

**EQUITY IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE
A CHANGE OF FOCUS**

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The Australian Public Service is in the process of moving through a major cultural shift when it comes to the employment of women and their overall representation across all levels.

There have been a number of phases in the history of the APS which have affected the progress of women in the APS.

The first phase included all those key historical milestones which I urge my colleagues to remember when trying to grapple with the many challenges that still lay ahead. Some of these include:

- it was not until after World War 2 that women could be appointed to the Australian Public Service.
- this year we celebrate the 30 year anniversary of the abolition of the marriage bar- until 1966, single working women were obliged to resign on the eve of their wedding.
- the overwhelming yes vote in the 1967 national referendum bestowed citizenship status on the indigenous population of Australia thereby opening up employment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women.
- women in the Australian Public Service received equal pay for equal work in 1972.

The second stage involved the introduction of Equal Employment Opportunity Programs. Come 1984, each department was required to produce an EEO Program. These programs would last for 2 to 3 years and their purpose was to implement strategies to help progress the representation of members of the four EEO groups . Twelve years and much effort in the preparation of glossy booklets later, some departments are into their third and fourth generation program with little change in the profile of their organisation to show for it.

Statistics as at December 1995 show us that women now make up over 47% of the workforce in the Australian Public Service. That in itself is fairly encouraging. However, when we look at the Senior Executive Service - the top 1% at the top of the management ladder, the real decision makers, women make up only 18% of this group. Compared to their representation of only 5% back in 1984, substantial progress does appear to have been made and when compared with the private sector, well at least our representation is visible!

However, analysis of our statistics reveals that if progress continues at this rate, despite all our efforts with EEO Programs, we will not reach parity in the senior ranks of the public service for at least another 25 years, another generation - personally - I can't wait that long!

These are the statistics which have lead the Public Service and Merit Protection Commission to seriously review how departments and agencies in the Australian Public Service use their EEO Programs to bring about change.

These leads me into the current phase. The Commission has recently introduced a major change in how departments are to evaluate their EEO Programs. Before future programs will be considered, departments are now required to undertake a comprehensive situational analysis to identify a few key result areas which will be incorporated into their new Program. This evaluation process often involves the collection of quantitative data on how many, of what sort of staff, are represented where in the organisation. This is then coupled with qualitative data. Popular methods of collecting this sort of information is to run an attitudinal survey of staff or conduct focus discussion groups to determine the overall health of the organisation and to highlight what issues staff feel are important. So often the results are quite different to what management had expected. The agency will then take all this information into account when developing their next EEO Program.

In addition to collecting service wide statistics, the Commission is also monitoring individual agencies, many of which are not performing anywhere near the average figures I discussed earlier. There are still a number of agencies in the APS who are facing very similar issues to what I believe your organisations would be currently facing.

Some possible “like” organisations in the APS and their representation of women at the Senior Executive level (these statistics were submitted by agencies and included in the Commission’s publication “Implementation of EEO in the Australian Public Service 1994-95 - Trends and Strategies”):-

15.2% of the Australian Customs Service Senior Executive Service is made up of women

9.8% in the Department of Defence

2.6% Australian Federal Police

None in the Australian protective service

DISMAL INDEED

By now you are probably asking how I could believe that the APS is undergoing a cultural shift and be confident that the barriers are breaking down against a background of these figures.

There are two major reasons for my optimism.

The first is the results of a survey of Senior Executives undertaken in 1994 which revealed that 85% of men identified themselves as firmly committed to implementing policies on EEO.

The outcomes of another survey of senior public servants in Canberra conducted firstly 1986/87 and then again in 1994/95 have been very encouraging. In 1987, 60% of respondents said they agreed or mainly agreed that the “APS should adopt

personnel policies designed to recruit and promote more women into its senior ranks". By 1995 that number had increased to 75%.

These results would indicate a significant shift in the attitudes of executives at the top.

Even though all selections in the APS are based on merit and our policies do not allow for quotas or targets for women, the key players at the top of the organisation were strongly supportive of introducing new practices which would aid the competitiveness of women for advancement up through the senior ranks.

You may well say how easy is it to say all the right things when completing a survey form in private but where is the proof.

This is my second point for confidence. The proof is everywhere. The number of innovative and far reaching initiatives currently being trialed or implemented organisations are staggering:-a

- number of agencies have introduced formal mentoring programs
 - some have found good value in special networks focussing on women's issues, for example the Endeavour Network in the Australian Customs Service
 - The Department of Finance has introduced a range of initiatives over the past 12 months to try and address their gender imbalance - these included the introduction of a range of family friendly policies and the hosting of Senior Women's Conference
 - the continued support for senior management programs such as "Senior Women in Management" and the Executive Development Scheme
 - the use of the Springboard Program for women in the first four classification grades - this proved particularly successful in the Australian Electoral Commission in NSW where women are concentrated at the lower levels in small isolated country centres
 - the Australian Protective Service conducted an attitudinal survey of all women and then hired professional specialist assistance to interpret the information so that a true understanding could be obtained of the results
 - A lot of mileage is gained from conducting special events on International Women's Day - 8 March
 - the Public Service Commissioner hosts special focus groups of senior women to keep up to date with emerging issues
 - shadowing programs have been piloted in some agencies where women work closely beside a senior executive for a period
 - the important role that flexible working conditions has played in the enterprise agreement arena in identifying productivity gains
- and most recently the number of agencies carefully watching the equity issues when undertaking their downsizing programs, especially considering the magnitude of the exercise and the speed with which the reductions had to be effected

THE LIST GOES ON

If the Australian Navy can start building submarines with women's facilities on board, I believe anything is possible. It is all this activity along with genuine commitment at the most senior levels to challenge the remaining cultural barriers which gives me confidence for the future.