

Public sector

# Gutting the APS created a diversity problem

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Contributor  
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In the early 2000's, I remember sitting around conference tables with other government chief information officers and technologists. Female CIOs headed up Immigration, Centrelink, CSIRO, Industry, Finance and AGIMO (a predecessor of Digital Transformation Agency) to name a few.

Yes, the 'women in tech pipeline' statistics and all the trends were against us at that time as well, but it really wasn't unusual to have this diversity at the top.

The diversity of the female cohort at the top was phenomenal. People with science, technology and mathematics backgrounds. People who had worked overseas for other organisations and governments. People who had worked in different sectors.



Gutting the APS: perfect conditions to create an era of government tech failures

This was an era of putting in place the digital foundations of government – and I believe made possible without stuff ups, because of the highly diverse Australian Government technology leadership.

The 'what happened' was not a 'woman problem' but a problem for Australia.

The 'what happened' was this.

The [Gershon Review](#) is widely acknowledged as the cause for gutting capability of the public sector through widespread outsourcing. But this period was a very deep well of doctrinal change.

Outsourcing was seen as the answer to an imaginary problem – a 'problem' that was in reality a doctrine. And that doctrine was that outsourcing as a strategy would be more cost effective and deliver better results.

And there was an underside of this doctrine. And that is that the value of diversity in technology leadership itself as an inherent capability multiplier within the public sector was not understood nor valued.

Perhaps even more insidiously, diversity in all dimensions including diversity of thought, was inconsistent with the doctrine of outsourcing.

Contemporaneously, the escalation of the 'insourcing' of consulting advice occurred together with the rise of long-term contractors, as examined in the [Thodey Review](#).

And the perfect conditions for the ensuring era of government tech failures was created. The problem with doctrine, is that it lingers.

*The [2020 State of the Service Report](#) shows a number of intractable trends, notwithstanding much diversity report writing and a range of women in STEM coaching programs.*

The breakdown of the SOSR statistics on job family by gender, show the workforce for ICT is 66 per cent men; for engineering and technical 82.2 per cent men and for science 70.7 per cent men. That is the aggregate figure across all levels.

There is also a gender pay gap of 7.3 per cent in favour of men in the APS, with higher pay differences in the SES.

For what it's worth, in the APS I was once told that I was an outlier in terms of gender, skills and salary – and that because I was paid so well above level, that my handsome salary would be pegged until everyone caught up. Well, that was never going to happen so I left to start my own business so as not to be constrained by the prevailing doctrine.

This contrary diversity doctrine has resulted in an increasingly homogenous profile of technology leadership. DTA (male); Services Australia (male); ATO (male); PM&C (male); Home Affairs (male); Health (male); Social Services (male); Bureau of Meteorology (female); Treasury (male); Education (male); Defence (male); Industry (female); NDIA (male); CSIRO (male); ABS (male); Parliamentary (male). To name but a few.

A very different technology leadership diversity profile to that around the conference tables in the early 2000's.

And yet, in other sectors there are great women in science, technology and engineering at the top of their fields in Australia and acclaimed internationally. The ANU College of Engineering and Computer Science; the 3AI Institute; the ANU Cyber Institute; World of Drones; the Chief Scientist of Australia; and the Australasian Institute of Digital Health – and others, run by women.

So the problem as I see it, is not a 'woman problem' but a doctrine overseen by men in the public sector. There is no denying the great value in the many coaching, mentoring and STEM and digital programs for women. These must continue.

But action beyond this is needed. Visible change.

I am reminded of the 'Yes, Minister' episode where Sir Jim Hacker wanted to implement a 25 per cent quota for women in leadership. Sir Humphrey responded that it takes time to do things quickly and that with an immediate start, there would eventually be 25 per cent in top jobs in 25 years' time.

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