

RESEARCH PAPER

24

WORKFORCE PLANNING IN THE IRISH PUBLIC SERVICE



STATE OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE SERIES

JOANNA O'RIORDAN
JUNE 2019



An Roinn Caiteachais
Phoiblí agus Athchóirithe
Department of Public
Expenditure and Reform



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ADMINISTRATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2012, a research paper in the IPA's State of the Public Service series (O'Riordan, 2012) explored workforce planning in the Irish Public Service. This paper was written half-way through the Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund) bailout of the Irish economy. Delivering on the terms of the bailout required significant cuts in public service expenditure and consequently in staff numbers. Workforce planning was seen as a tool to support government departments in maintaining services with an average reduction in the workforce of 10 per cent (Boyle, 2018).

The Irish economy has since broadly recovered and, writing in spring 2019, the Central Bank (Central Bank of Ireland, 2019) are optimistic about growth prospects, notwithstanding the uncertainty in relation to Brexit. The public service has also largely recovered from the years of austerity. By 2017 numbers employed in the public service had surpassed 2008 levels (Boyle, 2018). However, workforce capacity remains critically important:

It seems obvious that 'capacity' should be a central concern of public managers. Without the capacity to make good decisions and to implement them well, ineffective government is the best expectation one might have; the worst expectation is a failed state. The stewardship of capacity is therefore a central responsibility of management at all levels (Murray, 2007).

Strategic workforce planning is fundamental to capacity building in organisations. It facilitates the development of competencies in public servants and it promotes greater efficiency and quality in the delivery of services.

This Research Paper was commissioned as part of Our Public Service 2020 (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2017). This is the current reform programme for the public service. Action 13 requires the public service to mainstream workforce planning. A decision was made by the Action 13 working group to commission an updated research paper from the IPA to support them in their key objectives of:

- Advancing strategic workforce planning as a discipline within the public sector
- Ensuring the value proposition of strategic workforce planning is understood across the public sector
- Considering shared approaches to common workforce challenges.

1.1 Workforce planning in the Irish public service

Against a backdrop of financial collapse, the government in 2008/09 sought to reduce public service numbers through incentivised early retirement and career break schemes, with departing staff not replaced. In late 2009, Employment Control Frameworks (ECFs) were introduced in respect of each sector. These specified staffing reductions and in some cases the distribution of posts. A moratorium on the filling of vacancies by either recruitment or promotion was also put in place until the ECF was shown to be operating effectively in bringing about the reduction in staff numbers required.

However, concerns were expressed at the loss of human capital as a result of this downsizing, particularly in the Health sector (Cullen, 2012; Wall, 2012). Based on the negative impact on service delivery of downsizing initiatives in the 1990s in a number of countries including the US, Australia and Canada, the OECD (2011:11) emphasised that it

is 'essential that workforce adjustment measures are carried out within a sound framework of strategic workforce planning aimed at minimising adverse impacts and optimising decisions about the reduction and reallocation of staff'.

In order to support the process of workforce reduction, the government established strategic workforce planning groups in the civil service, education, health, local authority, defence and justice sectors. These workforce planning groups were intended 'to ensure that sectoral employers are developing plans to deal with the operational and strategic consequences arising from the anticipated staff turnover in 2012' (Howlin, 2012). While some organisations did subsequently engage with workforce planning, the overall picture in the Irish public service appears to be largely consistent with the conclusions of the OECD (2013:5) that 'many member countries continue to make little use of workforce planning'.

In the Public Service Reform Plan 2014-2016 (DPER, 2014) the emphasis remained on 'doing more with less'. While workforce planning is mentioned in the context of 'more closely aligning skills and competencies with emerging business needs' (DPER, 2014:30), the priority HR reform areas were changes to the HR function in organisations with the introduction of shared service centres to manage transactional HR issues, a review of people management and, with the gradual lifting of recruitment embargoes, a shift towards open competition and specialist recruitment.

Our Public Service 2020 (DPER, 2017), the third public service reform plan, was published in late 2017. The overarching emphasis of the new plan is to build public service capacity in order to deliver better services to the public. This is reflected in three pillars, Delivering for our public, Innovating for our future, and Developing our people and organisations. In order to deliver on these goals, the framework identifies 18 specific actions to be substantively progressed over the lifetime of the plan. Action 13 is to mainstream strategic workforce planning in the public service. An action team of representatives from each sector was put in place to progress the agenda, supported by the Public Service Reform Delivery Office in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER).

1.2 Report structure

Following on from this introduction, Chapter Two reviews public service workforce issues in Ireland, in particular highlighting the evolving nature of the role of public servants and reviewing a range of public service workforce issues. Chapter Three provides an update in relation to the workforce planning literature since the first IPA workforce planning report in 2012. The main focus of the chapter is to contribute towards the development of a shared understanding of workforce planning in the Irish public service, to highlight the benefits of workforce planning and, given the slowness to adopt workforce planning in public service organisations (OECD, 2013), some of the challenges or reasons for inertia which have been identified.

While some general guidance from the literature is provided for organisations engaging with strategic workforce planning, the report does not go into detail in respect of workforce planning models, that is, approaches to implementing workforce planning. This was comprehensively done in the 2012 report (O'Riordan, 2012). More recently, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2018) provide extensive guidance on workforce planning practice. However, it is very beneficial to see how practice is implemented, in other words, what good workforce planning looks like. For this reason, Chapter Four includes a case study of the Property Registration Authority, an Irish public service organisation with a well-developed approach to strategic workforce planning. Chapter Five provides conclusions.

2. THE PUBLIC SERVICE WORKFORCE – CONTEXT AND ISSUES

In discussing capacity and workforce planning in the Irish public service, context matters a great deal. This chapter describes a range of societal and workforce issues that impact on how the public service workforce is managed.

Public service work and the skills required of public servants are changing. In particular technology, demographics and economics are impacting the shape and nature of public services. The external labour market and prevailing economic climate also impact on the public service workforce in particular in relation to recruitment and remuneration.

2.1 The changing nature of public service work

It is well documented that the public service work environment is characterised by the need for ongoing reform and innovation. The drivers of these forces are numerous, encompassing factors such as the forces of globalisation, digitisation, decreased trust in political institutions, changing demographics, budgetary pressures, polarisation of politics, increasing complexity of social problems, less deferential and more demanding citizens and so on (Dickinson et al, 2019). There is also ongoing economic uncertainty. While the consequences of the Great Recession a decade ago have receded somewhat, the uncertainty surrounding Brexit dominates most economic and political conversations. Taken together, these factors illustrate how a VUCA world, characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity will increasingly shape the operating environment of public servants (Van der Wal, 2017).

A research team from the University of Birmingham (Needham et al, 2014) have carried out extensive research exploring the consequences of public service reform and how change impacts on people working in these services. The principal finding of their research is that future public service work will require a different set of workforce roles than in the past. They note that, while professional skills will remain important, public servants will increasingly have a role in negotiating and brokering interests among a broad array of different groups. The public service workforce therefore requires a set of relational skills. Crucial in this skill set is the ability to understand services from the citizen or consumer perspective.

Expanding on their initial review, the Birmingham team carried out further empirical research with workers from all sectors with the objective of gathering perspectives on how public service roles are changing and the types of roles, skills and competencies that will be important in the future. From this research ten characteristics of the public servant of the twenty-first century were identified. These are summarised in Figure 2.1.

FIGURE 2.1 TEN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FUTURE PUBLIC SERVANT

The twenty-first century public servant...

1. ...is a municipal entrepreneur, undertaking a wide range of roles
2. ...engages with citizens in a way that expresses their shared humanity and pooled expertise (working co-productively or in partnership with citizens is definitely on the agenda)
3. ...is recruited and rewarded for generic skills as well as technical expertise - 'soft skills' matter
4. ...builds a career which is fluid across services and sectors
5. ...combines an ethos of publicness with an understanding of commerciality
6. ...is rethinking public services to enable them to survive in an era of perma-austerity and ongoing change
7. ...needs organisations which are fluid and supportive rather than siloed and controlling - public service organisation need to be 'fit for purpose'
8. ...rejects heroic leadership in favour of distributed and collaborative models of leadership
9. ...is rooted in locality which frames a sense of loyalty and identity
10. ...reflects on practice and learns from others.

Source: Dickinson et al (2019)

One important clarification is that the roles and attributes highlighted above are likely to be pooled within teams rather than displayed in one person. As Needham and Mangan comment (2014:21), 'the 21st century public servant is a composite role and exists to illuminate a series of working practices rather than to provide a blueprint for a single worker'. Finally, based on their own research findings and also a review of other international research, Dickson et al (2019:12) conclude that 'traditional, professional skills are insufficient in the future context and there are an important set of 'softer' and less tangible skills that are necessary in driving a systems approach to public services'.

From an Irish perspective, we are perhaps only on the cusp of seeing how the role of public servants may need to evolve in the future. There have been some initiatives around citizen engagement, though the notion of co-production remains remote. Our Public Service 2020 generally promotes innovation, and in local government the concept of place-based leadership and an ethos of publicness combined with commerciality are strong. Ireland also still has a strong tradition of the civil service generalist. While perhaps somewhat discredited in recent times, the emerging research would seem to suggest that forecasts of the generalist's demise have been premature.

Ultimately there is reassurance for Irish public servants in the conclusions of Dickinson et al (2019), who note that while institutions do change, they do so in an evolutionary rather than revolutionary way. The challenge then, particularly for public service leaders, is to know how to navigate the future, retaining what is of value from established institutions and norms, while embracing new ideas, technologies and ways of doing public service work. However, one important consequence of the rethinking of the dimensions of public service work is the need to invest in strategic workforce planning which will help organisations to pinpoint the skills they need to ensure that we have a public service that is 'fit for purpose'.

2.2 The Irish Public service workforce – numbers and context

The number of people employed in the Irish public service continues to rise after a period of decline between 2008 and 2013. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, with the imperative of reducing the cost of the public service, recruitment was almost completely stopped. The non-replacement of retiring public servants resulted in numbers falling by 10 per cent over the period. However since then, numbers have risen steadily, surpassing the 2008 peak in 2017. At the end of 2018 numbers employed were 323,000.¹

Compared to other OECD countries, numbers employed by the government in Ireland as a proportion of the labour force are low. The size of government employment varies significantly across European countries ranging from 29 per cent of the labour force in Denmark to 11 per cent in Germany. Ireland at 15 per cent is consequently at the lower end.

In terms of the sectoral breakdown, the largest increases in numbers have been in the health and education sectors where a growing population is a key factor in the need for expanded services. These two sectors combined account for two-thirds of the public service workforce. Employment remains below 2008 levels in the local government, justice and defence sectors.

The ageing of the public service workforce is also an issue. For example, in the civil service one-quarter of the workforce will be eligible to retire in the next five to ten years.

Industrial relations and pay issues are central to the public service environment in Ireland. As part of the austerity measures of 2011, the pay scale of new recruits to the public service was reduced by 10 per cent. This issue is referred to as 'equal pay' by the public service trade unions, the implication being that there should be 'equal pay for equal work'. It has remained a pertinent issue across the public service, with an estimated 60,000 workers affected, and trade unions continue to campaign on the issue.

In the 2017 Public Service Stability Agreement (Workplace Relations Commission, 2017), the successor to the Lansdowne Road Agreement, the government committed to examining the issue of 'new entrants', those recruited since the 2011 pay scale changes. Following negotiations the government, in September 2018, put forward proposals providing for 'new entrants' to skip certain incremental points on their pay scale so that they would ultimately catch up with colleagues. However, the lower starting rates remained.

The issue of 'equal pay' is particularly strongly felt in the education sector. Allowances, for example for extra qualifications, are seen as part of teacher's pay and differentials in these between pre and post 2011 recruits were not part of the September deal. All three teachers' unions put the deal to a vote of members with the TUI accepting the proposals, while both the ASTI and INTO rejected the deal (Miley, 2018). As of spring 2019, the ASTI and INTO have indicated that they may ballot for strike action but talks with government are ongoing.

A review by the Public Service Pay Commission (2018) on recruitment and retention in the health sector was published in September 2018. The review was carried out under the Public Service Stability Agreement 2018-2020. The Commission are adopting a modular approach to their work and the research carried out was in respect of medical consultants, non-consultant hospital doctors and nurses and midwives. The main findings of the report are that there is no generalised recruitment and retention problem in respect of nursing and midwifery, but that some difficulties exist in meeting workforce requirements in some specific areas.

¹ Data in this section is drawn from Boyle (2018) using the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's databank figures and the OECD's Government at a Glance (2017). Numbers represent whole-time equivalents rather than actual numbers.

In December 2018 the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) indicated that 95% of its members had voted in favour of strike action over issues related to recruitment and retention, in particular what the INMO regard as inadequate staffing levels in public health services. In February a series of three one-day strikes were held. The Labour Court were asked to intervene and following negotiations a deal resulting in changes to grading and allowances was reached. This will be voted on by members of the nursing unions.

In the aftermath of the nurses' deal there are indications that other public service unions are likely to demand wage reviews at new government talks.

2.3 The dimensions of the workforce issues in Ireland's public service

The Irish public service is considered an employer of choice attracting large numbers of high calibre applicants even for competitions with a small number of vacancies. However, while the overall picture is good, there are still aspects of recruitment that require attention. For example, there are growing indications that there is a shortage of qualified teachers in Ireland and that the problem is likely to worsen due to a significant spike in student numbers over the next six years.

More generally, in organisations where labour turnover is an issue, consideration needs to be given to whether recruiters are attracting the right skills mix and whether organisations are investing effectively in the development of new recruits. Labour turnover is extremely costly so any organisation facing this needs to review processes.

Regulations around public service recruitment which ensure the integrity and merit of appointments can make it difficult to hire top candidates in a tight labour market. Even with the best efforts of the Public Appointments Service (PAS), organising several rounds of a recruitment competition can take a number of months, by which time candidates can have taken up alternative, private sector opportunities. At clerical officer level, where the PAS have significantly streamlined recruitment procedures, it is still not always possible to ensure there are enough suitable candidates to fill vacancies.

Once appointed, Freyens (2010) notes in relation to Australian public service recruits, it is important that employers find out more about the skills, motivations and aspirations of new recruits, particularly at graduate level and above. However, in Ireland this is at best done in an ad-hoc manner. If the public service invests in the induction, education and training of young graduates it is imperative that they have progression opportunities and a future in the public service. In the context of an ageing public service, having a strong, internal talent pool is vital.

With high levels of experienced and long-serving managers due to leave the Irish public service over the next decade, succession planning has emerged as a key area. The situation is exacerbated by the two major recruitment embargoes, during the 1980s and more recently after the financial crisis in 2008. In some organisations this means that there is a diminished cohort of potential successors for future leadership roles. Furthermore, as noted by Freyens (2010: 271), 'leadership is not acquired through leadership seminars and country retreats, but by building in-house experience and mentoring high quality recruits'. There are further associated concerns about the ongoing loss of corporate memory and core skills at middle management level due to retirements. Capturing and in some way retaining the knowledge and expertise of departing employees is as important as recruiting their replacements, but few organisations have policies or initiatives in this regard.

One staff development area that is currently being implemented by the civil service is a mobility initiative. Staff mobility, or the opportunity to change organisation at the same grade in order to further develop skills and experiences, was one of the action points in the Civil Service Renewal Plan (2014). Since 2018, staff at Clerical and Executive Officer level have been allowed to apply for transfers outside of Dublin. By early 2019, 20 per cent of eligible staff had applied for a move. It is intended to extend the scheme to higher civil service grades in the future, while Our Public Service 2020 (DPER, 2017) Action 14 refers to promoting greater mobility between public service organisations. However, a note of caution in respect of high levels of staff turnover is struck by Sasse and Norris (Institute for Government, 2019). They describe the current UK public service open labour market, where government departments may lose up to a quarter of their staff annually, as 'not healthy but debilitating'. Aside from the expense occasioned by high levels of personnel change in terms of recruitment, training and lost productivity, excessive turnover impacts on policy development and implementation.

Finally, staff engagement and morale are areas requiring ongoing attention due to their connection with employee performance. In staff surveys carried out in 2017 and 2018 in the civil service and health sectors, levels of satisfaction are shown to be improving on previous surveys. This is positive, but not unexpected. The austerity years of 2008 to 2014, with pay cuts, the departure of colleagues, no promotion and very limited development opportunities impacted significantly on morale so it is not surprising that the reversal of these conditions has a positive impact. There also remain areas of concern, for example the limited culture of innovation and involvement in the civil service, and the inadequate management of poor performance (DPER, 2018) and a need to tackle a culture of bullying and harassment in the health sector (HSE, 2018).

The common denominator across all these issues, which have the potential to seriously impact on public service capacity, is the imperative of planning in relation to the public service workforce. This needs to be done at all levels - sectorally, at organisation level and within teams. Strategic workforce planning is an approach that assists in this process.

3. WORKFORCE PLANNING REVISITED

This chapter updates the literature review in respect of workforce planning included in the 2012 IPA research paper on workforce planning. Section 3.1 looks to provide clarity around what is understood by workforce planning. This is followed by a review of why workforce planning matters. The context for the Irish public service has changed from austerity to innovation and development but the benefits of workforce planning remain significant.

Notwithstanding the benefits of workforce planning and the opportunity costs of not doing so – accumulated inefficiency, lost resources, missed opportunities – many organisations, public and private have been slow to commit to workforce planning. Section 3.4 examines some of the reasons for this inertia and makes recommendations as to how blockages to workforce planning can be addressed.

3.1 Towards a common understanding of workforce planning

There are numerous definitions of workforce planning, developed by practitioners, academics, think-tanks and others. One recent attempt to express workforce planning succinctly is:

A continuous business planning process of shaping and structuring the workforce to ensure there is significant and sustainable capability and capacity to deliver organisational objectives, now and in the future (Australian Public Service Commission).

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's proposed definition for the Irish public service is included in Figure 3.1.

FIGURE 3.1: A PROPOSED DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC EXPENDITURE AND REFORM DEFINITION OF WORKFORCE PLANNING

In the Irish public service, workforce planning is:

- The proactive management of current and future human resources by each organisation, aligned with their Statement of Strategy, to ensure the following are reflected:
 - Access to the right skills and experience
 - The changing needs of each organisation
 - The evolving environments within which they operate (includes impacts in relation to technological developments), and
 - Available resources

This should be balanced with wider resource priorities in order to:

- Ensure effective and responsive delivery of public services
- Underpin efficiency, accountability and drive reform in public service delivery, and
- Support the sustainable evolution of the public service pay and pensions bill, in line with the Government's overarching approach to public expenditure management.

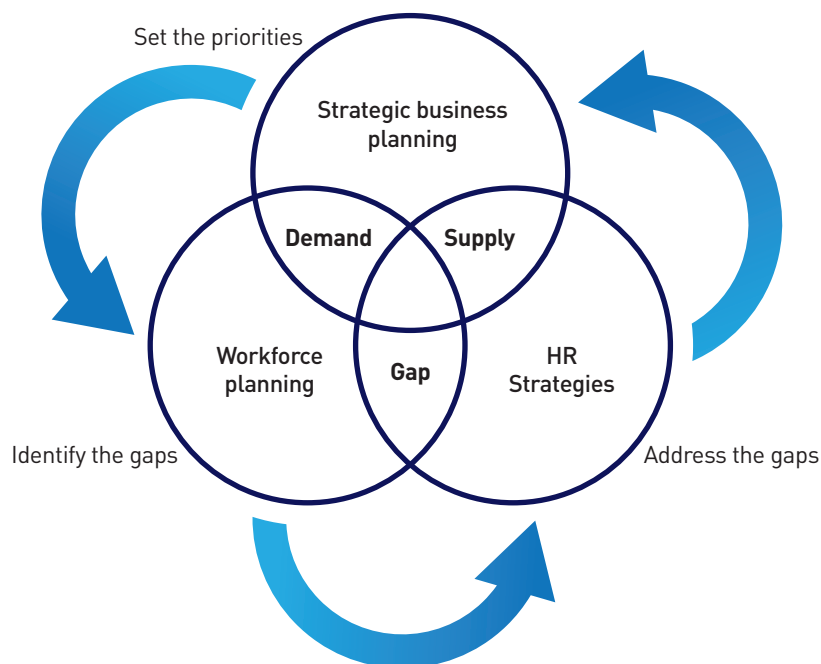
Source: Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

One of the most widely referred to definitions of workforce planning is 'having the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time', with 'at the right cost' sometimes added. While this definition is memorable and accessible, its usefulness has been criticised (HR Society, 2013) because the emphasis on the word 'right' suggests the workforce planning is an exact science that can produce right answers. In practice, workforce planning is an iterative and ongoing process. Implying that exact answers can be obtained may discourage managers, aware of the many uncertainties their organisations face, from attempting to plan.

What matters more than the wording used in any particular definition is what the concept implies. In essence workforce planning is about matching the organisation's demand for labour with the supply of labour over time. The term 'strategic' with which workforce planning is frequently prefixed is to denote the fact that this should be done in a manner that reflects the overall strategy or objectives of the organisation. Workforce planning is meaningless unless it reflects the nature of the business the organisation is engaged in, the types of people who are its customers, any planned business developments, relationships with partner organisations, the financial situation of the organisation and so on (Robinson and Hirsh, 2008).

A further key aspect of workforce planning is that it is not an end in itself, but rather is integrated with business planning, as noted above, and also with other HR processes and the organisation's HR or people strategy (Figure 3.2). Because workforce planning involves looking at the capacity of the workforce it stands to reason that the response to the gaps identified will involve reviewing the organisation's approach to the process of selection, recruitment, retention, development, compensation, and performance management of staff. According to the OECD (2013:14), 'Workforce planning can help organisations rethink and modernise their entire HRM process...Workforce planning can upgrade the practice of human resource management in government'.

FIGURE 3.2: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRATEGIC BUSINESS PLANNING, WORKFORCE PLANNING AND HUMAN RESOURCES STRATEGIES



Source: Australian Public Service Commission (2011)

The literature (CIPD, 2018) distinguishes between strategic and operational workforce planning. The former, which is suggested to have a three to five year horizon, is a comprehensive assessment of the external environment and internal business objectives and how these will impact on staffing decisions. An operational plan has a shorter time horizon, up to twelve months and focuses on identifying numbers of people to satisfy more immediate needs and how resulting gaps might be addressed. As noted by the CIPD (2018: 5), 'it is a tool to manage business as usual', focused more on headcount rather than the organisation and competencies of the workforce. In practice, most organisations fall somewhere between the two types of plan, they recognise the value of going beyond short-term workforce and recruitment planning, but struggle with taking a longer term perspective and, in particular, the more detailed workforce demand and supply analysis.

For many organisations the real problem with workforce planning is its execution. Organisations get the concept, but not being fully convinced of its benefits, are put off by its 'messiness'. As noted by Reilly (2016), the HR complaint is that management does not take the task seriously enough while managers argue that HR designs unnecessarily complicated processes asking for information they do not have or would find difficult to produce. The outcome is that nothing happens. The challenge for all involved is to keep workforce planning simple. At a most basic level, Reilly (2015: 2) notes 'there should be one version of the truth on essential data items (like headcount) agreed with Finance colleagues'. Beyond that the focus should be only on essential data, 'nothing irritates managers more than being asked for information that is subsequently not used'. Talking to managers about their priorities and workforce needs is often the next step. Lastly, the CIPD refer to a workforce planning mind-set rather than merely a process. This is helpful because it points to the fact that workforce planning should be an ongoing preoccupation of both HR professionals and line managers and that it should imbue the culture of the organisation.

3.2 Why workforce planning matters

According to the HR Society (2013:6), 'the case for WFP hits us in the face daily. How often do we find 'shortages of staff' as an excuse for poor customer service...Workforce planning will not solve all our resource problems, but for relatively minor effort, it can make us aware of risks, help us to plan to overcome them, and minimise disruption to meeting the demands of our mission'.

Workforce planning goes beyond forecasting headcount and filling vacancies. The objective is a detailed understanding of the organisation's workforce requirements and how those requirements can be addressed both now and in the future. Rather than simply reacting to political or market events, the organisation has a planned approach to the recruitment, deployment and development of staff. This is summed up by the OECD (2013:8) who conclude that 'workforce planning has the potential to contribute to government's agility by preparing it to respond to changing strategies or needs'. Some of the specific benefits of workforce planning identified by the HR Society are included in Figure 3.3.

FIGURE 3.3: WORKFORCE PLANNING – WHO BENEFITS:

Employees:

- Reduced stress due to overwork, insufficient co-workers, poorly deployed staff
- Reduced stress occasioned by dissatisfied clients
- More effective performance management and development
- Better career path planning

Managers:

- Having sufficient people to meet the demands of the task
- Better able to meet targets
- Better staff morale and productivity
- Avoiding adverse effects of poor workforce planning on costs

Senior management:

- Avoiding adverse effects on costs and service delivery
- Ensuring continuity of business
- Avoiding poor publicity

HR Departments:

- Effectively supporting organisation needs
- Achieving departmental goals
- Benefits from more streamlined processes (e.g. recruitment)
- Gaining professional credibility

Source: Adapted from the HR Society (2013)

3.3 Workforce planning and the public service

Workforce planning first came to prominence in a public service context in the mid-2000s. Initially it was promoted as a key element of organisations' response to the challenge posed by an ageing workforce (OECD, 2007). Subsequently, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, workforce planning was seen as central to managing workforce reductions. Drawing on experiences across member countries with previous downsizing initiatives, the OECD (2011:11) cautioned that it is 'essential that workforce adjustment measures be carried out within a sound framework of strategic workforce planning aimed at minimising adverse impacts and optimising decisions about the reduction and reallocation of staff'. The recovery of the international economy has resulted in a move away from austerity as the primary focus of the public service, instead the emphasis is frequently placed on the rapidly changing context and challenges faced by the public service. This has resulted in renewed attention on public service capacity or 'whether the public workforce have the skills, leadership and people management systems needed to tackle today's and tomorrow's public governance challenges' (OECD, 2019).

Challenges for public service organisations that fail to implement workforce planning are similar to those for organisations in general – incurring unnecessary costs, lost revenue, disrupted services and unsatisfactory recruitment processes – however, for public service organisations there is also the further consideration of how it impacts on policy making. The management committee of the Australian Public Service Commission (Freyens,

2010) put it in stark terms when they concluded that in the absence of workforce planning 'we will not be able to retain the skills we need to deliver the high quality policy, programmes and services that a government expects of a professional public service...nor will we meet the expectations of the Australian community'.

There is also a clear connection between workforce planning and governance. Good governance is an essential responsibility of senior public managers, who are accountable to government for the organisation achieving its goals and managing its resources efficiently. In a public service context where labour can account for around 70 per cent of overall costs (Robinson and Hirsh, 2008), effective workforce planning supports organisations in showing that they are spending public money appropriately. Similar to strategic planning, risk management or audit, workforce planning is a further tool of good oversight, with Freynes (2010: 275) emphasising that 'not having it indicates an incomplete governance toolkit'.

In summary, the reasons public service organisations need to engage with workforce planning are:

- There is a clear linkage between the objectives and budget of the organisation and the workforce
- Management have a heightened awareness of the linkages between the objectives and budget of the organisation and the workforce
- Organisation governance is supported – workforce issues are addressed in the present and consideration is given to how they may be impacted by changes in the future
- There is better people management generally because of linkages to other HR policies and practices
- Labour costs are reduced in favour of workforce deployment and flexibility
- Quality of outputs are improved and there is better service delivery
- Future retirements and departures are planned for, with successors identified and knowledge captured
- Vacancies are no longer considered in terms of gaps and replacements but as opportunities for change
- Employee morale and retention improve because staff realise that management are interested in their development and progression and because they have the opportunity and time to take up development opportunities.

3.4 Challenges and inertia in respect of workforce planning

Workforce planning, notwithstanding the clear needs for it and the wide-ranging benefits of doing it, is challenging for organisations. In late 2018 the Institute of Employment Studies who have championed workforce planning over many decades commented that they are 'surprised and disappointed' (Hirsh, 2018:2) how very few HR professionals have committed to workforce planning, with organisations 'mostly still saying that they will strengthen workforce planning 'when things are easier', or when their 'HR system is fully implemented' or when they have completed their latest reorganisation of the HR function'.

Some challenges to workforce planning are common to all organisations. Robinson (2010:5) comments that workforce planning is made complex by the fact that it involves lots of different activities, and that a whole range of reasons get in the way of effective planning, 'lack of strategic direction, poor quality data, or data not in the right format, getting workforce planning on the senior management agenda, choosing where to put workforce planning energies, getting the organisation to think long-term, and extracting sensible demand forecasts from managers'.

Lavelle (2007:372) notes that the impulse to engage in workforce planning in organisations is frequently triggered by budgetary imperatives or a perceived workforce crisis of some sort. As such it is a 'reflexive and tactical response'. Headcount data, staff lists and other workforce information are then analysed in the search for a way forward. However, typically the process gets derailed or compromised along the way either due to difficulties accessing the right information or because of organisational power conflicts where managers resist HR's efforts to make workforce adjustments.

However, for public service organisations there are a further set of challenges that have resulted in what Freyens (2010:272) terms 'factors of inertia'. In the first place some public service managers argue that they are subject to the vagaries of political policy and the Ministry for Finance and can rarely plan ahead for long. However, in practice as emphasised by Mayo (2015:176) 'the bulk of what most of them do continues to stay in place over the years'. Furthermore, as noted by the Australian Public Service Commission (2011) workforce planning isn't about predicting the future, rather it requires thought about future uncertainties and risks and the development of appropriate strategies to address them.

A related obstacle is the lack of correlation between the political agenda of government and the available public service workforce. As noted by the OECD (2013) this is associated with an ongoing tendency to view the public service workforce as a cost rather than an asset. During austerity this trend was evidenced in many OECD countries, including Ireland, through across the board staffing cuts, early retirements and recruitment freezes with limited regard for the mission of the organisation or the competencies of departing employees. Invariably this approach resulted in diminished organisation capacity and poorer service delivery. However, post-austerity the need to review the role of the workforce in delivering on government objectives is often not as prominent as it should be. For example, the workforce implications of reforms and innovations, including the need perhaps to develop the skills of staff, are not always considered from the outset.

This situation is exacerbated where the HR manager is not regarded as a full partner at senior management level. HR managers may be aware of some of the workforce challenges of particular policies or proposals but if they are not given a sufficient hearing or the autonomy to develop a response, workforce considerations will remain under-addressed. This point is emphasised by Pyne (2004:399) who comments that agency leaders are usually poor at integrating HRM functions with organisational strategy and tend to 'deny HR departments the leeway needed, for example to suggest new organisational structures, particularly when these stir established organisational culture'.

A further related difficulty noted by the OECD (2013) is that in many countries the budgets of public service organisations are determined with minimal regard for workforce considerations. While budgets are naturally based on the mission of an organisation, unless that is translated into the implications for the workforce it remains an ineffectual process. Yet, in many countries, workforce planning is considered the domain of HR and sometimes pejoratively referred to as the 'soft' or 'fluffy' side of central government. However, the OECD (2013:15) are adamant - 'workforce planning, performance measurement and budgeting need to be coordinated to ensure staffing levels necessary to maintain the core missions of the agencies'.

There is debate as to whether devolution of HR supports or inhibits workforce planning. On the one hand the OECD (2013) regard it as essential that line ministries and agencies have the authority and flexibility to manage the profile of their workforce for example, in terms of size, allocation of grades, and skills mix. For any Irish public service organisation with a 'delegated sanction' this is now in place. Subject to overall budget and a maximum number of employees, they are now free to manage their workforce. Ensuring this is in place is a minimum starting point.

However, the OECD (2013) also query the extent to which individual ministries and agencies have the possibility to innovate and implement strategies to attract, retain and manage their workforce, which are critical elements of workforce planning.

A further note of caution in respect of devolution is struck by Freyens (2010). While the autonomy it affords agencies is a positive, whether and how that autonomy is used is dependent on the skills, experience and proactivity of HR personnel in line departments. Even in the context of devolved HR, it would seem important that there is central coordination of HR activities and a whole of government approach to initiatives like workforce planning. However, again a balance needs to be struck, with the OECD (2013:15) commenting that too prescriptive an approach can cause problems for organisations. For example, the use of templates to ensure consistency may result in units adopting parameters that are not appropriate. They conclude that to be useful, workforce plans need to reflect the management and environment of the organisation for which it is developed.

Lastly, public service organisation culture can inhibit workforce planning. The OECD (2013:16) comment unambiguously that 'a slow moving, process oriented, and change averse culture can hamper efforts to adapt to emerging needs and changing contexts swiftly'. Workforce planning represents an innovation within the public service and some public servants may be unwilling to challenge the status quo and take a risk that it will prove effective. Workforce planning may also meet with resistance more generally with public servants, if for example it results in staff being asked to move within or between organisations or requires staff to do different tasks to those they were originally hired to perform.

3.5 Ways forward

Beyond the difficulty of ensuring that workforce planning is prioritised across the public service, there are also challenges in implementing it even among those organisations that are committed to the concept. The OECD (2013) emphasise the importance of context – there is no single approach to workforce planning that can succeed in all countries or in all organisations, rather the basic principles of the process need to be adapted to the relevant political and institutional context and engaging with workforce planning must be seen as an iterative and evolving process. Workforce planning is not something you can do and then trust to others to take forward. Overall plans will need revisiting on a very regular, perhaps daily basis, to ensure their ongoing relevance and action plans will need to be monitored to ensure they are being acted on and having the desired outcomes (Robinson and Hirsh, 2008).

As noted in the Introduction, the objective of this report is not to provide detailed guidance in relation to implementing workforce planning. That is extensively done elsewhere, for example

- O’Riordan Joanna (2012) *Workforce Planning in the Irish Public Service*, State of the Public Service Series, Research Paper Number 7, IPA: Dublin
- CIPD (2018), *Workforce Planning Practice*, CIPD: London
- Australian Public Service Commission (2011) *Workforce Planning Guide*

In addition, the final chapter of this report presents a short case-study of the Property Registration Authority of Ireland’s approach to workforce planning. The practical experiences of a similar organisation who has successfully developed workforce planning is in many respects the best guidance.

However, some key principles and recommendations to support the development of workforce planning are set out below:

- **Make a start** rather than endlessly review models and approaches. The consensus from the literature is to begin workforce planning very simply (CIPD, 2018). This can be done by talking to managers about where the organisation is going and their resourcing concerns. If there is uncertainty with regard to future directions, mapping out the implications of different scenarios at least provides some parameters to work with
- **Organisation, budget and workforce planning need to be integrated:** Workforce planning needs to feed into the annual budget process and HR staff need to be given a better understanding of business and financial issues
- **Communication** is key to effective workforce planning to create shared expectations, promote transparency and report progress
- **An organisation-owned practice:** As with any reform initiative senior management support is vital, however, managers at all levels need to be committed to the process. Workforce planning cannot be done in isolation by HR.
- **Professional capacity and support is needed:** Workforce planning is a serious area of expertise, not something that can be learnt or delivered in a few days.
- **The planning is more important than the plan:** Workforce planning is not an exact science, much of the value is in the process and plans cannot be considered to have failed if projections do not turn out to be right
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Workforce plans need to be updated on a regular basis and monitored to ensure that actions are being implemented as intended. More generally, organisations must monitor outcomes – what results intended or unintended, have been achieved as a result of these strategies.

4. WORKFORCE PLANNING CASE STUDY, THE PROPERTY REGISTRATION AUTHORITY

4.1 Background

The Property Registration Authority (PRA) is a statutory body under the auspices of the Department of Housing, Planning and local Government. The main functions of the PRA are to manage and control the Land Registry and the Registry of Deeds and to promote and extend the registration of ownership of land. The PRA also operates the Ground Rents Purchase Scheme under the Landlord and Tenant Acts. A merger of the PRA with Ordnance Survey Ireland and the Valuation Office was proposed by government in 2012. The three organisations are now all under the auspices of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government who are actively proceeding with the merger.

Workforce planning was instigated in a formal way at the PRA in 2012. The primary impetus was the request from DPER that government organisations develop workforce plans (DPER, 2012a and b) in order to better manage the impact on organisations of significant staff reductions. Workforce plans, together with an accompanying action plan, have subsequently been developed approximately every two years. The current Strategic Workforce Plan 2019-2021 (July 2018) is the fifth iteration.

From the outset, and consistent with recommended good practice, workforce planning in the PRA was approached in a comprehensive way. Consequently,

- It was recognised that workforce planning is a tool for organisation development, rather than only a mechanism for managing entry and exit into the organisation (headcount).
- While overseen by the HR department, workforce planning is a highly consultative process involving managers throughout the organisation, staff associations representative of the wider staff body, and other stakeholders
- As an initiative impacting on and being influenced by overall organisation strategy, responsibility and oversight for workforce planning lies with the management board
- Workforce planning is informed by and informs the organisation Statement of Strategy, business planning and risk management
- The workforce plan is highly evidence based with both quantitative (e.g. absenteeism, prospective retirements, organisation composition) and qualitative data (e.g. performance management and business process interventions) being used to support the plan.

The outcome of this wide-ranging approach is that strategic workforce planning is now embedded in the culture of the PRA and supports the organisation in fulfilling its statutory mandate and delivering on strategic goals. It further supports a robust approach to governance and compliance within the organisation.

4.2 Workforce planning in the PRA

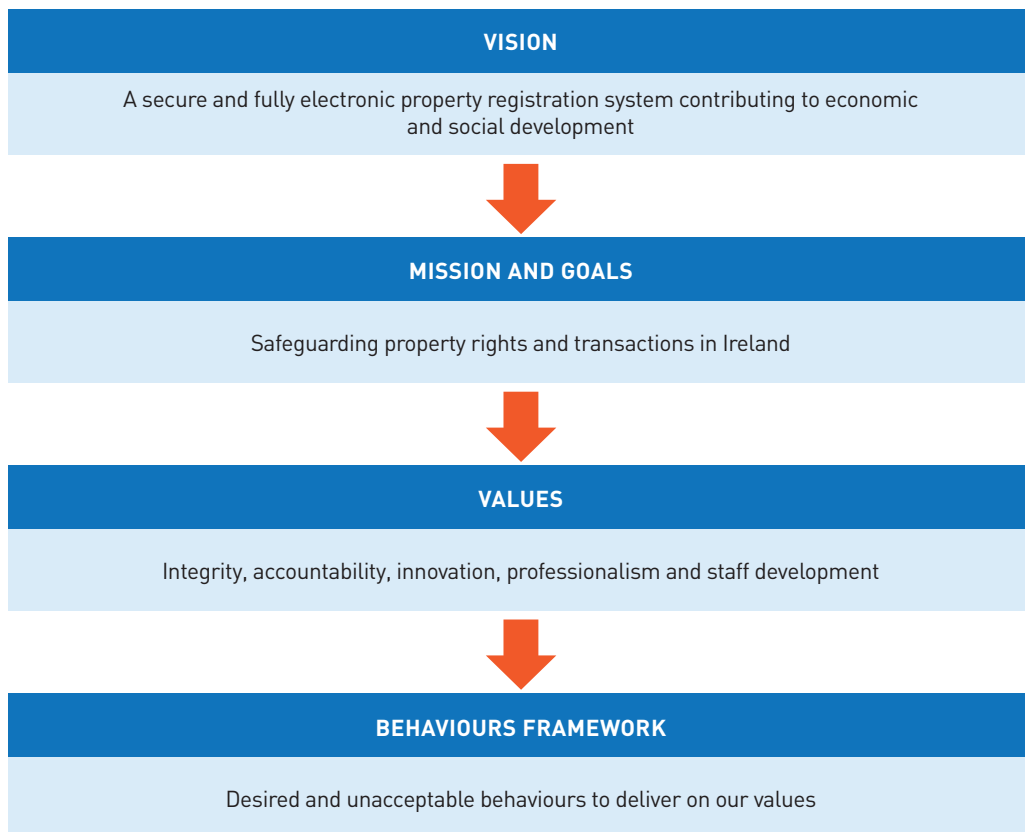
The PRA follow a standard approach to workforce planning. Broadly the steps involved encompass:

Step 1: Defining the organisation's strategic direction

The workforce planning cycle begins with an evaluation of the previous iteration of the workforce plan. The current

PRA Statement of Strategy and the vision, mission and goals of the organisation are also reviewed and their implications for the workforce considered. The PRA published a Behaviours Framework in February 2019. The framework sets out in detail the desired behaviours that should inform how work is performed at the PRA and which correspond with the values of the organisation identified in the PRA's Statement of Strategy. Unacceptable behaviours are also identified.

FIGURE 4.1: FROM VISION TO VALUES



Source: Property Registration Authority

Step 2: Review of the internal and external environments

Organisations don't operate in a vacuum and a range of external factors impinge on how an organisation provides services, who it serves and consequently who it employs (Cotten, 2007). Public service organisations in particular need to be aware of how external factors might affect the organisation. For the PRA, demographic and economic forecasts, for example from the CSO and ESRI, represent important contextual information. More specifically any information on the property market and housing policy are also reviewed. The public service reform agenda, for example the action points identified in Our Public Service 2020 (DPER, 2017) and the Civil Service People Strategy (2017), represent further important background information. Finally, specific issues facing the PRA, such as the proposed merger with Ordnance Survey Ireland and the Valuation Office, the electronic conveyancing agenda, and increases in property fraud and white collar crime generally, are considered. Analysis in respect of any of these issues is not exhaustive or very time-consuming. However, it assists the workforce planning team in considering how changes in the operating environment will impact on what the PRA does and how it does it.

Step 3: Assessing future workforce demand

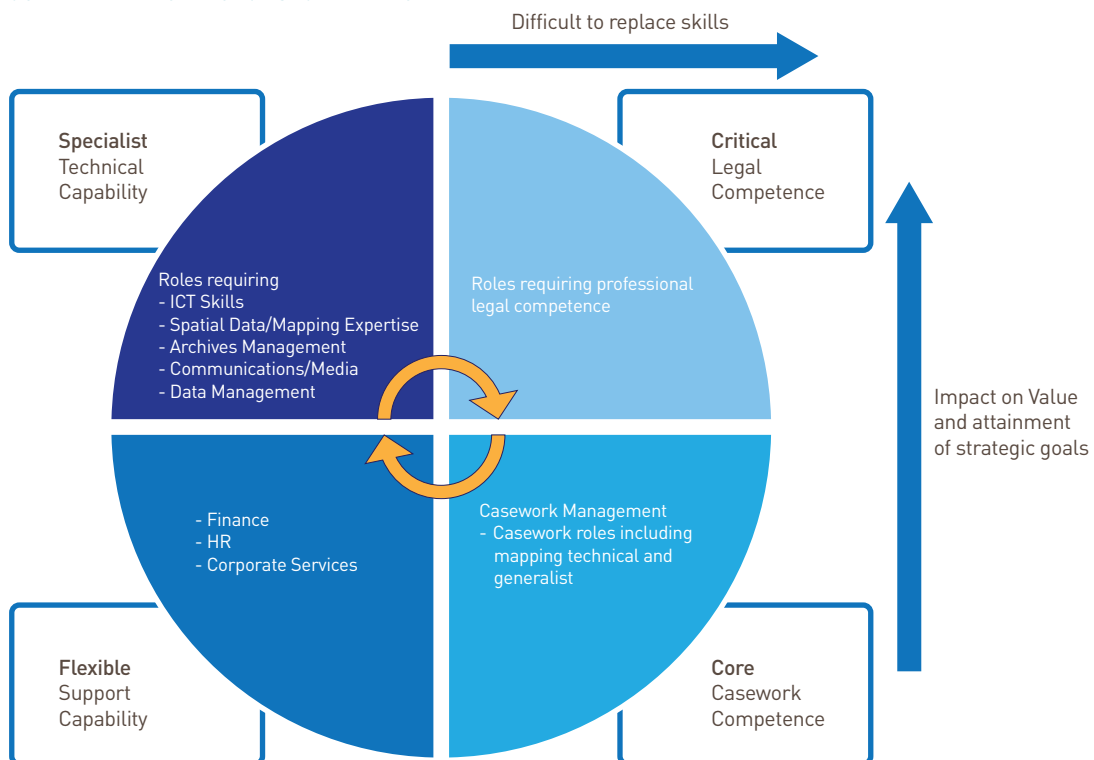
Workforce need is often referred to as the demand side of workforce planning. The demand forecast is an estimate of the number and mix of employees that an organisation will need in the future. It is based on projections in relation to forthcoming work commitments (O’Riordan, 2012). The PRA begin their workforce demand analysis with a SWOT analysis. Strengths and opportunities are regarded as facilitating better service delivery and increased output by the organisation, while weaknesses and threats encompass internal and external factors inhibiting service delivery and output. The PRA then use property market indicators and other evidence to present a case of ongoing momentum in the property market. They conclude by predicting that the trend of increased property transactions will continue for the next few years.

Step 4: Reviewing future workforce supply

When considering supply the starting point, especially in the public sector, is your current workforce, most of who will be still with you in five and maybe even ten years. The PRA currently (May 2019) have 529.29 whole time equivalent posts. In reviewing their current workforce they provide a comprehensive analysis of their workforce according to gender, age, disability, grade and work area. Projected retirements during the lifetime of the workforce plan (2019-2021) are set out by grade. It is noted that 56 people (10% of the workforce) is a significant number of retirements which needs to be managed through knowledge management and succession planning initiatives to avoid a negative impact on the organisation.

As part of their workforce analysis the PRA also categorise their workforce according to their contribution to the achievement of the strategic goals of the organisation and also the extent to which staff if they depart the organisation are difficult to replace (Figure 3.2). Risk factors identified in the corporate risk register (fraudulent applications, data breaches) also inform this analysis. On the basis of this research the PRA have identified that roles requiring professional legal competence represent their current area of greatest vulnerability.

FIGURE 4.2 PRA WORKFORCE SEGMENTATION



Source: Property Registration Authority

Step 5: Identify gaps and develop gap closing strategies

Gap analysis identifies the deficit or surplus between the projected workforce supply and demand. In respect of each of the staff segments identified in Figure 3.2 (core, flexible, specialist and critical), the PRA firstly link any identified gaps to the objectives contained in business plans and then identify how gaps might be addressed. Critically, it is not taken for granted that a gap means recruiting someone externally. Rather recruitment is only one of a range of responses with other actions including, better project management, behavioural science insights, learning and development, mobility, staff retention policy, skills transfer, retrenchment of obsolete grades and leadership development.

Cotten (2007:18) notes that most of the emphasis in gap analysis is on identifying and correcting deficits with 'much less attention paid to identifying any surplus'. However, this possibility has always been recognised by the PRA. Vacancies occasioned by the departure of a member of staff are not termed vacancies but rather gaps. It is recognised that sometimes a departure presents an opportunity for organisation change. For example, to restructure a team or a unit differently or to adjust the grade composition. Notwithstanding increasing work output, staff numbers have only risen marginally post-austerity and remain well below the 2007 peak level.

However, in certain situations, gap analysis has resulted in recruitment, where it is recognised that certain specialised skills are needed by the organisation. Therefore Strategic workforce planning, and the analysis, discussion and consultation that is part of it, has helped the PRA to focus on the actual gaps and to clarify thinking with regard to the precise skills that the organisation lacks to deliver on business goals. Arising from this approach the PRA has identified a number of new roles, Archives Manager, Records Manager, Quality Manager, Compliance Manager and Communications Manager.

Step 6: The Workforce action plan

Having identified workforce gaps and priority areas, the next step is to determine the specific actions needed to address those gaps. In other words to develop a workforce action plan. However, as highlighted by Robinson and Hirsh (2008:32) sometimes having invested so much in workforce planning, organisations can 'lose sight of the wood for the trees'. In other words forget to clarify how gaps identified will be addressed.

In their current workforce action plan, the PRA have identified 18 workforce areas for prioritisation. These are set out in a spreadsheet with associated actions and key performance indicators. Six of the eighteen areas are categorised as impacting on the pay bill, with the remaining twelve deemed to be non-pay bill initiatives. Implementation of the action plan is monitored on an ongoing basis.

4.3 Lessons learned:

The PRA have amassed considerable learning in relation to workforce planning. The key lessons they have learnt are:

- Workforce planning is not only about headcount and money, it is an initiative that helps build organisation capacity and therefore helps deliver on organisation objectives.
- The HR manager is a full member of the management team which ensures that workforce and capacity issues are kept on the management agenda.
- Workforce planning facilitates the organisation in seeing the departure of a member of staff not as resulting in a vacancy but in a gap and an opportunity for change.

- Transparency and communication around workforce planning are both necessary and beneficial, and are appreciated by staff representative bodies.
- The list of initiatives in the workforce action plan need not be over extensive – prioritising is ok – but those that are included need to be clear and measurable.
- Workforce planning helps you solve workforce problems, for example, rationalisation of grade structure.
- Workforce planning builds the capacity of the workforce because there is a focused approach to employee development – One accepted consequence of this is that the PRA lose staff because they are perceived as skilled and capable candidates in external competitions.
- Begin – your approach will evolve and develop as your skills grow and the benefits of workforce planning accrue.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Agile has become the latest fashionable term in HR. No matter where one looks organisations, under the heading of 'agile' are being urged to be change capable (Institute for Employment Studies), truly flexible (Harvard Business Review) and work smart (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) . The terminology has also caught on in the public service. The OECD in 2015 published a report *Achieving Public Sector Agility at Times of Fiscal Consolidation*. Our Public Service 2020 (Government of Ireland, 2017) refers to the key goal of developing 'agile and robust public service organisations'. The term agile has long since evolved from its original application in respect of high performing teams, the concept is now widely used to imply organisations that anticipate and address the forces affecting the organisation and adapt quickly and effectively (Carter and Varney, 2018).

The public service is changing as is the role required of public servants. However, as noted in this report, it is an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary process (Needham et al, 2019). The challenge for public service leaders is to know how to navigate the future, how to respond to new challenges, technologies and ways of working and to identify the skills needed to ensure a public service that is 'fit for purpose'.

The work of the public service is different to that of the private sector. The public service deals with issues that the private sector can't, domestic and global challenges that impact on citizens' prosperity and security. The fundamental purpose of the public service is government, not management. This requires that a great deal of attention be paid to the importance of fairness, equity, justice and social cohesion to maintain confidence in the government and political system (Matheson, 2004).

All these demands point to the singular importance of public service capacity and, in the context of public management, capacity is predominantly concerned with people – with understanding the organisation's needs and effectively responding (Murray, 2007). This cannot be done without strategic workforce planning. Workforce planning is rightly a high priority action in Our Public Service 2020. It supports the achievement of organisation objectives, meeting customer expectations, organisation governance, employee morale and the development of the workforce. There are few initiatives public organisations can invest in that produce such concrete returns as strategic workforce planning.

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