

SECTION 5: MAKING GOVERNMENT MORE EFFECTIVE

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5.1 Improving productivity

Improving the productivity of the Civil Service has been a preoccupation of the Singapore Government ever since it came to power in 1959. How the civil service can be more effective and responsive to public needs has always been in the minds of civil service leadership. Singapore has few resources beyond its people. To help Singapore remain competitive, an effective and vibrant public sector is essential.

The context for change

When the People's Action Party took over governing Singapore in 1959, the first step it took was to transform the attitude of civil servants. The political leaders were concerned as the civil servants, who were inherited from the colonial government, exhibited a mentality of control instead of service. Corruption was rife and many civil servants were indebted to money-lenders, causing their integrity to be compromised. The foundations for better productivity and service had to start with discipline.

Implementing change

The first stage was getting the basics right, creating structures, roles and ground rules and enforcing them and providing the public with an effective feedback system. Disciplinary rules were tightened, and rules and regulations were implemented to reinforce proper conduct. Transparency in procedures and impartiality in measures were instituted to ensure fair dealing with the public. The government set up inspecting institutions, including a complaints bureau, and took widely-publicised action against recalcitrants. A Political Study Centre was set up to imprint high level concerns and to inculcate the correct values in senior civil servants. Training in basic approved procedures in financial management and control was emphasised. The Organisation & Methods Branch was set up to improve efficiency in all departments, and to ensure that rules do not inadvertently promote corruptibility. The Audit role was strengthened to ensure compliance with rules and regulations. Procedures were documented and simplified. Internal controls were emphasised.

The next stage in the productivity effort was to introduce technology into government or civil service systems, and to control of manpower growth. Simple mechanisation of office procedures was introduced, for example the addressograph. Collection of property tax was computerised in the mid-1960s. The civil service payroll was computerised in the late-1960s.

The late 1970s saw some decentralisation. Forms control, the purchase of equipment, computerisation and mechanisation were left more and more in the hands of ministries and departments, which had to justify their needs to Budget. By the early 1980s, forms control, and with it procedures control (central instructions), were devolved, and mechanisation and computerisation was left with the departments. The early 1980s also saw the setting up of the National Computer Board to enhance the computerisation thrust.

The early Eighties also saw an increase in budgetary allocations for training. In 1981, the Report On Productivity, submitted to government by a national task force set up to recommend productivity strategies in the state, recommended that the Civil Service take the lead in learning and introducing some feasible features of Japanese management. This created a new thrust, as training programmes were implemented to support the introduction of Japanese productivity ideas, such as quality circles, into the civil service.

The period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s saw a relentless drive by the government to control the size of the civil service. The effort resulted in a shrinking civil service in terms of absolute numbers.

The recent introduction of Autonomous Agencies (AA), which has allowed government ministries and departments more financial and personnel management flexibility in return for greater accountability and specific performance measurements, is targeted at improving organisational performance management in the civil service.

The recent introduction of SIGMA (discussed in Section 8.4) or management accounting system is aimed at helping departments cost each unit of service or product produced, and at providing information to enable departments to make informed decisions and to track performance. In this way, what is not productively delivered by the civil service or can be privatised is hived off to private contractors. This hiving off or out-sourcing started in some departments in the early history of Singapore, but more is expected as the use of management accounting data is optimised.

The creation of AAs will bring the productivity process further. And in parallel, the PS21 effort (described in Section 3) of team-building, organisational reviews, staff suggestion programmes, work improvement teams, service excellence, staff welfare and more effective personnel policies are continuing the spirit of continuous improvement. The 21st century will see a greater thrust in IT management and innovation in the civil service, building on the productivity gains contributed by the civil service IT and computerisation effort of the last ten years.

The personnel policy area has also not been left out of the productivity or continuous improvement cycle. Medical benefits for civil servants and pensions have also been revamped so that such benefits do not become so heavy a burden to the state that they cripple the effective management of the future.

Thus, Singapore's civil service productivity drive, and the continuous search for more effective government, meant an attack on many fronts – from worker productivity to financial management, from manpower size control to greater accountability, from basic procedures to information technology, from directive leadership to people-centred leadership.

5.2 Contracting out services

Contracting out services has been used to some effect by many Commonwealth government departments. In Singapore, contracting out services over the last five years has become a way of life in many organisations.

The context for change

The need to contract out services arose from difficulties in recruiting and supervising permanent staff for certain jobs, and more importantly, from recognising that certain functions are more effectively carried out by external vendors, freeing resources within the ministries for more productive work.

Implementing change

Contracting out services is not something new. Contracting out transport services, grass-cutting, office-cleaning, printing and duplicating, training etc., occurs very naturally, and the line item budget has for many years provided for such expenditure under Other Operating Expenditure (OOE), in contrast to Expenditure On Manpower (EOM) or to Development Expenditure.

But contracting out secretarial, clerical and technical manpower services is a relatively new phenomenon – not a natural process like contracting out works and services using Development Expenditure, which has always been a feature of development activities.

The many years of control of manpower growth has resulted in a lean civil service, with some departments contracting in size while others have been restructured or privatised. The restructuring or corporatisation process, together with manpower constraints in other parts of the remaining public service, full employment and the difficulty in recruiting supporting staff such as office attendants, despatch personnel etc., has led to contracting out because such services need to be performed and cannot effectively be absorbed by other personnel. For example, private courier companies are now used where documents have to be despatched by hand.

The Singapore Civil Service experience is that contracting out services can be feasible in many areas in the public service. More and more, even clerical services and typing services are bought from employment agencies and companies that provide "temps". So also are maintenance personnel, technical personnel trainers, etc.

However, supervision of the work produced and its quantity, timeliness and quality, becomes unquestionably important if effective use is to be made of contracting out. For example, in contracting out grass-cutting of lawns/fields, it is important to ensure that effective monitoring exists to make certain that the grass is cut to the level required, at the frequency agreed upon, and that the cut grass is removed. This is an area which is often forgotten and therefore sometimes contracted out services are poorly supervised. Supervision and enforcement too requires that expectations are clearly written in the contract. Unless this is done, contracting out may mean not getting one's money's worth. But if done well, contracting out is an efficient way of using existing limited resources to good effect.

Recently, the Civil Service has also liberalised the contracting out of services traditionally provided for by the Expenditure On Manpower (EOM). Whereas previously, only Other Operating Expenditure (OOE) and Development Expenditure could be used to buy manpower services, the new rule being implemented is that EOM can be used on a temporary basis to buy services to make up for vacancies which cannot be filled for one reason or another.

5.3 Feedback from the public

The Singapore Government is very concerned about providing good service to the public. To help improve the quality of service provided to the public, we need feedback from the public.

The context for change

The public is more educated, more exposed to what is possible and has become demanding in terms of the level of services provided and how well they are served.

Implementing change

Feedback from the public comes in many forms, and some the civil service uses are:

- media;
- residents' committees;
- Members of Parliament during their meet-the-people sessions or correspondence;
- departmental surveys (e.g. surveys carried out by survey companies at the request of departments);
- customer feedback forms;
- focus groups;
- complaints from members of the public;
- the Service Improvement Unit (SIU) (discussed in Section 6. 1a);
- Quality Service Managers (QSM) in every ministry, major department and statutory board (discussed in section 6. 1a);
- staff dealing with the public.

At the political level, the Prime Minister and Ministers meet members of the professional and business communities regularly every year to get feedback on the situations they face and other dimensions such as service level, government policies, etc.

Among the various PS21 programmes (discussed in Sections 3 and 6.1b), those that focus on quality service include a statement, "Excellence in Public Service" (see below), which is an open pledge to the public that they will be given quality service. Feedback and suggestions are explicitly sought. The statement is openly displayed in all government premises at all major points of contact with the public. It assures the public of the government's commitment to the provision of quality public service. At the same time, the PS21 Hotline was set up to garner feedback from the public about the quality of public service.

EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC SERVICE

We want to give you quality service.

We are courteous and fair.

We do our best to help.

We have pride in our work.

We want to keep improving.

Feedback shows us where we can do better.

Suggestions help us improve.

Praise helps us work with a smile.

We need your trust, support and co-operation
for

EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC SERVICE

As can be seen, the importance of feedback is entrenched as a value all civil servants are exhorted to declare and act upon, so that in time they will view feedback positively and productively, instead of defensively. In time, it is hoped that even complaints will be viewed as feedback.