

Policy Capacity in the Northern Territory Public Service:

A view from the workforce

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KEY FINDINGS

- The research identified and surveyed policy makers about risk factors for policy work. The most common risk factor identified was no formal training in policy work (68%), followed by less than 5 years of experience in the policy field (63%).
- All respondents identified at least one risk factor and two thirds were 'at risk' on three or more of the nine risk factors.
- Respondents who were very frequently (weekly) engaged in responding to emergency issues (45%) were much more closely engaged in policy making networks.
- Relatively low levels of engagement with the public was a consistent theme throughout the survey.
- Over two thirds of respondents thought policy capacity overall was declining within the Northern Territory Government and most cited human resource issues as the main cause.
- One quarter of respondents thought their own department was effective or highly effective in terms of policy work.

RESEARCH AIM

To identify the facilitators and barriers for effective policy work ('policy capacity') in the Northern Territory Public Service.

This brief is a summary of results from an online survey conducted in 2013 of Northern Territory public servants with a substantial part of their job function being policy analysis or advice. We discuss how risk factors might influence the perception of barriers and needs of the 'policy workforce'.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the Northern Territory Commissioner for Public Employment supported researchers from Charles Darwin University and Michigan Technical University (USA) to conduct a survey of its workforce on policy capacity. The purpose of the survey was to identify the facilitators and barriers to effective policy work ('policy capacity') in the Northern Territory. Ethics clearance was granted by Charles Darwin University and the Northern Territory Department of Education.

This brief provides a summary and interpretation of a selection of results from the survey of Northern Territory (NT) public servants who consider a substantial part of their function to be in policy analysis or providing policy advice. We discuss how risk factors identified from the survey might influence the perception of barriers and needs of the 'policy workforce'. The results of the survey are structured into six sections –

1. A summary of what we have termed the policy capacity 'risk factors' held by survey respondents
2. Descriptions of the policy activity types respondents engage in
3. Descriptions of the policy issues they dealt with
4. Identification of barriers to better policy work
5. Perceptions of what might be needed to improve policy capacity in the NT
6. Perceptions about how the policy work environment is changing in the NT

A complete report of the survey is available from the researchers or the Northern Territory Office of the Commissioner of Public Employment (<http://www.ocpe.nt.gov.au>). To protect the anonymity of respondents we will not release results specific to any individual Department or Agency.

2. THE NORTHERN TERRITORY POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Much of the international research into policy capacity is done within national governments or in collaboration with governments of quite large and densely populated jurisdictions. Recent work done in northern Canada appears more relevant to NT contexts where particular policy making challenges are evident because:

- There are high levels of staff turnover in the public service
- There is relatively few 'home grown' policy workers, creating difficulties in building and retaining expertise in local issues
- There are close relationships between the political and administrative workforces
- Policy staff are distant from the national centres of policy making
- Policy staff have very close relationships with national policy structures (for example, in the NT, Indigenous affairs and Defence)
- Populations are small and the impacts of policy changes are more immediate and dramatic than may be the case in larger jurisdictions, and
- Policy work teams are small, therefore fewer people do a wider range of work

At the time of this survey, there were some specific policy capacity issues relating to partnerships with the Australian Government (for example, *Stronger Futures in the NT* and *Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage*)¹. Northern Territory Government re-structures following the change of Government in August 2012 and Local Government reform processes may have also influenced the survey results.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research data were collected in the second half of 2013 via an online survey of NT public servants with a substantial part of their work function being policy analysis and/or policy advice. There were 119 useable responses to the survey which, based on 2011 Census data, represented approximately 40% of the expected 'policy workforce'. Survey respondents were asked about their background in policy work, including their education and training for policy work, career paths and intentions, the challenges they face in doing policy work in the NT, and how they think these challenges could be addressed.

4. INTERPRETATION OF THE SURVEY RESULTS

The survey respondents were heavily engaged in virtually all of the activities identified in the literature as components of policy work (Table 1). Scientific research and public consultation were done by the fewest people and also least frequently. The relatively low levels of engagement with the public emerged as a theme from the survey, with publicly generated issues or issues involving consultation with the public among the least likely to be frequently dealt with.

Table 1: Percentage of respondents involved in policy related activities

Policy activity	Did at all (%)	Did monthly or more frequently (%)
Consult with decision makers	97	83
Consult with stakeholders	99	80
Brief mid management	93	80
Collect data or information	96	78
Brief senior management	96	73
Conduct policy research	90	73
Identify policy issues	89	72
Appraise/ assess policy options	95	69
Identify policy options	99	68
Negotiate with program staff	88	62
Evaluate policy processes and procedures	99	54
Negotiate with stakeholders	95	51

¹ Office of the Children's Commissioner (2012), *Children's Commissioner Northern Territory Annual Report 2011-2012*, Northern Territory Government, p.37; and Commonwealth's *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory* policy.

Evaluate policy results and outcomes	89	48
Implement policy programs	88	48
Brief high level decision makers	81	47
Negotiate with central agencies	84	46
Consult with the public	67	19
Conduct scientific research	30	16

Source: Survey of NT Public Servants in 2013, Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, NT

Overall, respondents represent a relatively inexperienced policy workforce, as we may have expected given the generally high levels of labour turnover in the NT. However, inexperience was more about lack of experience in the field in which they were working (63% had five years or less experience) than experience with the NT (27% of respondents had been in the Territory five years or less). Few workers had formal policy training and few were recruited because of their policy work expertise. Only half considered the content knowledge of their current job would be useful for future jobs.

Younger policy workers are more mobile and less likely to have developed a strong commitment to Territory issues. However, there was some evidence newer arrivals (who were generally younger) were more positive to current policy work conditions and management, and were more frequently involved in briefing senior management. It is possible some of the new arrivals were recruited as part of the recent government restructure.

Two other risk factors which seemed particularly important in terms of distinguishing behaviours and attitudes towards policy work were very frequent (weekly) engagement with emergency issues which were closely connected to the policy making networks, including liaison with and briefing officials; and accessing and using research and data. In contrast, those with no formal training in policy work were less active participants in policy networks. However, attitudinally they were generally more positive about current policy work conditions in the NT. They perceived fewer barriers, fewer needs for improvement, and were less affected by government restructuring.

Over two thirds of respondents believed policy capacity overall was declining within the Northern Territory Government, and just one quarter thought their own department was effective or highly effective in terms of policy work. Improving this situation may require more attention to training for policy capacity, however, training was not rated highly as a need (identified by 25% of respondents), although less than one quarter of respondents thought that training was adequate.

More universal areas for suggested improvements were 'more resources' with the recruitment and retention of policy and research staff being the most commonly cited need. There were also some concerns about the effectiveness of cooperation and information sharing between Northern Territory Government agencies, and between levels of government.

5. SELECTED SURVEY RESULTS AND TABLES

5.1 Policy Activities

We categorised a range of activities relating to policy work which were provided by respondents if they stated they undertook them at least once a year (Table 1). Respondents were considered 'high frequency' in terms of policy related activities if they did them every month. The most

frequently cited high frequency activities were consulting with decision makers (83%), consulting with stakeholders and briefing middle management (both 80%) and collecting policy related data or information (78%). In general, respondents with policy capacity risk factors were as likely to be high frequency undertakers of activities as those without risk factors.

5.2 Policy Capacity ‘Risk Factors’

There were nine ‘risk factors’ identified (Table 2). It is important to emphasise respondents identified as ‘at risk’ do not necessarily have low policy capacity. The risk factors essentially apply to the workforce as a whole – more people ‘at risk’ would tend to reduce policy capacity overall. The most common risk factor was a lack of formal training in policy work (68% of respondents had no formal training) and only ten of those respondents had undertaken any informal policy related courses. This was followed by the length of experience in the policy field (63% with 5 years or less), and ‘not recruited for experience in policy field’ (62%). All respondents had at least one risk factor with two thirds of all respondents being at risk on three or more of the nine risk factors.

Table 2: Content, context and process knowledge risk factors

Risk factor	At risk (%)
Does not have formal training in policy work	68
Has 5 years or fewer experience in policy field	63
Not recruited for experience in policy field	62
Not planning to engage after retirement	56
Does not have graduate degree	46
Deals with emergency issues every week	45
Not looking to transfer content knowledge to next job	43
Aged over 50 years	39
Has been in Northern Territory 5 years or less	27

Source: Survey of NT Public Servants in 2013, Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, NT

The most frequently distinguished risk factor was respondents who ‘deal with emergency issues every week’. The results showed these respondents were **more** likely than those who did not deal with emergency issues every week, to ‘highly frequently’ –

- Appraise/assess policy options (83% compared with 57%)
- Brief high level decision makers (66% compared with 37%)
- Identify policy issues (85% compared with 63%)
- Implement policy programs (62% compared with 37%), and
- Negotiate with central agencies (60% compared with 34%)

Those with no formal training in policy work were **less** likely to highly frequently –

- Brief high level decision makers (33% compared with 63%)
- Brief senior management (64% compared with 84%), and
- Negotiate with central agencies (34% compared with 61%)

Interestingly, respondents who had arrived in the NT five years ago or less were more likely to highly frequently brief high level decision makers (68% compared with 38%) and negotiate with central agencies (64% compared with 38%).

5.3 Types of Issues

We identified 16 policy issue categories from respondent answers (Table 3). Respondents dealing with issues demanding immediate attention on a weekly basis were more likely to frequently deal with at least ten other issue types. However, they were no more likely to deal with issues requiring public consultation, having a single clear solution, requiring specialist knowledge, demanding the creation of evidence, or requiring attention for more than a year.

Table 3: Percentage of respondents dealing with policy related issues

Policy issue type	Did at all %	Did monthly or more frequently %
Require less than one month attention	96	85
Demand immediate action*	91	75
Require 1-6 months attention	100	72
Require specialist knowledge	94	68
Hard to identify a single solution	89	68
Data not immediately available	96	65
Demand creation of evidence	94	58
Require 6-12 months attention	96	57
Require input from non-government stakeholders	94	55
Raised by non-government stakeholders	92	53
Political priorities from cabinet	81	49
Require attention for more than a year	91	48
Require inter-government coordination	86	48
Public pressure	81	43
Have single clear solution	66	37
Require public consultation	69	18

* Also used as a risk factor if respondent dealt with emergency issues every week

Source: Survey of NT Public Servants in 2013, Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, NT

5.4 Barriers to Better Policy Work

Respondents were asked to identify from a list of potential barriers which they considered as barriers or those creating no barriers (Table 4). Only five respondents (4%) said there were no barriers, of which four had arrived in the NT five years ago or less. Those with no formal policy training were less likely to nominate barriers than those with formal policy training.

Table 4: Percentage of respondents identifying barriers to better policy work

Barriers to better policy work	% of total sample
Government reorganisations	32
Not enough resources	28
Not enough time	27
Short-term orientation of work	23
Insufficient expertise in policy units	18
Lack of support within the Department	18
Lack of access to information and data	17
Minister does not consider our expertise	15
Lack of access to outside expertise	12
Lack of access to training	9
Lack of relevant skills	9
Inability to collect relevant information	8
Lack of support within the work unit	6
Job description inadequate	6
No demand from management	4

Source: Survey of NT Public Servants in 2013, Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, NT

5.5 Effectiveness of support actions

Respondents were asked how adequate they thought actions to support policy capacity were (Table 5). Respondents who had been in the NT 5 years or less were **more** likely to rate:

- Training opportunities as adequate or very adequate (42% compared with 12%), and
- Use of outsourcing as adequate or very adequate (33% compared with 8%)

Whereas,

- Respondents with no post-graduate qualifications were more likely to rate forecasting of policy challenges as adequate or very adequate (48% compared with 24%), and
- Respondents aged 50 years and over were less likely to consider the use of outsourcing as adequate or very adequate (4% compared with 24%)

Table 5: Percentage of respondents who rated actions to support policy capacity as adequate or very adequate

Actions to support policy work	%
Engagement by policy management	52
Engagement by networks	49
Forecasting of policy challenges	36
Recruitment of skilled policy staff	29
Training	22
Staffing levels	19
Use of outsourcing	16
Staff exchange between departments	9

Source: Survey of NT Public Servants in 2013, Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, NT

5.6 Needs for improvement

Respondents were asked about aspects of policy making which needed improvement. Once again, respondents with no formal training in policy work were less likely to identify many of the needs (Tables 6 and 7), with the exceptions being the need for more program implementation staff, better training, increased access to available data, and increased use of available technology; where they were as likely to identify a need.

Additionally, the risk factor group of respondents dealing with emergency issues on a weekly basis were more likely to identify a need for better information sharing (69% compared with 38%), but less likely to identify a need for greater commitment from management (40% compared with 64%).

Although, for other identified risk factor groups:

- Respondents not looking to transfer their content knowledge to their next job were more likely to identify a need for better training (45% compared with 23%), and
- Respondents aged 50 years and over were more likely to identify a need for clearer organisational mandate for policy work (67% compared with 42%).

Table 6: Proportion of respondents citing needs for improvement

Needs for improvement	No formal policy training %
Better recruitment and retention of staff	39
Greater coordination between departments	34
Better information sharing	34
Greater commitment from management	34
Stronger and clearer organisational mandate	33
Greater stakeholder engagement	32
More policy staff	31
Increased access to available data	28
Increased use of available data	28
More program implementation staff	25
Better training	25
More research staff	20
Change in public expectations	19
Increased use of available technologies	18

Source: Survey of NT Public Servants in 2013, Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, NT

Table 7: Proportion of respondents with and without formal policy training identifying needs for improvement

Actions to support policy work	With formal policy training %	Without formal policy training %
Greater coordination between departments	58	23
Greater stakeholder engagement	55	21
Better recruitment and retention of staff	55	32
Better information sharing	55	25
Stronger and clearer organisational mandate	53	25
Greater commitment from management	53	26
More policy staff	45	25
Increased use of available data	42	21
Change in public expectations	37	11
More research staff	32	15

Source: Survey of NT Public Servants in 2013, Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, NT

5.7 Changing work environment

The most frequently cited changes to the work environment were urgent day to day issues increasingly taking precedence over long term thinking; the need for policy officers to be more 'frank and fearless' in offering advice; policy directions becoming more politically driven; and the greater involvement needed by non-government stakeholders (Table 8).

Table 8: Nature of change in the policy work environment

Change item	% agree or strongly agree
Urgent day to day issues taking precedence over long term thinking	89%
Policy officers need to be more 'frank and fearless'	85%
Policy directions increasingly about what is most politically acceptable	78%
Need to foster greater involvement by non-government stakeholders	71%
Government reorganisation is affecting my work	70%
Less governmental policy capacity	67%
Increasingly require technical expertise	62%
Policy capacity increasingly outside government	62%
Decision makers have less technical expertise	59%
Interest groups having greater influence	51%
More use of higher quality research	51%
Evidence is increasingly being asked for	49%
Increasingly involving wider networks	48%
Decisions increasingly made by those outside government	27%
Increasingly consulting with the public	22%
Formal government institutions becoming less relevant to policy making	16%

Source: Survey of NT Public Servants in 2013, Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, NT

The risk factor group of respondents who had been in the NT five years ago or less were **less** likely to agree that:

- Policy directions were increasingly about what is politically acceptable (64% compared with 85%), and
- There was less government policy capacity (50% compared with 75%).

In respect of other main risk factor groups:

- Respondents who had five years or less experience in their current field were more likely to agree that interest groups were having greater influence (62% compared with 33%), and

- Respondents aged over 50 years were less likely to agree that evidence was increasingly being asked for to inform policy (22% compared with 66%).

6. CONCLUSION

This research brief has summarised the results of the 2013 survey of NT public servants who consider a substantial part of their work to be policy analysis or providing policy advice. We discussed how risk factors might influence the perception of barriers and needs of the public service 'policy workforce'. Over two thirds of respondents considered that policy capacity overall was declining within the Northern Territory Government, and only one quarter thought their own department was effective or highly effective in terms of policy work.

The main findings of the survey were the nine risk factors relating to the key issues concerning policy capacity in the NT Public Service workforce which may influence their perception of barriers and needs. The most common risk factor identified was no formal training in policy work which indicates a relatively inexperienced policy workforce.

Younger policy workers are the most mobile into and out of the NT and are less likely to have developed a strong commitment to Territory issues. Two other important behaviours and attitudes to policy work were distinguished as (1) those involved 'very frequently' (weekly) in responding to emergency issues were much more closely engaged in the policy making networks including liaison with and briefing officials, and accessing and using research and data; and (2) those with no formal training in policy work appeared somewhat disengaged and were less active participants in policy networks.

The survey results offer some practical insights for managers of policy workforces including:

- Formal policy work training is needed, but it may be difficult to engage policy workers in this training because they see it as a need for others and not necessarily for themselves
- Policy capacity may otherwise be increased through better inter-departmental (and potentially inter-governmental) cooperation and information sharing
- Policy capacity may be increased through more opportunities for policy workers to engage with non-governmental stakeholders; and
- Policy capacity may be increased through more opportunities for those leaving the full-time NT workforce to continue to contribute as advisors, mentors and trainers.