

MC Expert - working with the UK Civil Service

This factsheet gives an overview of the UK Civil Service for Meyler Campbell colleagues who may wish to work with civil servants.

Who are civil servants?

Civil servants are employed by the Crown to help the government design and deliver its policies. They work across the UK in central government departments, agencies, and non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs).

In March 2015, there were just under 440,000 civil servants. 1% of those work in the Senior Civil Service (SCS). The SCS tend to have strategic, trouble-shooting roles, closely advising ministers and working to develop partnerships across and beyond government.

Local government officers, National Health Service employees, the police and the armed forces are not civil servants. (They are usually called public servants.) Nor are the government; they are MPs or members of the House of Lords selected by the Prime Minister.

What standards and principles apply to the civil service?

All civil servants must follow the Civil Service Code which requires:

- integrity - putting the obligations of public service above personal interests;
- honesty - being truthful and open;
- objectivity - basing advice and decisions on rigorous analysis of the evidence;
- impartiality - acting solely according to the merits of the case and serving governments of different political parties equally well.

The impartiality duty means there is a particular premium on building a relationship of trust with Ministers. Civil servants must understand what is politically acceptable (broadly, what fits with the general direction as set out in the manifesto on which the party or parties were elected) but must also be able to challenge ministers where evidence and practicability suggest that a different approach may be needed.

How is the civil service organised?

Departments of State are the main organisational blocks for the civil service (eg Department for Business, Innovation & Skills or Department for Work and Pensions) and are led by the government's Secretaries of State. Departments focus on broad chunks of related policy areas, but there is always overlap between interests. Cross-boundary working and tackling silos are perennial issues. Within departments, there will be a wide array of directorates and divisions taking responsibility for sub-sets of the overall agenda.

Major delivery functions are often carried out by agencies attached to departments (eg JobCentre Plus or the Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency). There are also 'Non-Departmental Public Bodies' which act at arms-length from Ministerial control when a degree of independence is needed.

How is coaching viewed and used in the civil service?

There is an increasing desire to bring greater professionalization to the civil service, in part through a renewed focus on learning and development within which coaching is playing a role.

Informally, managers are invited to use “coaching approaches” with their teams, although most are not given specific training on what this means and how to grapple with the tensions of coaching in the line. That said, it has enabled receptive managers to hold better staff conversations and receive recognition for doing so.

For more formal coaching, civil servants below the SCS can access a list of other civil servants who hold coaching qualifications and have offered to coach colleagues for a few hours each month. This is on a no-cost basis. If civil servants are facing redundancy or similar, they may be offered external coaching as part of a redeployment package. The market for external coaches wishing to work with junior civil servants is therefore extremely small and specialist.

Senior civil servants may access external coaches from a pre-approved list and pay for these from their training budget. To get on to the list as a coach, you must pass the assessment process led by Civil Service Learning or be an associate of one of the handful of organisations approved to supply coaching. The list is not open continuously. In May 2016 it was open to applications, and criteria included: “significant experience of coaching at FTSE250 level and/or within the senior civil service”. Previously, expectations included over 100 hours of public sector coaching.

What sorts of issues might Senior Civil Servants bring to coaching?

Many of the issues facing SCS leaders are the same as for any other: the loneliness of leadership, grappling with work/life balance, career planning and so on. Personal values and the organisational drivers and contexts may however bring a different slant. These include the careful balancing act of the Ministerial relationship, how to motivate and inspire dispersed teams to deliver and improve statutorily required public services with exceptionally tight resources, and how to handle increasingly open public scrutiny of the civil service through Parliamentary Select Committees etc.

Where to find out more

These are just a select few of the many references available for the civil service:

Websites	
https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/civil-service	Gov.uk is the government’s main website with information about all departments and services.
http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/	Well-regarded, independent, apolitical think-tank exploring how to improve the work of Whitehall, Parliament and policy-making.
http://www.civilserviceworld.com/	Site run by Dods Parliamentary Communications who have extensive links with former and current civil service and Ministers. Updated daily with articles and interviews about the goings-on across the civil service.
http://www.civilservant.org.uk/	Site created and developed by former civil servant Martin Stanley. A mine of information about what the civil service is and how it operates.
Books	
Whitehall by Peter Hennessy	Detailed yet readable history of the civil service from the Norman conquest to the turn of the millennium. Prof Hennessy is an acknowledged expert in the field and writes extremely well.
How to Be a Civil Servant by Martin Stanley	Now in its 3 rd edition. Written by Martin Stanley (creator of civilservant.org.uk website)
The Blunders of our Governments by	Well-researched, extensive volume about some of the biggest

Anthony King and Ivor Crewe	failures of British governments (of all colours) in the last 30 years. Gives a sense of the complexity of the work of the civil service and the problems they grapple with.
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Katie Driver, May 2016