UNSW CANBERRA

Public Service Research Group

Things worth sharing in 2024

A major theme of the work done by the **Public Service Research Group** at UNSW Canberra is to not only undertake research but to use it to inform both policy making and implementation. As a consequence, we often publish in non-academic forums, including The Mandarin, The Conversation and blog-site The Power to Persuade. This short booklet presents some of the key contributions we have made this year to highlight the range and scope of the things we do.

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The NDIS reform bill has been passed – will it get things 'back on track' for people with disability?

By **Helen Dickinson.**
Published online August 22, 2024 by **The Conversation**

The government has passed a bill that will pave the way for sweeping reforms to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

In late March many in the disability community were surprised when the government introduced a new piece of legislation to get the NDIS "back on track". The route of the bill through parliament has not been easy and many in the disability community have been highly critical of it, even calling for the current reforms to be scrapped altogether.

On Wednesday, NDIS Minister Bill Shorten said agreement had been reached with states and territories about how they will work together regarding the scheme. The provision of "foundational" disability support and services outside the NDIS has been a sticking point.

Why has this bill been so controversial? And now amended reforms have passed, what will happen next?

A long and winding path

When the legislation to reform the NDIS Act was tabled there had been no exposure draft released beforehand. This meant there had not been public discussion and although some Disability Representative Organisations had been given details, they had been asked to sign non-disclosure agreements to prevent them talking about it. This was at odds with NDIS review recommendations that rules and changes should be co-designed with people with disability and adhere to the principle of "nothing about us, without us".

When the bill was introduced to parliament there were also two major processes – the NDIS review and the disability royal commission – that had delivered recommendations about disability services and supports and had not yet been responded to by the government.

Since then, there has been a response to the disability royal commission widely panned as "lacklustre and disappointing". But we still haven't seen a government response to the NDIS review recommendations released at the end of last year. This means the government is legislating before outlining what changes it will make in response to the review.

Further investigation

The bill was referred to a senate committee for further investigation. In what would become an ongoing theme, submission deadlines were tight with hearings held in late May and a final report due mid June. Yet hundreds of submissions were received from the disability community.

A staggering number of amendments to the legislation followed including how NDIS supports are defined and how human rights are considered.

The bill passed the House of Representatives in early June but the government did not have enough support to pass it in the Senate and it was referred for a second committee hearing.

Again, hundreds of submissions were received with people and groups pointing out the limitations of the bill and urging it should not be passed. The committee recommended the bill should pass promptly, despite renewed push back from the Greens.

Today, that has happened.

Concerns over cost shifting

Given the government's goal of containing the scheme's costs and growth, the disability community is worried this will result in cuts to services and supports.

Some in the community has accused the government of whipping up public outrage about the scheme with talk about significant fraud and money being spent on things like sex services, which only a small number of people are approved to receive under the scheme.

One solution to reducing the costs of the scheme suggested by the NDIS review was that a foundational supports strategy should be developed that would take some of the pressure off. In December of last year National Cabinet agreed to share the costs of these supports equally between the Commonwealth and states and territories and in January the Commonwealth committed $11.6 million over two years to support the development and implementation of the foundational supports strategy.

Meanwhile, the states and territories have spoken out against the bill from the start. This is likely due to concerns changes to the scheme would shift aspects of services and supports from the NDIS to states and territories.

The disability community also shares concerns around foundational supports. Given these are not in place and have five years to transition in, NDIS changes could leave service and support gaps and disabled people going without.

Minister Shorten has dismissed fears and said he was ready to force states to take on extra responsibilities. This process has caused a significant rift with important partners in this and other policies and programs.

This week the government admitted participants might have to pay for required NDIS needs assessment. This would amount to significant costs for participants and might mean some go without access to the NDIS, creating a significant equity issue.

Up until the very last minute groups such as Every Australian Counts and People with Disability Australia called on the government to pause or reject the bill for fear of causing harm to NDIS participants.

What's next?

The government has lost a lot of political currency with the disability community. It is likely any future legislation or changes to scheme rules will encounter significant opposition.

And now the legislation has passed there will need to be significant action to work out what these reforms look like in practice. The government has said it will co-design these with the community, but many remain doubtful given the journey so far.

These fears have been realised with the current consultation on how eligible supports should be defined in the NDIS. While these details have significant implications for how the scheme operates, the consultation period was initially set for a mere fortnight. It has since been extended by a week. This brief window for consultation on such an important issue could lead to changes that significantly limit the innovation and independence of participants.

Unless the government really starts listening to people with disability we will see the NDIS go backwards and some of the gains made for the disability community in recent years will be significantly eroded.

Non-hybrid workplaces limit autonomy and flexibility, breed resentment

By **Sue Williamson.**
Published online August 12, 2024 by **The Mandarin**

Last week the NSW government released a circular directing public servants to return to the office and limit working from home. The circular stipulated public servants "work principally in an approved workplace in NSW".

A notable feature of this circular is it does not mandate the number of days required to be worked in the office. It implies all — or most — work should be conducted on employers' premises. Premier Chris Minns reportedly stated employees should work at least three days in the office.

This position therefore still enables hybrid working. However, the circular does not state this and it will therefore be up to individual agencies to determine policy. The possibility, therefore, exists some agencies will further curtail remote and hybrid working.

The directive notes there are a range of flexible working arrangements employees can use. This is a positive clarification and one which maintains the status quo.

Not all public servants can work from home or in a hybrid way, and in NSW, we're told 85% of public servants are front-line staff. So, they may benefit more from different forms of flexibility rather than working from home or in a hybrid arrangement.

This begs the question: if only a small minority of employees can work from home in some capacity, why is there a need to direct them back to the office?

The answer seems to be purely political — pandering to the powerful property industry. The Property Council is gleeful, stating the directive will result in "more life, more investment, and more business for our cities". While economic growth is necessary, this is a short-sighted view. That horse has already bolted.

Economists are predicting cities will change, as the workplace continues to be decoupled from where people live. Regional areas benefit from decentralisation — and this is possible when people do work remotely full-time.
Economic growth will continue — just possibly not be driven by public servants buying their sandwiches in CBDs.

What about the people?

The circular refers to the need to be physically present in the office to foster a sense of belonging. What does the evidence say?

As my colleagues and I explained last year, working from home and hybrid working is good for inclusion and belonging. This is particularly the case for people with disability, and those with caring responsibilities, who have a clear preference to continue working from home.

The NSW government has expressed a commitment to increasing the number of employees with a disability — any requirement to return to the office full-time will not assist in meeting this aim. It will be important to monitor agencies' policies on working from home, and whether this impacts the rates of people with disability hybrid-working or remotely.

Additionally, more than two-thirds of the NSW public sector are women, and since women still take on the majority of caring responsibilities, this directive may negatively affect them.

Further, a solid evidence base is emerging that shows requiring people to return to the office does not work. Research we conducted last year clearly showed mandates limit autonomy and flexibility and breed resentment.

Our research aligns with other studies that also show this. Employees are likely to leave organisations with mandates and move to those that enable hybrid and remote working.

What about the managers?

Our research, and research produced by others, overwhelmingly shows employees want to hybrid work, with two-to-three days a week spent at home. This has been the case for years.

Managers support this way of working. Our 2023 research of managers in the Australian Public Service showed managers have developed techniques to facilitate successful hybrid working, such as "anchor" days, where the whole team is required to be in on a certain day.

For anchor days to be successful, however, workplaces need to be engaging. Managers and organisations realise this and are increasing team bonding activities to entice people back to the office. This is a much more successful way of ensuring people return to the employer's premises, rather than forcing them.

We asked managers about mandates. Generally, they were unclear about why a mandate was in place (noting our research was conducted before the mandate was removed in the APS). They believed the mandate was in place due to senior leaders wanting to see people in the workplace, and to be able to exert some control over those they could see. This is based on a lack of trust and is very old-school management.

Managers also told us employees were just as productive working from home. This finding aligns with other research showing hybrid workers are productive. A recent study by one of the leading academics in this area found productivity was maintained when employees had hybrid arrangements, and hybrid working increased job satisfaction and reduced attrition rates by one-third.

The NSW government circular also states people should work in the office to enable mentoring and on-the-job learning. There can be negativities associated when employees working from home full-time, which do include difficulties connecting with colleagues, social learning and mentoring.

Hybrid working, however, is the solution to much of this. It is estimated around 100 million employees in Europe and North America are in hybrid work arrangements.

This is no longer a trend but is business as usual. Organisations are increasingly realising this, and facilitating and supporting this form of working. It is imperative NSW public sector agencies do enable hybrid working and not totally curtail working from home, which is possible under the circular.

Tiered NDIS provider registration and a say on supports. Are we finally listening to people with disability?

By **Helen Dickinson.**
Published online August 5, 2024 by **The Conversation**

When the review of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) was handed down at the end of last year, one of the more controversial recommendations was to make provider registration mandatory.

The review – and NDIS Minister Bill Shorten – argued these changes were needed to make NDIS participants safer. But many in the disability community were worried these changes could restrict their choice and control over services.

Shorten established an expert taskforce to provide advice on the design and implementation of a new registration model in consultation with the disability community. This advice has just been published.

At the same time, a short public consultation period has opened so people can have their say on what supports should be funded under the NDIS, following headlines about ballooning costs and what funds are being used for.

Together, these developments might achieve a balance between safety concerns and allowing NDIS participants to manage their services in a way that works for them.

What the NDIS review recommended

Currently, only some NDIS service providers are registered with the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission. To do so, they must undertake compliance and auditing processes, which can be time-consuming and expensive.

All NDIS participants can purchase supports from registered providers, but some (those who are self-managed or plan-managed, rather than NDIS-managed) can also buy services from providers who are unregistered. About 7% of service providers in the NDIS are registered, but only around two-fifths of NDIS payments go to unregistered providers. Unregistered providers tend to be smaller operators and there are more of them.

The NDIS review suggested a mandatory risk-proportionate model to improve visibility and regulation for all providers.

This means all NDIS providers would need to be registered or enrolled and participants would not be able to purchase goods or services from providers that are not. Some providers say they would not become registered because of the significant costs and administrative burdens involved.

This might not seem like a particularly controversial recommendation, but it has split the disability community.

Some see it as a way to prevent some of the horrific abuse some people with disability experience.

But others are concerned it would shrink their choice of provider, lead some to go without services and increase the cost of the scheme.

Who were on the taskforce and what did they do?

Chaired by disability rights lawyer and activist, Natalie Wade, the taskforce met with more than 2,200 people with disability, allies, service providers and others over three months. The taskforce disagreed with the NDIS review that all providers should be registered, but said a new risk-proportionate model is needed.

The taskforce outlines four categories of registration:

- advanced registration for providers offering high-risk supports often in high-risk settings (such as group homes)
- general registration for those offering medium-risk supports or those who require additional skill and training or involve significant one-to-one contact with disabled people (such as some complex bowel care or giving injections)
- self-directed registration for participants or their guardian or legal representative who get supports through direct employment or independent contractors
- basic registration for providers offering lower-risk supports such as social and community participation and supports with more limited one-to-one contact.

Each of these categories comes with different requirements in terms of worker screening, practice standards, complaints processes and performance measurement requirements.

A fifth category set out by the taskforce does not require registration. This is for goods bought from mainstream retailers (such as a noise-cancelling headphones from an online store or a ramp from a hardware store) where there is no direct support provided to the participant.

The taskforce also suggests changes to:

- worker registration
- the NDIS Code of Conduct
- how provider performance is measured
- how provider audits are conducted
- how the Quality and Safeguards Commission receives and handles complaints.
- Some of these changes will take time as new systems and processes will need to be developed; others are more urgent.

This is particularly the case for people accessing supported independent living services, who need help at home all the time. Often, these are people with intellectual disability who have large NDIS budgets and are more likely to live in group settings. They are also more likely to experience violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. The taskforce recommends all such providers be registered within 12 months.

There is still some detail to be worked out about these recommendations and more co-design needed to make sure the system works for everyone. But these suggestions seem to do a good job of balancing protections and choice and control.

The report acknowledges many of the complex issues relating to this topic and suggests a possible pathway.

What about NDIS supports?

The taskforce report lands in the wake of the government's underwhelming response to the disability royal commission.

Meanwhile, the progress of legislative NDIS reform to get the scheme "back on track" through the Senate has been delayed by amendments and disagreements.

There is ongoing tension with the states and territories over who will fund foundational support.

Proposed lists of what supports will be covered under the NDIS have also been controversial.

The government has just opened public consultation so people with disability can help define what should be funded and what should not. But the timescales for consultation are very short, which might prevent all those who are interested from engaging on this topic.

What happens next?

The government now needs to decide how it wants to act on the provider and worker registration taskforce's advice.

The taskforce report acknowledges further consultation with the disability community is needed. It will be important that the government listens more closely.

Our careers have a melody

By **David Schmidtchen.**
Published online 17 July 2024, by **The Mandarin**

What is a career?

The list of jobs I have had might describe my career. However, it does not assume continuity of effort or coherence in approach. This is the broadest possible definition of a career.

For most of us, a career includes progress in competence and advancement in hierarchy. In this light, a career might be a pattern of related roles and knowledge through which I have deliberately moved throughout my working life. Success might be measured by how far I have climbed the greasy pole of the organisational hierarchy.

These definitions are not a flattering or inspiring view of a career.

An unusual way to think about a career is that it is an experience we have that is somewhere between understanding and imagination. This is a way to understand a career not as a set of jobs designed to serve an organisational outcome but as an everyday human experience. However, in experiencing a career, the roles of manager, worker, and team member become blurred.

The relationship between individual and organisation can be indistinct and impermanent. When, exactly, did I become a leader? Was my experience of that role defined by being in the role or the knowledge I had accumulated that made me eligible for the role?

We sometimes refer to the 'art of management', but our conversations are dominated by the 'mechanics of management'. We should think more about the 'art of career' and less about the 'mechanics of a career'. The following four thoughts offer a place to start thinking about a career and what it could be.

A career is indivisible

We think about careers as a series of movements between jobs. They are a stop-start thing rather than a continuous, always-in-motion thing. So, we think about a career as something that can stop at a time of our choosing.

But a career does not stop. It persists. It is continuous. If a woman leaves the workplace to have a family, has her career stopped? If I retire, will my career stop? Is a career defined by having a job for which I am paid? If not, what distinguishes a career from 'life?

Does the organisation define my career because it gives me a job, or is a career something that I am living and therefore indivisible and continuous? If a career is indistinguishable from 'life', are the organisational structures defining a career even relevant or important?

They are if I believe I become stripped of my 'life' when I go to work. For the time I am at work, I am a creature of the organisation, provided with the mindsets and tools to do the job. I shed my work persona and re-applied my 'life' on my way home.

Reducing a career to a series of jumps between jobs makes it easier to act on but reduces the possibility for speculation and imagination about a career because we get locked into a mechanical (and limited) set of options.

If a career is inseparable from my 'life', how would that change how I approach it, and how might organisations structure careers differently?

A career has melody

Where does that leave us if we abandon the need to 'manage' a career through a series of job jumps?

Music can be a series of notes. I can learn to read notes, but musicians reading the same notes hear the music. They hear the melody; they see the notes not as individual parts but as a continuous whole.

The same goes for language. You can see and read the words, but you know what they mean beyond the sequence that makes up a sentence. You are hearing the whole idea that is made up of words. If I included an unfamiliar word, you would still get its meaning because you could see it in the context of the whole.

So what? The only place we see the continuity of a career is in our heads—through the way we bring coherence to our experiences. This is where we hear the melody of a career. This is where we see the idea of a career.

A career is not 'out there' externalised in the world but rather 'in here' (I'm pointing at my head) as something only we can see and understand as more than the sum of its parts.

Are organisations, then, another player in the orchestra of our career rather than the conductor they are often perceived to be?

Careers change when we shift our attention

When considering careers as a series of jobs, we focus on the present. This limits our ability to see the relationships between things—the continuity or discontinuities.

Looking back (into the past), we can see the notes that make up a career, allowing us to hear the melody to that point in the music. The present (my current job) is about the ability to act, and my past experience is a memory.

But forgetting, revision, and reinterpretation are also memories. You do not remember a series of perfectly captured moments. We interpret, extrapolate, question, and imagine. It is the same with careers. We constantly reinterpret our experiences and bring them into a coherent whole that shapes how we think and act in our current jobs. All this is mapped as the pattern of an internalised career.

Our understanding of our career is not a map of reality but a continuous part of our identity. A career is indivisible from how we see ourselves. We understand a career through our emotions and perceptions and what we pay attention to in a role.

What we pay attention to when playing a role shapes what we learn and understand. We constantly filter our attention through our understanding of who we are—our identity. When we shift our attention or attend to something different, we shift our understanding of a career.

Careers are intuitive

Careers are not a set of pre-planned actions. We often cling to this belief because it gives us a sense of control. Careers are more intuitive and imaginative.

What if we saw a career as a collection of lucky or spontaneous moments? Mistakes would be inevitable and acceptable. But sometimes, a 'mistake' can open new doors. Why? Because a career is indivisible and continuous.

The real art of a career is not in planning every step but in embracing the possibilities and making the most of each moment.

Reflection, honesty, and courage are the keys to a career that is part of a fulfilling life. Embracing a career's intuitive nature might empower us to make confident and informed career decisions.

Reflecting on an inflection

The shock of the pandemic brought us to an inflection point as individuals. Many people reconsidered their relationship with work, reflected on their careers, and, in some cases, saw the boundaryless nature of work and careers for the first time.

We continue to experience the aftermath of the pandemic, which is evident in the workforce through phenomena that have been variously termed the great resignation, the great reshuffling, quiet quitting, and the endless 'return to the office' controversy.

We are in the midst of change, which allows us to think and behave differently. It may be a good time to question whether our understanding of 'career' improves or undermines individual and organisational performance. To do that, we need to start from a different place.

Milestone gender pay gap metrics show we still have a way to go

By **Sue Williamson.**
Published online 21 June 2024, by **The Mandarin**

We have just witnessed a watershed moment for the Commonwealth public sector. We now know the state of gender equality based on quantifiable metrics.

This is a milestone. While larger private sector organisations have been required to report to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) since the 1980s, this is the first time the Commonwealth public sector has done so.

Overall, the Commonwealth Public Sector Gender Equality Scorecard is a good news story. However, perennial barriers to gender equality remain.

As reported, the sector has a comparatively low gender pay gap (13.5% compared to 21.7% in the private sector). The gender pay gap is persistent. It is partly due to occupational segregation, where men are more numerous in higher paid occupations, such as professional, technicians and trades workers.

More women work full-time in the federal public sector compared with the private sector (75% compared with 54%). This is also positive, as working full-time provides more opportunities than part-time work. It also helps narrow the gender pay gap.

Of those working part-time, almost 80% are women. The first APS gender equality strategy, released in 2016, stated that "leaders must put mechanisms in place to improve the take-up of flexible work arrangements by men". Five years later, the next APS gender equality strategy again urged all leaders to role model flexible working (which includes part-time work).

Role modelling is an effective way to encourage men to work flexibly. Doing so can destigmatise flexible working and help reduce harmful gender stereotypes that limit people's choices and experiences.

Men still take very low rates of primary carer parental leave (11%) and predominantly use secondary carer's parental leave. Only 13% of Commonwealth public sector agencies have removed the distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' parental leave.

The Australian government has committed to removing these terms, instead using the simpler, more inclusive term, 'parental leave'.

This change in terminology signals that parental leave can be shared equally, and there is not one primary carer. This, coupled with an expansion of the quantum of parental leave over the next few years, may encourage more men to use this leave.

This is good for men, families and society. It enables men to spend more time bonding with newborns, which then increases men's involvement throughout a child's life.

The findings discussed above emphasise the need for all employees to be able to share parental leave and work flexibly. Setting targets for men's use of these provisions is needed, yet only 3% of agencies had set targets for men's uptake of flexible work.

Some years ago, my colleagues and I wrote about the need to set targets in specific areas to progress gender equality. We had analysed the first tranche of APS gender equality plans, and

found that few agencies had included measurable targets in their plans. Last year, we examined the next iteration of gender equality action plans, and found them lacking.

Plans need to include measurable targets, particularly to encourage men to work flexibly and use parental leave. Agencies should include targets as they continue to develop and implement their gender equality action plans.

The data used in the scorecard was collected in 2021-22. It therefore predates many of the reforms undertaken by the Australian government last year to progress gender equality in the APS.

The report is a benchmark, and we will be able to track further progress to achieve gender equality in future reporting cycles.

Want to change the 'system'? If yes, then read this

By **Vindhya Weeratunga.**
Published online 18 June 2024, by **Daily FT**

Changing the purpose of a system changes the system profoundly, even if all the elements and interconnections remain as they are

> *"If a revolution destroys a government, but the systematic patterns of thought that produced that government are left intact, then those patterns will repeat themselves…*
> *There's so much talk about the system. And so little understanding."*
>
> – Robert Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

As Sri Lanka gets ready for another Presidential election to choose the country's leader for the next five years we are hearing the same slogans, "we need a system change", "we need to change the system" again. But how do we do this, practically?

We have come to treat leaders, whether they are in the fields of politics, business, community, or any other, as some magical creatures who can perform wonders. Management literature has contributed to this thinking, conceptualising various leadership styles, from servant leadership to transformational leadership. However, a critical missing component in this thinking is the 'link' between leaders and the rest of the 'system'— the people of a country, an organisation, a community, etc. We often forget that leaders are in that leadership position because of the interrelationship that they have with those they lead. When we replace a leader, what we do is that we change the person, but we fail to change the other side of the link— ourselves!

A 'system' is made of three key aspects: elements, interconnections, and purpose. Elements include all of us citizens, our resources, and leaders. Interconnections are all the policies, rules, customs, and values that hold the elements together. Purpose, the most important determinant of how a system behaves, is the outcome that we are aiming to achieve.

I've read social media posts where some claim/imply that replacing everyone in the Parliament will bring about a system change. In reality, however, even if we substitute every single person in Parliament (elements), there will be no change in the system, if the interconnections and purposes remain unchanged.

On the other hand, changing the interconnections may change the system significantly. For example, what if we change the election laws? If I take the example of cricket, changing the rules (interconnections) of the game will create a whole new ball game! What if we change our ways of doing things — for example, instead of treating political leaders (whom we appointed, by the way), as demi-gods, treat them as those answerable to us, to serve us? Changing interconnections in a system can change it drastically.

Now think, what if we keep the same parliamentarians and the election laws, but we change the 'purpose' of the system. What is the purpose of our government? One thing about purpose is that it's not what is written or said by the leaders; the purpose is deduced by actions. Having seen what our national leaders are doing, I am not sure what the purpose of our Government is.

Let me take an example that is closer to my profession. The purpose of education institutes, we would like to think, is to disseminate knowledge and create a society with knowledgeable citizens. However, from what I see, I question whether the purpose is to maximise profits! Again, a system's purpose is 'seen' in what the system does rather than what the system says it aims to do. Changing the purpose of a system changes the system profoundly, even if all the elements and

interconnections remain as they are. What this means is that by changing a leader, we can't change the system UNLESS changing the leader also results in changing the interconnections and purpose! The million-dollar question is — where do we find such a leader?

Would a President without the majority support in Parliament be able to change any interconnections (e.g. laws) or the purpose of the Government? Are parliamentarians capable of understanding the gravity of this complex situation? Another perplexing issue: who is responsible for choosing the parliamentarians? Answers to these questions reveal the complex nature of the system we live in. It's easy to blame something or someone else, to shift the responsibility away from ourselves, but the reality is that we cannot absolve ourselves of the responsibility of creating this system.

In Plato's Republic, Socrates compares the State to a ship: "The uneducated voting on policy is as illogical as a ship taken over by a crew with no knowledge of sailing". Education doesn't come through the gaining of a university degree — that is only a measure of education. Anyone can be educated by reading and updating their knowledge, thinking deeply and rationally about what we want our country to be (the purpose), and participating in the democratic system by voting. Democracy is only as good as the people that take part in it.

Instead of voting for 'hope', 'change', 'someone different', or 'incorruptible', we need to look at prospective candidates' policies and plans, and then question whether these are, in fact, achievable and practical, and whether these address systemic issues. Think carefully whether the much-talked-about plans are aiming at the elements, the interconnections, or purpose.

Let's not get fooled by flashy words that, at the end of the day, are hollow. It's fine to offer a 'vision' but it's crucial to know how we as a country move towards that vision during the five-year term of a newly elected President. Further, what are the smaller steps that will be taken? How will the success of initiatives be measured?

So, you want a system change? Let's start by acknowledging that it cannot be achieved overnight. Systems have a way of recreating themselves because of the complex nature mentioned above. But a starting point is to look in the mirror!

Work or home? Navigating hybrid working arrangements

By **Sue Williamson**, Helen Taylor, Uma Jogulu.
Published online 29 May 2024, by **Apolitical**

While the battle rages on between employees and managers about where work should be undertaken, an attention to 'proximity bias' can lead to better outcomes for everyone involved.

- The problem: Employees and employers are 'battling' over when and where work should be done, and some workers are being advantaged through 'proximity bias' due to where they're working.
- Why it matters: Individual and agency performance is being negatively impacted by a failure to maturely craft optimal working arrangements while taking steps to mitigate proximity bias.
- The solution: Managers and teams should collaboratively design work patterns which recognise when it's best to work together in the office and when it's best to work from home while ensuring no advantage to those who choose to be office based.
- Hybrid working, where some part of the week is worked at home or remotely and the rest of the week is worked on the employer's premises, has become business as usual (BaU) in public sector workplaces.

Despite hybrid becoming BaU, a debate over where work is undertaken has emerged, with return-to-office mandates becoming the latest human resource controversy within workplaces, both in Australia and internationally. Practitioner news headlines such as "mandate mayhem", "revolt against return-to-office" and "employees resent return-to-office mandates" highlight the angst this issue is causing. We also acknowledge legitimate concerns in workplaces about the impacts of proximity bias, a phenomenon where people in positions of power show favouritism or preferential treatment to those who are physically closer to them, such as those employees who work in the office rather than remotely.

What does the latest research show?

We've looked at both practitioner and academic research to assess the current evidence on whether mandates may prevent proximity bias. We conclude that such mandates are not only unnecessary but may have negative consequences. Our research, conducted within the Australian Public Service (APS) and published in our report Hybrid working: from 'the new normal' to 'business as usual', has shown that mandates and caps limiting working from home can cause employee resentment. These mandates also limit the benefits which can be gained from enhanced flexibility and autonomy.

Our goal in this article is to show how we can mitigate the negative effects of proximity bias within public sector workplaces without resorting to unpopular mandates and caps.

Mature and respectful conversations about when and where different types of work are best performed will help agencies and individuals optimise outcomes from hybrid working.

Despite hybrid working being well-established, working from home can still mean missing career opportunities. We know from both academic and practitioner literature that proximity bias can negatively impact both organisations and individuals. This can happen when work is allocated based on employee proximity to decision-makers, often resulting in a failure to fully utilise the skills and knowledge of remote workers. This exacerbates employee engagement and retention problems and leads to poorer performance and well-being outcomes. We've shown in previous research that women and people from marginalised communities are more likely to prefer working hybridly than employees in dominant demographic groups. Therefore, proximity bias can also increase inequalities through exclusion from decision-making activities and insufficient access to senior

leaders. Hybrid working may help mitigate proximity bias in a way that does not negatively impact employee engagement and retention if certain conditions are met.

Our 2023 research with almost 80 Australian Public Service (APS) managers was conducted before mandatory caps on the number of days APS employees could work from home were removed. At that time, we found that policy implementation differed amongst teams and that there was some resentment of requirements to be in the office. Individuals acknowledged their concerns about potential negative impacts of proximity bias and these concerns were influencing their decisions to work in the office to enhance their visibility and connect with senior leaders. This was particularly noticeable where there were reports that senior executives attended the office more than middle managers and employees and tended to delegate opportunities to staff on-site.

Mature and respectful conversations are needed

To maximise the benefits of hybrid working and mitigate proximity bias, the literature promotes overt recognition of and education about this form of bias and the use of a range of explicit strategies to address it. These include the use of anchor days, where employees and teams commit to coming into the office on a specific day. Other strategies include better use of virtual platforms for meetings and ensuring performance measurement systems are based on quantifiable and objective metrics. Additionally, building an inclusive culture is seen as important in alleviating bias while also helping meet individual employee needs through enhancing autonomy.

Given the importance of autonomy in employee motivation and engagement, enabling employees to choose where they work can produce benefits for all. We suggest that maximising the benefits of choice of work location will be achieved if managers and their teams engage in open and respectful conversations about the optimal hybrid working arrangements which best benefit individuals, the team and the organisation. As one APS senior manager said:

> *'I would like to see the APS mature its conversation about hybrid working away from set ratios and percentages to actually helping our staff and managers understand when is the best to come together and work in the office and when is the best to work from home and actually giving them the tools and technologies to support that.'*

Forcing employees back into the office or setting caps for the number of days employees can work from home is not the way to resolve this latest human resource controversy. Such actions will likely negatively impact the achievement of critical outcomes through lowering employee engagement and heightening resentment from a lack of autonomy.

Mature and respectful conversations about when and where different types of work are best performed will help agencies and individuals optimise outcomes from hybrid working. Conversations where managers and teams determine their own in-office/working-from-home arrangements will maintain flexibility and prevent employee resentment.

Preventing proximity bias can be achieved through increasing awareness about this emerging form of bias, creating an inclusive organisational culture and ensuring performance management systems are based on quantifiable and objective metrics.

Threatened species have declined 2% a year since 2000. Nature positive? Far from it

By **Megan C Evans**, Brendan Wintle, Hugh Possingham.
Published online 17 May 2024, by **The Conversation**

Our government has great aspirations. It has committed to end extinctions and expand our protected areas to cover 30% of every Australian ecosystem by 2030. This is part of its Nature Positive Plan, aligned with the 2022 Kunming-Montreal global biodiversity pact. The goal is not just to conserve nature but to restore what is being lost.

But how can these goals be reconciled with a budget that allocated more public money to carbon capture and storage than biodiversity?

This week's federal budget was a new low point for investment in nature. Environmental groups roundly criticised the "bad budget for nature", which delivered next-to-no money to protect and recover Australia's unique and threatened biodiversity.

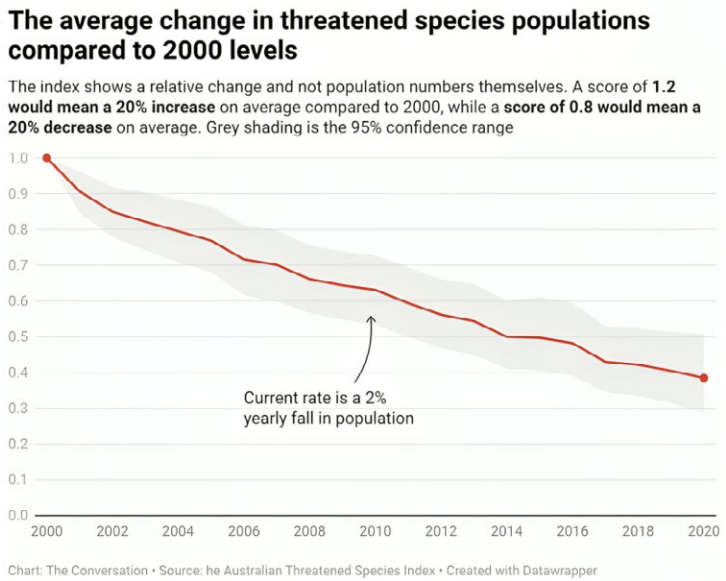
Research has shown Australians want at least 2% of the federal budget spent on nature. Instead, less than 0.1% of the budget spend will support biodiversity in some way. Over the past decade, biodiversity funding has gone down 25% relative to GDP.

Let's say the government decided it was finally time to roll up the sleeves and do something. How would they go about it? What would it take to actually reverse the decline, as the government says it wants to in its Nature Positive approach?

Our threatened species populations have been declining by about 2-3% a year over the past 20 years. The first step is to stop the fall. Then the challenge is to restore dwindling species and ecosystems.

The Dow Jones for threatened species goes down, down, down
Australia now has a Threatened Species Index. Think of it like the Dow Jones for wildlife. It uses trend data from bird, mammal and plant species collected from over 10,000 sites to measure progress for nature in Australia.

Last year, Treasurer Jim Chalmers talked up the index as part of the first national "wellbeing budget", which aimed to measure Australia's progress across a range of social, health and sustainability indicators.



What does the index tell us? You can see for yourself. The health of our threatened species has fallen by about 2-3% a year since the turn of the century.

If, as is likely, the trend continues, it will lead to the extinction of many more of our unique native animals and plant species. It will signal the failure of the government's Nature Positive policy and a global biodiversity tragedy.

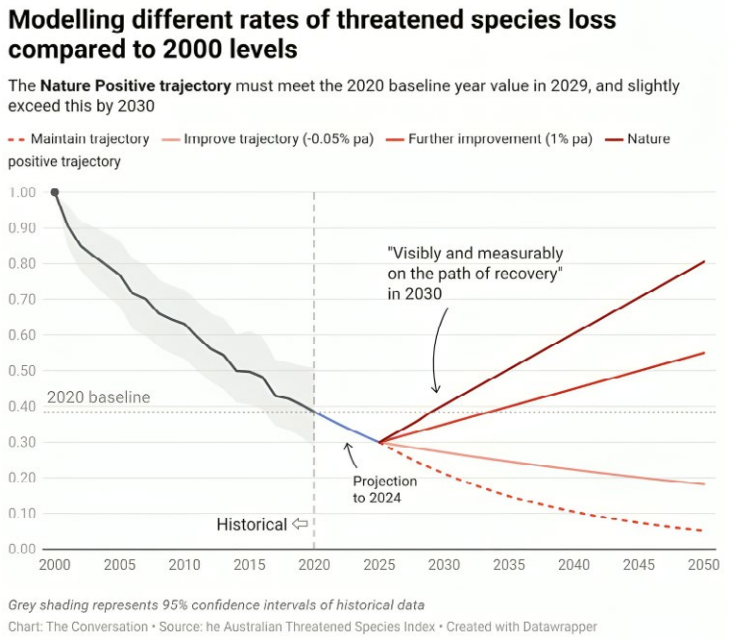
Given we have had decades of successive decline, what would be needed to reach the goal of nature positive?

Nature positive actually has a very specific meaning. It would:

> *halt and reverse nature loss measured from a baseline of 2020, through increasing the health, abundance, diversity and resilience of species, populations and ecosystems so that by 2030 nature is visibly and measurably on the path of recovery.*

This definition gives us a clear, measurable timeline for action, often described as nature's answer to net zero.

To reach nature positive means halting biodiversity loss by 2030 so that in the future there is much more biodiversity, relative to a 2020 baseline.



What would that look like using the Threatened Species Index? To get on track with nature positive, we would have to stop the index declining, stabilise, and then increase from 2030 onwards.

Of course, strong environmental laws and aligned policies are needed to effectively prevent further loss of habitat.

But we also need to invest in restoring what has been lost. Scientists think this is possible with $2 billion a year to recover our most threatened native plants and animals, and another $2 billion annually to drive ecosystem restoration across Australia.

The budget is not nature positive

In the budget papers, the government uses the Threatened Species Index as a performance measure for its nature positive goal. It expects the trajectory of the index to be "maintained or improved" out to 2027-28.

But given our species and ecosystems are steadily declining, year after year, to maintain a trajectory is simply to embrace the decline. It's not nature positive at all. The government could make minor improvements, slowing the collapse, and claim it was improving the lot of nature.

Imagine if our GDP growth was negative and the government's goal was merely to slow its decline over the next five years – there would be national uproar.

If the government is serious about nature positive – which is an excellent goal – it would be setting more ambitious targets. For instance, the goal could be for the index to climb back up to 2020 levels by the end of the decade.

Instead, Labor is planning for biodiversity decline to continue, while describing it as "nature positive".

Watching over the steady decline of our species and calling it nature positive makes about as much sense as opening up new gas fields and calling it net zero.

Greenwashing Nature Positive
Unfortunately, this is not the first time the government has engaged in nature positive greenwash.

In coming weeks, the government will introduce bills to parliament to establish two new agencies, Environment Information Australia and Environmental Protection Australia. But there will be one bill missing – the reformed federal environment laws, intended to give teeth to the nature positive push.

The laws were pushed back indefinitely, to the shock of scientists and environmental groups.

But let's be generous and say these laws finally make it to parliament after the next election. Would they be enough to stop our species losses and put the Threatened Species Index onto a nature positive trajectory?

Australia's reformed environmental laws are described as Nature Positive. Are they? Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, CC BY-NC-ND
It's unlikely.

The consultation documents show the government is aiming to deliver "net positive outcomes", whereby development impacts to threatened species and ecosystems are more than compensated for.

But we don't know the detail. How much improvement is the government aiming for? In the draft laws, this figure is listed simply as "at least X%".

Time to aim higher
It is hard not to feel dispirited over the government's backtracking on its promise to:

> *not shy away from difficult problems or accept environmental decline and extinction as inevitable.*

But we cannot give up. As the plight of nature worsens, even iconic species such as the koala and platypus are now at risk. As ecosystems collapse, our food security, health and wellbeing, communities and businesses will suffer.

Perhaps one day we will have a government able to grasp the nettle and actually tackle the nature crisis – for the sake of all of us.

Zen and the 'wicked problem' of AI and digitalisation

By **David Schmidtchen.**
Published online 15 May 2024, by **The Mandarin**

Every technology was once the technology that would change the world.

Eighteen months ago, AI applications such as ChatGPT engaged the public's imagination and fears. Today, AI continues to ride the enthusiasm that comes with the peak of inflated expectations, but the shadows of the trough of disillusionment are deepening.

The history of technological change gives us two lessons.

Lesson One. The technology's developers, evangelists spruiking it, and end-users all have different views on what it does. What the technology delivers in practice is rarely consistent with these views.

Lesson Two. The growth in the use of technology and its value to our lives is not threatened, slowed, or stopped because we become bored or the technology is no longer useful. The failure to make the most of technology is generally a failure of effective implementation.

In our digital economy, new technology will continue to present us with wicked implementation problems that extend well beyond the enthusiasms of developers, evangelists, and users.

Today, the ethics of AI are problems for policymakers and leaders. For example, the rapid spread of AI has increased the computational power required to train AI programs, increasing power consumption and putting unwanted strain on energy grids. The many benefits of AI come with, often unforeseen, local and global costs.

Technology adoption has always been a wicked problem for leaders, just as strategy myopia has been our Achilles heel.

Planning the 'wicked' out of wicked problems
By definition, wicked problems are highly resistant to resolution. Yet strategists and planners seem intent on removing the 'wicked' from them. Unfortunately, the wickedness of wicked problems lies in the interactions between causes, policies, politics, and stakeholders, which are often conflicting but also sometimes resonating.

The traditional business planning process involves working systematically from problem to solution through evidence gathering, data analysis, and stakeholder engagement, developing a preferred option supported by a detailed implementation plan. It often addresses a symptom of the problem and takes too long. This approach divorces the problem from the context, which is the very characteristic that makes it wicked.

Our planning mindsets and tools are not well suited to unfolding patterns of socio-technical change where the answer is not optimisation.

Digital transformation starts with technology
We all make the mistake of thinking that technology is a thing or a collection of things. It's not. There is always an intent behind technology driven by the question, 'How can we make it better?', where the 'it' is quite specific. Consequently, technology inevitably carries a design to organise knowledge, people, and assets to achieve a precise goal.

Three characteristics separate digitisation generally and AI specifically from classic technologies. These characteristics inherently introduce wicked problems and require systems solutions.

First, they are modular. The technology is complete in itself but also stackable. Stacking

creates layers that enable rapid recombination that creates new outputs and opportunities. The recombination speed is increasing, and the depth of the layers is becoming opaque. Modularity has been an engineering principle for many years; now, it is a wicked problem.

Second, digital technologies are generative. The ability to transform and reuse information as content has been an innovative boon and the source of social media disaster. AI has taken technology's generative characteristics to new places, leading to problems in AI ethics and embedded biases. Most recently, those looking for an advantage in AI products are exploring how AI models can be used to improve another AI model. This takes technology to new, weird, and wicked places.

Third, there are people. This takes us back to lesson one. What technology delivers in practice is rarely consistent with what the designers think it will do because people interact with it. People interacting with technology is a wicked problem.

Strategy and planning in the wicked world of technology implementation should begin with a deeper understanding of the systemic effects rather than controlling its more obvious outputs.

The most basic question about new technology is how today's ethical values and norms will apply in the world the new technology creates. All business strategies and plans follow from there.

Where does that leave planners?

The dynamism of technology and the uncertainty it creates may leave strategists and planners grasping for relevance. However, lesson two hints at where the effort should be applied. It requires a shift in mindset and language from 'strategic planning' to 'strategic implementation'.

The objective is not to produce a perfectly articled strategy accompanied by a detailed implementation plan. Rather, the challenge is identifying and focusing on the core human questions and responding.

Planning and action begin with a clear-eyed understanding that policy, strategy, and implementation are blurred, interacting, and interdependent. Implementation is an ongoing evaluation of the context and issues that arise from interaction. Planning involves determining what system-level changes will be needed to capitalise on the most immediate opportunities and prevent the most pressing harm to people and performance. Options are alternative system-level courses of action that transcend or circumvent strategic risks as they are known today or immediately foreseeable.

Finally, there should be a genuine need to learn from errors rather than expect to find all the answers in advance. This has implications for the follow-on systems of assurance and quality, which are inherently underpinned by the principles of linear management models seen through a rear-view mirror. Retrospectively assessing 'failure' is a contemporary challenge for all organisational leaders wrestling with wicked problems.

Strategic implementation is a systems approach

The difference between traditional problem-solving and working with wicked problems has been likened elsewhere to the difference between throwing a stone and throwing a live bird. The stone's trajectory can be calculated precisely using the laws of physics, while the bird's trajectory is far less predictable.

AI is the latest technology to show us that the world is less predictable than we want to believe. However, as we address the issues, some handholds are firmer than most.

- Leadership remains fundamentally important. Not the process maintenance leadership that has come to dominate our organisations but rather leadership that is demanding, active, and constant in its commitment to the overriding strategic priorities of the organisation.
- People are a constant. Not the process and paper of people but a genuine commitment to understanding that the interaction between people and technology goes beyond automation. Performance comes from systems where technology augments human capacity and capability.
- Independence must be thoroughly built into the strategy and planning system. The decision-making environment should allow dissent to identify bias and magical thinking wherever possible.
- Governance must be simple. Structures, processes, rules, and procedures must be as simple and straightforward as possible so that everyone can understand them. Today's organisations are hamstrung by process complexity, which undermines agility.

EU Pact on Migration and Asylum: An Uneasy Balance between Solidarity and Responsibility

By **Kelly Soderstrom.**
Published online 14 May 2024, by **Australian Institute of International Affairs**

Last month, the European Parliament narrowly voted to pass a landmark raft of legislation called the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. The Pact comprises five regulations to manage the movement of people, especially asylum seekers, into the European Union (EU).

In a post on X (formerly Twitter), President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola heralded the passage of the Pact as a balance between "solidarity and responsibility." But what does this mean, and how does the Pact do this?

Solidarity refers to cooperation among EU member states. It typically relates to resource sharing, which is based on reciprocity and mutual self-interest. In the context of migration and asylum, solidarity means providing funds to EU members to support resources for asylum seekers as well as sharing the administrative load for large numbers of asylum claims.

In the context of migration and asylum, responsibility refers to the humanitarian and legal obligations of states to provide international humanitarian protection. This is particularly true under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that everyone has a right to seek and enjoy asylum, and under the 1951 Refugee Convention, which details where and when asylum must be provided by states. Earlier EU regulations and directives in the Common European Asylum System also detail obligations of member states to provide humanitarian protection.

The central tension in asylum governance is between humanitarian protection and sovereignty. Sovereignty, or the claim to exclusive power within a given territory, relies on the ability of the government to control who crosses into its territory and accesses protection and resources. International humanitarian protection challenges this claim because, in certain circumstances, all people have the right to cross into a territory and apply for protection and associated resources from the government.

Since governments are obliged to provide international humanitarian protection, they must find a way to do so which does not stop them from being able to discharge their obligations associated with sovereignty. States thus seek to strike a balance between sovereignty and responsibility in which obligations are fulfilled as much as possible, but with the understanding that concessions in either obligation are likely necessary.

In the case of a multi-level governance system such as the EU, state responsibilities in asylum governance become complicated by member state responsibilities towards each other. These mutual, inter-state responsibilities stem from an obligation to maintain the legitimacy and cohesion of the EU. Member states must not only maintain their own sovereignty but must also work in solidarity to support other member states in maintaining their own sovereignty while fulfilling their own obligations.

Within the multi-level system of the EU, striking a balance between sovereignty and humanitarian protection relies on finding a balance between solidarity and responsibility. This means pursuing policies and developing policy instruments which fulfil as many solidarity and responsibility obligations as possible, with the recognition that neither type of obligation will be fully fulfilled. The trick is not to compromise on the most important aspects of the obligations. It is here that the New Pact falls short.

The uneasy balance between solidarity and responsibility in the Pact

The balance struck between solidarity and responsibility in the Pact is an uneasy one at best. In some areas, the fulfilment of solidarity and responsibility obligations appear to balance. For example, the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation details methods for states to contribute to "mandatory solidarity" in migration management. This regulation has the potential to ensure greater member state engagement in humanitarian protection. However, given the failures of the 2016 quota-based refugee resettlement scheme, and previous problems with implementing the Dublin Regulation, the balancing power of the mechanism will lie in the willingness of EU states to fully implement the law.

Despite balance in some areas of the Pact, other areas tip the balance away from the EU's humanitarian responsibilities. In a 2022 report, I argued that the Screening Regulation in the Pact uses the fiction of non-entry to curtail asylum seeker rights for the purposes of efficiency in asylum application processing. To increase control at the borders, the Screening Regulation creates a secondary screening process that challenges the fundamental right of all people to seek asylum in a third country.

Similarly, the amended Asylum Procedures Regulation (APR) in the Pact creates a fast-tracked border procedure for target migrant groups that allows for migrants to be detained in EU border facilities. As I argued in a 2019 article, such group-based asylum seeker processing procedures threaten individual human rights.

Both the Screening Regulation and the APR demonstrate how EU states have opted to prioritise fulfilling their solidarity and sovereignty obligations at the expense of their humanitarian responsibilities.

Defence middle managers decide department priorities don't apply to them

By **David Schmidtchen.**
Published online 7 May 2024, by **The Mandarin**

At the final hearings of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, Commissioner Peggy Brown asked Defence associate secretary Matt Yannopoulos to reflect on an earlier observation that Defence seems resistant to change and how he thought that might be changed.

In short, Yannopulos' response was in three parts: consistent communication in an enterprise as large as Defence is hard, Defence has many competing communication priorities, and middle managers keep deciding that Defence priorities do not apply to them.

Like many large organisations, working in Defence feels like Groundhog Day. The same problems rise and fall with predictable and repetitious regularity. For example, former Defence secretary Allan Hawke lamented middle managers' 'learned helplessness' as a barrier to reform over twenty years ago.

If I wanted to get there, I wouldn't start from here

Defence leaders need a new place to begin their analysis of the reform problem.

Defence is not alone in facing rapid, unpredictable, and, in some cases, unprecedented change. Also, like many organisations, Defence is a purposeful system. It is organised and structured to deliver on that unique purpose. It is an enterprise comprising many complex, interrelated, and interdependent parts whose behaviour is difficult to predict and imperfectly informed.

Such systems are naturally resistant to change or disruption because they have been designed to deliver consistency and stability. In an increasingly uncertain and volatile environment, it is questionable whether striving for consistency and stability would be feasible or desirable.

Middle managers are not unnaturally resistant to change, as senior leaders are fond of suggesting. Instead, they respond to systems cues and incentives that reward permanence and continuity. Even the most erudite and persistent communications will not change their behaviour.

Instead, we might ask, 'Why do middle managers in Defence believe they are so powerless to influence change?' and 'How have they come to believe they are powerlessness?' These are questions about the systems that shape behaviour rather than the symptoms.

Defence is an enterprise constantly in motion, not a fixed set of problems to solve. Piling on the communication about Defence's many priorities is a fixed solution to a fluid problem. Effective reform and change come from leaders acting as levers to influence the shape of the organisational flow.

Help, I'm trapped!

One way to think about improving organisational flow is to work on the system blockages.

Coronary heart disease occurs when major blood vessels to the heart become blocked and narrow, restricting blood flow to the heart. There are various stages of treatment, but all are focused on reducing or removing the blockages to blood flow.

In organisations, blockages are known as system traps. Identifying and working on these traps gives leaders a more complete way of bringing about change focused on improving the system's overall performance.

There are four main types of system traps: novelty, strategic lock-in, poverty, and rigidity.

Robodebt had all the hallmarks of a novelty trap. The novelty trap stems from an obsession with delivering organisational 'hacks' through innovation. A 'new' or 'novel' idea captures leadership imagination, winning the support to expand and extend rapidly. The idea becomes the star, and implementation races ahead of consequences with disastrous outcomes. The concept behind robodebt continues to trouble the APS.

Large IT implementations and the PwC consulting debacle show the signs of strategic lock-in. A highly intensive strategy consumes all available organisational resources. Switching between strategies is almost impossible when the strategy doesn't deliver the expected benefits.

Trapped in the strategy, the organisation becomes intellectually, economically, and emotionally exhausted by the implementation of a solution that is known to be sub-optimal. Switching between large IT implementations is difficult for these reasons. PwC's widely reported 'revenue at all costs' strategy locked the firm into a pattern of behaviour that has diminished its reputation in Australia and damaged the industry.

Middle managers in large organisations are often caught in a poverty trap. They have the ideas and may be able to repurpose existing resources to implement them, but they are hamstrung by leadership, policy, or process that reduces their capacity to implement a new idea and navigate their way through the continuously changing context. They are unable to act due to circumstances beyond their control.

The Defence enterprise is caught in a rigidity trap. When enterprises become highly centralised, tightly connected, and self-reinforcing, they become inflexible and brittle. Fixed objectives that reduce adaptability, learning, critical thinking, and diversity are symptoms of an enterprise caught in a system rigidity trap.

As the Defence and Veteran Suicide Commissioners and Defence senior leaders acknowledged, the potential for change for an enterprise caught in a rigidity trap is low.

Rules, order and systems

Undoubtedly, reform and change in Defence is difficult, but it's not impossible. It does require imagination, courage, patience, and endurance. It requires leaders with high systems thinking skills who can see the system traps spitting out symptoms. as Robert Pirsig neatly captured in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance:

If a revolution destroys a systematic government, but the systematic patterns of thought that produced that government are left intact, then those patterns will repeat themselves in the succeeding government. There's so much talk about the system. And so little understanding.

Many large enterprises find themselves in a prison of ideas, policies, procedures, structures, and behaviours that are a system of thought that resists surface-level change management — a prison of our own making.

A systems approach to transformation, reform, and change acknowledges that middle managers face related and interdependent problems. They encounter mixed messages, contradictions, and misinformation daily.

A central challenge for senior leaders initiating change is separating legitimate resistance from dysfunctional inertia. The opportunity to communicate dissent is part of feedback in a system; saturation communications admonishing better behaviour is probably not.

Less systems thinking, lower performance

Any new approach for seeing, valuing, and doing is only as good as the capacity of the individuals engaging in its design and implementation. For systems-based endeavours, the capacity of the participants for systemic thinking will always be either an enabler or a constraint.

It is unrealistic to assume that enterprises without high levels of system thinking capabilities can effectively engage in a system-based approach to transformation. This might be why calls for 'systems approaches' have not transpired into actions and outcomes.

The central questions become, 'What are the requisite systems thinking skills necessary for success? 'Do the individuals and teams engaging in the application possess those skills? If not, then how could this skill gap be bridged?'

The Australian public service is letting Indigenous people down. How do we fix it?

By **Jenny Stewart.**
Published online 6 May 2024, by **The Conversation**

For years, First Nations people have been telling governments they want to be listened to. In particular, they want more ownership of the programs and services that are supposed to help them. The Voice referendum may have failed, but the need remains.

The recent Productivity Commission review of the Closing The Gap agenda reiterated these problems, adding that despite some signs of change, very little had been done in designing and implementing programs to move away from the "business as usual" top-down approach.

If good intentions alone could bring about change, we would not be in our current predicament. As Indigenous diplomacy researcher James Blackwell noted in February, despite high-level discussions, and the provision of more money, the "reset" that is required remains elusive.

How do we get there from here? With many gaps to close across a variety of areas, it's more important than ever to get the best outcomes for Indigenous people. Having a public service that works with them is key, but what's standing in the way?

Barriers to change

Public service organisations are not set up to be flexible.

Government structures and processes are built around accountability. This means purposes must be defined, money assigned and acquitted according to law, and performance measured against agreed criteria. Everything must be quantifiable. If the only goal is to protect taxpayers' dollars, it works well enough.

But the status quo has limitations when it comes to dealing with complex problems.

Indigenous issues differ from place to place, and almost always have multiple causes. Many of the young Indigenous people who break the law do so because there are few jobs where they live, they don't have enough support to undertake and complete the education and training they need, and they don't feel safe at home.

Addressing all these problems at once is almost impossible. But heavy-handed interventions tend to make matters worse. So, how do we make progress while still having measurable policies with clear lines of accountability?

The academic literature – and there has been a great deal of research in these areas – gives us some guidance. Official reviews, inquiries and reports, particularly where they give prominence to submissions from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, are helpful.

More importantly, the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as so many have outlined in submissions and testimony to myriad reviews, suggests what the top priorities should be. There are some common themes across their thoughts, experiences and expertise. Having reviewed much of the available literature, and in keeping with my own engagement with Indigenous people about working with bureaucracy, here are some practical suggestions.

Stop crowding out local knowledge

Submissions to the Closing the Gap review show us the kinds of difficulties that stop people getting things done. Far from being neglected, Torres Shire Council reported that on Thursday Island, the local community was suffering from an excessive state and federal agency presence, crowding out opportunities for local people to do the work.

The chair of Indigenous collaboration Empowered Communities, Ian Trust, pointed to the group's continuing frustration with top-down service delivery that failed to meet local needs. He said:

> *'All the power remains in the hands of the state and territory jurisdictions to determine actions to be implemented to try and meet the Closing the Gap objectives. Shared decision-making is happening at the national or jurisdictional level, rather than at the local or regional level. No learning over time occurs to iteratively improve actions taken on the ground.'*

The status quo is not so much a Gordian knot as a Gordian mess. Clearly the public sector needs to fund programs designed by First Nations decision-makers, as close to the action as possible.

But Indigenous leaders are saying: please don't overcomplicate matters. There is a danger that well-intentioned bureaucratic processes will further bury local initiatives in a plethora of Closing the Gap implementation plans and constant meetings.

Of course, in times of crisis, political intervention is inevitable, but it only brings about ad hoc change, as we have seen recently with the Alice Springs curfew.

Indigenous leaders themselves have urged giving more funds and encouragement to communities that are finding ways to help themselves. Listening well means following up on these leads.

Changing the make-up of the bureaucracy

The incentives and expectations for public servants currently reward controlling issues rather than providing the right support for innovative practice.

Rewarding, or at least acknowledging, leaders who genuinely listen to Indigenous people in their approach is necessary. These people then lead by example, helping create culture change in their departments over time.

This goal isn't necessarily easy to achieve. Years of outsourcing, and a lack of credible strategies for developing and retaining staff, particularly from diverse backgrounds, has left the public service struggling for talent. The "old hands" have departed, and staying too long in one place is not for the ambitious. This hasn't helped in tackling multifaceted social issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The lack of built-up wisdom and experience can hinder the work of organisations on the ground. As Aboriginal organisation Dharriwaa Elders Group submitted to the Productivity Commission review, community engagement does not mean employing more people to engage with communities, but ensuring bureaucrats have the experience, wisdom and respect to manage contracts well. They also require the communication skills and relationships to exercise influence at higher levels when needed.

Good things take time

Systemic problems cannot speedily be fixed. Throwing money at them, in the absence of careful analysis, only makes matters worse.

As the establishment of the National Indigenous Australians Authority showed, large changes in administrative arrangements, even if well-intentioned, take years to bed down on the bureaucratic side.

Having Indigenous people design and deliver the programs that affect them will take time to become standard practice. There are well-established Indigenous organisations in the health field, but in others, like housing, even registered Indigenous organisations have lacked sustained funding.

Closing the Gap targets are necessarily wide-ranging and can seem overwhelming. But more plans, more talking, and more bureaucracy won't help.

Does human work have to be efficient?

By **David Schmidtchen.**
Published online 22 April 2024, by **The Mandarin**

It had been a typical day, or at least that's what it seemed like. The morning began with a jolt at 3am, the usual hour when sleep reluctantly gave way to a mind buzzing with reflections on yesterday's dealings and apprehensions about the day ahead. This was the time reserved for mentally reworking all those persistent problems — those gnawing issues that never seemed to get resolved amid the relentless grind of "fixing" things.

After some futile attempts to lull the mind back to sleep, there was a surreptitious glance at social media — an act of momentary guilt before the alarm abruptly shattered the brief respite, signalling that an hour of rest had passed. The intention to exercise lingered unfulfilled, pushed to tomorrow yet again.

The morning at home followed a mechanical routine intertwined with clandestine work texts sent in between. The drive to the office was no different, punctuated by two quick phone calls, setting the tone for the flurry of activity ahead.

Arriving at work, the atmosphere was ablaze with cheery greetings and contagious enthusiasm, quickly drowned out as the first of the day's many meetings kicked off. The calendar was crammed, leaving one to ponder if even bathroom breaks required scheduling. There was a recurring wish for better preparation, a futile endeavour in the ceaseless whirlwind of tasks.

Hours bled into each other — emails dispatched, reports scrutinised, calls dialled, colleagues engaged — all in pursuit of that elusive sense of accomplishment. When the journey home began, three more calls were neatly tucked into the day's dwindling minutes.

The evening at home was a familiar ritual, interlaced with lingering thoughts about the day's proceedings. Despite the whirlwind of busyness and the apparent productivity, a sense of dissatisfaction loomed. What was achieved? Did today's endeavours amount to more than just crossing items off a list?

As the night deepened, the mind circled back to the core questions: why the lingering unease? Why is there reluctance to face another day in this routine? Was there substance buried beneath the surface of incessant activity, or was it merely a veneer of progress? The day's pursuit of fixing things seemed to beg a deeper question — was there something that truly needed fixing within?

Constant activity and excessive busyness have become the measures of a productive and successful career. The Productivity Commission reports that while Australians are working more hours, the output of all that effort failed to keep pace. This resulted in national labour productivity falling 3.7% in 2022-23.

Productivity measures, nationally and organisationally, are, at best, crude. Innovation, workforce capability, and quality are better measures of business performance. In light of events over the past 12 months in the private and public sectors, a strong argument could be made for adding integrity.

The dark side of increased working hours without improvements in outputs is the strong and persistent evidence of workforce burnout. Burnout has been consistently shown to reduce capacity through absence and withdrawn commitment. It significantly affects the performance of governments and businesses seeking to improve workforce innovation and productivity.

Undeterred by findings that remote and hybrid working improve workforce productivity and well-being, senior executives continue pushing for a return to office-based work where productivity can be seen and heard as busy fingers clipping across keyboards. That said, there are reports that the return to the office push has stalled, and others have reported that new and lavish incentives are being trialled to entice the workforce back.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been offered as the saviour of worker wellbeing by lightening the heavy workloads. However, this is a solution to a shallow understanding of burnout.

The problem

"If we just stopped talking about burnout, it wouldn't be a problem," says one senior executive to his colleague. True story.

There is a sense that burnout is a form of contagious hysteria. The more we talk about it, the more it's a problem. Sitting just below the surface of that view is the thought that people are not supposed to enjoy work anyway. As a matter of principle, we should accept that work will take from us, and we need to harden up and make our peace with that.

But people do enjoy work. It is an integral part of our lives, and when work is enjoyable, we tend to perform better — we produce more of a higher quality.

Productivity measures slavishly recorded and reported reduce people's work experience to the drudgery of clock-punching. For example, the obsessiveness with billability and utilisation as productivity measures in large professional service firms has led to dysfunctional cultures, integrity breaches, and negative impacts on people.

Time spent has become the measure of performance rather than innovation, quality and social good, which are sprinkled through the aspirational statements of most public and private sector organisations.

The truth

Workforce productivity occasionally enters the national conversation. For example, 'leaners' and 'lifters' split the workforce into two simplistic categories. Leaners' idleness was an evil to be stamped out, while lifters only rested to be better prepared for the next day's work.

Yet idle time is a source of creative thinking so craved by organisations.

Many of the best ideas are had in the shower. Freed from the day-to-day, our minds roam, the task-centred brain disengages and the subconscious has the space to make connections, allowing new ideas to bubble to our awareness.

Similarly, those advocating a full-time return to the office lament the loss of the 'water-cooler' conversations that are the genesis of creative collaboration. It is unlikely that, before the pandemic, those now advocating for the return to office would have seen these conversations as 'productive'.

This fluid and undirected thinking, often associated with creativity, innovation, and insight, is quickly crowded out by a day filled with activities, tasks, and meetings. We need quiet moments to listen to our thoughts or interactions with others that are open and engaging rather than defined by the need to beat back the nearest crocodile.

The work

Today, the most significant leadership deficiency is the reluctance to redesign work. The pandemic melted every excuse for not re-organising work. AI is adding new arguments. Flexibility, autonomy, and augmentation are the new principles of work design.

Burnout is a state of physical and mental exhaustion caused by work. It leads to the extinction of motivation and commitment to the job and organisation. Workforce shortages in critical occupations, for example in health professions, are often less about a lack of skilled people and more about burnout experienced in their day-to-day work.

The hidden cause of burnout is often a loss of autonomy (the choice in how work is done), respect (the breaking of the psychological contract about what is fair and reasonable), and agency (the inability to influence the circumstances of the work to improve the situation). The loss of autonomy, respect, and agency leads to feelings of helplessness.

Redesigning work to integrate new technology, remove obstacles to efficient performance, challenge historical practices, increase personal autonomy, and invest in upskilling to improve capability are the most effective ways to reduce burnout and simultaneously increase opportunities for innovation and creativity.

The discontents

The pandemic broke what we had come to believe the axioms of work. Most importantly, many people reconceived their relationship with how work is done. This continues to play out in workplaces nationwide and has been given a kick-along by technologies like AI.

Attempts to return to the past are met with reluctance. Persisting along this path quickly leads to discontentment. In a time of widespread skill shortages and freedom from location, workforce mobility increases. These decisions are not necessarily based, as they once were, on advancement but instead on work-life integration and opportunity.

When work no longer works, people move to where the work works for them.

The cost

Productivity focuses on efficiency, but more efficiency is never enough.

How we lead and manage organisations is as much a technology as AI, yet less attention is paid to management innovation. How work is designed, arranged, and organised — how it flows — is critical to the innovation and creativity needed in the workplace. Relentlessly organising for efficiency delivers marginal performance returns and damages the future sustainability of our organisations. Workforce burnout is a symptom of failed organisational design that will worsen if the underlying cause is not addressed.

Australia's long-sought stronger environmental laws just got indefinitely deferred. It's back to business as usual

By Euan Ritchie, **Megan C Evans**, Yung En Chee.
Published online 17 April 2024, by **The Conversation**

We've long known Australia's main environmental protection laws aren't doing their job, and we know Australians want better laws. Labor was elected promising to fix them.

But yesterday, the government walked back its commitments, deferring the necessary reforms to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act indefinitely in the face of pressure from the state Labor government in Western Australia and the mining and resources industries.

Federal Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek was on the front foot yesterday, promising the new national agency Environment Protection Australia and Environmental Information Australia will still go ahead.

But decisions by the planned agency can be overruled by the minister via expansive "call in" powers. And because Labor has backed away from rolling out essential legally enforceable national environmental standards this term, it's hard to see how the agency can actually be the "tough cop on the beat" we were promised.

Labor promised substantive change that would prevent further species extinctions. But yesterday's announcement was basically the continuation of business as usual.

Environmental organisations such as the Australian Conservation Foundation – which backed many of Labor's proposed reforms – are now "deeply disappointed".

What just happened?

Yesterday's announcement effectively defers substantive change until after the next federal election.

Rather than a full package, the government has split its planned reforms into three parts, under the umbrella name of the Nature Positive Plan.

The first is the nature repair market, which many stakeholders – conservationists and business leaders alike – have been sceptical of. It was legislated in December, but nature repair projects can't start until the market governance and methods are established.

The second will create the federal Environmental Protection Australia agency and Environment Information Australia body. The agency will be responsible for development assessments, decisions and compliance and enforcement, with staff drawn from existing divisions within the department, while the information agency will support decision-making with data, as well as report on progress against environmental targets.

But the third is the crucial bit – the reformed environment protection and biodiversity laws, and the legally enforceable national environmental standards underpinning them.

We need these standards and laws to properly address longstanding deficiencies such as lack of clear policy objectives and "no go" zones for development, failure to account for climate change impacts, ongoing native vegetation clearing and habitat destruction that drives extinction, and a lack of alignment with other laws.

But these vital elements have been deferred to "an unspecified date". Despite the urgency of our extinction crisis, we have a cart but no horse in sight.

How did we get here?

In 2020, Graeme Samuel released his scathing report detailing the many failings of the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. The laws, he wrote, were "ineffective" and needed fundamental reform. Labor came to office pledging to end extinctions, tackle climate change, and repair nature.

But two years later, little solid progress has been made. In cases such as the controversial Lee Point development planned in Darwin, the government has appeared to put development ahead of considerations of threatened species and First Nations' cultural values.

Samuel called for comprehensive amendments to the laws within 12 months, and for full reform by 2022. Instead, the government only began consulting in May 2023, undertook a "lockup" consultation with peak environment bodies in October, and ran public consultation in November. Now we hear these reforms have been pushed back indefinitely.

In the West Australian, Minister Plibersek describes the changes as:

> *a staged rollout of sensible reforms that better protect Australia's natural wonders, while also supporting faster, more efficient decision making […] This package is a win for the environment and a win for business*

Speaking on ABC radio, she denied there was any "unnecessary delay":

> *there is a careful approach to make sure we get this right, because this is generational change […] I'm not going to go into the parliament with a flawed set of laws that we can't get support for.*

This is questionable. In 2022, Australia signed up to the ambitious global push to turn around the destruction of the natural world, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. We agreed to work to bring biodiversity loss almost to zero by 2030 and for native wild species to become more abundant and resilient by 2050. Deferring our main environment laws is not the way to do this.

Restoring nature isn't possible without stronger environment laws

Preserving nature can only be done with substantive legislative reform, given Australia's existing environmental laws do not effectively regulate and stop the ongoing destruction of nature.

As Samuel pointed out, our current laws are not keeping the environment in good shape. They focus on individual approvals for projects, not clear outcomes for the environment.

As it stands there will be no climate trigger – meaning no assessment of impact on climate change – despite the threat this poses to biodiversity. The Great Barrier Reef is suffering its worst recorded mass bleaching this year, the fifth in eight years.

Even so, fossil fuel production continues with many more projects awaiting approval.

Nature can't afford further delays

Without the reformed environment protection laws, the strengthened Safeguard Mechanism – the government's main plan to drive down emissions from large polluters – will not work properly. This is because environmental law needs to be amended so greenhouse gas emissions from new coal and gas developments are reported on and tracked.

In fact, without the national environmental standards – which the federal environment department dubs the "centrepiece of our reforms" – the whole package of reform seems toothless.

Labor's failure so far to deliver on its promise puts their goals of "no new extinctions" and a "nature positive" future for Australia at risk.

Barbie's leadership lessons for the real world

By **Catherine Althaus.**
Published online 15 April 2024, by **Apolitical**

The Barbie movie can teach us some insightful lessons in modern public sector leadership.

- The problem: Mainstream leadership is not enough to equip us for the modern challenges and opportunities of our VUCA world.
- Why it matters: Without shifting our worldviews and tools, we will continue to treat everything as a technical problem to be solved and we will continue to misdiagnose adaptive challenges, further contributing to over 70% failure in change management across the world.
- The solution: Adaptive leadership provides options to make progress on the issues that matter to us.
- The Barbie movie was a phenomenon of unexpected impact, becoming the highest-grossing film of 2023.

Clever scripting, meticulous attention to music, costuming and casting detail and curation of intense emotional connections to childhood play experiences and so-called gender wars have seen the movie become a cultural phenomenon.

Can we learn anything from the hype? Here are some insightful lessons that Barbie offers for modern public sector leadership:

Perfection is an illusion and challenging the status quo is hard

Margot Robbie's stereotypical Barbie character microscopes the existential disruption of so-called perfect communities and the very real disruption that can happen to the comfort we find in our status quo. Barbie finds her satisfying Dreamworld rudely disrupted when she starts having thoughts of despair and death. Her sanitised perfect life starts to fall apart, symbolised by the arches of her plastic feet collapsing. She has never encountered this reality before. She can no longer walk through her life in the same way again. As many modern leaders will relate, her stock standard technical recipes for leadership success no longer work. What got her to this point, won't work anymore. She is bumping up against adaptive challenges. She is paralysed, overwhelmed and, at many points, in denial.

What then unfolds is a clever plot move to make us pause over the distribution of power amongst our organisations and societies. We need to dig beneath the surface of status-quo perfection to uncover systemic anomalies and unrest. Barbie is forced to reach out across her normal factional alliances to visit 'Weird Barbie' — that Barbie who is played with a little too hard — to figure out what might be her next steps.

Barbie tries a classic traditional leadership move. She seeks to be rescued by a big hero. She laments: "I'm just going to sit here and wait and hope that one of the more leadership-oriented Barbies snaps out of it and does something about this whole mess". Sound familiar? But we know from modern leadership scholarship and practice that this impulse reaction doesn't cut it. Adaptive challenges don't have a solution. We are all implicated in the 'mess' and we all need to play a part. Leadership is a team sport as well as an individual journey.

Thus, Barbie starts on an adventure uncovering her own and Ken's assumptions and worldviews, opening up different possibilities for them both. They both start digging into the identities they held of themselves with all the embedded DNA code and associated lessons they had accumulated. What they previously considered the only way to conceive of themselves and their realities is now open to new interpretations and possibilities, accompanied by new responsibilities and consequences. They both — in their own unique ways — step into the frontiers of their own competence and reach for new insights into the roles they have unquestionably accepted to date but are now beginning

to surface, test and renegotiate. Along the way, they confront the losses precipitated by change, whether they want that change or not.

The relationship between change & loss

Barbie encourages us to pause, reflect and challenge ourselves to consider the leadership of inflicting loss on ourselves and those we love and care about. Stereotypical Barbie did not know what she was getting herself into. She bumped up against traditional command and control authority-informed leadership frameworks as well as the more challenging adaptive leadership ideas from Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky that suggest we have to 'disappoint people at a rate they can tolerate'.

Barbie moves beyond competition between Barbies and Kens towards a new reality where everyone is invited to reimagine their purpose, roles, histories and aspirations. In doing so, Stereotypical Barbie did not know where everyone would end up, but she was aware that everyone was going to lose something if they were going to shift the status quo. Such is the nature of change. It is not change per se that we fear but the loss embedded in change. Being adaptive means simultaneously living with the hope of improvement and the reality of loss.

Adaptive leadership offers a range of techniques to help empower and equip people at all levels across systems to make progress on the deep-seated things that matter to us where otherwise we don't know what to do. It boosts capability and confidence, promotes personal responsibility and purposeful experimentation and provides tangible methods to drive individual, organisational and systemic change. Some adaptive leadership tools that Barbie explored include:

1. Orchestrating conflict to make progress — here the Barbies and Kens all engaged in what Michael Johnstone and Maxime Fern describe as 'provocations' of each other in attempts to shift the status quo of their systems. Without this deliberate surfacing of systemic 'hotspots' and moving of people out of certainty into disequilibrium, it was likely that the Mattel-imposed construction would remain intact. Too often we back away from conflict; adaptive leadership tells us to seek it out with purpose.
2. Giving work back and honouring local knowledge — Barbie explored not just a solo hero but instead the leadership practices of everyone across the Dreamland system. The challenges they faced could not be solved with a technical recipe or a single authoritative vision. Stereotypical Barbie was part of the central plot tasks of the movie, but she had to turn to many characters across the film and call upon them to do the work of leadership to achieve movement and progress. They all had to rely on each other and their local contributions to give effect to change. Usually, we take on problems and run straight to solutions. Adaptive challenges don't involve 'solutions'; the best we can ever achieve is progress. Instead, adaptive leadership demands we slow down, lead with questions and consider carefully who is implicated in the system and whether we might just be part of the problem.

Another key theme threading throughout the film is the existence and worth attributed to those dolls — such as Weird Barbie, Allan, Sugar Daddy Ken, Pregnant Midge and Skipper, to name but a few — hiding in plain sight. These discontinued dolls did not fit into the perfect Barbie world but were critical to the struggle and development of new Dreamworld possibilities. Whereas Mattel executives openly shamed and ridiculed these discontinued Barbies as having no worth. What became clearly important is how they achieved their own distinctive fit in the new Dreamworld.

What does Kennough say to us?

In the film, Stereotypical Barbie discovers the power of trust and the value of creating a 'holding environment' that allows Dreamland to explore alternative realities. She suggests that everyone honour their pasts but not necessarily cling to them as they decide where they want to go next.

This meant the Kens, Barbies and discontinued dolls of Dreamland, along with the alternative universe of the real world, reflecting on and potentially reshaping their identities independent of each other as well as in multiple relationships with each other.

This recalibration can be painful when identities and worldviews, deeply 'baked in' and intertwined with our professional roles, social selves, ancestral ties, societal expectations, rules of conduct and our very conception of humanity, are challenged or changed.

An important technique used in Barbie was that of opening up new freedoms and choice points for Dreamland. The characters moved beyond polarised choices towards new open-ended questions. Dreamland had been about just Kens and Barbies, stuck in set patterns and living with tense undercurrents and ignorance; Ken subsumed and craving special attention from Stereotypical Barbie and Barbie oblivious of the realities of pain and suffering and how it might deepen her appreciation for a life beyond plasticity. After the jolt of the provocation of feelings of death and despair, Barbie invited herself and those around her — including reaching out to new factions that she otherwise had not seriously engaged — to reframe not what it means to be a Ken or a Barbie but what it means to be a fulsome human.

> *Barbie makes me wonder how willing public officials are to step into the spaces of holding communities through loss.*

This reframing of set roles and identities meant Dreamland could move the context of the Barbie-Ken conflict as well as bring everyone into problem setting and developing solutions. Everyone, including the Mattel executives, bought into a grassroots reimagination of what it means to be human, giving away certain aspects of their roles and identities in order to gain new options. For Ken, this meant unhooking from Barbie to explore his own desires and goals. For Barbie, this meant withholding her stereotypical plastic status to pursue appointments with a gynaecologist to gain an actual female reproductive system. Not everyone came out 'winning' and it was not necessarily a traditional happy ending. The status quo shifted, however, and progress was made.

The real challenge for public policy in communities

Barbie makes me wonder how willing public officials are to step into the spaces of holding communities through loss. Not just one part of any given community in a competition over scarce resources or the singular possibilities of grand ideological visions. But holding every single one of us as we open ourselves towards radical empathy and the call placed on ourselves, our communities, our nations and our planet to hold the complexities of our multiplicities as we renegotiate what we each might give up and take on, in order to make progress on things that matter to us.

Australia, for example, where I am from is in the midst of such a 'moment' in the aftermath of the Voice referendum. While some might interpret the referendum outcome as closing down conversations, Australia remains caught in a systemic — and now potentially suppressed — standoff about its national identity. We can see similar dilemmas all over the world — at national and regional levels such as in the Middle East, or within communities or even families.

Political and public policy leadership becomes not just about wielding authority over others in the navigation of who gets what, where, when and how, but about creating and sustaining holding environments that sequence and pace the inevitabilities of loss. Without this, I suspect none of us will be able to realise our full potential to help our societies navigate the possibilities and tragedies of our time.

Choice and control: Are whitegoods disability supports? Here's what proposed NDIS reforms say

By **Helen Dickinson.**
Published online 12 April 2024, by **The Conversation**

The government's recently introduced bill aims to get the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) "back on track". Against a backdrop of concerns over the scheme's cost, it sets out changes that should substantially reform the NDIS over the next few years.

There is a promised transformation in terms of how NDIS support packages are calculated. The new approach will prioritise evidence-based supports and hopefully allow more flexibility to participants in how they spend their budgets.

But the bill also introduces a definition of what constitutes an NDIS support. Holidays, groceries, payment of utility bills, online gambling, perfume, cosmetics, standard household appliances and whitegoods will not be funded, the bill's explanatory notes specify.

Such exclusions could prove shortsighted, creating more inefficiencies within the scheme and mean disabled people lose opportunities for independence.

Changes to assessment and spending

The changes outlined in the bill will move the NDIS towards a needs-based assessment.

This will be supported by the use of functional assessment tools, removing some need for people to collect evidence from medical professionals.

"Your needs assessment will look at your support needs as a whole," NDIS minister Bill Shorten said on the day the bill was tabled. "And we won't distinguish between primary and secondary disabilities any longer."

At the moment plans are made up of a number of categories of funding and line items that set out how plans should be spent. The NDIS review noted this process is often confusing for people and limits how they can spend funds. So the changes offer more spending flexibility.

But the bill's new definition of NDIS support, aims to:

> *narrow the scope of […] constitutionally valid supports to those that are appropriately funded by the NDIS.*

Whitegoods are one of the exclusions listed to clarify guidance on what supports people with disability can access through the NDIS.

At the moment, what an NDIS support is isn't defined. Provided something is deemed reasonable and necessary and related to disability, it can be funded.

At first glance, whitegoods might not seem like important disability supports – and therefore a category ripe for constraining costs. But banning these NDIS supports will likely increase costs and could reduce independence for NDIS participants.

Whitegoods are not just appliances

People with disability have long been at the cutting edge of technology, seeking to use different products and applications to support them in everyday tasks that many of us take for granted.

In modern terms, an example could be a person with a physical impairment that means they find it difficult to lift heavy items. This may mean they struggle to lift wet washing out of a machine or to hang it on a washing line.

So, a combination washer-dryer appliance could mean they are able to independently do their laundry. The alternative option would be to have a support worker to take clothes from the washing machine, hang them on a line and bring them in again once dry.

Having such an appliance allows a person to independently achieve household tasks their disability could prevent or make more difficult or dangerous.

It is also likely to be more cost-effective over the long term. The hourly rate for a support worker employed on weekdays is typically between A$40–$50 per hour. It doesn't take many hours of support-worker time before purchasing a whitegood becomes more cost-effective.

For some people who struggle to navigate a kitchen and cook safely, a device like a Thermomix multicooker (that can chop, mix and cook) can mean they are able to independently prepare meals.

These are expensive at around $2,000. But again, this expense can be justified when compared with the cost of hiring a support worker to prepare meals. The Administrative Appeals Tribunal has previously overturned decisions by the National Disability Insurance Agency (which administers the NDIS) not to fund technologies like this on the basis these are disability related expenses.

The importance of early investment for independence

The NDIS was introduced in response to the deficiencies of the previous system. It is meant to take a lifelong view of disability funding.

Unlike the previous crisis-driven system, the idea of the NDIS is to invest money in the short term to save money in the longer term. Investment in disability care improves social and economic participation and independence.

Narrowly defining disability supports could serve to reduce innovation within the scheme and result in poorer care outcomes. That would only add to cost pressures over the longer term.

Hybrid working in the APS: From productivity to performance to outcomes

By **Sue Williamson**, Helen Taylor, Uma Jogulu and Judy Lundy.
Published online 2 April 2024, by **The Mandarin**

Our latest research on hybrid working suggests that a shift is occurring in the Australian Public Service (APS), from a predominant focus on productivity to performance to outcomes.

Last year we spoke with more than 80 APS managers and supervisors who managed employees working hybridly (where some part of the week is worked at home, and the rest is worked on the employer's premises). We also asked about productivity and performance in a hybrid setting.

Responses offered invaluable insights. Around 40% of our participants stated that productivity has either increased or stayed the same since the widespread shift to working from home. This continues a trend we have observed through our research going back to 2020.

However, this is not the end of the story. Productivity has always been difficult to quantify in the public sector. Trying to assess the impacts of working from home on productivity is even more difficult — there are so many variables.

We have previously suggested that the focus needs to switch from productivity to performance. Our research reveals that managers are doing just that — in our focus groups, they discussed work performance with an emphasis on outcomes.

For example, managers who previously used timesheets told us that these had been removed or were maintained more as a compliance requirement, rather than as a monitoring tool. They emphasised the focus on outcomes:

> *[O]ne key thing that I think really did happen for us across COVID, and is continuing now, is a complete removal of looking at the times, looking at timesheets. Not that we don't look at timesheets, but we're only interested in the outcomes, we're interested in 'is the job being done?'*

More specifically, the managers and supervisors focused on outcomes over rigid working hours or location of work in their management approach. As one stated, they aim to foster "a productivity culture versus an attendance culture". This productivity is dependent on performance, and management which focuses on outcomes.

Practitioner research highlights that autonomy and trust complement an outcomes-focused approach, and lead to increased performance and productivity. Our research shows that working hybridly can increase employees' autonomy as they are able to manage themselves to achieve work outcomes.

Our findings indicate that employees working autonomously make decisions about when and how their work is completed. As one manager explained:

> *"…for me, the input and the output, that's the way I can control, and in the middle they can do whatever they want to".*

Hence, flexibility, autonomy and trust are key to successful hybrid working. Autonomy is essential to increased flexibility, and practitioner research recommends organisations provide hybrid employees with high levels of autonomy and high levels of flexibility. This will also ensure organisations remain competitive because flexibility with autonomy has been proven essential for staff retention.

The APS is flexible and adaptive, which are great facilitators for increased autonomy, flexibility and a focus on outcomes, rather than outputs or time spent in the office. An outcomes focus may not only supersede tired old debates about productivity, but also ensure hybrid working benefits individuals, teams and organisations.

To further explore these findings as well as other aspects of hybrid working we investigated in this research, including wellbeing, career development and visibility, register for the online launch of our report.

Draft NDIS bill is the first step to reform – but some details have disability advocates worried

By **Helen Dickinson.**
Published online 27 March 2024, by **The Conversation**

Since the review of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) released its recommendations in December, there has been a series of Town Hall events to discuss them around the country – but no actual changes. Today the government introduced a new bill to make way for NDIS reform.

Disability minister Bill Shorten said "legislation and rule changes are the key to unlocking a trustworthy and sustainable NDIS and will enable the government to drive change".

What changes does the bill suggest? And what do people with disability need to know about what might happen next?

Why now?

Although the NDIS Review set out a five-year timeframe for reform, many of the items within this bill are needed to modify the NDIS Act and to allow for those changes to take place. One big motivator for action is the government's commitment to moderate cost growth of the NDIS – rather than see it grow to more than one million participants and cost up to A$100 billion a year by 2032.

Some in the disability community have expressed concern about legislation being introduced without co-design with them. Reports suggest disability advocates who did see the bill before its introduction were subject to non-disclosure agreements. The government says co-design will take place over an 18-month period to flesh out the changes.

Although states and territories asked the government to delay introducing this legislation because of concerns over foundational supports, the bill does not mention them. It is mostly focused on the scheme and the work of the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) that administers it.

What changes are outlined in the legislation?

There are a large number of changes outlined in the bill and there will be a lot to unpack in coming weeks. Broadly these focus on:

- how people access the scheme and plans are created
- how participants can spend funds
- how the NDIA can step in if they have concerns funds are not being spent effectively
- the powers of the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission.
- The first big change is in how people will be assessed for entry to the scheme.

At the moment the scheme lists impairments that are likely to give people access to the scheme, for example permanent blindness or severe intellectual disability.

The review argued this was unfair because people may have a similar level of need as a result of a condition that isn't listed. They have had to provide more evidence, which can be difficult to obtain and expensive. It has also meant access has been driven via diagnosis rather than the impact on function and daily activities.

A new type of assessment

The changes outlined in the bill will move the NDIS towards a needs-based assessment.

This will be supported by the use of functional assessment tools, removing some need for individuals to collect evidence from medical professionals.

“Your needs assessment will look at your support needs as a whole,” Shorten said. “And we won’t distinguish between primary and secondary disabilities any longer.”

Many of the tools needed for this process do not yet exist. But some in the community are wary given the controversy over proposals to introduce Independent Assessments a few years back. Those plans were shelved after significant backlash suggested they could become dehumanising and traumatising.

Tightening control on budgets and supports

The bill also outlines changes to how individuals can spend their plans.

At the moment plans are made up of a number of categories of funding and line items that set out how plans should be spent. The NDIS Review noted this process is often confusing for individuals and limits how they can spend funds. The changes will allow participants to spend funding allocations in more flexible ways.

The bill defines what constitutes an NDIS support and links to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities for the first time. Examples include “supports that facilitate personal mobility of the person in the manner and at the time of the person’s choice”.

However, holidays, groceries, payment of utility bills, online gambling, perfume, cosmetics, standard household appliances and whitegoods will not qualify as NDIS supports. Participants will only be able to spend funding on those things identified as an NDIS support and which a participant requires as a result of their impairment.

The bill would give the NDIA more power over how participants manage plans. These powers will be used if the NDIA have concerns that an individual is not able to use their plan effectively or someone else might be trying to exploit or coerce them to use their funds in a way that isn’t consistent with their best interests.

The Quality and Safeguards Commission has previously been criticised for insufficient action. The review suggested a new model of regulation that would be scaled according to the level of participant risk. A taskforce examining provider and worker registration will report back some time in the middle of this year. So there are no changes to provider registration in this bill.

There is an expansion of the commission’s compliance and enforcement powers. They will be able to scale up efforts and restrict employment of a support worker when they have been banned by an approved quality auditor.

More legislative changes ahead

These won’t be the last changes we will see to the NDIS legislation in the near future.

The government has already indicated it is likely there will need to be further changes following engagement with the disability community.

Co-design requires trust and the government will be hoping that releasing this legislation without significant engagement with the disability community hasn’t damaged relationships too badly.

States agreed to share foundational support costs. So why the backlash against NDIS reforms now?

By **Helen Dickinson.**
Published online 26 March 2024, by **The Conversation**

On Monday evening Australia's state premiers and territory chief ministers got together and called on the federal government to delay or amend draft laws to overhaul the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The laws are to determine how states provide "foundational supports", a key recommendation of the NDIS Review.

There was a sense of optimism in December when National Cabinet agreed the states and Commonwealth would split the funding of foundational supports and the Commonwealth would add billions to strengthen Medicare. This was meant to ease the costs of specialist support within the NDIS.

So why are the details proving controversial now? And does the backlash mean NDIS reforms might fall over at the first hurdle?

Creating other avenues of support

Last year's NDIS Review was tasked, among other things, with considering the financial sustainability of the scheme.

The review argued there is no single issue driving the growing cost pressure of the NDIS. But the lack of accessible and inclusive mainstream services for people with disability was pushing them into the NDIS. This means more people are on the scheme than was originally intended.

We have seen particular growth in the number of young people with autism and developmental delay entering the NDIS. One in ten boys aged between five and seven have an NDIS plan when starting school.

While this could indicate the original scheme estimates were not correct, it's likely a significant proportion of demand is being driven by a lack of other available supports through mainstream services.

Supports the states used to provide

The NDIS was never intended to provide services to all people with disability and about 86% of disabled Australians do not have NDIS plans. Those without NDIS plans access the same mainstream services as the rest of the population – be they schools, health services or public transport.

But mainstream services are not always accessible to people with disability. Research from the University of Melbourne in 2022 shows the vast majority of Australians with disability who don't have NDIS plans can't access the services and supports they need. When this happens people have to go without or pay for additional supports such as taxis, mobility equipment or domestic assistance themselves.

Since the establishment of the NDIS over a decade ago, states and territories have pulled back from providing some services for people with disability.

Home and community care programs to support people under 65 years of age with less intensive disability needs, for example, are inconsistent and underfunded in many places. So if a person with disability needs help with some shopping or cleaning, their only option for support may well be to apply to join the NDIS.

Are these reforms a surprise?

The NDIS Review acknowledges the scale of reform outlined in its recommendations are significant and should be transitioned to over a five-year period. But many of the changes that will take place within the NDIS are dependent on having foundational services in place outside the scheme. Foundational supports are a key priority in the reform process.

The development of a foundational supports strategy should not have taken states and territories by surprise. The day before the NDIS Review was launched in December, National Cabinet reached its decision to share foundational support costs equally between the Commonwealth and states and territories. And at the end of January, the Commonwealth committed A$11.6 million over two years to support the development and implementation of the foundational supports strategy.

Although fresh reports say state and territory leaders fear "uncosted" foundational supports, premiers were reportedly given an indication of additional costs at the December National Cabinet meeting.

Since then, state and territory governments will have been working to determine exactly what foundational services are needed in their jurisdictions and how many people might want to access these. Given the NDIS Review recommended better and more detailed data collection, many of these governments likely don't have good enough data to easily understand what the demand for these services might be and therefore what they might cost.

While states and territories appear to have signed up to the general direction of reform, the latest reports suggest premiers are concerned at the speed and the scale of the changes. In a context of tight state budgets there are likely also fears of extra budgetary pressures from developing new systems of support.

Future disability reform

Debates over which parts of government should fund which services are not new. But focusing on who pays for what misses the bigger picture.

Getting a system of foundational supports in place is essential not only for the sustainability of the NDIS but also for all those disabled Australians who are currently going without necessary supports to live their lives. As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, Australia has a commitment to protect the rights of people with disabilities and ensure their full inclusion in society.

The NDIS is one part of realising this commitment, but it will not be able to achieve this on its own. If they can't access mainstream services, disabled people are shut out from participation in aspects of daily life we should all be able to take for granted.

Disability advocates argue delaying tactics from states and territories are unacceptable and reform needs to happen now. The federal government seems committed to the top recommendation of the NDIS Review. It remains to be seen whether the states and territories are ready to move at the same pace.

Don't just give me a cupcake!

By **Vindhya Weeratunga.**
Published online 8 March 2024, by **Daily Mirror Sri Lanka**

As International Women's Day approaches, many institutions gear up for their annual celebrations of their female workforces. In the aftermath of last year's celebrations, the glossy press releases and social media posts painted a picture of companies showering their female workforces with tokens of appreciation, ranging from flowers to cupcakes, and motivational speeches from accomplished women. All these are, undoubtedly, well-intended and wonderful initiatives, BUT how are these actions addressing the root causes of workplace issues, including gender inequality? What tangible changes await women in the workplace after these celebrations are over?

The purpose of International Women's Day (IWD), according to UNESCO, is to assess the progress women have made in the social, economic, cultural, and political arenas so that we know where we stand compared to other countries. In other words, the progress made towards achieving gender equality and women's empowerment.

Let's take, for example, the introduction of paternity or parental leave policies. While on paper these initiatives appear progressive, how many men take advantage of such initiatives? Are they truly involved in the caregiving responsibilities? And more importantly, are companies actively encouraging their male employees to do so? Are men made aware of why taking this leave is important? The reality is, according to published data, the uptake of paternity or parental leave is very low, worldwide. Men are often hesitant to take leave as they fear career implications. It's not just about introducing policies; it is also about the effective implementation and monitoring of it.

In addition, some companies boast that they have a high percentage of women and that their recruitment is based on 'merit'. This is highly questionable in a society where gender biases persist. In a society where women have traditionally been disadvantaged or not preferred for certain job categories or positions, how are organisations ensuring that biases don't come into play? How are they ensuring equity? Merit-based recruitment is ideal if organisations also ensure that their recruitment panels are representative of both genders and other diverse groups, and the panel members have received training and are aware of unconscious bias.

Furthermore, some organisations report the representation of women in certain roles, especially higher management and board positions, to demonstrate improved diversity. However, the question of 'inclusion' remains paramount. Are these women truly empowered to influence decision-making? Are they listened to? Or are they mere tokens of diversity? The 2024 International Women's Day theme is "Inspire Inclusion." Diversity and inclusion are two different things. As the famous saying by Verna Myers goes, "Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance!" It's true that during the last two or three decades the number of women in key positions in companies has marginally increased but in most instances their voices are unheard.

This Women's Day calls for a shift in focus from symbolic gestures to systemic change. Awareness training for men on supporting women to thrive at work, coupled with zero-tolerance policies for discrimination and harassment, are steps in the right direction. Again, having training and policies will not change the system; it will, however, create awareness. Effective monitoring of how things have progressed and taking corrective measures is equally important.

Other things that companies can do include exploring reasons for women's well-being problems and addressing the root causes; this does not mean, offering yoga as a fix for well-being issues, but identifying ways in which companies can reduce burdens and provide the required resources for women to address the root causes.

At the heart of enabling women to thrive is the implementation of flexible work arrangements. Research shows that flexible work arrangements benefit women (and people with disabilities)

to a significant extent by enabling them to effectively manage their work-life balance, which leads to greater productivity and heightened engagement with the organisation. Whilst challenges exist in certain sectors, a willingness to challenge the traditional ways of working can pave the way for meaningful change.

As we approach another International Women's Day, let's start to think differently. It's time to move beyond flowers and cupcakes – it's time to design a future where every woman can thrive.

Taming the consulting industry when 'doing the right thing' is an objective reality

By **David Schmidtchen.**
Published online 19 February 2024, by **The Mandarin**

The inquiries into the consulting industry have returned, providing fresh insights into ongoing transgressions, misunderstandings and leadership hubris. Soon, the committees will pivot from raking over the coals to considering the future.

The Department of Finance is seeking industry input on a Supplier Code of Conduct supporting clauses to include in commonwealth contracts effective April.

However, it is important to understand what you are regulating when designing regulation for an industry that has steadfastly refused to be regulated.

A predictable start

Codes of conduct and ethical practice are widespread in the public and consulting sectors. Codes of behaviour and practice describe the minimum expectations for professional conduct.

Typically, codes are mentioned in induction training and are most likely to be revisited when something has gone wrong. Codes are written to influence behaviour positively but are often implicitly read as a list of things not to do.

In response to robodebt, the APS Code of Conduct is an after-the-fact response. At the same time, academic research has consistently shown that codes of ethics in consulting have little influence on ethical behaviour.

The proposed Supplier Code of Conduct is a mix of social, economic, and process practices businesses should consider part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) obligations. But as Rio Tinto demonstrated, what is espoused in a glossy CSR brochure may not be embedded in corporate culture.

The Supplier Code of Conduct is necessary, but it will have little or no direct influence on ethical behaviour in consulting firms. The financial services industry has been subject to regulatory initiatives and codes of practice for many years, but the Hayne royal commission showed how little these had affected behaviour. Internal business performance incentives had a more immediate effect on what was valued and what wasn't.

Trusted partners

Positive regulation for the industry should start with the question, 'What is consulting?' More often than not, the understanding is assumed and often flawed. Consulting is both means and ends, process and outcome. And this is where the ethical issues begin.

Clients don't call consultants when everything is going well. They call consultants when uncertain about the process, the outcome or both. Consultants should bring an independent perspective and act as a sounding board for testing decision options.

But sometimes, clients employ consultants not because they are uncertain but because they want the legitimacy of an agreeable external opinion. Clients sometimes employ consultants as a shield for unwelcome decisions that have already been made.

The ethics of consultants cannot be divorced from the ethics of their clients. The Supplier Code of Conduct is silent on the client's ethics and behaviour in using consultants. Not all clients are well-intentioned.

Inevitably, consultants are inside client deliberations, so they have a privileged position and information. Independence, prudence and reasonableness are core principles of the consultant's art. They are keepers of secrets, and consequently, they have power.

Consulting advice can be provided on the outcome, but more often, the focus is on working with the client to develop options for achieving the outcome. This is sometimes portrayed as a doctor-patient relationship. The consultant is the doctor diagnosing the disease and recommending treatment options for the patient to follow. This is not accurate.

The relationship is more akin to a temporary dance partner. The consultant and client come together for as long as the music lasts. When it works well, each is enriched by the interaction. The focus is on partnership and performance rather than expert and object.

Proven experience

Professionals — doctors, engineers, psychologists, accountants — have specialist knowledge and credentials to work with that knowledge, their activities are regulated, and they have shared values and ethics in the practice of the profession. A person cannot join a hospital and practice as a doctor. But it is possible to become a consultant by joining a consulting firm.

So, what is it that consultants bring to the dance? 'Proven experience' is a common phrase consultants use to demonstrate their value.

A doctor or engineer acts on an established body of knowledge; management consultants don't. The nature of the role is that there can be no specific body of knowledge. Knowledge comes from previous interactions with clients on similar problems. This knowledge is, in theory, disseminated through the firm.

Methods and playbooks are substituted for knowledge. Assessing and adapting to organisational politics becomes the principal skill — the recent insights into 'power mapping' demonstrate the importance of knowing client politics in detail. The technique is necessary for practitioners operating from the experience of previous practice rather than specialist domain knowledge.

The knowledge base of consultancy is largely unverifiable. It is demonstrated by reference to the previous engagements rather than specialist expertise that is tested, verified and grown.

The tools, techniques and methods are equally unverifiable other than through the firm's experience. Ultimately, clients have few guides or tests to determine whether the assertion of proven experience can be trusted. Consequently, the decision is based on personal trust between the client and the consultant.

The relationship between client and consultant is an inevitable determinant of ethical practice. Both parties need to be clear on their roles, and they must navigate day-to-day ethical dilemmas together.

Getting upstream of the problem

How we think about ethical behaviour is more than just an academic pursuit. The metaphors and short-hand language we rely on govern our everyday actions down to our most mundane behaviours.

The government procurement processes and guidelines create an adversarial relationship between the buyer and supplier. The structure of these processes shapes the understanding clients and consultants alike have about their relationship. Buyers and suppliers become organised around an adversarial relationship's customs, habits and traditions.

Positive regulation should shift the focus from remedying ethical breaches based solely on compliance with the rules to an upstream focus on seeing the reality of the relationship between buyer and supplier.

It would shake up our view of clients and consultants to include regulations that deal with the raw facts of probity in procuring services and the complexity of receiving and delivering those services. Ethical education would focus not only on the rules but also on the principles and reasons that lie behind the rules.

Repeating the mistakes of the past

Ethical behaviour does not arise from applying a familiar flowchart or algorithm, and the rules do not create it. Instead, ethical behaviour is discovered through the client-consultant interaction.

It is discovered through a relationship in which empathy and care for each other's circumstances are fostered, hubris and prejudice are challenged, dissent and difference are valued, and basic behaviours for understanding right from wrong are assumed.

It's an idealist's view, maybe. But what's the alternative? Continuing to repeat the mistakes of the past?

Positive regulation of the consulting industry requires a significant mindset shift.

Ethical behaviour is not solely the responsibility of consultants; clients must also acknowledge their responsibilities. Consulting firms must face the reality that their incentive structures work directly against making good ethical decisions. Clients need to be more aware of how the framing and processes of procurement influence behaviour.

'Doing the right thing' is an objective reality. Maybe future industry regulation should start there.

Population can't be ignored. It has to be part of the policy solution to our world's problems

By **Jenny Stewart.**
Published online 8 February 2024, by **The Conversation**

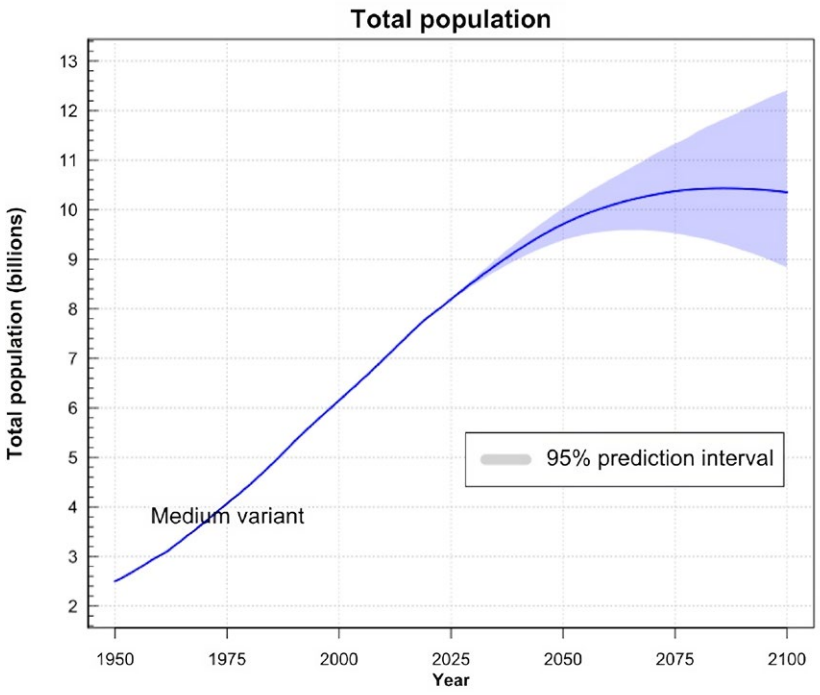
There is a growing consensus that environmental problems, particularly the effects of climate change, pose a grave challenge to humanity. Pollution, habitat destruction, intractable waste issues and, for many, deteriorating quality of life should be added to the list.

Economic growth is the chief culprit. We forget, though, that environmental impacts are a consequence of per capita consumption multiplied by the number of people doing the consuming. Our own numbers matter.

Population growth threatens environments at global, national and regional scales. Yet the policy agenda either ignores human population, or fosters alarm when perfectly natural trends such as declining fertility and longer lifespans cause growth rates to fall and populations to age.

That there are still too many of us is a problem few want to talk about. Fifty years ago, population was considered to be an issue, not only for the developing world, but for the planet as a whole. Since then, the so-called green revolution in agriculture made it possible to feed many more people. But the costs of these practices, which relied heavily on pesticide and fertiliser use and relatively few crops, are only now beginning to be understood.

The next 30 years will be critical. The most recent United Nations projections point to a global population of 9.7 billion by 2050 and 10.4 billion by 2100. There are 8 billion of us now. Another 2 billion will bring already stressed ecosystems to the point of collapse.



It's the whole world's problem

Many would agree overpopulation is a problem in many developing countries, where large families keep people poor. But there are too many of us in the developed world, too. Per person, people in high-income countries consume 60% more resources than in upper-middle-income countries and more than 13 times as much as people in low-income countries.

From 1995 to 2020, the UK population, for example, grew by 9.1 million. A crowded little island, particularly around London and the south-east, became more crowded still.

Similarly, the Netherlands, one of the most densely populated countries, had just under 10 million inhabitants in 1950 and 17.6 million in 2020. In the 1950s, the government encouraged emigration to reduce population densities. By the 21st century, another 5 million people in a tiny country certainly caused opposition to immigration, but concern was wrongly focused on the ethnic composition of the increase. The principal problem of overpopulation received little attention.

Australia is celebrated as "a land of boundless plains to share". In reality it's a small country that consists of big distances.

As former NSW Premier Bob Carr predicted some years ago, as Australia's population swelled, the extra numbers would be housed in spreading suburbs that would gobble up farmland nearest our cities and threaten coastal and near-coastal habitats. How right he was. The outskirts of Sydney and Melbourne are carpeted in big, ugly houses whose inhabitants will be forever car-dependent.

Doing nothing has a high cost

The longer we do nothing about population growth, the worse it gets. More people now inevitably mean more in the future than there would otherwise have been.

We live very long lives, on average, so once we're born, we tend to stick around. It takes a while for falling birthrates to have any impact.

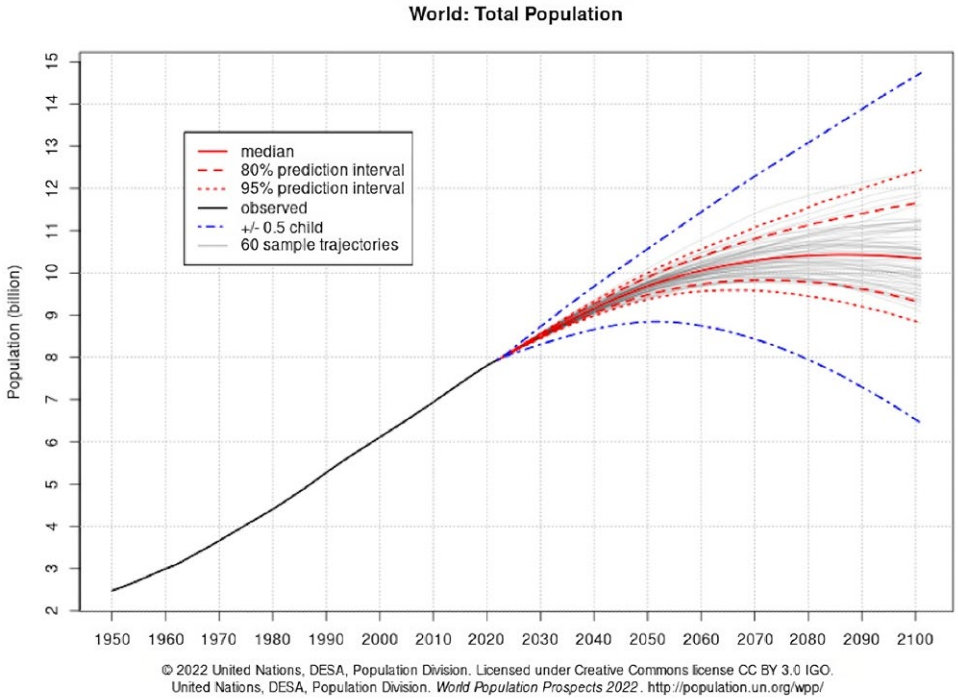
And when they do, the population boosters respond with cries of alarm. The norm is seen as a young or youngish population, while the elderly are presented as a parasitical drag upon the young.

Falling reproduction rates should not be regarded as a disaster but as a natural occurrence to which we can adapt.

Recently, we have been told Australia must have high population growth, because of workforce shortages. It is rarely stated exactly what these shortages are, and why we cannot train enough people to fill them.

Population and development are connected in subtle ways, at global, national and regional scales. At each level, stabilising the population holds the key to a more environmentally secure and equitable future.

For those of us who value the natural world for its own sake, the matter is clear – we should make room for other species. For those who do not care about other species, the reality is that without a more thoughtful approach to our own numbers, planetary systems will continue to break down.



Let women choose to have fewer children

So, what to do? If we assume the Earth's population is going to exceed 10 billion, the type of thinking behind this assumption means we are sleepwalking our way into a nightmarish future when a better one is within our grasp.

A radical rethink of the global economy is needed to address climate change. In relation to population growth, if we can move beyond unhelpful ideologies, the solution is already available.

People are not stupid. In particular, women are not stupid. Where women are given the choice, they restrict the number of children they have. This freedom is as basic a human right as you can get.

A much-needed demographic transition could be under way right now, if only the population boosters would let it happen.

Those who urge greater rates of reproduction, whether they realise it or not, are serving only the short-term interests of developers and some religious authorities, for whom big societies mean more power for themselves. It is a masculinist fantasy for which most women, and many men, have long been paying a huge price.

Women will show the way, if only we would let them.

Dissent is not a dirty word

By **David Schmidtchen.**
Published online 6 February 2024, by **The Mandarin**

Shared spaces for dissent are few in our workplaces. The cultural norms that shape our behaviour are tightly defined and vigorously patrolled. Dissent is subversive and controversial. It opens the door to discord, disagreement, and conflict. It is dangerous.

But those with the courage, conviction, and confidence to disagree with 'how we do things around here' contribute disproportionately to improving team performance. The few who dissent force the majority to think outside the box, guard against complacency, keep group processes focused, improve decision-making quality, and open innovation. Dissent is the diversity of thinking in action.

Recently, all leaders have seen the cost of conformity in senior leadership groups. Ziggy Switkowski's report on PwC nails the problem and its causes.

> *"Historically at PwC Australia, partners have built and relied upon a high degree of trust in each other, with a preference for maintaining harmony. In practice there is not a lot of constructive dissent, with relationships and loyalty being key to career progression. In recent years, the emphasis on growth coupled with high levels of trust and reluctance to challenge created blind spots. It may also have contributed to a willingness of partners to tolerate poor behaviours of 'rainmakers'. Against this backdrop, the overplaying of collegiality creates risk."*

Loyalty, conformity, dependence, and silence reinforced by incentives built into career pathways were how things were done here. The consequences were catastrophic for the firm, those directly involved, and, most unfairly, the many who were innocent.

Senator Deborah O'Neill has warned anyone in the consulting industry who thinks 2023 is yesterday's news that the industry's leaders have "demonstrably failed to meet so many key markers of ethics and professionalism".

Ethics, integrity, professionalism, and reform are best served by cultures where critical dissent and challenging the status quo are collectively encouraged—a culture where failing to engage in critical dissent is considered abnormal behaviour.

We value conformity

It's stressful to be different — to go against the group. We want to be liked and accepted, and most of the time, it makes sense to do what everybody else does. We want to conform.

But the crowd is not always wise, and the desire for conformity leads teams and organisations into unfortunate and, occasionally, catastrophic places.

Conformity promotes silence. We become silent about what we know and about our concerns. We are silent for the sake of the group. We are silent because expressing dissent has consequences.

Dissenters are seen as selfish individualists, expressing opinions that serve their projects, teams, or careers. They are driven by arrogance and self-interest. Nobody wants to be that person.

Dissent can be discouraged in teams, particularly senior leadership teams, because it is taken as undermining the self-reinforcing optimism and buoyant positivity necessary to lead. Dissent is seen as disruptive, leading to conflicts that threaten team cohesion. Most dangerously, dissent introduces friction into decision-making. And, so, the comfort of conformity is cherished over the social awkwardness of dissent.

Without dissent, the danger of self-perpetuating errors increases. Blind spots in decision-making get bigger. Critical thinking is stunted. Silence and powerlessness become the norm. Protecting reputation becomes more important than doing what is right.

Until everything went bad at PwC, the senior leadership probably thought everything was good. There is a lesson there for all leaders.

The reasons why people express dissent

Leaders have two roles in creating the conditions for constructive dissent: they must facilitate dissent and resolve dissent. Success in both roles requires a more nuanced understanding of why people dissent.

Dissent is not always good or virtuous. Dissent can come from those who are disengaged, and disloyal. People in this category are small in number and often well-known. This is a performance management issue.

The larger group are those who are loyal but concerned for the group. These dissenters are motivated by care and are troubled enough to express their concerns. These are critical friends in the group, and those who adopt that role should shift within the group depending on the issues and decision-making context.

Some people dissent because their moral convictions and personal values are in danger of being breached. Personal convictions take precedence over group norms. If expressed, this type of dissent should be listened to carefully. It takes courage to express a personal view that runs against the group.

Given the varied sources of dissent, it should be normal behaviour in leadership teams. Unfortunately, conformity is conflated with loyalty and non-conformity with disloyalty.

Leaders permit dissent but are responsible for facilitating how it improves decision-making and resolves differences of opinion. There is great value and less risk in taking the time to integrate new information, adjust to accommodate different perspectives, and cohere around a robust way forward.

Leading constructive dissent

The view of dissent as resistance to be overcome rather than useful feedback is pervasive. For example, change implementation is often focused on overcoming resistance. Resisting change is interpreted as obstruction. Middle managers, reluctant to give up old habits, are often called the ‘permafrost layer’ when they speak up. Undoubtedly, there is, in some cases, an element of this. But while we default to the negative, it is also entirely possible that expressing dissent, particularly in implementation, makes sense.

Dissenters work in a complicated social environment where a strategic cost-benefit analysis is constantly in play: Who is watching? Will I be heard? Will it make a difference? What can be gained? What can I lose?

Understanding the internal conflicts that prevent team members from speaking up when they disagree is central to leading constructive dissent—for example, understanding that people may not be prepared to break group rules but are quietly relieved when others do.

The social dynamics of organisations and teams introduce competing pressures that can influence whether speaking up is personally the right or wrong thing to do. For example, incentive structures and performance management systems are designed to encourage compliance, not dissent. Dissenting has a measurable and personal cost. Building accountability for psychological safety into incentives and performance management sends a tangible signal that dissent is an ordinary, natural, and valued part of organisational life.

Seeing with a child's eyes

Encouraging dissent requires an openness to diversity in thinking. It requires people to willingly challenge the 'obvious' and to ask (out loud) 'the dumb question'. Sometimes, it requires a child's eyes, the person who can say, 'The Emperor is naked.'

We all need to acknowledge the realities of politics, self-interest, and dissent in leadership teams that navigate competitive pressures and tensions and constantly make trade-offs in uncertain conditions.

Dissent is essential to innovation and effective performance. But it requires confident leaders who can create conditions where dissent is not a dirty word.

Does ethics pay?

By **David Schmidtchen.**
Published online 24 January 2024, by **The Mandarin**

The Post Office-Horizon scandal is unfolding in the UK as another showcase of public service and corporate failure. As we learn more, the usual suspects surfaced: employee concerns were ignored, implementation failure was concealed, and executive leaders focused on protecting profit and reputation.

Are we becoming habituated to these failures?

Do we all shrug our shoulders and say, 'Well, that's just business, isn't it?'

Quentin Beresford's book Rogue Corporations is a sobering reminder of how common business leaders pursuing 'profit at all costs' fail, with devastating consequences for the community.

Profit and growth come first

The Hayne Royal Commission into Banking seems like a distant memory, but it is worth remembering a central theme of the findings: "… incentive, bonus and commission schemes throughout the financial services industry have measured sales and profit, but not compliance with the law and proper standards".

Kenneth Hayne noted that the banks' culture and conduct were "driven by, and reflected in, their remuneration practices and policies".

Ziggy Switkowski's report into PwC called out a culture where 'revenue is king'. A culture where 'rainmakers' who exceed financial targets were described as the 'untouchables', or individuals to whom 'the rules don't always apply'.

Elizabeth Broderick's review of EY highlighted a profit over people and purpose approach, "A competitive culture with inconsistent accountability for individuals who 'perpetrate harmful behaviours".

Financial targets and the incentives that support them are devilishly difficult to get right. If not positioned and managed carefully and continuously questioned, targets can degrade capability by creating unintended incentives and distorting internal relationships.

The explosive Ford Pinto

The 'explosive Ford Pinto' is a well-known example of poor target setting with disastrous consequences.

Ford set the goal of building a car for "under 2,000 pounds and under $2,000" by 1970. The effect was that employees overlooked safety testing and designed a car where the gas tank was vulnerable to explosion from rear-end collisions. Fifty-three people died as a result.

As a recall coordinator at Ford in the early 1970s, Dennis Gioia provides valuable first-hand insights into the important difference between business and moral decisions.

Early on, as problems with the Pinto became evident, based on the numbers, the business decision was that the losses were within acceptable business parameters. Twice, when presented with the numbers, Ford's business leaders decided not to recall the Pinto despite the danger to consumers.

Gioia's reflection on his time with Ford is instructive. He was on the "fast track" participating in a "tournament" to be recognised, the "pay was great", and the "psychic rewards of working and succeeding … proved unexpectedly seductive".

He recalls how competition and regulation were disrupting the car industry. The feeling inside the company was "beleaguered" and "threatened". A strong tribal mindset of 'we vs them' ran through the company. Ford's culture, systems and accountabilities shaped individual and collective decisions toward achieving business goals while minimising moral questions.

When the finding is that the company prioritised 'profit over people' or pursued 'profit at all costs', the conditions for that outcome were set well in advance and not questioned until after the disaster had unfolded.

Money and motivation don't work the way you think they do

Reward and punishment are two sides of the same coin, and both are focused on compliance, not motivation.

Fifty years of research studies across different domains have shown that incentives do not alter underlying behaviour; they temporarily change what people do. The key takeaways are:

- Money is a hygiene factor, not a motivator.
- Incentives undermine natural motivation and commitment.
- Incentives discourage risk-taking.
- Incentives focus attention on 'what' rather than 'why'.
- No matter how well crafted, incentives promote individual behaviour over collective performance.
- Incentives corrode curiosity.
- There is no evidence for the persistent belief in business that lavish financial incentives drive individual or collective performance improvement.

The Big Four consulting firms' questionable ethical standards are well documented and reach back to Enron's collapse. The latest missteps continue a theme. However, other examples show us the problem is common to business culture.

Excessive remuneration created a corporate culture of 'yes men', which was a significant factor in the downfall of HIH Insurance. A compulsive drive for growth supported by big bonuses for performance contributed to the collapse of Storm Financial. Bupa's culture of consensus – how we do things around here – elevated profit maximisation, leading to disastrous outcomes in aged care. Rio Tinto's profit priorities led to the destruction of the Juukan Gorge caves underpinned by a box-ticking approach to corporate social responsibility.

The growth and profit culture emphasises short-term business decisions at the expense of integrity and moral responsibility. The recurring integrity crises in large corporations suggest that business leaders do not believe that repeated failure is an argument for change.

It's not personal, it's just business

The recent example of moral and ethical failures suggests that business leaders resist, discount or dismiss ethical and moral questions as 'academic' or impractical constraints on performance. Consequently, corporate social responsibility, quality and adherence to standards can be successfully managed through marketing and minimalist box-ticking.

Questions of ethics and moral responsibility are framed in a limited way as 'business ethics' or 'business pay-off'. The Ford Pinto example shows that business decisions and ethical outcomes can be conflicting. It also shows that not one decision makes the difference, but many small decisions are taken over time by people complying with the incentives built into the culture. Consistently, those with concerns don't feel they can speak up or raise concerns, and those who do are ignored and side-lined.

Does ethics pay?

PwC has suffered the full effect of ethical failure. Extraordinary damage to reputation, forced reorganisation, lost talent, increased scrutiny and lost profit. The fallout has spread across the consulting industry, and trust will be difficult to recover.

Moral and ethical decisions are embedded in social relationships. To make good decisions, leaders must be concerned and care for those impacted by their decisions — the workforce, clients and the community.

The more tenuous the relationship or the more distant the leader is from the impact of decision-making, the more the decision becomes impersonal. It is just another cost-benefit calculus made in the interests of the business. A decision that is often rewarded with money or recognition.

There is a need to change the frame in which business decisions are made, moving away from one where self-interest is incentivised, and business leaders are distant from the impact of their decisions. Decision-making's ethical and moral dimensions must be better accommodated and not considered an academic pursuit to be ignored. Ethical questions in decision-making are the starting point and trump all other considerations.

People are the foundation of ethical decision-making; the systems and culture are enablers. Decision-makers must have a strong ideal guiding their judgement, and they need to know the firm's leadership and culture will support them when the decision is about impact, not profit.

NDIS review changes require trust between government and people with disability

By Sophie Yates and **Helen Dickinson.**
Published online 22 January 2024, by **Committee for Economic Development of Australia**

The recent independent NDIS Review is likely to transform both the scheme and the broader disability support ecosystem. If the reforms are to achieve any of their intended effects, implementers will need to address the trust deficit to achieve genuine co-design with the disability community.

Although there have been several reviews and inquiries during its first 10 years of operation, the recent independent NDIS Review is the most significant, and is likely to transform both the scheme and the broader disability support ecosystem.

The 26 recommendations (and 139 supporting actions) cover many topics, including: supports outside the scheme, access, planning, supported decision-making, psychosocial disabilities, housing, information and market stewardship, First Nations participants, workforce, quality and safety, and implementation and governance. It is impossible to summarise them all here, so we will focus on some of the biggest and most controversial recommendations.

Foundational supports

One contributor to rising scheme costs is a greater number of participants than planned, rising from original 2011 estimates of 411,000 participants to more than 610,000 today. This mismatch may have been partially driven by incomplete data when estimates were made, but is also thought to be driven by states and territories scaling back their disability support. This means that in some places the NDIS is the only support for people with disability.

To address this 'oasis in the desert' problem, the review recommends foundational supports, jointly funded by state and territory governments (50:50 with the Commonwealth) and delivered outside the NDIS. These might include information provision and linkages to services, plus more targeted services like home-based support (e.g. shopping and cooking), aids and equipment, early childhood support and psychosocial support.

The NDIS was never intended to be the only way to get disability supports in Australia, so this recommendation will assist people with disability who aren't on the NDIS to access supports and will decrease the inequality between those on the scheme and the far bigger group who aren't.

Access and planning

There are likely to be some big changes to scheme access and planning. The lists that allowed some people automatic access based on their diagnoses will be removed, and participants will instead be granted access based primarily on functional need rather than medical diagnosis – although the tools to effectively assess functional need across a wide range of disability types do not yet exist.

Currently, once people have been accepted onto the scheme, their individual budgets are determined by setting out support needs on an activity-by-activity basis. In the new system, people will instead have their budgets set based on high-level needs (which already occurs in similar systems such as in England). Rather than having funding tied to highly specified activities, there will be more flexibility about how people can use their budgets. Doing this will focus less on specified activities and more on outcomes, which may be a way to drive more innovation in services and supports.

A new Navigator role will be created to help all people with disability access supports. Each person will be allocated a Navigator, funded through the new foundational supports system and not from individual budgets. They will help people outside the scheme access foundational supports, assist people to apply to the NDIS, and help those on the scheme to learn about the NDIS and use their plans. Specialist Navigators will focus on particularly complex areas like housing and psychosocial disability.

Children

Approximately half of all NDIS participants are children, a far greater proportion than anticipated. This has increased costs, but the review team also heard that the way the NDIS scheme supports children is often not based on best practice.

The review panel suggested children would be better served accessing foundational supports in homes, early childhood centres and schools, rather than relying on individual budgets for clinical interventions in specialised and segregated settings. This will require significant investment by governments in foundational supports for children under the age of nine.

Mandatory registration

One of the most controversial recommendations relates to quality and safeguarding. Most NDIS payments currently go to providers who are registered with the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission, but there are relatively few registered providers and they tend to be larger organisations. Unregistered providers are much larger in number, but tend to be smaller in size, and take a smaller percentage of NDIS funds overall (see NDIS Review, p. 911).

To improve quality and safety, the review recommends mandatory registration for all providers, including light touch "enrolment" for low-risk providers such as suppliers of consumables. But our research shows that some NDIS participants depend on unregistered providers – for example, suppliers of assistive technology, allied health practitioners, cleaners/gardeners and sole trader or directly-employed support workers. This is especially important in non-urban areas that have few (or no) registered providers, and some say it is vital for their choice and control over supports.

It is important to note that registration does not equate to safety or quality under current arrangements. We are not aware of any evidence (and the review report does not provide any) that using unregistered providers is overall less safe or more expensive. As Grattan Institute Disability Program Director Sam Bennett has said, the review might be "using a sledgehammer to crack a nut on this one".

Trust and implementation

There is a lot of detail to work out following the review's high-level recommendations. How they are implemented will be crucial. As the review notes, implementation has often not been done well throughout the first decade of the NDIS.

The report emphasises that the substance of many of these recommendations will need to be co-designed and implemented with stakeholders, particularly the people with disability (and their families) who depend on the NDIS to live inclusive lives. But this won't be straightforward. After years of exclusion, poor policy implementation, lack of co-design and broken policy promises, many in the disability community have very little confidence that seemingly well-intended recommendations will be implemented by governments or the NDIA in a way that improves the scheme.

For example, one detail that has some stakeholders nervous is a proposed shared support ratio of 1:3 (1 worker to every 3 participants) for daily living supports. While the report says this won't necessarily mean people have to live together, some are concerned that it will work against ongoing efforts to dismantle group-based segregated living arrangements.

If the reforms are to achieve any of their intended effects, implementers will need to address this trust deficit to achieve genuine co-design with the disability community.

Where can we find ethical leaders?

By **David Schmidtchen.**
Published online 10 January 2024, by **The Mandarin**

It is no small undertaking to be an ethical leader.

Ethical leadership is a personal commitment to navigating yourself and others through social contracts and norms, decisions and judgments, trusted relationships and self-interest, duties, responsibilities and accountabilities.

Ethical leadership is always personal. And, if we subscribe to the idea that leaders are at all levels, it is not exclusively a characteristic of the most senior leaders.

In the wake of high-profile integrity failures in the business and government, the APS has committed to building a pro-integrity culture grounded on culture, systems and accountability. A pro-integrity culture assumes ethical leaders.

Where's the integrity problem?

In the most recent State of the Service report, 92% of respondents understood how their role contributes to achieving outcomes for the Australian public, and 84% believe strongly in the purpose and objectives of the APS.

Most also agreed their immediate manager is open and honest (82%), accountable (81%) and takes responsibility (79%). These compelling results suggest that the APS already has a strong pro-integrity culture.

The simplest problem with measuring integrity in this way is definition. Integrity is a characteristic that is sought-after and admired in aspiring leaders, but its presence or absence is observed in moments.

Integrity is a distinctive characteristic that is part of the psychological make-up of a leader, but it has also been refined and developed over time through exposure and experience. The characteristic of integrity is observed as behaviour, but the behaviour is judged in context.

We know integrity when we see it. Its presence can be inspirational and affirming, and its absence, as we have seen in repeated business and government failures, can be costly.

Surveys and questionnaires, such as the APS employee census, are valuable and useful tools, but they are not, and cannot be, designed to capture the nuance and immediacy of integrity.

There is a need to approach the issue differently, starting with the idea that integrity is not a problem to be fixed but rather a capacity and capability that is developed and matured over time.

A different approach might put the leader, rather than the culture or system, at the centre. The objective would be to work out from where integrity is simultaneously the institution's greatest strength and weakness.

Mostly, there is a need to start with a more searching understanding of integrity in the APS.

The public service ideal

There is an ideal of public service bound by the understanding that public servants learn their craft over time.

Public service careers have more in common with a vocation than a profession or trade. The lines between the three are easily blurred, but with a vocation, there is often a central ideal. There is a

relentless obsession with understanding and reaffirming the ideal. For this reason, integrity failures hit harder in the APS because they directly harm the public service ideal.

Through the government, public servants hold publicly sanctioned power and represent the values of public service to the community through decisions and actions. The APS has an institutional identity that carries the public service ideal. Consequently, the community holds public servants to a higher moral standard, personally and professionally, in achieving government outcomes. The failure of an individual is quickly reflected as a failure of the institution.

The challenge for public servants is to consistently demonstrate high ethical standards in an environment that can test personal ethics, lead to decisions between competing goods (or, occasionally, competing bads), and put personal careers and ambitions at risk. 'Speaking truth to power' or being 'frank and fearless' is not as simple or clear-cut as these unassuming and often repeated phrases imply.

To act with integrity, public servants must have deep knowledge of the context of government. The depth of this knowledge is the foundation for leading ethically and acting with integrity. Consequently, understanding and learning from history is critical. Robodebt will be an integrity touchstone in the APS for many years.

To learn the craft, APS leaders must be grounded in the institution's history — its institutional successes and failures as well as the character of its exemplary leaders that best represent the public service ideal.

The health and resilience of the public service ideal are intimately entwined with the quality and expertise of APS leaders. When leaders fail to meet the standard, personally or professionally, the institution's culture, systems and accountability look fragile.

The unit of measure for institutional integrity is not the culture or the system but rather a person, in a moment, working through contradictions and paradoxes while under time pressure to decide and act. Sustaining the public service ideal always starts with the quality and experience of a public servant.

Where to focus investment?

The APS is constantly under external pressure to be more efficient and do more with less. Maintaining the ideal of public service in this environment leads to compromise and contradiction.

But the more significant threat to the public service ideal, and thereby ethical leadership and integrity, is the decay of APS knowledge, skills, expertise and experience. Uplifting APS capability is more than improving digital literacy and project management.

Learning to navigate environments where power, interests and ambition can challenge the ideals of public service is essential. They are skills needed in some measure at all levels but are acute for the SES.

Public service integrity is nourished by a continuous investment in APS workforce capability. Even when the scaffolding of institutional culture, systems and accountability are well constructed, it is important that material from which it is made does not decay.

The APS Taskforce report, Louder than Words, weaves integrity training through the recommended actions the APS should implement to build a pro-integrity culture. It is also likely the departments and agencies are also implementing complementary training.

But will more of the same type of training contribute to preventing future failure?

Integrity is tested in a moment. At that moment, a person, a leader, makes a choice and exercises judgment. When the moment passes, the course is set, and we are all either on the right or wrong side of ethics.

Education and training inform the decision but the ability of a person to apply that knowledge, to understand how to adapt the knowledge to suit the circumstances, and to have the self-confidence to take actions consistent with the public service ideal in conditions of risk and ambiguity will be the crucial difference in that important moment.

In implementing the actions of the taskforce report, there is an opportunity for the APS to be bold and imaginative in its approach to building a pro-integrity culture. And, it should seize this opportunity.

For the APS, integrity is the heartland issue.

Integrity is where good leadership begins

By **David Schmidtchen.**
Published online 12 December 2023, by **The Mandarin**

We want confident leaders. We admire those who are decisive and accept risk. We need leaders who make sense of complex challenges and show us what it means to persevere. Confidence is a positive and sought-after leadership characteristic.

However, any strength overdone is a weakness. Recently, we have seen a culture of leadership in business and the APS where excessive confidence has become hubris. Power and entitlement distort the leader's perspective — a lack of empathy and dismissiveness of others' views becomes normal behaviour. The rules are for other people.

The APS taskforce report Louder than Words positions the solution to recent leadership and integrity failures as a combination of culture, systems, and accountability. The recommendations 'largely focus on the SES' but acknowledge that 'integrity requires action at all levels'.

The report advocates for building a 'pro-integrity' culture in the APS underpinned by compliance and accountability. However, the report notes that the APS is not seeking to 'reinvent the wheel 'because there is a lot of 'good integrity practice to draw on from within agencies'.

Recent reviews of leadership and integrity failures in the Big 4 consulting firms provide the same reasoning and advice.

But if everything was already in place and only a few tweaks to the leadership climate and compliance regime were required, why have there been so many fundamental failures of leadership and integrity?

Integrity is everywhere but nowhere around me

Commissioner Catherine Holmes praised former Centrelink compliance officer Colleen Taylor as a good public servant. Her example shone all the brighter against the evidence from SES officers that led Holmes to 'despair of the Australian Public Service'. Taylor was a public servant of integrity.

Former secretary Mike Pezzullo has left the building, having 'breached the Australian Public Service Code of Conduct on at least 14 occasions'. Many senior public servants seemed flabbergasted when the allegations against Pezzullo first became known. Further down the hierarchy, others didn't seem as surprised.

In parallel, politicians have enjoyed flaying the consulting industry over professional and personal integrity issues. The inquisition is not going away, with senator O'Neill, the chair of the committee, noting that the behaviour of the Big 4 executives showed they were 'only still really cracking open the challenges'.

This seems justified as the Victorian government and EY try to explain why a business case underpinning a significant government decision was to be completed as 'desktop research'. There are questions for the government, but there are also questions for the consultants who took on work where they knew a professionally rigorous review was not possible.

The machine model of integrity

The various reports and reviews often describe a machine-model view of integrity. The recommendations read like a repair manual for the local mechanic.

It starts with the idea that integrity refers to being 'whole and undivided'. Internal and external consistency is the key to utility and performance. So, much like a bicycle wheel, if the parts are all in order (tyre, rim, spokes and hub), then good performance follows. For organisations, if culture, systems, and accountability are in order, then good leadership performance naturally follows.

If only that were all there was to it. Unfortunately, integrity is not a naturally emergent property of effective compliance and sound measurement.

Integrity and good leadership: it's personal

Colleen Taylor's warnings were ignored, and the 'callous indifference' to her concerns led to her retirement. For Taylor, the impact was personal.

Integrity is where good leadership starts. It is a characteristic that is admired and sought after. It is a moral virtue that speaks to good conduct, where the observable behaviour demonstrates a commitment to acting from sound moral principles. It concerns truth and is embodied in the phrase 'frank and fearless'.

Integrity is difficult to define. But, as we have seen, a lack of integrity is a serious failing that disqualifies a person from leadership. When intelligence or charisma is valued over integrity (as it often seems to be) or when leaders who are dismissive or afraid of strong followers are promoted, a clear statement about the incentives for success is made.

But integrity is always personal. Good leaders are more than just technically competent; they are capable. They are confident in and focused on exercising judgment. They are concerned with facts and evidence but also attuned to what's missing. They have a clear sense of their social obligations to others. This is where integrity thrives.

Bromides, profit, and responsiveness

Culture, systems, and accountability are all important, but they are focused on preserving and protecting institutional integrity. The actions become one-dimensionally focused on the control and regulation of behaviour. The objective is to avoid wrongdoing. Recent reviews of poor behaviour have shown that incentives and compliance approaches are the problem. Indeed, there is ample research evidence that compliance-based regimes lead people to be less rather than more likely to see behaviour as worthwhile.

The challenge for business and APS leaders is to move past catch-all bromides like 'doing the right thing at the right time' or 'deliver the best outcomes sought by the government of the day'. At best, these are meaningless and, at worst, dangerous.

Profit in business or responsiveness in government are both crucial for performance. But when the measures for these become the focus of leadership behaviour, then, as we have seen, integrity can be sacrificed.

Profit and responsiveness do not define purpose. This is not why people come to work. They are not a cause, explanation or rationale for decision-making or behaviour. They are an incidental measure of successful leadership.

Colleen Taylor was faithful to the obligations of good public service. She had the confidence and personal integrity to speak up and felt a strong social obligation to protect the APS from doing the wrong thing. Senior leaders should have addressed her views but were unwilling to listen to views contrary to theirs.

Good leadership and integrity are not the products of social engineering. They are the characteristics of good people trying to do good for others.

When it comes to trust, there's more to measuring than counting

By **David Schmidtchen.**
Published online 4 December 2023, by **The Mandarin**

The Australian Public Service Commission has quietly released the 2023 Trust in Public Service report.

Seventeen public services, including the Australian Tax Office, Services Australia, the Department of Agriculture and the Australian Consumer and Competition Commission, were courageous enough to seek feedback from the Australian public on their services. The leaders of these departments and agencies should be commended for their commitment to openness and learning.

Similarly, the team behind the design of the Survey of Trust, on which the report is based, should be congratulated for its methodological rigour in attempting to measure the unmeasurable.

The model that underpins the survey reduces trust to a function of satisfaction and expectation that forms a feedback loop from which trust in public service can be deduced. There is nothing wrong with the model or its assumptions, but it is not a solid measure of trust in public service.

The flight to measurement

Government and business leaders have embraced the idea of measurement to the point of obsession.

The PGPA Act is strong on the need for robust agency performance measures. The recent Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) Audit Opinion Insight reinforces the importance of measurement. It helpfully identifies 'enterprise-wide performance frameworks' as an area for improvement across the APS.

The ANAO seeks the whole truth of agency performance through independent and objective measures. The limit to measuring enterprise performance is the complexity of human organisations.

There are no performance measures free of the choices, perceptions and judgements of people in the agency or the environment to which it is constantly adapting. Measurement necessarily involves solidifying the paths of probabilities and possibilities into a number that represents performance at a point in time. The number could be meaningful or meaningless.

However, the ANAO is focused on embedding measures into agency culture to improve managerial accountability and not the philosophical challenges of measurement. So, inevitably, the focus will be on identifying measurable and concrete performance indicators that can be traced to clean and accurate data.

And while qualitative measures are permitted, agencies and their risk and audit committees will fly quickly to quantitative measures — a flight hastened by the spectre of an independent audit by the ANAO.

Learning the lessons of incentives and incomplete measures

A small few might recall the Enron corporate disaster of 2001. At the heart of the disaster was the focus on the share price as a measure of success and, when given as stock options to senior executives, leading to failures in leadership, ethics, and integrity. A disaster that also led to the rapid demise of the global professional services firm Arthur Andersen. Incentives and measures shape behaviour, and they are challenging to get right.

The Hayne royal commission into banking and the more recent inquiries into PwC and EY have highlighted the clear link between incentives, measures of success and behaviours. Incentives that elevated profit over customers and ethics led to devastating consequences beyond the banking and consulting industries to impact employees and customers.

The Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme highlighted the explicit and implicit incentives built into the scheme and its administration that contributed to reducing the quality of advice provided by the APS.

The recent Pink Floyd-inspired title of the APS Integrity Taskforce, Louder than Words, identifies the role of incentives in improving integrity across the APS.

Inevitably, talk of incentives leads to a recommendation for measuring and reporting on integrity to 'track progress and identify opportunities for improvement'.

Measuring integrity has similar philosophical and methodological problems as measuring trust.

If public service is a 'craft', then the measures should follow

In 2020, the idea of craft was proposed as a way to define a career in the APS. It was a good idea, that artisanal nature of learning the art of good public service.

In everyday terms, craft is associated with customisation, care, and attention to detail. A craftsperson is part of a vocation that draws on technical skills and specialised knowledge learned through practice and exposure to more experienced practitioners.

Craft is valued because it is unique, authentic and different. Integrity is implicit in the practice of the craft.

Public servants make policy and deliver services based on choices and judgements about accessibility, openness, fairness, impartiality, legitimacy and participation.

Consequently, trust and integrity are central to the choices and judgements that public servants make every day. They are the outcomes of a craft practised well.

But, how do you measure a craft?

A craft done well fits. It meets the utility requirement and how well the parts fit together.

We can measure utility. For example, does it meet the requirements of purpose and function? But good policy and service delivery are also designed to be seamlessly arranged and elegant as much as functional. Elegance and functionality are both central to craft.

The managerialism that has come to dominate government and business delivery prizes functionality and sees elegance as a cost. The measures associated with performance indicators and incentives reflect this.

Relying on functional measures can distract from what is expressed in a vision and strategy. It, often unintentionally, discounts aspiration in favour of practicality.

The concreteness of numbers overwhelms the seemingly amorphous considerations of elegance in design and delivery. But in good public administration, fit is an essential determinant of trust. A policy or service works because it fits not only the government's intent but there is harmony in how the parts work together to deliver the vision and strategy.

Some important things are not measurable

The quality of a craft is hard to judge. It requires knowledge, experience, and a clear-eyed sense of intent and circumstances. Functional measures remain important, but the data they are based on will always be limited and narrow the conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis. When

linked to incentives and behavioural outcomes, overdependence on these measures is a recipe for consequences experienced by Enron, PwC, EY, and the APS.

Trust in Public Service is a good report that provides some insights into satisfaction with and expectations of public service delivery, but it is a narrow measure of trust in public services. Those tasked with implementing the recommendations of the Louder than Words report to measure integrity will face similar challenges.

The first question might be, is integrity measurable?

The fish is still rotting from the head

By **David Schmidtchen.**
Published online 28 November 2023, by **The Mandarin**

Bob Garratt's central (and timeless) observations from his bestselling book, The Fish Rots from the Head, can be summarised as "bad leaders harm organisations" and "effective corporate governance is essential".

Persistent senior leadership failings in Australia's public and private sector suggest Garratt's book might be the must-have 2023 Christmas present for Australian senior executives.

It's not just a 'few bad apples'

The 'few bad apples' approach is the first response in the crisis management playbook for senior leadership failures. Isolate, contain and control the narrative: 'We're investigating, the guilty will be punished, it's a few bad apples, nothing to see here, move along'.

Unfortunately, the troubles rarely turn out to be a few bad apples.

The 2019 Hayne royal commission into misconduct in the banking, superannuation and finance industry was refreshingly straightforward on the connection between leadership and governance: "A culture that fosters poor leadership, decision-making or behaviour will undermine the governance framework of the entity."

In a recent speech, Kenneth Hayne highlighted that a key finding from the royal commission — prioritising profit over ethics — still needs to be effectively addressed.

The resonance with Ziggy Switkowski's recent review of PwC is strong. Switkowski found a culture at PwC where 'rainmaker' partners were 'untouchable' and to whom 'the rules don't always apply'.

Switkowski described a leadership culture that incentivised the pursuit of profit over integrity and service quality.

Similarly, Elizabeth Broderick's recent review of workplace culture at EY Oceania reflects themes of profit and leadership but also adds psychological safety to the list of issues. These three themes were reminiscent of Broderick's much earlier review of the treatment of women in the Australian Defence Force.

The robodebt royal commission concluded by criticising the leadership and integrity of former ministers, the senior executive of the Australian Public Service and consulting firm partners. The Australian Public Service Commission is managing 16 code-of-conduct inquiries arising from the royal commission. Home affairs secretary Mike Pezzullo has been sacked after breaching the APS Code of Conduct at least 14 times.

Meanwhile, returning to the private sector, Alan Joyce and Qantas's dramatic fall from grace has profit and leadership hubris as persistent reporting themes on the causes of the problems.

As Quentin Beresford highlights in his recent book Rogue Corporations: inside Australia's biggest business scandals, these recent senior leadership failings cannot be wished away as isolated incidents. There is a pattern of not learning from experience.

Would similar reviews or investigations of the agriculture, mining or energy sectors find these failings of leadership, ethics and integrity are limited to consulting, aviation and the public service?

The persistence of national survey findings on 'toxic leadership', 'toxic cultures', and 'quiet quitting' speak to more widespread leadership problems.

The pity is that review after review identifies well-known causes of the harm done by poor leadership that could have been easily gleaned from a cursory reading of an introductory leadership text.

Lots of investment in leadership, but for what return?

The typical response to leadership failure takes two forms: seeking justice and systems breakdown. Both are necessary and important responses, but they lead us to gloss over another, perhaps more fundamental, question: Are we producing good-quality senior leaders?

One way to look at persistent leadership failures in the public and private sectors would be to say that leadership development in Australia should be having an existential crisis.

For example, Gallup estimates that worldwide companies spend as much as $50 billion a year on leadership development, "while surveys of executives consistently show improving leadership development is a priority challenge".

So, there is an extraordinary annual investment in leadership training and development. Yet, we are experiencing persistent high-profile senior leadership failings that damage the reputation and performance of critical public institutions and industries.

It's more than just a few 'bad apples'.

Are we getting the senior leaders we deserve?

Looking at the problem through a cracked mirror, we might conclude that we get exactly what we are paying for.

Our conversations about leadership are almost exclusively focused on effectiveness. But, adjacent to this view, and less talked about, is who gets to be the leader.

There is considerable research exploring the link between the 'dark triad' of personality characteristics (narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy) and those gaining leadership positions. For example, a survey of financial leaders in New York found they scored highly on psychopathic traits but lower than average in emotional intelligence.

Looking at the dark side of leadership distinguishes between leadership emergence (how leaders become leaders) and leadership effectiveness (what good leaders do that improves performance).

Are we selecting senior leadership characteristics that skew our decisions toward those who value profit over integrity or compliance over fearlessness?

We may be getting the leaders we deserve.

A good question

Verona Burgess, reflecting on the response of the APS to the robodebt royal commission and other inquiries, asked how, singularly or combined, the proposed initiatives would prevent future failings.

It's a good question. The initiatives outlined by the APS seem targeted at the symptom, not the cause.

The absence of good leadership is the theme that runs through all the recent failings. In response, we are drawn to fixing the symptoms, but more might be gained from focusing on how we are developing and selecting the right leaders.

We should also acknowledge that what constitutes good leadership has been learned (repeatedly).

Bob Garratt's book is about history but his two lessons are still relevant.

Should people who had disability before they turned 65, be allowed to become NDIS participants after 65? We asked 5 experts

By Lucy Beaumont, Elizabeth Kendall, **Helen Dickinson**, Henry Cutler, Kathy Boschen, Mark Brown
Published online 2 November 2023 by **The Mandarin**

The question of whether there should be an age limit to joining the National Disability Scheme (NDIS) has been debated since its inception a decade ago.

It is being asked again as we wait for the NDIS Review to release its final report. The report is expected to explore eligibility, sustainability and how costs should be split between the scheme and other government departments to provide an ecosystem of supports for people with disability.

Currently, once someone turns 65 they are no longer eligible to apply for NDIS support, even if they had disability before then. (NDIS support can extend beyond 65 for people who are already participants in the scheme.) Some people and groups say this is discriminatory.

So, should people who had disability before they turned 65, be allowed to become NDIS participants after 65? We asked five experts.

Four out of five said yes
Here are their detailed responses:

Elizabeth Kendall
Disability and rehabilitation

Growing up in the 1960s and 70s, I used to watch my neighbor working tirelessly in his back yard. Born in 1944, he was a full-time lifelong taxpayer, a distinguished paralympian with gold medals, earning an OAM and AM for his contribution to the disability and sport sectors. Remarkably, he had designed a concept similar to the NDIS back in the 1980s.

As I began my career in the disability field, his profound impact became more evident. If anyone deserved lifetime care and support, it was my neighbor. However, already aged 70 when the NDIS was established, he was compelled to sell his home to afford an aged care facility.

Ageing with a disability is vastly distinct from typical ageing, and some impairments may not become problematic until people are older. A serious disability acquired at or even beyond 65 years will require much more than the inadequate aged care system can provide. This glaring inequity demands our urgent attention.

Helen Dickinson
Public service

Yes, but it is complicated.

There will be a small group of people who may miss out on access to the NDIS because they acquire a significant and permanent disability close to the age of 65. Given the time it takes to gather evidence and be accepted onto the scheme, they may be over the age cap once considered.

The challenge for those who have had a disability for longer is that ageing can often change or

make the impacts of disability more significant. For others with degenerative conditions (such as motor neurone disease) it may take time for the impacts of their condition to make significant levels of support necessary.

Aged-care services are not always well placed to appropriately support these people.The more pressing issues are why aged-care supports do not offer appropriate disability supports and whether an age cap in the NDIS is discriminatory.

Henry Cutler
Health economics

The objectives of the NDIS and federally funded aged-care programs are to ensure care recipients receive the support they need to participate in life. Those with equal needs should receive the same subsidised support, however recipients should not receive services that have little benefit.

The NDIS age cut-off is somewhat arbitrary relative to need. It was likely introduced so people with disability over the age of 65 would not receive subsidised duplicate services from both the NDIS and aged care programs. That would lead to waste and inequity.

However, first-time access to disability services should not be different because someone is older than 65 years. That is unfair and potentially inefficient from a system perspective because aged care services may not deliver as much value if they do not account for specialist disability needs. Rather than changing the NDIS, federally funded aged-care programs should instead ensure the same types of services that would be funded under the NDIS are also funded through aged-care programs.

Kathy Boschen
NDIS supports

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We cannot discriminate against people with disabilities, regardless of age. Further, the Age Discrimination Act (2004) states it is unlawful to discriminate against someone on the grounds of their age with respect to the provision of goods, services, and facilities.

Compliance with these laws and obligations mean we would need to change NDIS eligibility for people over 65, whether they had a disability before then or not. We would also need to reallocate funding from aged care and the Commonwealth Continuity of Support Programme to the NDIS. Australians must also understand ensuring equity may reduce NDIS funding allocations and support availability.

Alternatively, we would need to increase the NDIS budget. All Australians could benefit from changes to access. It is estimated every dollar spent on the NDIS creates $2.25 in the economy. Understanding this return on investment could foster support from all sides of politics, the media, and business leaders.

Mark Brown
Disability and aged care

Ideally, mere citizenship would qualify anyone for sufficient quality flexible support at any age. Which scheme funds the support ought to be just an administrative detail. Yet, as the NDIS Review panel has commented, the NDIS has become an “oasis in a desert”. People who do not quite meet the NDIS eligibility criteria (because of age, diagnosis, or support needs) do it tough compared to similar others who just scrape in. So I cannot blame anyone who fights to get into the scheme. I would too.

In the long term, yes, the NDIS should soften the age limit, and grant access to people over 65 in some circumstances. However, first aged care and other support systems need reform. The sustainability of the NDIS depends on it not being the only ticket to support and inclusion. Which system one finds themselves in should not determine the quality of support.

What does working from home mean for harmful worker stereotypes?

By **Sue Williamson**, Helen Taylor and **Vindhya Weeratunga.**
Published online 2 November 2023 by **The Mandarin**

The average Australian Public Service (APS) employee is a 43-year-old woman at the APS 6 level, working in service delivery. She most likely has caring responsibilities. While this might be the typical APS employee, society's image of what the 'ideal worker' looks like is quite different.

The stereotypical ideal worker is a man who works long hours, has a 'wife' to do domestic duties, and is constantly available and highly productive. He works in the office rather than at home, as visibility is equated with reliability.

Our research reveals that the ideal worker norm is changing. This is due to the widespread uptake of working from home.

Based on a 2021 survey of almost 5,000 APS employees, we looked at how diverse groups of employees worked. We wanted to know whether they were working in ways consistent with the ideal worker norm.

We compared women as a group, women with disability, and women with caring responsibilities against men as a group, men without disability, and men without caring responsibilities. We looked at hours worked and productivity.

We investigated whether employees worked their usual span of hours (hours between starting time and finishing time) when working from home. The majority of women carers worked the same span of hours as pre-pandemic even while undertaking caring responsibilities. Women with disability also worked their usual span of hours. This suggests reliability and availability, aligning with the ideal worker norm.

Slightly more women than men worked more hours when working from home. More than a third of women carers worked more hours. This aligns with the ideal worker norm.

Our findings show that just over two-thirds of women considered themselves more productive when working from home, compared with just over half of our men respondents. Just over two-thirds of disabled women also stated they were more productive when working from home. These groups were, therefore, more aligned to the ideal worker norm than men working from home.

Additionally, working from home enabled respondents to focus more. A third of women respondents said they were more productive due to fewer interruptions and distractions, compared with just under a quarter of men.

Our research shows that women as a group, disabled women, and women carers worked in ways traditionally associated with the ideal worker norm. This is both good and bad. The finding that these groups of women can be ideal workers is positive, as it shows that women can be just as productive while working from home. Our findings show that women perceive they are more productive than men while working from home.

However, increased groups of employees becoming ideal workers has drawbacks. This stereotype promotes harmful behaviours such as long working hours and not attending to family responsibilities.

We conclude that while these groups of women can be seen to be ideal workers, a new, multi-dimensional ideal worker is emerging. We further conclude that this is undermining the ideal worker norm. If more women are becoming 'ideal workers', then we may all end up being an ideal worker. The norm therefore loses currency.

This means that the focus on traditional ways of working, which include long hours, constant availability and being in the office, could also disappear. The stereotypical APS employee might just then also become an ideal employee.

‘I want to get bogged at a beach in my wheelchair and know people will help’. Micheline Lee on the way forward for the NDIS

By **Helen Dickinson.**
Published online 26 September 2023 by **The Conversation**

If you have read anything about the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in the last few years, you will have encountered many metaphors. The NDIS is the “lifeboat in the ocean”, “an oasis in the desert”, “a plane being built mid-flight” or a “limitless magic pudding”.

I research disability policies and services and confess I’ve used more than a few of these in my work. Who doesn’t love a metaphor? They are a way of explaining complex concepts we might not be familiar with and helping others to make sense of the world.

But I worry whether these metaphors give those without experience of disability or the NDIS a sense of what the real issues are. If I were stranded in an ocean a lifeboat would be welcome. Even if it lacked a few essential items, it would meet my immediate need. But why was I in the ocean in the first place? Are others in a similar situation? How we will decide who gets to come aboard the lifeboat? And why does the ocean exist in the first place? All this is important because the ocean in this metaphor is a creation of social systems and attitudes, not a geographical reality.

The latest Quarterly Essay Lifeboat: Disability, Humanity and the NDIS written by author Micheline Lee weaves together personal testimony and detailed analysis of history and policy. It illuminates the reality behind these metaphors for the lives of disabled Australians and considers what needs to happen to realise the original intent of the NDIS.

The deficit model of disability

Lee grew up in a world prior to the NDIS, when disability support and services were highly rationed, subject to significant waiting lists, inadequate, disempowering and crisis-driven. She writes,

> *It was a lottery whether you would receive a service.*

Before the NDIS (pre-2013), disability supports such as a hoist or a wheelchair could be unaffordable even for individuals like Lee, who at that time was a government legal adviser living with her partner and son. The policies and services a society develops reflect how we view those they serve. As writer and disability activist El Gibbs argues,

> *this lack of support wasn’t accidental; it’s the end result of centuries of seeing disabled people as unequal, as wrong, as not really human.*

Lee and three of her siblings were born with spinal muscular atrophy. Family lore was that this was the result of an ancestral curse. On migrating from Malaysia to Australia her parents became born-again Christians and the congregants of the church would implore Jesus to remove the “Demon of sickness” from the siblings. Disability was firmly seen as being a problem or deficit within the body of an individual who needed to be cured.

Lee’s discovery of the social model of disability challenged how she had been raised to understand it. The social model sees disability as produced by

> *social and environmental barriers such as discriminatory attitudes and policies, inaccessible buildings and transport, and inflexible work arrangements.*

Disability is not a matter of deficit in the individual. Society has a responsibility to remove these boundaries. Disability activists, such as Rhonda Galbally, have documented the rise of the disability rights movement in Australia, which fought for the establishment of the NDIS.

Citizens or consumers?

The promise of the NDIS was significant. As Lee describes,

> *Disabled people wanted more than just survival, getting out of bed, showering and eating, and maintaining basic health. They wanted support to participate and to create the lives they chose – to come out of isolation, to live in the community, work, make friends and pursue interests like other people.*

Yet, inherent within the design of the NDIS are two competing logics: citizenship and consumer rights. The former sees the role of the scheme, in collaboration with others, as enabling and empowering people with disability to engage with the community and broader society.

The latter provides funds to people with disabilities to act as empowered consumers within a market, exercising choice and control to ensure private providers deliver the services individuals demand. So far in the implementation, this logic has won out.

But the market has not worked as expected. As the NDIS Review notes, too often NDIS plans (which provide the basis for funding and services within the scheme) are not well-designed and are inflexible to the needs of individuals. Across the country, either services are not available or providers are not willing to work in a way that meets the needs of the individual.

All too often consumers find they do not have power in working with providers. NDIS participants are often expected to act as the "ideal consumer", writes Lee, someone who is compliant with the demands of the provider, doesn't ask for things to be done in their own way and doesn't display behaviours that are considered too "difficult". The theory of the empowered consumer is far from realised.

But the major limitation of the first decade of NDIS implementation, I'd argue, is a lack of action to make society more accessible. This isn't just an issue of ramps or Auslan interpreters (although of course both are important facilitators for some people with disability).

It is also about the kinds of attitudes society holds towards people with disability. Lee describes a discussion with a friend about NDIS supports potentially helping a person with disability get a job. Her friend responds, "But what can they do if no one wants to give me a job?".

This is the crux of the challenge for the NDIS, we can build the best lifeboat in the world. But who wants to spend their life adrift on the ocean?

Not only has there been little action here, writes Lee, but the existence of the NDIS may have served to make day-to-day life outside the scheme more challenging. Her essay contains several testimonies from people with disability who are now expected by (non-disabled) strangers to always have a support worker accompany them when travelling, attending medical appointments, or even going to the supermarket.

People within the broader community, she writes, are less willing to offer support to get items off a shelf at a supermarket or lift a bag from a wheelchair to be screened by airport security because they now regard this as the job of the NDIS. Disability is seen by many as something specialist professionals and services should handle, not a facet of the human condition.

This is the opposite of what many disabled people want, as Lee explains:

> *I don't want to be confined to my own little lifeboat. I want my community to be open to all and inclusive. I want to get bogged at a beach in my wheelchair and know people will help. I want to push into a crowded, heaving mosh pit and join the other dancers.*

Draining the ocean
Lee charts how, over the course of the implementation of the NDIS, the voice of people with disability has been eroded. It has been replaced by those of non-disabled people, often with corporate and profit-motivated interests.

Repeated narratives about the NDIS being a cost burden – pushed by the media and federal opposition – have led to short-term cost cutting that make it difficult for the scheme to work. The market-based system is not operating as intended and changing attitudes outside the scheme have been neglected. The current NDIS Review is hearing about all these issues, but none are surprising to disabled people.

It is incumbent upon those of us within the non-disabled community to listen and act to create a more inclusive society.

Lee is still hopeful for the scheme, which has at its heart "the Australian ideal of the fair go".

The first step to bringing the NDIS back on course is to be aware of the deeply entrenched biases that lead people to act in ways that disregard the dignity and equal value of disabled people.

Lee argues we need to change the way people with disabilities are seen – as equal and and capable of making significant contributions. Only when this happens will society be willing to take steps to include people with disability.

The NDIS also needs a culture change. The voice of people with disability needs to returned centrally to the scheme, not just through the National Disability Insurance Agency but via providers of disability services, who tend to be non-disabled people lacking insight into the lived experience of disability. Being active in the scheme is more than just being able to make choice about services, it is about disabled people being listened to and their experience valued.

Making the NDIS work as intended, is a job for all of Australian society and not just disabled people.

70% of Australian students with a disability are excluded at school – the next round of education reforms can fix this

By Catherine Smith and **Helen Dickinson.**
Published online 18 September 2023 by **The Conversation**

The National School Reform Agreement is made about once every five years in Australia. This is the main way the federal government can steer changes in how Australian schools are run.

The current reform agreement ends in December 2024, and the new one is starting to be developed. One of the early priorities is to improve outcomes for all students, "particularly those most at risk of falling behind". An expert panel will deliver a report to all education ministers by the end of October to inform negotiations.

Meanwhile, a wide-ranging NDIS Review, looking at the sustainability of the scheme, is also due to report around the same time .

Earlier this month, Bruce Bonyhady, the chair of the independent review, said state governments need to build "foundational supports" in schools to reduce the strain on the NDIS. This follows our recent research that showed huge issues with the way students with disability are included in school life. For example, 70% of surveyed students with a disability report being excluded from events or activities at school.

Negotiations around the next school reform agreement alongside the NDIS Review provide a real opportunity to better educate and support students with disability.

What is the National School Reform Agreement?

The National School Reform Agreement is a joint agreement between the federal and state governments that aims to improve student outcomes across schools. It also deals with funding arrangements. Each state or territory makes its own agreement with the federal government.

The Albanese government extended the current agreement by a year, with the new one due to begin in January 2025.

Within the bilateral agreements are activities that support particular student cohorts. But the current setup is not working adequately for students with disability.

In January this year, a Productivity Commission review noted many of the bilateral agreements either did not include specific reform actions for students with disabilities, or did not include details of how this would happen. It also noted there is no NAPLAN data collected on students with disabilities – so it is very difficult to measure academic progress.

The commission suggested linking NDIS data to school reporting. While this would be welcome, it won't capture students with disabilities who are not part of the NDIS. And it won't capture the issues people face at the boundaries of the NDIS and education where there is debate over who should provide funding and support.

Unprecedented demand on the NDIS

Meanwhile, the NDIS is not necessarily able to provide the support school students need.

The NDIS was originally designed to provide funding to individuals with significant and permanent disabilities, estimated to be 10% of the 4.4 million disabled Australians. Today, more than 610,000 individuals receive support from the scheme – around 14% of Australians with disability.

There has been a particular growth in terms of the number of children in the scheme. More than half of those in the NDIS are under 18 and 11% of five- to seven-year-old boys are participants.

Some commentators have argued this is not sustainable, with the NDIS budget estimated to reach A$35 billion this year.

Bonyhady says he believes the increase in numbers may be due to a systemic issue. With limited supports outside the NDIS, parents are left with little choice but to try and secure a place on the scheme.

The NDIS was never intended to replace existing mainstream services such as education and health. But ambiguities about responsibilities for funding often lead to service gaps. Our research has consistently shown students with similar characteristics can receive inconsistent support, depending on:

- parents' and/or carers' understanding of nuances in the system
- the community support in the school the student attends
- the training of teachers and supports within that school, and
- school leadership decisions on allocation of disability support funding.

A young boy leans on a tree.
More than half of NDIS participants are under 18. Trinity Kubassek/Pexels
The importance of inclusive education
We know students with disability are not being properly included at school. As our research also found, 54% of those surveyed said they felt welcome, and only 27% felt supported to learn. On top of this, 65% of students reported experiencing bullying and 13% preferred not to answer.

Issues such as inadequate teacher preparedness, heightened risk of bullying, and experiences of exclusion can have lifelong repercussions.

On the other hand, if mainstream schools are inclusive, this can give students with disabilities friendships, higher aspirations and a richer learning experience.

Inclusive education also benefits those without disability. A 2021 meta-analysis showed inclusion at all levels of education reduces discrimination, prejudice and hostility. Academically, results for all students in inclusive primary settings are better than, or equivalent to, non-inclusive settings.

So if we have well-funded, inclusive educational environments, we can not only enrich the academic and personal growth of students with and without a disability, but also alleviate the pressure on the NDIS.

What needs to happen now?

The next reform agreement needs to commit specific funding for the support of students with disability in their school, and the development and training of their educators.

We also need a commitment to report properly on students' progress. This means progress is measured also at the individual level (involving individual learning plans), rather than simply against a developmental continuum.

Well-funded inclusive education is a human right and is crucial in setting up all young Australians for their future.

APS bargaining requires more than just improved terms and conditions of employment

By **Sue Williamson** and Cameron Roles.
Published online 10 September 2023 by **The Mandarin**

As bargaining over sector-wide common terms and conditions of employment (Common Conditions) in the Australian Public Service (APS) nears completion, we reflect on progress to date.

Many of the newly negotiated Common Conditions are noteworthy. However, we consider that the most significant change is an ideological shift that has influenced the form, content, and outcomes of bargaining.

A turn to public value

We find that the Australian government's approach to APS bargaining represents an ideological shift. Since the 1980s, Western governments have embraced neoliberalism. New Public Management (NPM) aimed to make the public sector more like the private sector, with increased competition, efficiency, accountability, and adoption of private sector management techniques.

One aspect of this form of neoliberalism was setting terms and conditions of employment at the agency level, through enterprise bargaining. This was held to be more efficient than centralised bargaining. However, this resulted in pay dispersion and inequity, and fragmentation of the terms and conditions of employment across the APS.

Bargaining frameworks have been used since 1997 to underpin agency-level bargaining. These frameworks set limits around wage increases and, since 2014, severely limited improvements to terms and conditions of employment. Common Conditions are now being negotiated between the unions, employee bargaining representatives and the government to apply across the APS.

This is a fundamental change to APS bargaining. For the first time since the introduction of enterprise bargaining, the Common Conditions will be included in each agency's enterprise agreement, along with some remaining agency-specific terms and conditions of employment.

This shift signals a repudiation of NPM values. It also signals a turn to public value, which is based on the realisation that market solutions may be incompatible with the goals of the public sector and the notion of serving the public. Public value exceeds creating economic value to focus on improving how society functions.

The current APS bargaining embodies public value, which is evident in three ways.

First, public value incorporates a commitment to progressing equity. The Common Conditions will increase fairness and equity, particularly through reducing pay fragmentation and improving gender equitable provisions. Second, public value also incorporates notions of sustainability. Increased pay and improved conditions of employment will attract and retain employees, making the APS workforce sustainable. Third, best practice processes are also a hallmark of public value, and this is evident through genuine bargaining being conducted.

Improved terms and conditions of employment

The public value approach has resulted in important new provisions, which include:

- expanding the formal right to request flexible working arrangements to all employees, underpinned by a bias towards granting the request;
- removing the cap on the amount of time employees can work from home, and
- increasing the quantum of paid parental leave to 18 weeks for each parent over the life of the agreement.
- The quantum of the pay rise is yet to be determined as Community and Public Sector Union members and other employees consider the government's latest 11.2% pay offer over three years. How pay fragmentation will be reduced is also still being negotiated.

Other important conditions have not been agreed to by the Australian Government in this bargaining round, such as gender affirmation leave, and disability leave. However, a continued public value approach to future negotiations is likely to further improve APS pay and conditions of employment.

Rethinking scholarly assumptions about vulnerable workers: A call for reflection and action

By **Catherine Deen.**
Published online 31 August 2023 by **The Power to Persuade**

Inequality persists as a grand challenge that has extensive repercussions for individuals (e.g., poverty and exclusion) and societies at large (e.g., economic instability and crime). In the realm of vocational and management research, a fresh impetus has emerged to undertake scholarship that resonates with society's concerns about the struggles faced by vulnerable workers. Vulnerable workers include a broad group of people who have lower levels of human capital resulting from the vicious cycle of psychosocial constraints such as ill health (physical or mental), poverty, history of abuse, addiction, among other conditions. Vulnerable workers are at risk of being abused, exploited, or wounded at work – whether physically, psychologically, socially, or a combination of these.

While the academic community has made strides in examining the experiences of people with disability and LGBTQIA+ workers, there are many "missing persons" in the literature resulting in huge gaps in our understanding of unique types of vulnerable workers. For instance, Restubog and colleagues (2021) underscored that since the year 2000, there have been fewer than 50 articles in top-tier management journals about people in specific categories such as workers with chronic illnesses (e.g., HIV, cancer), mental health issues (e.g., depression), migrants and refugees, victims of violence, and previously incarcerated individuals. These "missing persons" are active in the workforce, and confront an array of vocational barriers such as discrimination, marginalisation, and stigmatisation. As inequality persists in workplaces, it is time for us to intensify efforts to shed light on the intricacies of vulnerable workers' unique experiences.

A note on terminology

I note that the use of the word "vulnerable" may be contentious for some readers. For example, the social model of disability holds that the experience of being disabled stems from a society that does not make adjustments for people with impairments to participate fully in social and political life, and thus some may prefer "marginalised". I do not discount this important point and acknowledge the scholarly and activist discussion about this terminology. In this blog, I apply a definition of "vulnerable workers" from Audenaert et al. (2020) who offered a psychosocial perspective. My colleagues and I recognise that the terminology used in academic literature must be clarified (i.e., marginalised, vulnerable), and explore these points in our article in the Journal of Vocational Behaviour.

Why study "missing persons" in the vulnerable workforce literature?

There are three compelling reasons why scholars and policymakers must examine the experiences of vulnerable workers. First, vulnerable workers are a significant proportion of the global workforce. For instance, the International Labor Organisation reports that there are about 244 million migrants (3.3% of the total population, about 73% of whom are workers) and that there are about 2 billion workers who are informally employed and vulnerable worldwide.

Second, vulnerable workers grapple with substantial career hurdles, including a range of abuses such as low wages, precarious labor conditions, and unsafe work environments. These injustices underscore the need for collaborative interdisciplinary efforts toward resolutions.

Lastly, owing to their distinct attributes and situations, conventional academic assumptions—such as prevalent theories and models—about the general workforce will not be universally applicable to vulnerable workers. Given that management scholarship has historically relied on samples largely representing WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) and POSH (Professionals

with Official jobs in Safe, High-income countries) demographics, our accumulated knowledge thus far likely does not encapsulate vulnerable workers' experiences.

Here, I summarise prevailing assumptions about the general workforce that may not necessarily correspond to the reality of vulnerable workers.

Recruitment and selection

Recruitment and selection research highlights how to attract high-performing applicants to maximise organisational performance. There is also an assumption that applicants choose jobs based on a range of positive factors such as person-organisation fit, job design, and available alternatives.

These traditional assumptions about attracting applicants and job choices may not hold for vulnerable workers. While the general workforce may be able to choose based on their skills and preferences, most vulnerable workers do not have that luxury. Their choices are limited by circumstances that may (or may not) be linked to their vulnerability.

For instance, migrants and refugees confront unique obstacles when entering their host country's workforce. Many have non-transferable job qualifications, which makes it difficult and expensive for them to formally enter the labour market.

Career development

Conventional research on career development assumes that employees navigate various career stages, steer their own career paths, and/or possess resources that support their development. In turn, this is based on an assumption that workers have access to suitable employment that facilitates their career growth and sustains their work. In actuality, vulnerable workers often work to fulfill essential survival needs, and they might find themselves compelled to accept whatever available job comes their way, regardless of its quality or working conditions.

For instance, undocumented young adults expressed that financial pressures substantially diminish their autonomy and create barriers to them seeking decent employment. Also, experiences of marginalisation (e.g., exclusion, discrimination) curtail their freedom to independently shape their careers. Turning to voices from workers with chronic illnesses, breast cancer survivors described how their treatments impacted their careers negatively due to loss of control over their career trajectory and related decisions. Similarly, people who have spent time in prison revealed that while they received training on how to navigate the job search process, they lacked awareness about their career interests, needs, and values.

Authenticity at work

Research about authenticity at work has received much attention in the past decade. Viewed from the individual perspective, authenticity at work involves aligning one's inner self and identity with external behaviours. Theory suggests that authenticity at work bolsters well-being, engagement, and work performance.

However, authenticity can be perilous for vulnerable workers due to potential discrimination and exclusion. For instance, those who disclose their HIV status face stigma which may lead to negative emotions and poor performance. Likewise, prior discrimination experiences make chronically ill workers anticipate further bias, prompting concealment and increased job strain. Employees with autism may avoid discussing their condition to evade stigma and stereotypes. In essence, while authenticity at work may have its benefits, the experiences of vulnerable workers demand careful consideration, given the risks they face.

A call for reflection and action

In the careers and management field, we need to think much more critically about the theoretical assumptions we make regarding the vocational experiences of overlooked vulnerable workers. It is time for scholars to reflect and commence research that properly captures the experiences of "missing persons" from careers discourse. Otherwise, organisational research will continue to prioritise the well-understood, safe, and privileged subset of employees – leading us to impose unsuitable theories and assumptions on large sections of our workforce.

A New Way Forward or More of the Same? The EU's Responses to the Syrian and Ukrainian Asylum Crises

By **Kelly Soderstrom.**
Published online 30 August 2023 by **Australian Outlook, Australian Institute of International Affairs**

As the conflict in Ukraine continues, the European Union's response to the arrival of Ukrainian asylum seekers has come under increasing scrutiny given its contrast with the 2015 Syrian asylum crisis. Does the more welcoming reception of Ukrainian asylum seekers mark a progressive turning point in EU asylum governance?

The marked difference between EU and member state governance responses to the 2015 Syrian and 2022 Ukrainian asylum crises provides deeper insights into the drivers of EU asylum governance choices now and into the future.

What was the EU's response to the 2015 Syrian asylum crisis?

Civil and political unrest in the Middle East and North Africa in the early 2010s precipitated the largest movement of forcibly displaced people to Europe since WWII. In 2015, almost 1 million asylum seekers, the majority fleeing conflict in Syria, arrived before the end of the year. Germany and Sweden accepted the most asylum seekers, with 1.2 million arriving in Germany by the end of 2016. Despite the high number of arrivals accepted by these nations, other countries, such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, refused to accept asylum seekers. The EU institutions relied on the Common European Asylum System to manage asylum administration, this was most notably under the Dublin Regulation framework. This placed a high administrative burden on member states at the periphery of the EU, especially Italy and Greece. Pressure on national asylum systems, combined with high profile and politicised events such as the Paris attacks, led to calls from politicians to decrease the number of arrivals.

To reduce the number of asylum seekers travelling to Europe, the EU pursued a strategy of externalisation. This aimed to keep asylum seekers at the periphery of the EU, intercepting boats on the Mediterranean Sea, and blocking the Western Balkan migration route. Many member states also reintroduced border controls, citing security concerns as the reason for the reintroduction of controls. Supranational agreements with third-countries, such as Turkey and Libya, provided states with incentives and support to prevent asylum seekers from reaching Europe.

How does the EU's response to the 2022 Ukrainian asylum crisis compare to 2015?

In 2022, more than 6 million people fled conflict stemming from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As of August 2023, 5.2 million Ukrainians had applied for asylum or temporary protection in the EU and neighbouring countries. All EU member states currently host Ukrainian asylum seekers. Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic have accepted the most refugees, with Germany and Poland each currently hosting about 1 million Ukrainians.

Instead of pursuing an externalisation strategy, the EU's response to has been one of solidarity and internal management. This is especially apparent in the Commission's unprecedented activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD). The TPD obliges EU member states to provide Ukrainian refugees with the rights to reside, seek employment, attend school, and travel freely within the EU for up to three years. According to the Council, the purpose is to "provide immediate and collective protection" for Ukrainians and "reduce pressure on the national asylum systems" of member states. Although member states faced similar pressures during the 2015 crisis, the TPD was notably missing. Instead, EU institutions and member states sought to control refugee flows by keeping asylum seekers out of the EU or confined to the periphery of the block via the Dublin Regulation.

The 2022 activation of the TPD represents an exceptional shift in EU member state solidarity in asylum governance towards responsibility sharing.

Although asylum seekers from other countries continue to travel to the EU, Ukrainian asylum seekers are often given special treatment. Ukrainian nationals are frequently allowed to quickly cross borders into the EU whereas nationals from other countries must wait for long periods of time before they can cross. Boats continue to traverse the Mediterranean, carrying asylum seekers from Africa and the Middle East. These boats are often intercepted and turned back. Many boats do not complete the journey, with the International Organisation for Migration reporting that in 2022, 2,411 people died or went missing attempting to cross the Mediterranean. Despite these deaths, the EU and its member states continue to pursue a policy of deterrence. In 2023, the Italian government passed legislation inhibiting NGO assistance for migrant boats in distress (in an attempt to deter future boat journeys), while the Greek coastguard continued to push back asylum seekers crossing from Turkey.

Why were the responses to Ukrainian and Syrian asylum seekers so different?

EU member states have been criticised for appearing to be more welcoming to Ukrainian asylum seekers than others. Many scholars, journalists, and humanitarian NGOs have accused the EU and some member states of being racist and Islamophobic in their responses. Ukrainian asylum seekers are predominately Christian, whereas refugees from Syria are mostly Muslim. In 2015, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán refused to resettle refugees in Hungary if they were not Christian or were not European. Hungary, as well as similarly restrictive Poland and the Czech Republic, have all accepted many hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian asylum seekers. The double standard of protection for Syrians and Ukrainians highlights the embedded religious and racial discrimination of some European migration policies which shape European responses to asylum crises.

Geopolitical differences between the crises matters too. The threat that Russian aggression represents to EU security demands EU action. Instead of viewing the situation as a primarily humanitarian crisis, as was the case in 2015, EU policymakers see the 2022 crisis as a geopolitical conflict. By demonstrating solidarity with the Ukrainian asylum seekers, the EU is positioning itself in opposition to Russia without directly becoming involved in the conflict. Further, many Eastern European countries share with Ukraine a post-Soviet history and fear of Russian aggression that inspires solidarity with Ukrainian asylum seekers. By contrast, conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East have not been perceived as similarly threating or geopolitically unbalancing. The EU and its member states therefore did not have the same geopolitical security pressures driving their responses to the asylum seeker arrivals as in 2022.

The EU also pursued a more welcoming asylum governance strategy in response to the 2022 crisis to construct and legitimise a more humanitarian European identity. In the wake of the 2015 crisis, the EU developed a negative reputation among political leaders, scholars, and humanitarian NGOs for failing to adequately and consistently welcome asylum seekers. This reputation conflicts with the EU's core values of human rights and solidarity. To repair its reputation, the EU and its member states are incentivised to pursue more open and consistent asylum governance strategies that welcome rather than deterre those fleeing Ukraine.

What does this mean for the future of EU responses to asylum crises?

Although the EU's response to Ukrainian asylum seekers appears unified and welcoming, especially when compared to to the 2015 asylum crisis, it remains to be seen if this solidarity will continue and if countries hosting large numbers of Ukrainian asylum seekers will continue to be welcoming. The use of hardline deterrence policies, especially through the imposition of boat pushbacks on the Mediterranean, indicates that the progressive approach to Ukrainian asylum seekers may be an aberration rather than a durable shift in EU asylum governance. Instead, this may be a symptom of a differentiated asylum system dependent on prejudiced interpretations of asylum seeker deservingness, geopolitical pressures, and potential EU reputational benefits.

Struggling Brand "Bhutan"

By **Lhawang Ugyel.**
Published online 15 August 2023 by **9Dashline**

The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan, best known for introducing its policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) to the world, stands at a crossroads. Embedded into Bhutan's national development philosophy, GNH seeks a holistic approach towards development centring around the values of sustainability, happiness, and good governance. Bhutan is also famous for being a "net carbon negative" country as a result of its strong environmental conservation efforts. Yet, the reputation as 'one of the world's greenest and happiest countries' is contrasted with the fact that many of Bhutan's young people are leaving the country in search of better economic opportunities. Bhutan is still a developing country with a per capita income of USD 3,266 and it remains heavily reliant on external debt and grants for its capital expenses. Also, while Bhutan's conservation efforts come at a huge economic opportunity cost for the country, it is doubtful how much of a difference Bhutan's individual efforts to mitigate carbon emissions will make to diminishing global climate change.

The latest GNH Index shows that the Bhutanese have become "happier", with the GNH Index rising from 0.76 in 2015 to 0.78 in 2022. The same study, however, reveals some tension between the 'happiness' and 'income' relationship. Although the report claims that income is "not highly correlated" with GNH, results show that the group of poorest people (i.e., the bottom 20 per cent of the income quintile) also had the largest proportion of unhappy respondents, while the group of richest people (i.e., the top 20 per cent of the income quintile) had the highest share of happy respondents. Importantly, the study was conducted in 2022, when the world was just recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. While Bhutan managed the COVID-19 pandemic relatively well, its reliance on hydropower and tourism as major sources of revenue and employment posed a problem in its recovery. For instance, the pandemic further delayed the start of the 1.2 GW Punatsangchhu I, a run-of-the-river hydroelectric power project, which has not only caused a potential loss of income but also cost the government triple the initial cost. The project is only expected to complete in 2025.

Bhutan's challenges

The culmination of challenges and issues that Bhutan is facing has played out in multiple ways. In his State of the Nation report in December 2022, Prime Minister Lotay Tshering stated that 25,271 Bhutanese were living abroad, with the largest numbers in Australia (8,495), followed by India (5,779) and Kuwait (2,714). These numbers are alarming for a country with a small population of approximately 750,000. It is also highly probable that they are conservative estimates. Data released by the Australian Government, for instance, show that from July 2022 to March 2023, 10,755 Bhutanese got their visas to Australia. Even by Australian standards, the number of Bhutanese migrants is substantial. For the year 2021-2022, Bhutan ranked 16th in Permanent Migration Outcomes and 20th in Selected Temporary Visa Grants.

Perhaps it is time for the world to step up and convince Bhutan that its values are worth standing up for by investing in a sustainable economy premised around the well-being of its individuals.

The Bhutanese government is concerned about the migration of its people, and there is cause for this concern. For example, as per the census conducted in Australia in 2021, 12,004 people reported being born in Bhutan. Almost 66 per cent of these people were between the ages of 25 to 44 years. The same census reveals that more than 40 per cent of them had a qualification of a bachelor's degree level or higher. Such skilled and qualified migrants of a productive age cohort are very attractive to recipient countries such as Australia but come at a great loss for Bhutan.

In certain ways, the quality of Bhutanese migrants to Australia is a testament to Bhutan's successful investment in education. Thimphu, however, is unable to reap the rewards of its investments. As Bhutan's population pyramid inches closer towards an ageing population, the opportunities to enjoy its demographic dividends are narrowing. For the country to benefit from its demographic

outlook, it has to be able to create sufficient and appropriate opportunities for its productive and skilled people. It is the lack of such opportunities that is forcing people to move to other countries. In an ongoing study to be published at the end of 2023, we found that the main push factor driving Bhutanese to Australia was the 'lack of economic opportunities' in their country of origin. While taking measures to mitigate some of the push factors that are causing Bhutan's migration — which also include work-related issues, lack/poor delivery of services in Bhutan, and poor standards of living — there are lessons to be learned from other countries with similar experiences. While some measures have been taken towards encouraging international remittances, there is still scope to capitalise on opportunities for "brain gain" and attracting investments from Bhutan's migrant population.

Transforming Bhutan?

The government has realised that there is a problem and initiated major reforms. Under the theme "Transformation Bhutan", a series of governance and economic reforms have been implemented. One such reform, implemented in 2022, was to "transform the civil service" and improve governance in Bhutan. An outcome of the transformation exercise was that 47 senior executives were fired for failing to "meet the expectations of the positions that they had been holding". Another reform was to Bhutan's tried-and-tested tourism policy of high-value and low-volume, and the tourism levy was increased from USD 65 to USD 200 per day. Similar transformation-related reforms are taking place across other sectors, such as taxes, education, and urban planning. The long-term benefits of these reforms are yet to be seen. In the short term, however, the reforms are having the opposite effect, causing a great deal of uncertainty and consternation to the Bhutanese people.

To Thimphu's credit, the government has revised the pay of its civil servants in an effort to retain its skilled professionals from July 2023 onwards. Ranging from 55 to 74 per cent increases across all levels, this is a substantial increase compared to previous revisions. The comparison, however, should no longer be year-to-year, and it has to be compared against the income earned overseas. For example, with the recent pay increase, the senior-most executive in Bhutan's civil service now earns Nu 115,115 per month (approx. USD 1,400). In the same period, i.e., 1 July 2023 onwards, the national minimum wage in Australia increased to AUD 23.23 per hour (approx. USD 15.50). A person working at the minimum wage in Australia can earn more in a month than a government secretary in Bhutan — and the high expenses attributed to the social obligations of individual Bhutanese (such as financial contributions to family and community members) will likely offset the high cost of living in Australia.

Moving forward?

There is a sense of urgency in Bhutan as it seeks to graduate from the least developed countries (LDC) category in December 2023. To grow its economy, Thimphu will have to keep more of its skilled and qualified population from migrating and attract foreign investors. As a way to generate quick returns, Bhutan has started to invest in "new-age businesses", such as bitcoin mining and drone technology. Profits from Bhutan's investment in cryptocurrency are already being used to partially fund the recent pay revision in Bhutan. But the image of Bhutan as a cryptocurrency investor raised eyebrows when a couple of cryptocurrency companies that had listed Bhutan as one of their clients filed for bankruptcy earlier this year. To the international audience, these changes in Bhutan's image and the sight of its young population leaving the country are confusing. Until just recently, Bhutan had enjoyed an image of perfectly balancing the pursuit of GNH and at the same time increasing its GDP and preserving its environment.

How Bhutan considers moving forward is important. There now appears to be a shift in the thinking of Bhutan's development philosophy. The prime minister has admitted that recent trends have put the country's GNH philosophy into question. In the end, Bhutan's policymakers will have to decide what is best for the country and its people. These choices will have consequences both domestically and globally. For Bhutan, it might mean having to give up the "happiness" and "net-carbon negative country" brand that it has painstakingly built over the last few decades. For the rest of the world, this would mean losing an exemplar that shows that there is an alternate pathway to development. Perhaps it is time for the world to step up and convince Bhutan that its values are worth standing up for by investing in a sustainable economy premised around the well-being of its individuals.

What should be the purpose of public service?

By **Catherine Althaus.**
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Spoiler alerts ahead. Living is a remake of Akira Kurosawa's 1952 film Ikiru, or To Live.

The movie Living featuring Bill Nighy is a poignant drama that should be watched by every public servant. It confronts the imperative question: should public servants play an active role in directly serving the community or should they only be passive implementation agents of the government of the day?

Nighy plays Rodney Williams, the quintessential umbrella-wielding, pin-striped, bowler hat-wearing British public servant who catches the train every morning with relentless predictability to serve the post-war London County council.

Rodney undertakes his duties alongside a range of office subordinates, including youthful optimist Miss Margaret Harris and public servant newbie Mr Peter Wakeling. The rules-based order of a mainstream interpretation of bureaucracy dominates the first scenes.

Mr Wakeling is brought into the inner circle of the routines and habits of an encrusted, but gentlemanly Rodney and the strict interpretation of orderly processes that guide the form and function of how due process is delivered through the County system. Grey and beige dominate the palette, just as quiet and orderly paper shuffling overwhelms the soundscape.

Then the big blow hits.

Rodney receives news from his doctor that he has terminal cancer and nine months to live.

The private world he has built around himself crumbles immediately. He cannot discuss the diagnosis with his son and frustrated daughter-in-law who are living with him in their modest suburban dwelling. He has flashbacks to his now widowed existence and to a lifetime of lost opportunities. He confronts his mortality and challenges his own status quo, playing hooky from work and tripping to the seaside, contemplating suicide but instead relishing a day at the beach. Losing his signature bowler hat, striking up friendship with a stranger who takes him drinking and, later, meeting up by accident with Miss Harris who has left the public service in a quest to be a manager at a local high-end tea shop. Rodney transforms his view of his world and what time he has left in it. He connects with people and with the world and allows himself to become inspired by the beauty and joy of his childhood. He remembers the power of play and his mum's refrain each evening to come back inside after frolicking around his local community.

At the close of the film, we see the results of Rodney's self-provocation. He eventually goes back to work, but this time, he sets himself a mission. He helps a group of dedicated, persistent local women achieve their quest to convert a World War II bomb site to a local community playground. Rodney dies during the film and we witness the powerful questions that his final public service - to help these women cut through formidable red tape to build the playground - generates in his co-workers. They reflect on his shift in motivation and actions, his style and energy, the outcomes he achieves and the sacrifice he is willing to undergo. And it makes them question their system, their processes and their purpose. Why are they doing what they are doing? Will his transformed achievements inspire any change in the system?

In many ways, Living is about micro-moments of genius. Quiet, street-level acts of purposeful persistence. These are seemingly not dramatic but actually stand as monumental moments of daring paradigm challenge. We see these in Australian settings. When we defy the odds, when we

show compassion, when we sacrifice ourselves for important values, when we challenge the status quo and invite it to be better. Moments like winning the America's Cup. The outpouring of community volunteerism to meet disaster relief. The ANZAC sacrifice. Ash Barty winning Wimbledon. Gun control in the aftermath of the Port Arthur massacre.

Living is powerful because nowhere do we connect with the elected official, that all important minister who is the elected representative of the people. We don't see them or hear from them. They are an omniscient figure who undoubtedly is there, but they are not involved in this particular drama as an active figure. Don't get me wrong, elected reps and ministers are super critical in our system of governance. But in Living, a very real scenario is played out. Street level bureaucracy is at play. The drama lies in the discretionary relationship between the public and public servants.

Instead of the senior echelons of policymaking at the apex of ministerial offices, senior public officials and ministers, we interact in Living with the relationship of Rodney with a group of active women citizens. What's fascinating is Rodney's relationship with them. For the first half of the movie, he is involved almost in a game of defiance with them. Using rules, he, and the system he participates in and helps shape, propels them from one agency to another, sending them on a wild goose chase through complicated webs of bureaucracy. It results in bringing them back to the very place they started with a rejection tactic that says, "building a community playground is not my problem". The visceral experience of this is directly felt by Mr Wakeling, who is asked to accompany the women, and we viewers feel the very inhumane powerlessness and frustration that these citizens are forced to assimilate. The hope, of course, is that they will give up. But they don't. They hold onto their purpose.

Meanwhile, our protagonist Rodney has gone through a metamorphosis and a road to Damascus intervention through his cancer diagnosis. From being a mastermind of stalling tactics, he realises that he shares a common purpose with the local playground activists. He thinks they are right. This is what the community wants and needs. And for the final third of the movie we witness his mastermind skills being deployed to leverage the bureaucracy, to follow due process, to work on behalf of these citizens to get them their playground. He works directly with the citizens and helps them achieve their playground because he makes it his purpose, he makes it personal, his final act of service in a life that has become timebound and momentous in what he would remember on his deathbed as his legacy.

And there we have it. At the centre of Living, sits a foundation challenge to the doctrines of responsible and representative government that lie at the heart of our Westminster system. Professor Richard Mulgan eloquently presents these doctrines in their nuanced perspectives.

In our Westminster system, we believe that ministerial responsibility means that it is the minister who is the elected accountable representative. Public servants have to serve the minister, and in so doing they serve the public. Does this make them stooges or lackies, as Peter Shergold framed it? They can certainly interact effectively, personally even, with communities, and bring back the voices and wishes of the people to the minister and seek out the minister's decision to make something happen. This is legitimate and the wise course of action in the Westminster tradition.

But does it always happen this way? Do public servants feel empowered to go out and actively seek community sentiments and engage with them to then bring back an evidence-based, well-analysed and articulated case to their minister to get their decision to "make it so" or no, as the case may be? Or are they waiting passively to be told what to do, or not to do, by their political masters; focused only on implementing the will of the government of the day. In the absence of such active community interaction, public policy can be influenced more greatly by those with greater access to ministers and decision makers; the corporations, consultants, lobby groups, and activists filling the void.

In Living, we see powerfully this choice lived out on the screen. Rodney, before his cancer diagnosis is actively taking a position of red tape until he hears otherwise from his political masters that a playground is directed to him to make happen. He is part of a technical machine. But after his terminal prognosis, Rodney takes an active role to seek out community sentiment and make it happen - effectively, ethically, compassionately, respectfully, lawfully. He is still part of a machine, but he has given it personalised community driven purpose.

Over Australian public administration history, we know that politicians have sometimes felt that the bureaucracy was too big for its boots and knew better than its masters. At other times, the bureaucracy has been hauled over the coals for its learned helplessness.

Either extreme seems terrifying and a misapplication of Westminster. Surely there is a place for a bureaucracy to step confidently into its place as part of the fabric of Australian democracy? An institution that dynamically and adaptively uses its agency to actively serve the Australian public and the common good of all Australian communities in keeping with the will of the elected government of the day but with the same kind of urgency and purpose that impelled Rodney?

That's my purpose in this article. To get us thinking that this is not only possible, but desirable. That's the kind of public service I want to be part of. As we engage in important times of APS reform at this point in our history, we have the ability to challenge our existing systems of governance and see if they are still fit for purpose. I, for one, feel that there is much that is good about our system that is worth holding onto, but I don't think it is enough. Just like Rodney, Australia is experiencing its very own life-changing situation. We have the opportunity to question our purpose and the legacy we want to create. Pivoting and clarifying our ideas of responsible and representative government to meet modern challenges seems like it is pretty important if we're going to leverage the best of Australian values and update our democracy, including the purpose of public services in it.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

psrg@unsw.edu.au

unsw.to/psrg

@PSResearchG

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