

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT INSIGHT BRIEF

NUMBER 7 OCTOBER 2019

THE INNOVATION SYSTEM OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE OF CANADA

The OECD report *The Innovation System of the Public Service of Canada* reviews the experience of innovation in the public service of Canada and the broader innovation literature to build an emerging model for Canada and other countries to assess their own innovation systems and navigate their innovation journeys.

What is known about public sector innovation?

- Innovation is varied, multi-layered and fundamentally complex
- Innovation involves ongoing discovery and learning
- Innovation requires intervention (active management and support)
- Innovation is influenced by surrounding ideologies and paradigms
- Innovation can be top-down or bottom-up
- Innovation is a process, not an event

The implications drawn from learning about innovation is that innovation is a key capacity and capability that government's require – and that **a systemic and systematic approach is needed to support innovation.**

Introducing a new model for public sector innovation

The emergent model of public sector innovation offers four interdependent factors that affect innovation performance. This is not a prescriptive model, and rather provides four lenses through which to consider and assess the strengths of an innovation system:

Clarity - *is there a clear signal being sent to system actors about innovation and how it fits with other priorities?*

Parity – *does innovation have equal standing with other considerations when it comes to proposed courses of action?*

Suitability – *are the capabilities, systems, and infrastructure appropriate and sufficient for the available option?*

Normality – *is innovation seen as integral, rather than as an occasionally accepted deviation from the norm?*

This brief is based on the OECD publication *The Innovation System of the Public Service of Canada*.

Key messages:

- Innovation is an important tool for government as they're faced with rapid technological change, fiscal constraints and increased citizen expectations
- Innovation is fundamentally complex and much is still being learnt about how to support and embed it as a practice within governments
- The Canadian public sector has a long history of innovation activities and has a strong base to start from. However, the innovation system is still quite fragmented and more needs to be done to ensure innovation is an embedded, sustainable practice and not an ad hoc activity
- An effective innovation system is dependent on sustained, collective effort, involving action from different actors at the individual, organisational and system level

The report is available at:
<https://www.oecd.org/innovation/the-innovation-system-of-the-public-service-of-canada-9789264307735-en.htm>

Beyond Canada – how the model may be relevant for the governments of other countries

Innovation is an issue relevant to all governments as they face a rapidly changing environment with similar structural and systemic issues. Although countries differ in their specific contexts and priorities, the innovation model is an adaptable tool which will be of use to other countries.

There are three priority concerns for government with regard to public service innovation: delivering on today (exploiting current knowledge), delivering for tomorrow (exploration and engagement with emergent issues and technologies), and ensuring innovation readiness (ensuring the necessary absorptive capacity across the public service to engage with new ideas and new ways of working).

The report recommends that governments seeking better understand their innovation systems can make the most use of the systems model if they reflect on the following: understanding the past, exploring the present, and considering the possible (futures). All four elements of the innovation model are crucial, and a country's innovation system will only be as strong as its weakest area.

The OECD, through its Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, will work with other countries to test and further develop the model.

For more information, contact Dr. Richard Boyle (rboyle@ipa.ie)

This brief is one of an occasional series of papers highlighting issues of interest in public management. It was prepared by Ellen Garvey.

Other insight briefs produced as part of this series are available at <https://www.ipa.ie/research-papers/insight-briefs.4014.html>