Working Party on Public Employment and Management

Public Management and the Coronavirus (Covid-19) Pandemic: Emerging Responses and Initial Recommendations

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This note examines how governments across the OECD are managing public servants in response to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. It summarises the principles underpinning the most common measures taken across the OECD and identifies initial opportunities for managing and harnessing change. The content of this note was developed through a Special Session of the Working Party on Public Employment and Management held on 15 April.

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1. Public servants rising to the challenge

Public servants across and beyond the OECD are playing a leading role in coordinating a response to the pandemic. They are keeping medical systems functioning and families safe. They are finding novel ways to design and channel unprecedented economic stimulus spending and manage severe spikes in unemployment. The Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has transformed the work and workplaces of the public sector almost overnight. Public sector workforces are being asked to work in new ways, juggling new tools with old procedures and processes.

In this context, OECD Public Employment and Management Officials met virtually on April 15, 2020. The meeting provided a platform to share and reflect on the current state of the public service in OECD countries; discuss innovations being developed and deployed to work productively in this context; and raise key challenges faced now and in the future. This note is a synthesis and summary of the broad areas of agreement.

**Principles underpinning initial public employment responses:**

In the short term, the focus of governments has broadly been on the twin need to protect public servants while maintaining the capacity to deliver on core and quickly-emerging government priorities.

**Put Health and Safety first:** Public employers are protecting their employees from contracting and spreading coronavirus (COVID-19) through a variety of measures such as generalised teleworking and enforced distancing measures if in the office.

- **Korea** has issued compulsory guidelines on remote working for many staff, although some senior managers are in the office with precautions such as staggered lunch hours and physical distancing. Identifying vulnerable groups and using data such as commuting times to implement work rotation and remote working has also been a feature.

- **The Slovak Republic** is providing facemasks to public servants, implementing a rigorous hygiene policy and eliminating/limiting social contact through postponing in-person recruitment and classroom training.

**Pay attention to mental health:** Governments are increasing mental health support services in recognition that many public servants are carrying an increased emotional burden linked to their duties and/or personal situation.

- In **Latvia**, an employee survey aims to assess the wellbeing of public servants, including causes of anxiety and their expectations of the government and their management. This survey aims to offer targeted psychological help to public servants and has garnered more than 3,000 responses from more than 90 institutions.

- **The Netherlands** has developed an online toolbox for public servants with information and short videos about working from home and maintaining work-life balance.

**Match workforce supply with demand:** This crisis has forced public service leaders to reprioritise quickly, determine essential positions and areas, and redeploy the workforce to meet changing demand.

- **Ireland** developed tools (questionnaire and online portal) to map transferrable skills and facilitate temporary mobility assignments across the public service.

- **The United Kingdom** is adjusting existing infrastructure and coordination mechanisms to reallocate employees according to need.
Switch the ‘default’ on remote working: Whereas employees used to need special permission to work from home, today the default is that all employees that can work from home must work from home. Authorisation is in many cases now required to be able to come into the office.

- In Italy, teleworking is now the default - formal authorisation to work from home is no longer required.
- The United States is operating at maximum teleworking capacity and issuing guidance to managers to support this.

Leverage digital capabilities: public administrations who had already invested in digital capabilities are better positioned to manage the crisis. Internal network capacity, cloud systems and familiarity with videoconferencing tools also enable more public servants to work productively from home, and to even continue interviewing and training candidates for critical roles.

- Estonia is benefitting from pre-crisis investment in distance learning technologies to up-skill employees.
- Denmark has also experienced less strain due to their digitalised working environment, and is using technology to coordinate people management issues through twice-weekly virtual meetings of all heads of HR.

Maximise leave flexibility: Not all public servants can work from home. In some cases this has given rise to the creation or adjustment of leave arrangements to enable staff to recover from illness or care for a family member.

- Germany increased special leave provisions for certain groups from three to 20 days.
- France developed special leave provisions for staff who need to take care of children.

Keep learning: Most public servants are using new technology and ways of working to carry out their jobs. Online learning tools and coaching can help to up-skill the workforce, including digital skills. Leadership and management skills are also key to maintaining productivity in transformed work environments and supporting workers to manage the transition.

- Australia is providing re-skilling opportunities for public servants to help them carry out crisis-related work.
- Belgium expanded its online training offer, adapted in-person training for online access, and fast-tracked certain training programmes.

Communicate and check-in: Public service leaders are using new channels such as video-conferencing and instant messaging services to share fast moving information with staff and unions. These and employee networks generate opportunities to stay in touch with team-mates and colleagues from across the public service.

- Canada developed dedicated webpages and resource for employees to provide them with information and resources on working remotely and on improving mental health during the public health crisis.
- Norway is exploring the use of targeted ‘pulse’ surveys to check in with employees and uses a portal for public employers with Human Resource information and guidance for managers updated daily.

Plan ahead: The present state of most public administrations is changing so quickly that most public employers are focussed on managing the here and now. But some are also looking forward, in recognition that the future workplace will be different. Some have already established working groups
2. Post-pandemic, public administrations have an opportunity to embed lasting change

The immediate focus of public administrations is on protecting public servants and ensuring that essential public services can still be delivered. Managers, teams and staff are adjusting to new working methods and tools. Many are understandably preoccupied with caring for family members and juggling work-life balance. Nevertheless, administrations across the OECD are also considering the longer-term impacts of changes that have been rapidly introduced during the pandemic. Specifically, the post-crisis period will be a unique opportunity to capitalise on changes – such as large-scale remote working – whose implementation was expected to occur only gradually in the future.

Eventually, governments will have to figure out how to manage a return to offices and a resumption and acceleration of non-pandemic related work.

This presents public administrations with challenges and opportunities. The longer-term challenge facing public employers is understanding the degree to which fundamental orthodoxies around managing public servants have been changed. Do all employees need to be present in their offices from 9 to 5 if they have just shown that they can maintain productivity during weeks of working from home? What would this mean for performance management? For recruitment?

Evaluating, adjusting, and formalising aspects of the immediate response can provide public administrations with much-needed flexibility and dynamism to face future challenges.

- **Finland** set up two working groups in the Prime Minister’s office to monitor the current situation and prepare an exit strategy.
- **Slovenia** is looking at the leadership, management and digital competencies that will be necessary to strengthen the public administration after the crisis.
Opportunities to move toward lasting agility in the public service:

- **Reflect**: Public administrations are undergoing a massive and unplanned experiment in flexible people management, which – despite logistical challenges – is revealing areas of strength and resilience. Reflection on performance and productivity in this time of crisis will be essential to harvest lessons for future reforms.

- **Normalise successful innovations**: Remote working, new communication and information technologies, platforms for agile workforce redeployment, are but a few of the tools that public services are implementing to manage this crisis. These also have many other applications across the public service and would become permanent fixtures of the post-pandemic new normal.

- **Engage**: Across the public service, individuals, units, teams and Ministries are collaborating and exchanging intensively. Post-crisis, administrations can build on these exchanges to move toward a public sector that is increasingly flexible and resilient. A common element in many countries’ responses has been early and proactive engagement between employers and employee representatives, highlighting opportunities to engage unions as partners for change.

- **Lead**: Effective public service leaders will harness these opportunities to advance a vision of the public service that is forward-looking, flexible and fulfilling. Actions undertaken now are an opportunity to centre leadership on core public service values, agile delivery, innovation and productivity. The OECD’s *Recommendation of Public Service Leadership and Capability* sets out 14 principles to guide leaders in this transition.

- **Celebrate the value of public service**: Public employees are heroes in this crisis. They are keeping medical systems functioning, families safe, finding novel ways to address the unprecedented economic and social impacts, keeping businesses afloat and dealing with incredible spikes in unemployment. This is a unique opportunity to renew the image of public service as an attractive workplace that has impact. Post-crisis, public managers should consider how to showcase the values of a job or career with the public service.

Further reading


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