



Observatory of
Public Sector Innovation

Canada Report Supplement

Current Activity as Viewed through the Innovation System Lenses



Disclosure

This supplementary booklet should be considered as a working document that was used in the production of the report *The Innovation System of the Public Service of Canada* (OECD, 2018).

Due to the fragmented nature of any innovation system, it is quite possible there are errors, omissions, or things that have been misinterpreted or nuances missed (but that's part of the learning process). We invite the reader to note that as such, this document has no official standing, but was shared for instructional purposes as part of OPSI's work and to fulfil the mission to help countries understand their public sector innovation systems. It should not be used as a formal reference or for citation.



Current Activity as Viewed through the Innovation System Lenses

How are each of the major activities, initiatives or structures contributing to the performance of the innovation system? Informing the analysis provided in Chapter 6, this section looks at each initiative in turn, and considers how they relate to each of the innovation system lenses: clarity, parity, suitability, normality.

Federal, Provincial and Territorial Declaration on Public Sector Innovation

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- A high level statement about the importance and value of innovation.
- Sends a high level signal, backed by the authority of the most senior public servants.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Message to public service leadership about expectations.
- Seen as rhetoric or not tangible/resonant at the level of individual public servants.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Helps situate innovation in regards to the many agendas and priorities of the Public Service, and puts it into context, though may take time for that to filter across the system and be accepted as meaningful.

Contribution to “parity”:

- Puts some weight/form to the priority of innovation, provide a hook for those trying to advocate innovative approaches.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Potentially helps different jurisdictions to leverage each other’s capabilities by providing an entry point for collaboration.

Contribution to “normality”:

- Helps emphasise that innovation is part of the expected.

Impact and Innovation Unit definition of innovation (Annual Report 2016-17)

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- Definition of what is meant by innovation at a working level, and what it means to the Impact and Innovation Unit.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Helps contextualise innovation, sends a signal from the centre.
- Contributes to the noise around innovation, potentially competing with other definitions / conceptions.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Helps start to bring clarity to the language around innovation, but unless it fits with more contextual (agency-based) definitions / workings, it may contribute to further confusion.

Contribution to “parity”:

- Signal from the centre of importance of innovation, helping to develop and emphasise the case for doing things differently.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- N/A

Contribution to “normality”:

- Helps to make innovation be seen as part of routine business.

Deputy Minister Task Force on Public Sector Innovation (replacement to Deputy Minister Committee on Public Sector Innovation)

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- High level action-oriented committee with tangible responsibilities, especially core systems transformation, and disruptive policy solutions.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Tangible commitment from the leadership echelon of the Public Service.
- Considerable expectations may be placed on it, beyond what such a high level structure may be able to achieve.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Sends an important signal about the role and value of innovation, and demonstrates high level leadership support.

Contribution to “parity”:

- Puts weight to the priority of innovation, and provides a forum for issues/problems to be raised/progressed.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Tangible commitment and investment from senior leadership, provides a forum for the socialisation of emerging issues and technologies with senior leaders (and thereby likely others as well), and connects them to policy (and thus potential implications for what needs to be done / invested in).

Contribution to “normality”:

- Demonstrates that innovation is expected and part of the system, that it is taken seriously, that innovation is part of core business.

Policy and Program Entrepreneurs / GC Entrepreneurs (replaces reverse mentors of the Deputy Minister Committee on Public Sector Innovation)

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- Group of mid-range level staff dedicated full time for a period of 12-18 months supporting the Task Force, working on projects that will focus on initiatives delivering measureable impact on policy and program challenges cutting across departmental mandates.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Tangible commitment of resources and provides a chance to train / expose a select group of staff in innovation.
- Potential for participants to be seen as “chosen ones”/contribute to innovation being seen as an “us and them” activity.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Sends an important signal regarding leadership support for innovation.
- Provides a group of natural ambassadors with time and interest in spreading the story/narrative of innovation, helping to put innovation in context.

Contribution to “parity”:

- Provides a means by which to explore issues in depth and to develop a fuller understanding of innovation in the Public Service context, and identify potential blockages/limitations.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- A tangible investment that provides a means to train a group of potential innovators at the same time as giving them a strategic awareness of how emerging issues may play out and what that means for the Public Service.
- Forum for exploring and socialising potential disruptive shifts and technologies and their implications for the Public Service.

Contribution to “normality”:

- Helps demonstrate that innovation is valued and potentially rewarded, helps show that innovation is at the heart of the work of the Public Service, and is important to core policy issues. There is however a potential risk that it ends up reinforcing some perceptions that innovation is something done by a select group.

Experimentation direction/commitment

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- Provides a structural driver for innovation within the system, ensuring that agencies must demonstrate (or be seen as demonstrating) their engagement with innovation.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Forces an engagement with innovation, and involves commitment of resources to innovation.
- Acts as a demand push without necessarily ensuring the supply side (skills and capabilities).

Contribution to “clarity”:

- At least initially it adds to confusion in that experimentation and innovation are blurred together; in time should help provide clarity by sending a signal and providing an opportunity for agencies to experientially learn what innovation means for them and how it fits with their priorities.

Contribution to “parity”:

- As a structural driver, this measure ensures that opportunities for experimentation (a subset of innovation) must be considered, thereby giving innovation significant parity with business-as-usual in some contexts. However, having a structural driver without well-developed complementary parts (processes, capabilities, expertise, etc.) does not necessarily make innovation easier or reduce the reliance on people having to go “above and beyond” in order to successfully deliver innovative initiatives.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- The experimentation commitment is helping to ensure that agencies are confronted with the question of whether they have the capabilities to undertake experimentation, and consider their position; as a significant shift in direction, it may take time for this aspect to truly be embedded in practices and strategic thinking.

Contribution to “normality”:

- A structural driver linking spending and experimentation ensures that innovation is connected with core business, though initially it may be that some agencies rebrand existing activity rather than changing it (though this in turn may still help reinforce innovation as part of what is normal and expected).

Innovation Labs/Hubs**What is it and what does it do for the system?**

- In response to the Blueprint 2020 process, a number of agencies established innovation labs and units, which can provide a forum for exploration of new approaches and how they can contribute to agency priorities.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Avenues for contextualising innovation in agency contexts, assisting in bringing in new thinking and new ways of working and applying to agency issues.
- Labs can sometimes be introduced without full consideration of how a “structural irritant” (something that is purposefully designed to question existing practices) will fit with the rest of the organisation. This means that over time labs can lose their initial champions/supporters and be vulnerable to consolidation/abandonment.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Labs helped provide a focal point for innovation in a number of agencies, and helped situate innovation in relation to agency priorities by giving people a working understanding of what innovation is and what it means to them; as currently working, the range of labs are also partly contributing to a fragmented collective innovation narrative.

Contribution to “parity”:

- By providing a “place” (physical or otherwise) for innovation, the labs both act as a demonstration of interest/forum for exploration of issues and potential problems, but also as a unintentional side-lining of innovation by putting it “over there”.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- The labs help provide spaces and forums for experimentation and testing of new capabilities, testing the implication of different ways of working.
- By being separate zones of activity, the signal to underlying operations that new things and new ways of working can sometimes be masked (we already are doing something, it does not have to affect our core work).

Contribution to “normality”:

- Labs, at least initially, can unintentionally act to reinforce that innovation is something that happens “over there” and is someone else’s job; labs provide a forum to connect innovation with the core practice of an organisation, however this can sometimes be hard to integrate back into the rest of the organisation once taken away from the supportive conditions of the lab.

*Treasury Board Secretariat / Privy Council Office Policy on Transfer Payments
(Generic Terms and Conditions for innovative transfer payments)*

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- Five year pilot (2017-22) giving departments new paths for distributing government grants and contribution programs that aim to solve existing problems, providing allowance for incentive-based funding, prizes and challenges, micro-funding.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Allows for different relationships and patterns of activity.
- May provide a process adaptation without reflecting deeper structural challenges to using new approaches.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Sends a signal about the use of innovation (though caveated by being a pilot exercise).
- Helps to situate/contextualise some additional avenues/methods for innovation.

Contribution to “parity”:

- Embeds innovation in some of the core processes/rules of the Public Service and gives mechanisms and explicit permission for a select range of different methods to be used.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Helps update core business operations by integrating new ways of operating; not necessarily matched with the skills and capabilities needed to successfully use those new ways of operating.

Contribution to “normality”:

- Contributes to an awareness that innovation is not only connected with, but a key part of how to achieve, core business.

Impact Canada Initiative

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- A formal whole-of-government effort that will help departments accelerate the adoption of outcomes-based funding approaches to deliver meaningful results to Canadians.

Potential benefits and risks:

- High-level commitment, attached to government priorities.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Sends a strong signal about the use of innovation, and helps to further situate and contextualise particular methods and approaches, and (in-time) provide tangible real world cases of how the application of innovation can lead to achieving government priorities.

Contribution to “parity”:

- For particular projects and high-level priorities, this initiative provides an established mechanism to work through different ways of working, and presumably ensure an easier path to innovative outcomes.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- The initiative adds to the demand side for new capabilities, and provides a signal that existing ways of working are not sufficient, and that new capabilities, relationships and practices are required.

Contribution to “normality”:

- The initiative connects strongly with core business, demonstrating that innovation is important/needed for priority areas, and is therefore part of how things are/should be done.

Impact and Innovation Centre of Expertise (Impact and Innovation Unit)

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- Provision of expertise to support the Impact Canada Initiative with regards to innovative funding and partnership approaches, impact measurement, and behavioural insights.

Potential benefits and risks:

- A source of advice and guidance for agencies attempting to use new methods (in certain circumstances).

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Assists agencies to contextualise innovation and different methods, and how it can fit with their priorities.

Contribution to “parity”:

- Reduces the barriers that may exist for considering and trying new ways of doing things, and provides a formal mechanism/source of guidance that can help balance any competing concerns/risk issues.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Develops, and provides a critical mass for, new capabilities.

Contribution to “normality”:

- Contributes to sense that innovation is part of core work (and valued by central agency), and provides a means to socialise new methods and innovative thinking more broadly.

Behavioural Insights Community of Practice (Impact and Innovation Unit)**What is it and what does it do for the system?**

- This horizontal community invites practitioners to share information, research methodologies, and experimentation results.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Provides a forum for practitioners to share and learn from each other, and to identify good practices.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Helps situate and contextualise innovation (particularly behavioural insights)

Contribution to “parity”:

- Provides a forum to identify issues, and for sharing lessons/ways to navigate/handle or overcome those issues.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Contributes to the development of new capabilities.

Contribution to “normality”:

- Helps socialise innovation, provide a forum for people to understand how innovation connects with the work of others, and normalises behavioural insights as a practice.

Innovative Staffing Resource Management Strategy**What is it and what does it do for the system?**

- An Impact and Innovation Unit strategy to surface and seed talent across the Public Service, onboarding individuals from outside the government and from within departments/agencies, to build capacity across departments and agencies regarding behavioural insights, impact investing, impact measurement, and data science.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Provides an avenue to build further capability in key innovation areas, and strengthens ability of Impact and Innovation Unit to act as a hub of expertise.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “parity”:

- Provides a demonstration of new ways of working/recruiting to others and that it is possible to access new talent in different ways.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Contributes to the development of new capabilities.

Contribution to “normality”:

- Helps normalise innovation, and integrates it as core business for a central agency, thereby demonstrating it as an expectation/the way things are done.

Results and Delivery Agenda**What is it and what does it do for the system?**

- A process for tracking commitments identified in the Government’s Mandate Letters, including both for government-wide priorities and for individual departmental priorities. Supported by Chief Results and Delivery Officers / Network.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Potentially aids with the identification of priority problems/issues where an innovative response is needed/wanted.
- Potentially locks in particular problem frames and therefore associated courses of action.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Provides a strong signal about the importance of results and delivery but this does not necessarily yet sit comfortably with a focus on innovation (doing things differently).

Contribution to “parity”:

- Clearly identifies what is important, and thus provides an overriding concern that can help the navigation of project hurdles where delivery requires innovative options; alternatively it might reinforce the status quo and limit the opportunities for new things to be tried because of the focus on a tight agenda/existing conceptions of what is important.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Potentially contributes to a demand for new capabilities by identifying where current practices and capabilities are insufficient for what is done; alternatively in some cases it may result in a reprioritisation of resources towards particular goals (invest more rather than do different).

Contribution to “normality”:

- N/A.

Micro-missions**What is it and what does it do for the system?**

- Platform to match small opportunities in one area with discretionary labour from a public servant in another.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Provides an avenue for working differently, and for matching capability gaps with available skills.

- Potentially does not fit well with dominant paradigms/operating models.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “parity”:

- Opens up conventional processes; provides a means by which to mobilise resources in different ways, including for innovative projects.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Exploration of a variant to traditional operating models.

Contribution to “normality”:

- Helps to demonstrate that different ways of working are part of the routine.

Free Agent Program

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- A platform for individuals who possess innovation and problem-solving attributes and wish to work in a project-based manner. They are able to choose their work and undertake project-based opportunities across the Public Service.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Provides a mechanism for developing and leveraging talent.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Sends a signal that things can be done differently and provides a tangible example of what innovation in practice looks like.

Contribution to “parity”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Provides a mechanism to leverage, develop and encourage new capabilities; provides a demonstration of a different operating model.

Contribution to “normality”:

- Demonstrates that innovation can be part of the job; potentially contributes to the sense that innovation is something done by a discrete group of people.

Talent Cloud

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- Pilot project working towards the idea of a digital marketplace where workers have access to rights, benefits and union representation, while retaining the flexibility to choose work inside and outside government.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Demonstrates an entirely new way of thinking about managing capabilities within the Public Service.

- Nascent and vulnerable to steep learning curve before delivering / demonstrating results.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Demonstration of a radically ambitious initiative, that innovation is not limited to safe things.

Contribution to “parity”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Points to an entirely new model of how to access and leverage capabilities.

Contribution to “normality”:

- N/A.

New Directions in Staffing

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- Designed to simplify and streamline staffing, this policy provides for more variety in hiring processes, agile approaches to staffing and policies, more room for managers to apply their judgement when staffing, and increased focus on outcomes, including the quality of the person hired, and less on process.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Easier to recruit different people into the Public Service.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “parity”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Makes it easier to recruit/access different/new capabilities.

Contribution to “normality”:

- N/A.

GC Tools (GCconnex, GCcollab, etc.)

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- New tools/platforms for the Public Service enabling greater/easier collaboration across agencies and with members of the public.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Makes information sharing and collaboration easier.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “parity”:

- Helps reduce barriers to information flows, thereby making it easier for the consideration of different options, as well as making it easier to connect different actors with shared interests.
- Provides a forum for sharing of lessons/navigation of the system.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Provides open source platforms that are likely more suited for a digital government.

Contribution to “normality”:

- N/A.

Policy Horizons**What is it and what does it do for the system?**

- Capability for strategic foresight.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Can help identify emerging issues and the implications
- Potential for disconnect with core work by being seen as too distant/remote from day-to-day priorities.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “parity”:

- Provides a wider context for decision making, and challenges existing assumptions about how events or trends may play out.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “normality”:

- N/A.

Award for Innovative Management (Institute of Public Administration Canada)**What is it and what does it do for the system?**

- The Award distinguishes government organisations that have shown exceptional innovations that address the wide variety of issues facing society today.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Helps showcase, affirm and legitimise innovations within government.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Provides real-world examples of innovation and sends a signal that innovation is wanted/needed.

Contribution to “parity”:

- Provides real-world cases and examples of where new things have been tried, thereby expanding the case history of what can be considered.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Provides, and celebrates, examples of innovation and helps socialise new ways of working, thereby potentially providing a forum by which to scale/disseminate the lessons from the application of new approaches (and their potential implications for how government works).

Contribution to “normality”:

- Helps demonstrate that innovation can be celebrated.

Innovation Fair

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- An annual opportunity for departments and agencies to showcase their innovative processes and projects, and share good practices across the entire federal Public Service.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Helps showcase, affirm and legitimise innovations within government.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Helps contextualise and situate innovation, provides tangible examples of what innovation looks like and how it fits, and provides a signal of the value/desire for innovation.

Contribution to “parity”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “normality”:

- Contributes to a perception that innovation is part of the normal; potentially contributes to innovation as an exception by marking it out as a special event.

Public Service Renewal Agenda

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- Public service renewal involves elements of both modernisation and innovation, and building and nurturing capabilities for the future. Identifies renewal priorities.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Message about expectations and what is needed for.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Can help situate innovation, as renewal and innovation are generally in alignment, however the narrative connecting the two may not always be clear.

Contribution to “parity”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “normality”:

- N/A.

Canadian Digital Service

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- Delivers solutions by working with federal organisations to design, prototype, and build better digital services. It builds capacity by investing in recruitment, learning, and communities of practice to help departments and public servants amplify their skills in areas like user research, design, and data science.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Provides a dedicated structure for the consideration of digital government, and the use and promotion of digital practices.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- Digital transformation agenda and innovation generally will be in alignment, but narrative connecting the two may not be clear.

Contribution to “parity”:

- Provides a structural locus for different practices and different perspectives about core work.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Development of new capabilities, and signal of what is happening elsewhere/how current operations may not be sufficient/what else is possible; digitisation should enable faster intelligence about elements of what’s not working and thus what might need to change.

Contribution to “normality”:

- Provides a platform for articulating and thus shaping what is the new normal.

Policy Community

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- A functional community of policy shapers and influencers, bringing together public servants from across disciplines and all departments and agencies to improve how policy is shaped in Canada.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Increased learning and sharing of information/perspectives about the core work of the Public Service.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “parity”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “normality”:

- A natural forum for sharing and normalising new practices, including new policy instruments and approaches.

Policy Ignite

What is it and what does it do for the system?

- Regularly held grassroots event organised by federal public servants, for federal public servants and other policy stakeholders to showcase bright ideas in policy development.

Potential benefits and risks:

- Provides a parallel forum for public servants to develop and pitch ideas, and build alliances/learn from others.

Contribution to “clarity”:

- N/A.

Contribution to “parity”:

- Provides an informal mechanism for the development and refinement of possibilities, thereby helping supplement/circumvent existing channels of approval that may not be the right space for it.

Contribution to “suitability”:

- Provides an informal space for the identification of new issues and potential implications; provides a space for the light-touch development of capabilities (skills and networks).

Contribution to “normality”:

- N/A.

