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The Senior Management in the Public Service of Central Governments

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Chapter 6

The Senior Management in the Public Service of Central Governments*

* This chapter focuses on staffing issues in a small, but crucial, component of the public sector. For those staff groups for which data are available, “government” refers to a subset of general government that is concerned with public administration (primarily tasks of regulation and policy making that exclude for example teachers and doctors), defence and compulsory social security. In responding to questions on the survey of Strategic Human Resources Management in Government, governments have used their own definition of the core public service, and in some cases this is larger than “government” as defined here. However, “government” as defined here is always covered by the responses.

Why is the senior management important?

As performance and efficiency have become more urgent issues in public governance and management, more attention has also been given to the role, tasks and capabilities of the senior management, which is the highest non-political staff in the central government administration.

The past decades have witnessed an influx of new ideas and initiatives in the public governance and management field in OECD member countries. Many of the recent public management reforms involve a delegation of the responsibility for human resource management, and a strengthening of the performance orientation of public governance and public management. Senior management plays a key role in implementing these new policies, and the quality and capacity of the senior public management has thus become a key public governance issue.

The senior public management is the interface between the political government and the political cabinets on the one hand and the public administration on the other. They are responsible for the proper and appropriate implementation of legal instruments and of political strategies and measures. They are also responsible for the coherence, efficiency and appropriateness of the government activities.

There is a broad spectrum of different forms of senior management arrangements across OECD countries. These reflect different administrative cultures, historical developments and constitutional solutions. Even the terms used to refer to the senior management vary across countries, and the same English term may have different meanings even in English-speaking countries. This chapter will use the term “senior management” generically for all countries.

What is their relation to the political government?

The boundaries between the political and administrative arenas have been the focus of many of the discussions about the senior management. The discussion has focused on preventing patronage and ensuring the existence of a professional and politically neutral administration. The political interest in advanced administrations is however not so much about traditional political patronage as about ensuring political responsiveness and personal compatibility. The boundaries have therefore also been discussed from a governance perspective, using principal-agent analyses developed in modern game theories.

The relationship between politics and administration is often subject to tensions. The senior management is expected to be committed to the interests of the State as such and to government by law, and not to the interest of a particular political government. At the same time however, they are expected to be responsive to the elected government and make sure reforms by the political government are fully implemented. OECD countries have devised systems that handle these tensions in different ways, and there is no agreement on a single best solution. Some of the features found in these systems include:

- The processes for entry, promotion and posting are often either entrusted to a professional body, or exercised by the political government under parliamentary supervision. There are, however, also cases where they are handled by the political government itself.
- The criteria for selection are often regulated in the Constitution or through an ordinary law.
- The use of performance management tools has been first and foremost applied to the management of senior management. Performance assessments and rewards have been introduced in many countries as a way of increasing the responsiveness of the senior management without infringing on their neutral professionalism.
- Fixed term mandates (in some cases referring to the contract of employment in the public service, and in other cases only to the assignment to a specific post, or to the group of the senior civil servants) have been introduced in some countries in order to support a strengthened performance orientation.

The full picture of the boundaries between politics and administration can be better understood by describing the role played by the ministerial cabinets (political advisers). These are appointed on trust rather than merits, and their numbers vary between a handful in some countries to several hundred in others. According to a recent report (SIGMA, 2007), there are three main types of ministerial cabinets:

- In some systems, ministerial cabinets work alongside a politically neutral senior management. Their basic role is political advice, and they do not interfere with the implementation of government decisions entrusted to senior civil servants.
- In other systems, ministerial cabinets are a mixture of outsiders and seconded civil servants. The members of ministerial cabinets tend to get involved in policy implementation by issuing direct orders to line staff. In these cases, the efforts to make senior managers more accountable for their results may be undermined, and the senior management may be drained of managerial talent.

- In yet other systems, ministerial cabinets work alongside political appointees but without administrative or hierarchical supervisory functions over line managers. In these cases, the relationships between the cabinet staff and senior management are blurred, and many cabinet members are already civil servants.

The United States is in many ways a special case, with its combination of presidential control over the Executive and a strong Congress. The number of political appointees is relatively large, with approximately as many political appointees in senior posts as career senior civil servants, but there are at the same time special features that help to maintain a proper balance between political responsiveness and neutral competence. Among these are that Congress adopts a list of positions that can be filled through political appointment, and that many political appointees have to be confirmed by the Senate. The merits of candidates are therefore normally being scrutinised very thoroughly, even if there is no formal competition.

How is the senior management organised?

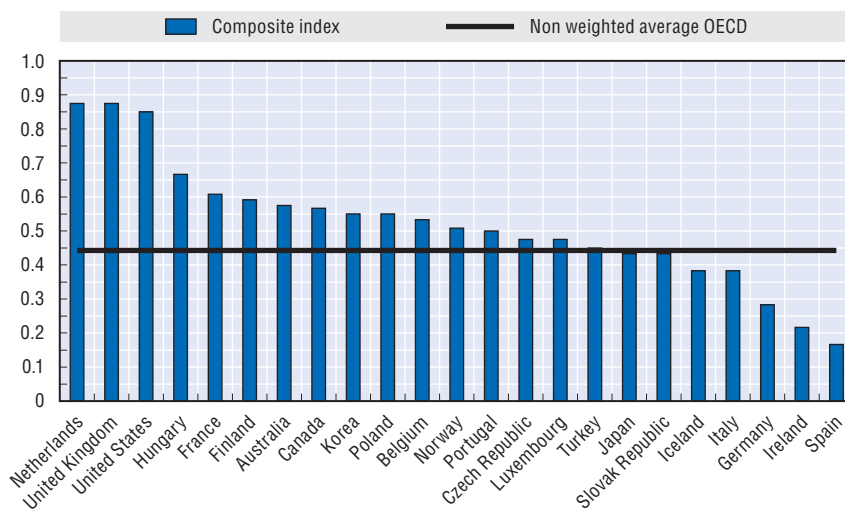
A number of OECD countries have established separately managed Senior Civil Service (SCS) systems for senior management. An SCS system can be a separate element, but it could also be constituted by the top ranks in a broader civil service-system for central government employees.

An SCS can be defined as a structured system of staff arrangements for the highest non-political positions in government. These may be responsible for functions that cover policy advice, operational delivery or corporate service delivery. An SCS is typically a career system, managed through appropriate central institutions and procedures in order to provide stability and professionalism, but also allowing a necessary flexibility to match changes in the government.

Figure 6.1 shows the level of institutionalisation of the specific management that applies to the group of senior managers in OECD countries. It is based on data about the existence of a separate group of senior managers, the identification of future leaders early in careers, their recruitment process, the existence of a defined set of skills, the special emphasis put on the management of their performance, and the term of their appointment.

Even in countries without a formally delimited SCS system, there exists in most cases a managerial group which is widely recognised as the senior management, and to which a certain amount of differentiated management practices or rules apply.

Figure 6.1. **Intensity of the institutionalisation of structured group management for senior civil servants at central level**



Note: Please see Annex A for further details on the methodology.

Source: Survey on Strategic Human Resources Management in Government, OECD, 2006, and GOV (OECD) estimates (missing data estimated by mean replacement).

The reasons given for establishing a formal SCS system can be grouped in three categories:

- Overcoming fragmentation into silos or compartmentalised ministries by creating a corporate culture and allowing better mobility across ministries and departments.
- Enabling flexibility in recruitment and employment conditions.
- Clarifying boundaries between politics and administration.

The first category aims at creating a homogeneous group whose corporate values are shared across departments. The creation of a separate SCS system does not however bring about a corporate culture by itself. Other factors like manageable size, opportunities to network and to exchange ideas, training and internal mobility are of relevance as well.

The second category aims at making it possible to attract the “best and the brightest”, irrespective of whether they come from the private or the public sector, and to bring in persons with skills sets that normally do not exist in the traditional public administration, such as managerial skills and experiences in service management and business planning. Countries that have position-oriented systems (rather than career-oriented) can however achieve these ends without setting up a formal SCS system.

The third category aims at improving the credibility and trustworthiness of the public administration by ensuring that it is managed by politically neutral professionals. This motive has been especially important in transition and developing countries.

Who are the senior management?

In a majority of OECD countries, there is a defined group of senior staff widely identified or understood to be the senior management at the national level. In some countries including Australia, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Korea, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States, and probably in the future in Finland, this group has been defined legally or through otherwise formally defined arrangements.

In other countries, the senior management is more informally defined. This is the case for example in France, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Norway and the Slovak Republic. In some countries including Austria, Germany, Mexico, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland which have not defined such a group, it is still possible to identify their senior management.

The size of the senior management is important for the manageability of the system. Since there is no clear or universally accepted definition of senior management, any estimate of their numbers is however very subjective. The size of the groups that countries indicate as being their senior management varies across countries. Smaller countries tend to have less than 1 000 senior managers while larger ones tend to have more than 2 000.

A key task for the senior management is developing and maintaining shared codes and a common culture. This would enable a convergence of administrative culture and processes across the administration. It would also facilitate horizontal co-operation and management development. A clear corporate identity and culture would make it easier to assimilate new members of the group. If the group is too big, then it might be difficult to achieve these effects, and some countries are therefore creating an inner circle for which a more effective corporate management is possible.

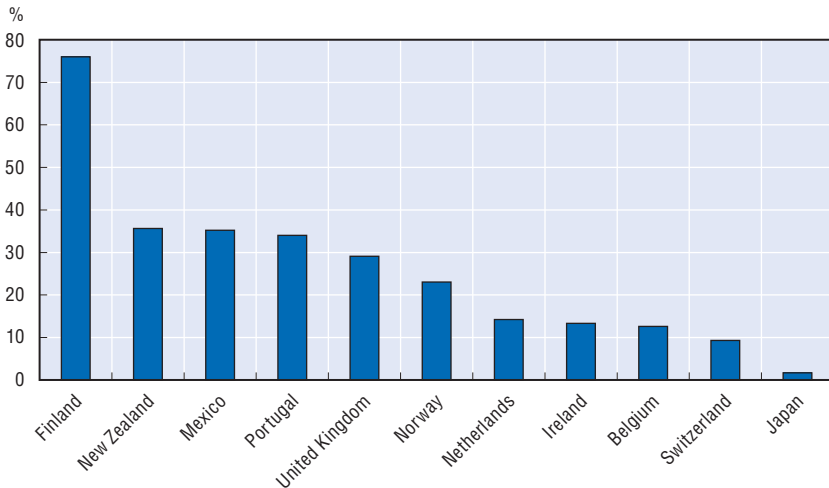
Box 6.1. Senior management in the Netherlands

The Minister for the Interior is responsible for the senior management. In 1995, the group was legally defined as the *Algemene Bestuursdienst* (ABD) composed of about 750 staff in the five top grades. In 2000, it also set up a core group within the ABD – the *Topmanagementgroep*, or TMG – composed of about the 60 highest managers in the central government administration, and targeted special development measures at this group.

The main competences of the senior management have traditionally been in generalist institutional knowledge and specialist knowledge in a particular policy field. The recent wave of managerial reforms has instead emphasised delivery-related or process-related skills. This process of managerialisation of skills has, however, been accompanied by concerns about losing either specialised knowledge among senior management or not being able to find senior policy advisors.

The senior management is dominated by men in most countries, although the share of women is increasing in all countries. Little is known about the ethnic minorities since many countries do not collect this data. It seems, however, that there are increasing concerns regarding this issue and policies have been launched in many countries to foster the recruitment of minorities.

Figure 6.2. Representation of women in senior positions in central governments in selected OECD countries (2005)



Source: Survey on Strategic Human Resources Management in Government, OECD, 2006.

There is a tendency in a number of countries to separate further the management of senior managers from that of senior experts. In a knowledge based economy, senior experts may become more valuable to public organisations, and should thus be highly valued and rewarded. However, as most have no or very few staff to manage, a number of countries have found useful to separate the management of these groups and thus send clearer signals to each as to what is expected of them.

How is the senior management managed?

All countries with SCS systems and most other countries have a central unit in charge of all or part of the management of the senior management. This central unit reports to different authorities in different countries: to Parliament, to the Head of the State, to the President or Prime Minister, to a specific minister or to each minister.

The degree of independence from political interference varies across countries, with two cultural blocks placed at each end of the spectrum, and with other countries situated at various points on the spectrum.

- At one end are the Westminster systems, which have the largest independence from politicians. Those systems have commissioners who report to Parliament or to the Head of the State. If recruitment functions are devolved to ministries, commissioners are still entrusted with the responsibility for interpreting the principle of selection on merit, on the basis of fair and open competition for all civil service recruitment and with the approval of appointments of recruits to the most senior posts.
- There is a set of intermediary systems, where entry into the senior management group is on the basis of fair and open competitions, but where the government has a relatively discretionary influence over who is posted where.
- At the other end are the countries where the dependence of the executive is expected as the recruiting responsibility lies with the minister of each department. In these countries there are often no external checks and balances that ensure the adequate implementation of objective merits and uniformity in the way in which candidates are assessed, ranked and selected for senior positions.

The design of the recruitment processes also varies. Countries with a meritocratic recruitment process leave the whole procedure in the hands of a central unit. In other systems, a hybrid variant is used, where an independent commission screens and ranks applicants, and where the government then has some leverage to pick from a short-list or to reject unwanted candidates. Other countries provide a fully transparent merit-based competition for entry into a wide senior civil service groups, but competition for promotions and postings within those groups are then less transparent.

All senior management positions are open to external recruitment in a number of countries, including Australia, Finland, Hungary, the Netherlands, the Slovak Republic and Sweden, as are most of the positions in the United Kingdom and the United States. The actual number of external recruits – especially from the private sector – is, however, seldom very large. Most senior managers have a public administration background; normally from the central government

administration and occasionally from other levels of government. In other countries, the vast majority of posts above entry level are only open to those who have already been admitted into the service. In Germany, where there is no formal senior civil service as such, civil servants become senior staff through career progression within the civil service.

A number of countries (Ireland, Korea) which had a typical career based senior civil service system, where managers had to be recruited from a group that had been hired very early in their career (and in many cases right after university) have now opened up the recruitment of a limited percentage of their posts to lateral entry and new staff coming from the private sector. For countries wishing to go in this direction, the challenge is to provide for a very transparent recruitment process.

In many countries where there is a defined group of staff widely understood as senior civil service, there is also a centrally defined skills profile. This is the case in Australia, Belgium, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Korea, the Netherlands, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States. In many of these countries, including Belgium, Finland, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United States, senior managers are recruited with a more centralised process than other staff.

Increasingly, the defined recruitment profiles include not only management but also a proven record of leadership skills, defined as the capacity for managers to make their organisation achieve better results and implement reforms.

Interdepartmental mobility is considered an important issue in almost all countries, because it fosters a more corporate ethos at the top. Most countries have developed strategies to encourage mobility, but the degree of success of these strategies is uncertain as data are hard to come by.

A number of countries have introduced appointments for limited terms, in some cases without guaranteed employment after the term of office ends. Other countries have mechanisms for removal of senior managers that have proved themselves unfit for further service, although actual removal seems to be a very rare occurrence. In other countries, while remaining in the group of senior civil servants is dependent on the assessment of performance, senior civil servants tend to have more extensive guarantees regarding their stay in the wider civil service.

Performance-related pay and performance appraisal systems have been implemented in many countries. More emphasis is put on the management of performance of senior staff than other staff in Australia, Belgium, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Korea, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States. Many countries such as Canada put a special emphasis on evaluating managers' people management skills. Performance-related pay is proportionately more important for senior civil

Table 6.1. **Examples of fixed-term appointments or fixed-term duration of mandates in selected OECD countries**

Belgium	Managers receive a temporary mandate of six years, which is granted by either the minister or the president of the department. Only the president of the "Chancellery and Support Services" receives a mandate which expires automatically at the end of the legislature.
Finland	A draft law stipulates that, although top management posts in central government administration shall be permanent, fixed-term appointments of five years shall apply in respect of individual management tasks.
Italy	Managers (first and second level managers) have a fixed-term contract. At the end of the contract, the manager can be appointed to another post, also in a different administration.
Netherlands	The July 2000 reform of the "general status of civil servants" changed the entire profile of the Senior Civil Service (SCS), <i>inter alia</i> by reinforcing the distinction between the Top Management Group and other SCS members. While all members are given a permanent appointment, assignment to a particular function is for a fixed term: members of the Top Management Group are appointed by the Cabinet for a term of five years, with the possibility for prolonging this period twice for the duration of one year each time, after which they must be transferred; the general government service appoints other SPS members to positions for a period from 3 to 7 years without mandatory transfer.
New Zealand	The Chief Executives (CE) of the ministries are appointed by the "State Services Commissioner", often using the help of outside recruitment consultants after publication of the vacancies. CEs are given a renewable contract of five years or less up to a maximum of eight years. The career of the chief executives is not guaranteed when they leave their job or their contract is not renewed or is terminated.
Norway	SCS are on contract employment, and some of them at the same time are on fixed-term contracts.
United Kingdom	Agency directors are recruited for a fixed term of five years.

Source: Survey on Strategic Human Resources Management in Government, OECD, 2006.

servants than for the other civil servants in Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States. It is however still marginal, ranging from 1% in some countries to 15% in Canada and New Zealand.

Many countries are putting significant emphasis on the management of the capacities of senior leaders and on their training. Special programmes are also in place to use managers at their best. For example, in Canada in 2007/08, 95% of Assistant Deputy Ministers and equivalents had a talent management discussion with their Deputy Minister. Managing talent at this level is intended to ensure better utilisation of the skills and experience of every member of this community.* In addition, the advanced leadership programme for senior management was launched in October 2007.

What are the challenges?

There are two important challenges. One is that countries generally need a senior public management that is able to pursue performance oriented governance and management, to ensure a sufficient cohesion across the

* For more information, please refer to www.psagency-agencefp.gc.ca/tal/adsm-eng.asp.

inevitable silos of ministerial sectors and public organisations, and at the same time to preserve and protect the ethos that is the hallmark of a politically neutral and professionally competent public administration. This will require appropriately designed arrangements for the management of the senior management, and for the development of their managerial competencies.

More flexible arrangements may undermine the politically neutral professionalism of the senior management. One example is the fixed term mandates that have been introduced in several countries in order to support a strengthened performance orientation, but which may also make senior management more vulnerable to political disfavour and a short term focus of their actions. In other cases, countries note an increased turnover among senior public servants. In Canada, the government has put an additional emphasis on leadership development and succession planning as part of HR planning to address this challenge.

The other is that countries need to find or maintain an appropriate balance between the two faces of the senior public management; that is as the politically neutral stewards of the government by law principles and the responsive servants of the elected government. This will require appropriately designed measures to introduce or strengthen the ethos of the public administration and protect it from patronage and other improprieties. This may also be a challenge for the country's political system which has to be sufficiently sophisticated to preserve and protect the politically neutral public administration.

What lessons for the future?

It is clear from the experiences and reform efforts in OECD countries that the senior management plays a central role for the achievement of more performing and efficient public administrations and for improvements in the public services. There is however a broad spectrum of different arrangements and no obvious consensus on what would constitute the “best practice”. One reason for this is that the arrangements interact with the constitutional system and political culture of the country.

It is also clear that a number of OECD countries have undertaken reforms aiming at creating or strengthening a distinctive senior management corps, going hand in hand with the delegation of managerial responsibilities, agencification, and the emphasis on performance management. There are, at the same time, some common trends or universal ideas behind different arrangements that would suggest some kind of convergence. These include:

- The top priorities for the development of the senior management are improved leadership and managerial skills. Many countries are therefore opening up recruitment processes for external applicants.

- Most OECD countries have introduced or are introducing transparency in the handling of senior management, especially with the opening up of the recruitment procedures. In a number of countries, transparency in the promotion system within the group of senior managers could, however, be improved.
- Most OECD countries aim at an appropriate balance between political responsiveness and neutral competence, and reforms address this issue in different ways.
- Diversity is becoming an increasing concern in most OECD countries, and policies are developed to promote gender balance as well as increased representation of ethnic minorities.

In other areas, no universal trends can be seen:

- The existing arrangements in OECD countries can be grouped in four fields depending on if there is a formal Senior Civil Service system or not, and if the arrangement is career-based or position-based. Traditional career based systems are tending to open up their recruitment process to lateral entries from non civil servants, and traditional position based systems are tending to provide more long term career management of their future and present civil servants through early identification of potential future leaders and more individual career planning.
- The role played by political appointees and ministerial cabinets varies, and there is no clear trend in this regard. This also means that the scope for political interventions in the handling of the senior management and in the exercise of the top managerial functions varies across OECD countries. There is probably scope for improved separation of political and administrative functions in some countries.
- While some OECD countries have taken special steps to strengthen the cohesiveness of the senior management and achieve a clear corporate entity at the top, others are either confident in their existing arrangements or show little interest in cohesiveness.
- Most OECD countries stress the need for improved performance management, usually through its formalisation. While its impact on individual careers seems to be growing, its effect on salary and demotions for senior management is highly diverse and rarely significant. There is probably scope for improved linkage between the handling of the senior managers and organisational performance.

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