



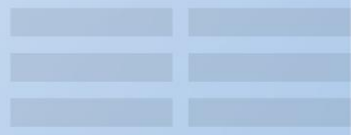

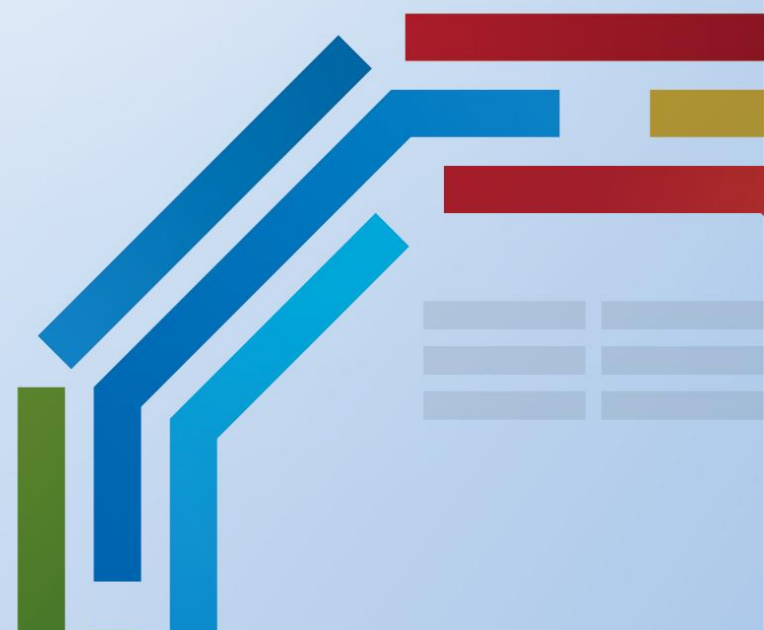
2024 UN PUBLIC SERVICE FORUM AND AWARDS CEREMONY

WORKSHOP 2

Young Public Servants: Engaging young people for a more innovative, effective, and future ready public service

CONCEPT NOTE

Organiser: Public Service Innovation Branch (PSIB) / Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government (DPIDG) / United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA)



Introduction

The 2024 United Nations Public Service Forum will take place in Incheon, Republic of Korea from 24 -26 June 2024, under the theme 'Fostering Innovation amid Global Challenges: A Public Sector Perspective'.

The Forum will be comprised of a series of workshops where various topics related to the overall theme will be explored in more detail. Workshop 2 will explore how to better engage young people in public service and focus on how young public servants capacity for innovation, skills and talents can be fostered and leveraged for a more effective and future ready public sector.

Context

Young people and the public service

In 2020, the global youth population (aged 15 to 24) totalled 1.20 billion people, or close to 16% of the world's population¹. While this proportion is expected to slightly decrease over the coming decades, the figures hide widely varying regional realities. While some countries are experiencing declining and rapidly ageing populations, others, particularly those in the Africa region, are grappling with the realities of steady or increasing youth populations.

Reliable data on the share of young people in government, and public administration in particular, is difficult to come by. But where data does exist, the signs are that the proportion of young people in all forms of government remains low. For instance, the average share of young public servants aged 34 and under in central public administrations of OECD countries sits at 18%². In the US, only 7% of permanent public servants at the federal level are under the age of 30, compared to close to 20% in the private sector.³

There are many reasons behind such low representation, including budget cuts that limit the hiring of new employees and an inability of the public sector to compete with the private sector in job attractiveness, flexibility, and salaries. The COVID-19 pandemic brought in flexible work arrangements across many sectors and industries, including the public sector. However, return to 'business as usual' working methods and a failure of the public sector to pivot to more permanent flexible arrangements and innovations can act as a deterrent for younger recruits who may favour more flexible work schedules in other sectors.

¹ United Nations World Youth Report 2020, pg. 40, <https://social.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/2023-08/2020-World-Youth-Report.pdf>

² Governance for Youth, Trust and Intergenerational Justice: Fit for All Generations? <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/1a587081-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/1a587081-en>

³ <https://ourpublicservice.org/blog/redesigned-gogovernment-org-and-why-we-need-more-young-people-in-government/>

When young people do enter the public service, they often start at the bottom of the ladder, their skills and talents being under-utilised until they reach seniority in both time served and age. Young public servants are often relegated to rudimentary tasks, excluded from decision-making, and can often face hierarchical barriers to taking the lead on innovative ideas and projects. This can sit in sharp contrast to careers in the private sector, particularly the tech industry, where young talent and ideas are lionised. As such, in particular for more motivated and creatively minded young people, a career in the public service can often be regarded as stifling, with an employer ill-equipped to foster the career aspirations and talents of its younger employees.

In many countries too, governments suffer from a bad image amongst young people. Interlocking social, economic, and political crises, including high levels of youth un- and under-employment, rising inequality, inflation and increasing living costs, coupled with concerns about government inaction on social and environmental matters, amongst other issues, have led many young people to doubt the effectiveness of, and trust in, government and, in turn, dismiss a life of public service.

The need to engage more young people for a future ready public service

As the world struggles with these increasingly volatile conditions, engaging young people in government is more crucial than ever. Not only does doing so help foster an active and engaged citizenry, for now and the future, but it also allows public administrations to exploit the vastly untapped resource of youth talent, skills, insights, and capacity to innovate, particularly, but not only, in the technological realm.

Through working to attract, hire and retain young and diverse talent, governments can better position themselves to tackle interlocking challenges from the local to global levels, now and in the future. As older public servants retire and hiring managers seek to fill vacant posts, rolling opportunities arise to regularly assess and take stock of the skills, talents and innovations needed for the public sector to meet these challenges and to develop the agility, flexibility and innovation needed to be future ready.

The public sector possesses increasingly unique strengths and advantages that can be used to attract more talented young people to its ranks. In today's precarious 'gig-economy'⁴ era, temporary contracts, job insecurity and a lack of benefits have become the norm for many young people seeking employment. In this respect, the public sector has the edge over the private sector in terms of providing job security, paid leave, and social security benefits: entitlements which have become more highly coveted since the COVID-19 pandemic, which laid bare the vulnerabilities young gig-economy workers face.

⁴ The gig-economy refers to a labor market characterised by the prevalence of short-term contracts or freelance work as opposed to permanent jobs.

In addition, while political apathy is rife amongst younger generations⁵, young people's engagement in civic and community life is robust, including both on and offline⁶. The public service, based on the core values of service to others, integrity, and accountability can offer young people meaningful and purposeful employment aligned with their personal values. Better showcasing the values, innovation and responsiveness of the public service to pressing development challenges from the local to the global level can speak to how young people engage in causes they care about and increase the attractiveness of the public service.

As public administrations look to the future and work to transform to meet current and future challenges, it is crucial that they adapt so that they are more attractive to young employees. This requires dynamic workforce planning with modernised recruitment processes, flexible workplace arrangements, attractive benefits, job security, and importantly, investment in and strategic use of young public servants' talents, skills, and innovations.

Focus

The workshop will look at how to better engage young people in a life of public service. In doing so it will: discuss the unique talents and insights that young recruits can bring to the public service; examine the barriers to young people's recruitment and career growth; explore how to attract and retain young public servants; discuss how to foster and leverage young people's distinct perspectives and capacity to innovate and lead in government settings; and will share experiences and good practices globally.

Structure

This workshop will comprise four core substantive sessions. The fifth and final session will be focused on preparing a set of key messages based on the outcomes of the workshop for the overall report of the Forum.

Session 1: The young public servant in context: Understanding the challenges, barriers, and opportunities young public servants face

This session will provide a concise overview of the workshop and the issues to be explored. It will begin by examining the current situation of young public servants, notably the barriers they encounter when trying to enter and while starting their careers in the public service.

Younger public servants can face a range of challenges early in their careers, including being provided limited opportunities for participation in process and product innovation and decision-making, as well as few opportunities for leadership and growth. In countries where hierarchy in the public service plays a dominant role, younger public servants may often be

⁵ United Nations World Youth Report 2016 'Youth Civic Engagement', Chapter 3, Political Engagement, https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2018/12/un_world_youth_report_youth_civic_engagement.pdf

⁶ Ibid, Chapter 4, Community Engagement

relegated to work that does not fully utilise their skills, expertise, ingenuity, and capacity for innovation. This session will discuss some of the key challenges faced by young public servants in their work, and how they relate to structural features of public institutions (for instance, legal and regulatory frameworks and human resource policies, and institutional approaches to innovation).

In the context of public sector transformation and ‘FutureGov’⁷ initiatives, the session will then go on to examine why and how more young people should and can be attracted to the public service and the necessity of their active engagement in driving transformation and innovation in the public sector.

Session 2: Attracting and recruiting young public servants for a future ready public service

As public administrations work to replace those retiring, they are presented with a continuous opportunity to take stock of the skills (or lack thereof) within the public sector and actively hire young public servants with the expertise needed to meet the current and future demands of public administrations.

The first step to increasing the number and quality of young public servants is attracting and recruiting the right people. Better showcasing the unique advantages, values and work of the public service is critical to increasing its appeal and relevance to young people.

However, in many cases, governments’ hiring processes are not designed for bringing in new talent. From rigid application procedures to stringent academic requirements, many hiring processes are not meeting young people where they are at – which is often online. Mobile device-based applications and use of social media platforms to advertise and promote careers in the public service, amongst other outreach methods, represent a shift away from traditional hiring approaches, which potentially serves to reach not only more young people, but young people with a greater diversity of skills and backgrounds.

In a rapidly changing technological landscape, skills-based hiring is also a way to ensure that young people with non-traditional academic backgrounds have a gateway to the public service, which may help ensure a more dynamic mix of competencies, expertise, and skills to reflect the changing demands on the public sector.

This session will explore concrete actions, initiatives and strategies that can be implemented to better attract and recruit young people to the public service. Drawing on examples of good practices, the session will focus on actions and initiatives in the area of recruitment.

Session 3: Retaining young public servants through an innovative and flexible public administration

Attracting, training, and recruiting new public servants can be a lengthy and costly endeavour. High levels of job turnover amongst younger public servants can raise recruitment costs and lead to the loss of valuable talent and skills, in turn impacting productivity. Retention is therefore critical to an effective and efficient public service. However, young recruits can often become jaded with a public sector job when it seems out of step with the expectations they

⁷ <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/SDGSummit2023/SDG-Action-Weekend/futuregov>

had upon recruitment. Efforts to make public service jobs more attractive to young recruits must be matched with systemic change that utilises their skills and talents as advertised.

Recently, digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence (AI) have been rapidly transforming the public sector and how public servants work. Delivery of public services, data collection, hiring processes, institutional procedures and decision-making are all becoming increasingly automated. These advances require an agile and adaptable workforce that embraces innovation and creativity and fosters an environment where curiosity, experimentation and new ideas and approaches can be explored and tested. As young people, many of whom are 'digital natives'⁸, transition into the public service, the public sector must adapt and grow in ways that recognise and leverage both the formal and informal digital skills of younger generations throughout their structures, to enhance the delivery of public services and institutional innovation.

Nurturing the careers of public servants from entry-level onwards is central to ensuring retention of talent. As well as offering competitive salaries and benefits, providing spaces for career development and mobility via different pathways and trajectories that value different skills, approaches, and expertise equally, can help ensure workforce diversity, approaches, and retention overtime.

Rethinking working methods, and structures, including through the opening of spaces for participation, collaboration, co-creation, trainings, leadership opportunities, and innovative schemes aimed at leveraging the skills and talents of young public servants, is necessary for a future ready public service that prioritises innovation and responsiveness, and safeguards against a 'brain drain' of young talent to other sectors.

Session 4: Fostering dynamic leadership at all levels

Young public servants can play a pivotal role in driving innovation in the public sector, bringing new perspectives, ideas, and renewed energy to addressing pressing challenges. Their willingness to embrace change can reinvigorate outdated systems and drive progress and innovation. However, creating the space and opportunity for the effective leadership of young public servants is crucial to ensuring these contributions are recognised, sustained, and maximised.

At every career stage, leadership skills are essential, and opportunities exist for them to be fostered and developed. Allowing the autonomy of younger workers to lead on initiatives and projects, big and small, is a core component of creating a culture where public servants can continue to learn, grow, and innovate, and can help cultivate a sense of ownership and commitment to their work. In this context, leadership means more than just learned managerial skills and abilities; it requires mentorship, empowerment, and the establishment of an inclusive atmosphere where young public servants are encouraged to propose ideas and take the lead on projects with the support of their managers. In many places, however, such an approach can often be felt to threaten existing systems of hierarchy and, as a result, are often actively resisted. Cultural views regarding leadership and hierarchy can be at play, while

⁸ Digital natives typically describe those born into the 'information age', or after the year 1980.

dismissive and outdated views on the lesser capabilities of young people can undermine young public servants attempts to take the lead.

This session will look at how leadership can be fostered throughout the career of the public servant with a focus on entry through mid-level, while also examining the mindset changes needed for those in higher positions, or current leaders, to embrace and enable such change.

Session 5: Conclusion and recommendations

This session will draw on conclusions, key messages, and recommendations from all the previous sessions. The workshop rapporteur will lead a discussion among participants to identify key messages that will feed into the Forum's outcome Report.

Organisational Details

- This workshop is organised by the Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government (DPIDG) / Public Service and Innovation Branch (PSIB).
- Participants will include officials from central and local government, policymakers, public government experts, public sector institutions, practitioners, youth civil society, and young public servants.
- The workshop will be conducted in English, with translation into Korean.

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