

Head of Profession, communications

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1. Purpose

This paper provides recommendations to the State Services Commission Communications Review Steering Committee on the creation of a Head of Profession for the public sector. The paper is intended to recommend whether or not a Head of Profession, communications would add value in New Zealand.

2. Background

In August 2008 a working group was set up to review the communications function in the public sector. Its purpose was to provide a view of the state of the public sector government agency communications and outline areas for improvement. The resulting report 'Communications Function Review 2009' provided recommendations to the State Services Commissioner.

This paper addresses recommendation 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." The paper is based on research on how other jurisdictions approach the Head of Profession function and discussion and consultation, primarily with communications practitioners in New Zealand.

3. Discussion

Research for this paper included assessment of the New Zealand current operating environment, international models for Heads of Profession and the roles they play in the state sector.

New Zealand's operating environment

In looking at the value of a Head of Profession there are some points of context that need to be considered.

The first is the government's current policy regarding communication staff in the public sector: The government has made it clear that the number of communications staff working in the public sector needs to decrease. Moves to establish a new structure for communications could be perceived as contrary to Government intent.

The second is the State Sector Act, which devolves organisational responsibility and accountability to chief executives. Therefore the potential role of a Head of Profession must recognise the chief executives' accountability for operations within their own departments. This issue was canvassed in the Communications Review 2009. Feedback from chief executives, at that time, indicated that centralising the communications function would be considered counter-productive.

Lastly, work is being undertaken on Better Administrative and Support Services (BASS), a project looking at improving public sector efficiency by centralising some services. The scope of this work includes corporate communications and therefore also links to the question of a Head of Profession.

Therefore, in the short term it is unlikely that a Head of Profession will be created in the form of a stand alone entity. However, it would be useful, in the short term, to look at interim steps that could be taken to improve the standards and consistency of communication activity across the state sector.

Overseas models

Assessment of government communications functions of international models was undertaken. The models varied considerably, both in form and function. In Canada the Head of Profession sits within the Treasury Board of the Canadian Secretariat. In some Australian states it sits in the Department of Premier and Cabinet and South Africa has a dedicated function.

The UK also has a dedicated function headed by a Permanent Secretary for Government Communication and a Government Communication Network (GCN) which is accessible to all government communicators. The GCN is a virtual network that links the UK civil service with professional communicators. Its focus is on raising the professional standards of government communicators and best practice.

Both the Permanent Secretary role in the UK and the GCN were created as a result of the Phillis Review (2003), following a period of sustained media comment about concerns that the government's communications had become too politicised.

Head of Profession functions

Looking at the overseas models one thing becomes clear; there is no standard definition of what a Head of Profession is. Given this, an assessment of the potential value of the role is more usefully based on function rather than structure.

In summary, the broad functions a Head of Profession performs include:

- **Building skills and capability** – for example, developing competency frameworks and training resources for communications professionals, and sitting on appointment panels for senior government communications roles
- **Developing best practice standards and guidance** – for example, policies, mentoring and case studies to support communications staff
- **Coordination** – leading communications work on cross-government initiatives and sharing information
- **Centralised services** – specialised communications and marketing procurement, consultancy and project management services for government agencies

Would a Head of Profession add value in New Zealand?

This question was canvassed at a meeting of communications managers and directors (nine attended). All agreed that the functions of a Head of Profession would add value to the sector but that the establishment of the position would be difficult to achieve in the current environment.

It was also agreed that it was not possible to establish a Head of Profession within a one to two year time frame but that it was more likely that if it is to occur, it would be in a three to five year timeframe.

In addition to the communications meeting a discussion document and questionnaire were sent to all communication managers and directors. However, because there was a very poor response to the questionnaire, only the views of those at the meeting have been taken into account.

In the short term, the group suggested an alternative proposal, to appoint a Chair of Communications to assist the communications function in the public sector.

Proposal

Following assessment of existing activity in New Zealand and of the functions of a Head of Profession it is proposed that a Chair of State Sector Communications is established.

The proposal, to establish a Chair of Communications, was endorsed by the representative communications group. The chair, selected from public service communications managers and directors would be appointed by public service Chief Executives. It is envisaged that the Chair would continue with day to day

responsibilities and activities within the department or agency they work and an agreed percentage of time would be allocated to the role of the Chair.

The State Services Commissioner and the Chief Executive of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet would have responsibility for the management of the role and function of the chair, deputy chair, governance panel of chief executives and administrative support. The panel may also receive advice or consult with a senior communications practitioner operating outside of the state sector, such as the President of PRINZ or IABC.

The chair and deputy chair would operate on an annual rotation system.

New role: Chair, State sector communications

Purpose - to lift the contribution the communications function plays in support of government priorities by improving the quality and consistency of communications practice in the public sector

Benefits - to standardise communication practices, improve coordination across the public sector and enhance quality and consistency of communications

Role - to lead government communications and improve performance across the sector, develop best practice standards and guidance, centralise services and coordinate information across the sector

Person - senior communications manager or communications director status (for both chair and deputy chair), excellent management, relationship skills and judgement. A twelve month appointment on a rotation basis

Governance panel - headed by the State Services Commissioner and two public service chief executives, one of which should be DPMC (appointed on a rotation basis). It is essential that SSC and DPMC lead this initiative. Independent membership or advice may be sought from officials of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand or the International Association of Business Communicators

Adding value - there are a number of practical ways the proposed Chair of Communications will add value. For example:

- Standardisation of practices such as training and measurement
- Recruitment and appointment panels
- Promoting the professional competencies

- Sharing resources and information
- Chairing communication practitioners' monthly meetings
- Coordinated response to emergency and crisis management
- Coordination of public information campaigns
- Coordination of advertising programmes and publications material

In the discharge of these responsibilities the chair and deputy chair would receive secretariat support from the State Services Commission.

4. Evaluation

It is proposed that the role is reviewed after two years to consider its value, including an assessment on whether a more formal structure could or should be put in place.

5. Conclusions

1. Establishing a Head of Profession would add value but is not achievable in the short term.
2. Many of the functions of the Head of Profession could be incorporated into the proposed new role of Chair of Communications without having to establish the UK model framework.
3. The Chair of Communications would add value and produce real benefits to the state sector communications sector.

6. Recommendations

The working group recommends that:

1. The Head of Profession is deferred in the short term
2. The appointment of a Chair of Communications is approved
3. The appointment of a Deputy Chair is approved
4. A panel of chief executives is nominated and approved
5. Administrative support for the Chair is approved
6. A review is undertaken after two years

Appendix i

A Head of Communications for the Public Sector

Discussion Document

March 2010

Introduction

This document seeks ideas on whether a 'Head of Profession' for public sector communications would add value in New Zealand and, if so, how.

The document follows on from recommendation 8 of the Communications Function Review 2009. That recommendation is:

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.

The paper provides information on:

- What is meant by a 'Head of Profession'
- The potential value of the role
- Current context in New Zealand
- Feedback questions to help inform the assessment.

Feedback

You can provide feedback by:

1. Attending the discussion at 12:30 Thursday, 18 March, at MORST or,
2. Emailing your feedback to: elizabeth@griffincomms.co.nz by Friday 19th March

Next Step

The next step is to take your feedback and produce a report on the concept of a head of the public sector communications profession in New Zealand.

Context

We have been asked to consider the introduction of a Head of Profession. The UK established a Head of Profession as a result of an independent review of government communications. A number of other countries have also established this position.

Do we need a Head of Profession in New Zealand? What value would it add and what are the potential benefits or drawbacks of such a position if it were introduced here?

To put these questions in perspective we have briefly summarised the current operating environment in New Zealand which includes:

1. The government's 'sinking lid' policy on the number of communication staff in the public sector. The government has signalled they expect the number of communications staff working in the public sector to decrease and to date that expectation has been met. Moves to establish a new form of communications function in the public sector could be perceived as contrary to Government intent.
2. New Zealand's State Sector Act devolving organisational responsibility and accountability to chief executives. Any discussion around the potential role of a head of function would have to recognise chief executives' ultimate accountability for the operations within their own department. This issue was canvassed in the Communications Review and there was clear feedback from chief executives consulted that centralising the communications function would be counterproductive.

We also want to identify any activities that are not currently being fulfilled here and to discuss ways those activities could be accommodated.

In the short term it is unlikely that a Head of public sector communications will be established. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss any interim steps that could be taken with out the creation of a formal head of profession and the medium to long term potential value of a Head of Profession position.

What is a Head of Profession for communication?

The term Head of Profession is used in various countries to describe different things. Rather than thinking of it as a particular role or part of a structure, it is more instructive to think of what activities it encompasses.

Based on overseas models the broad functions that a centralised or Head of Profession performs include:

1. **Building skills and capability** – for example, developing competency frameworks and training resources for communications professionals, and sitting on appointment panels for senior government communications roles
2. **Developing best practice standards and guidance** – for example, policies, mentoring and case studies to support communications staff
3. **Coordination** – leading communications work on cross-government initiatives and sharing information
4. **Centralised services** – specialised communications and marketing procurement, consultancy and project management services for government agencies.

How they are structured overseas

Overseas models for delivering the Head of Profession function vary considerably. For example the Permanent Secretary for Communications in the UK and the Government Communication and Information System in South Africa has a dedicated function.

In other jurisdictions there are a number of examples where at least some of these functions sit within other types of organisations. This is most common with the best practice standards and guidance role. In Canada for example, the role sits with the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat and in some Australian States it sits within the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

What could a Head of Profession add in New Zealand?

This section provides background for discussion on whether New Zealand is 'lacking' in terms of the four activities listed above and if so, potential ways for addressing them.

It may be useful to think about the value and viability of the ongoing implementation and oversight of some of those recommendations sitting with one organisation.

You might also consider how the recommendations in the Communications Function Review 2009 might fit with the role and functions of a centralised Head of Profession.

1. Building skills and capability

Existing Activity

Network of Public Sector Communications

The Network provides a professional forum to share information, contacts and experiences. Its constituted aims are:

“To provide, by the participation and contribution of members and the organisation of meetings and activities, a professional network for friendship and encouragement, and sharing of resources, information, contacts and experience, with the aim of improving the quality of public sector communications.”

The Network has a focus on training activities to build the skills and knowledge of public sector communicators. In more recent years the Network has increased its activity, concentrating on building the capability of early career professionals.

Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) and International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Wellington

The Institute and Association both have aims similar to the Network, although have a wider membership base as they include members from the private sector. They also hold a number of events based on training and information sharing between practitioners. Both have been increasingly active over the last few years.

2. Developing best practice standards and guidance

Existing Activity

PRINZ also has a focus on standards and guidance. It has a code of ethics that its approximately 1300 members are required to sign-up to.

IABC offers its members access to a library of communications resources including books, research and reports.

Both PRINZ, IABC and the Institute of Policy Studies hold annual awards as a way of highlighting and rewarding communications best practice, many of the awards are relevant to the public sector.

The Cabinet Manual

The Manual has guidelines for government advertising that are designed to provide guidance on advertising and publicity. Cases in recent years have highlighted the importance of these guidelines. However, the guidelines have the very limited focus of ensuring government activities do not support party political purposes and are not intended to provide wider advice or support.

Links to Comms Review Recommendations

A number of the recommendations from the Communications Function Review are addressing the question of standards and guidance, including:

- Recommendation 5 on measurement and reporting tools
- Recommendation 7 on a training module for communications practitioners regarding on SSC Code of Conduct
- Recommendation 9 on research into best practice communications units to be used to develop in formation of model units
- Recommendations 10 on *The Network* being made available in New Zealand, along with material from the UK's GCN resources
- Recommendation 12 on a set of standard guideline procurement documents.

3. Coordination

Existing Activity

Cross-government communication coordination does not tend to occur as a matter of course. But it does happen, usually around large multi-agency initiatives.

State Services Commission

The Commission currently plays the most visible role in the area of cross government coordination. The Commission was a major driver behind the *Communications Function Review* and in recent years it has also played a limited coordination role in areas such as OIA requests and parliamentary questions, which DPMC had done in the past.

The SSC facilitates the monthly meetings of public sector communications managers, which focus on sharing context, experience and expertise amongst managers. Attendance at the meetings tends to be limited and therefore their value in strengthening cross-government coordination has been limited.

4. Centralised services

Centralised communications service does happen in some jurisdictions, a notable example being the Central Office of Information in the UK. The Office is a communications centre of excellence and operates on a cost recovery basis.

In New Zealand the *Better Administrative and Support Service* (BASS) project is looking at improving public sector efficiency by centralising some services. BASS's scope covers executive and corporate services, which includes corporate communications. BASS therefore seems an obvious way to address the question of the potential to centralise communications service in New Zealand.

Questionnaire

Below are a set of questions that will help shape a paper for SSC on how a Head of Profession might work in New Zealand.

We would appreciate any feedback you have on these points, or any other issues you think are relevant to the discussion.

1. What activities could be undertaken to deliver on the intent of a head of profession?
2. How would these differ from the purpose and activities of existing organisations?
3. What capability (skills and experience) would be required to deliver these activities?
4. Is there potential for existing organisations to play a greater role in delivering 'head of profession' activities?
5. How could these activities link with recommendations included in the Communications Review?
6. Would a Head of Profession add value to New Zealand?
7. Why?
8. Any general comments