several of the Chief Executives interviewed indicated a willingness and desire to see upskilling of communications professionals and the sharing of best practice in the sector. They even saw a role for the setting of some common minimum standards. They were equally adamant, however, that centralisation of the function would be counterproductive to the creation and delivery of effective communications for individual agencies.

A consensus of the Review Group is that the desirability of a 'Head of Profession' as a mentor and developer of standards should not be lost sight of for the longer term. The Review Group requests that both State Services Commission and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet gives consideration one to two year basis to the pros and cons of implementing such a position in New Zealand.

Recommendation

That the SSC in conjunction with DPMC make an assessment within a 1 to 2 year timeframe whether creation of a 'Head of Profession' for communications would add sufficient material value in the New Zealand context to warrant investment in creation of such a position.

Summary of Recommendations

Function definition recommendations

1. Reference documentation is prepared which clearly articulates the rationale for the communications function as a critical component in the development of policy and delivery of services in the public sector.
2. That a short, memorable but all encompassing function definition be agreed and provided to public service departments for incorporation in appropriate documentation relating to the communications function.
3. That further work is undertaken, in conjunction with the SSC's Human Resource Capability survey team, to identify what constitutes a core communications practitioner according to ANZCO codes, and distributed to the HR teams that input the survey data.
4. Work is completed, in consultation with SSC on a set of competencies for communicators. These competencies will be both technical and behavioural, using the Lominger and UK GCN frameworks and include a component for senior managers.

Leadership and accountability recommendations

5. Drawing on GCN web resources a set of best practice measurement reporting tools be developed and made available to all core public sector agencies. Such tools be trialled for one fiscal year and then incorporated as agreed measurements in departmental statements of service performance.
6. An induction package on the communications function be prepared and piloted for all newly appointed Public Service Chief Executives, in conjunction with the State Services Commission's Manager, CE Services and Agency Performance Improvement.
7. Heads of Communications to develop a training module for all communications practitioners in the public service agencies reinforcing their responsibilities to uphold and espouse the values set down in the code of conduct for public servants namely to be fair, impartial, responsible and trustworthy.
8. That the SSC in conjunction with DPMC make an assessment within a 1 to 2 year timeframe whether creation of a 'Head of Profession' for communications would add sufficient material value in the New Zealand context to warrant investment in creation of such a position.

Machinery of function recommendations

9. Research is undertaken into best practice communications units from which guideline information is produced on the makeup of 'model' units for agencies of varying size and type. Guideline material to be included as a component of the Chief Executives Induction packs.
10. Final consultation is undertaken on the stock-take of the UK GCN web resources and arrangements are made with the Network of Public Sector Communicators to make available information to all as an ongoing source of guidance on best practice.
11. The existing DIA guideline document relating to relationships between agency communicators and communicators in ministers officers be consulted with Ministerial advisors and SSC officials for refinement and preparation of a formal ongoing document circulated before the end of 2009.
12. A set of standard guideline procurement documents be prepared, drawing on pre-existing material and in conjunction with the Ministry of Economic Development's Procurement Group, tailored for the communications function. The templates to be made available to all procurement sections of all Government agencies.

Acknowledgements

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Jason Ryan of the SSC contributed significantly to formation of the Group and to the writing of the first draft of the final report. The work has been well critiqued by the Steering Group who displayed sufficient trust in the judgement of their colleagues on the Working Group to provide light handed oversight.

Finally, thanks are due to the Sponsor, Iain Rennie, the State Services Commissioner, for his encouragement and support of the Review project.

It has been a privilege to undertake this stocktake of public sector communications. We know it is but one step on a continuing journey of improvement. We stand ready and eager to contribute further to the development of a highly professional communications function that will deliver value for money.

Michael Player
Chairperson
Working Group
Communications Function Review
April 2009

Appendices

1. Terms of reference
2. Project Plan
3. Intervention logic for public sector communications
4. Heads of Communications Survey summary
5. Chief Executives Survey summary
6. Report on visit to the United Kingdom communications
7. Analysis of GCN and Canadian web resources
8. DIA Guidelines for dealing with Ministerial offices