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PUBLIC SERVICES CANADA (A): MATTIE JOHNSEN

Gerard Seijts wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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Mathilde (Mattie) Johnsen was a brilliant environmental engineer. Graduating at the top of her class in the master’s program in environmental systems engineering at the University of Regina, Johnsen had a laudable record of professional growth as an engineering analyst for Public Services and Procurement Canada (Public Services). She was responsible for overseeing a team involved in the Public Services mandate of managing a large real estate portfolio for over 100 federal departments and agencies. Johnsen’s team was one of several teams that ensured that facilities the federal government shared with provincial and municipal levels of government, Indigenous peoples, and industry were developed and maintained to comply with applicable environmental regulations and standards.

The bureaucracy of her work sometimes irritated Johnsen and she assumed that she could earn a higher salary in the private sector, but she enjoyed the perks of being a civil servant. Her extended health care coverage was comprehensive, as was her personal time allowance, which included vacation time, personal days off, and family care time. She also had access to a professional development program that subsidized continuing education. Johnsen had recently made effective use of this program by receiving funding and salary allowance to pursue an executive master of business administration (MBA) degree at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

Johnsen chose the MBA program both as an opportunity to add credentials that could help her secure an executive position with the government and as an opportunity to advance her French language skills. Her family spoke French (and some Norwegian) at home, but growing up and going to school in Saskatchewan meant that Johnsen was immersed in an English environment. Although she spoke French, she was not professionally and fluently bilingual—something that would be a significant asset in her work at the Canadian federal service. She knew that with polished French language skills and an MBA to add to her career record with the federal government, she would be an almost unbeatable force when competing for positions at the executive level.

Johnsen was particularly excited about a new opportunity for several senior director positions that had been recently advertised. According to the posting, the federal government planned to renew its science and technology infrastructure over the next 10 to 20 years. The objective was to create federal science and technology facilities that were multi-purpose, collaborative, and environmentally supportive, with modern scientific equipment and information management technology.

In the private sector, environmental sustainability projects (i.e., “green” initiatives) were usually limited due to their low profitability. However, those concerns were less of an issue in the public sector. In fact, Canada had made a public international commitment to pursue environmental initiatives. Therefore, the government had to prove that it could be environmentally responsible in terms of its laboratories and technology hubs. The new program was ripe with opportunity, and Johnsen was eager to secure one of the available senior director positions.

Public Services and Procurement Canada

Public Services was one of the largest Government of Canada departments. It was the central purchasing agent for all required items, from office supplies to naval ships, for all government departments. It also served in several other important capacities: as treasurer and accountant for the government, pay and pension administrator for more than 275,000 employees, linguistic authority and integrity advisor, information and digital services provider, and real property manager.[[1]](#footnote-1) The department had 15 branches and bureaus with specific responsibilities. For example, the real property branch managed a large real estate portfolio that included office buildings, courts, monuments, buildings (both within and outside Canada, such as embassies), and the Parliament of Canada and its facilities in Ottawa. The real property branch also maintained a collection of numerous bridges, dams, and highways.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The department was led by the Minister of Public Services and Procurement, who was also the Receiver General for Canada. The minister was supported by a large team that included a deputy minister and over 10 assistant deputy ministers, as well as a dozen other senior executives and various regional directors. The department employed more than 6,500 people, of whom 40 per cent were employed in the real property services program.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Landon Kokomo was a director general in the real property branch. He was a career civil servant, having joined the federal service out of high school. He had started with a basic administrative position but worked hard and methodically advanced up the federal service employment grid. The government’s early professional development program helped pay the costs of pursuing a university degree at night school, and this had allowed Kokomo to pursue opportunities in the executive category of jobs. Kokomo had enjoyed his career, but he was looking forward to retirement. He had his required 30 years of service, so he could retire on a full pension in just over a year, at the early age of 55—a key benefit of civil service in which he fully planned to take part.

He was aware that some younger staff members considered him out of touch with the latest management trends, referring to him as “old school.” However, Kokomo was observant, and most colleagues preferred Kokomo’s hands-off approach to performance reviews. The official forms were 10 pages long and needlessly bureaucratic. Nobody was likely to read all parts of the completed forms, except to sign them at the time of review (or appeal for promotion, if necessary). Kokomo opted for brevity rather than lengthy notes in the documents, and allowed the staff member to complete most parts of the forms, including parts he would normally be required to complete. If a problem arose, he would speak directly to the employee and find a suitable way to resolve the issue.

Johnsen’s Career

Johnsen graduated with her master’s degree in 2012 and started working right away for Canada’s federal government. Tens of thousands of jobs had been cut from the civil service under the renewed mandate of Stephen Harper as prime minister, and the science and technology sector of the federal service—the sector with most of the jobs in environmental engineering—was hit particularly hard.[[4]](#footnote-4) But Johnsen had excellent grades and was passably bilingual—a critical qualification for most federal service jobs. The province of Saskatchewan had a high rate of unemployment outside of the mining sector, which Johnsen had no interest in joining. So, when she saw the opportunity for a one-year temporary assignment with the federal government, Johnsen took her chances and applied.

The job would mean relocating to the Canadian capital city of Ottawa for the year, at her own expense, but Johnsen reasoned that the risk was worth the opportunity to break out of the limits of employment in Saskatchewan. Most of her environmental engineering classmates applied for dwindling career opportunities with the government’s Ministry of Fisheries and Oceans, Natural Resources Canada, or Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, but Johnsen applied to Public Services because she felt it was an essential department at all times—whether supporting the government in downsizing or in growing. Her gamble paid off. Johnsen landed a contract position with Public Services and then secured a coveted permanent position with the federal service before the end of her one-year term.

Johnsen enjoyed her work. She was mainly responsible for ensuring that the government’s buildings and facilities complied with environmental regulations. She travelled around the capital city region and often to other parts of the country, visiting the facilities she was assigned and auditing their various mechanical systems, such as heating and venting and waste management. She knew the facilities managers did not look forward to the audits, but they had to comply—and Johnsen ensured they did. Her statistics showed that she rarely had to issue second warnings. And she was often able to make suggestions that improved a building’s environmental efficiency beyond the required minimum.

There were only a few incidents of building managers complaining to Johnsen’s superior, claiming that she was impolite and inflexible and that she had an unreasonable sense of what could be accomplished with an aging infrastructure. Johnsen was convinced that most of the building managers were engineering “wannabes,” who she described as people (usually men) who had failed to graduate from university, if they were even accepted, but still thought they possessed all the skills a university education provided. She tried to be professional, but she found it irritating when building managers tried to tell her what was, and what was not, possible in adapting building infrastructure to meet environmental regulations, even though *she* was the engineer. Inevitably, the results from Johnsen’s building infrastructure directions always met or exceeded expectations. In a couple of meetings with her direct superior, and in one with Kokomo, she reviewed complaints, explained the situation, and convinced her direct superior and Kokomo of the contributions she was making.

In 2016, following the election of a new Liberal government in Canada, Public Services was restructured and Johnsen had her pick of new job prospects. She had already advanced three job grades since her start with the federal service in 2012. Johnsen’s goal had been to advance one job grade every 18 months, and she had already met that goal, but she knew there was still room for further advancement in her current job category. She was eager to move into a management stream. Her performance appraisals had always been good: she met or exceeded her benchmark goals, and she showed initiative in recommending new standards for environmental management in Canada’s owned and leased properties. Complaints from the few building managers were considered low in importance and did not appear in her appraisals.

Johnsen successfully pursued a position in the management stream, giving her command of a team of engineers, technicians, and administrative support staff. Instead of ensuring that buildings already in the government’s portfolio complied with environmental management standards, Johnsen and her team were responsible for negotiating with municipal and provincial governments, regulatory agencies, the private sector, and Indigenous peoples for shared use of facilities. In some cases, the federal government was looking to use someone else’s property or land; in other cases, the other party was looking to use property or land that was already in the federal government’s portfolio. In either situation, Johnsen was involved.

She loved her work. The more complicated the negotiations, the happier she was. She was equally content managing environmental standards for small federal bureaus to be established on First Nations land as she was negotiating responsibilities to meet emissions standards for a large city office building shared with a provincial government. Her favourite project involved the management of environmental standards for a building owned by the federal government—the Marbella Building. The structure was currently used by a hotel chain, an accounting firm, a city government, and two federal departments. One of the two federal departments was a military office with its own standards. Some of her colleagues were sure that she would be unable to successfully negotiate the management of environmental standards for that building, but she proved them wrong—although not without a certain amount of drama. She enjoyed telling that story at parties, especially at staff parties, where it always solicited gasps.

The Marbella Project

The challenge with the Marbella project was the ventilation system in the building. The Marbella adjoined a building owned by a hotel, and the hotel wanted to expand by moving its kitchens into the Marbella. The challenge was that, to include a professional kitchen, the building needed a higher standard of ventilation than that needed by the other occupants, who were using their floors in the Marbella largely for business offices. The office occupants were never going to agree to share the additional costs for equipment required by one building occupant, and the hotel would never agree to assume the additional costs for the upgraded ventilation system for all building occupants. The option of building a new segregated ventilation system was financially not feasible. The potential loss of one or two office occupants was manageable. However, if the hotel were to back out of the Marbella sharing agreement with the federal government, a new tenant would have to be found to occupy the hotel’s significant amount of space. As well, extensive renovations would be incurred to separate the new tenant from the adjoining hotel.

Kokomo was responsible for negotiating the overall arrangement for sharing the building, and he wanted numerous proposals costed. Johnsen was tired of never-ending revisions and one-on-one private conversations with the various building occupants. She was certain that if she could get everyone in a room with her idea for cost sharing, she could reach an agreement. However, while she had advanced her idea several times with the director, he had refused to sign off on Johnsen’s plan. She raised her concerns and suggestions several times in group meetings, but the other parties involved in the project were unable to resolve their own challenges, let alone the overall issue. It sometimes took every ounce of Johnsen’s strength to restrain herself from telling others how to solve their own problems. At most meetings, she was at least generally successful in proposing solutions and pointing out options for their issues. Unfortunately, her colleagues were rarely motivated enough to support Johnsen’s ideas.

One day, after a considerable amount of unsuccessful negotiations, during which Johnsen had been frustrated by the department’s inability to wrap up the project, she decided to insert her proposal for the ventilation system in the middle of the documents to be circulated for the next meeting. She counted on Kokomo to follow his usual routine of not reading the documents before the meeting but waiting instead for meeting attendants to fill in the information he was lacking. When Johnsen recounted the story, she always acknowledged that she had taken a significant risk with her decision.

The initial response to Johnsen’s plan was a heated exchange between representatives at the meeting. Kokomo, not having seen the document, struggled to catch up and regain control of the meeting. Johnsen, usually telling the story after a drink or two with staff after work, enjoyed imitating the director spluttering, stammering, and trying to answer questions on the spot:

“*Umm, one sec . . . let me look at that . . . unh . . . .*” I knew that’s exactly what would happen and I just waited for it. Three . . . two . . . one! Opportunity for me to jump in and take over. And I did! Within an hour, I had convinced everyone to assume the shared cost of the highest ventilation standard suitable for office space; the hotel would assume the additional cost of upgrading that standard to what was required for kitchens. The end result was superior ventilation for the offices and a manageable upgrading cost for the hotel. Win, win!

Ol’ Koko wasn’t pleased. He was quick enough, though, to take credit for the idea in the meeting and when chatting with everyone after, but he exploded when we got back to the office. “*What the hell were you doing?!* *You had no right. You ought to be fired!*” But what was he going to do? I negotiated a resolution to a stalemate, for heaven’s sake! Koko knew I had him.

Johnsen liked to remind people that, after that incident, she was sent in along with the senior team to the most difficult or complicated situations.

Team Leader

In the fall of 2016, riding on the energy of her success with negotiating a resolution to the ventilation system problem, Johnsen took advantage of the federal service professional development program. She had applied to three executive MBA programs and was accepted by all three. However, she chose Université du Québec à Montréal to stay within the grant amount available under the federal service program and to improve her French language skills.

Kokomo was eager to see Johnsen in the program, which he suggested could lead to a promotion, although it could also mean pursuing positions in different departments. His only requirement before approving Johnsen’s application was that she commit to take a specified number of credits in people management, noting that “success and advancement are dependent on how well you can manage your team.”

Johnsen had completed various internal leadership programs in her career with the federal service, and she trusted that her team consisted of accomplished individuals. She regularly celebrated success and accomplishments with her team. To encourage team members to grow in their roles and take on new challenges, Johnsen gave them as much responsibility as possible without risking the team’s success at negotiating solid agreements. People she described as “whiners and slackers” did not last long on her team. She was proud of her ability to get people to step up to their talents and perform. The downside of her strategy was that, after she pushed her staff members to improve their skills, they were often recruited by other groups and departments. The result was a high turnover rate in her team. However, Johnsen took pride in offering growth opportunities and watching team members meet their benchmarks and eventually move on.

The Opportunity

In 2018, Public Services was tasked with updating Canada’s network of aging laboratories. An anticipatory job posting went up for various senior directors to provide “leadership in developing, planning, managing, and implementing frameworks, strategies, policies, and plans” to update the Government of Canada’s science and technology infrastructure. The update was to specifically ensure that the government’s science and technology facilities were environmentally sound, with the latest green technology and equipment. Instead of negotiating temporary solutions that met existing environmental regulations, Johnsen would have an opportunity to propose long-term solutions that would set new benchmarks and actually ameliorate the environmental strain exerted by laboratories. Even better, the positions were at a job grade EX-02—the second level of the executive classification of jobs. At that second level, the job presented an opportunity for Johnsen to break into the executive class of the federal service, effectively bypassing the entry level EX-01 executive position. The executive classification of jobs provided senior executives with the opportunity to tightly manage their employees’ growth as new executives.

As was typical in the federal service, the selection process took months to complete. However, early in 2019, Kokomo called Johnsen in to a meeting to discuss a different job offer. Kokomo offered her a one-year contract senior director position, but at the EX-01 executive level. Although the position was considered a promotion, it would mean moving from a permanent position to a temporary position, which involved some career risk. If she accepted the offer, Johnsen would have to apply for a leave of absence from her current permanent position so that it could be held for her return. However, if the leave was granted, her current job would not actually be held for her return; rather, she would be guaranteed “work at an equivalent level,” but not necessarily within her current department. Of course, there was a chance that her one-year contract could become a permanent position, or that she could secure another permanent position before the contract expired.

Johnsen was disappointed by Kokomo’s temporary position offer. However, she remained determined in her conviction that she had been the right applicant for the posting of senior director positions at the EX-02 level. Taking advantage of another perk of working in the civil service, she requested a review of the selection process for the senior director positions posting. She was determined to prove yet again that she was not only an invaluable applicant, but the most suitable candidate for the posting. She was certainly worth a permanent appointment at a higher level.

Johnsen began preparing her appeal (see Exhibit 1).

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Exhibit 1: Email from Mattie Johnsen to Landon Kokomo, Director General, Real Property Services Branch, Public Services and Procurement Canada

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| From: Mattie Johnsen  Subject: Appointment under Selection Process #2018-SVC-EA-HQ-375480  To: Landon Kokomo  Date: February 5, 2019  Dear Landon,  Thank you for offering me the temporary EX-01 position with the new Science and Technology Infrastructure Projects. I’ve taken some time to think about your offer. As you know, I had hoped for a permanent EX-02 position and I believe that I am eminently qualified for such an appointment. Therefore, before accepting your offer, I request that my application and the appointment process be reviewed. As you will see, I meet—and often exceed—the essential qualifications for the job.  *Graduation with a degree from a recognized post-secondary institution in a field relevant to the position*:  In addition to undergraduate and graduate degrees in environmental systems engineering, I have a master’s degree in business administration. My academic preparation is multidisciplinary and far greater than required.  *E1. Significant experience in establishing and maintaining strategic partnerships with a variety of stakeholders such as federal government departments and agencies, other levels of government, internal service lines, or private sector organizations*:  As you know, my work over the last three years has involved working with a number of stakeholders to negotiate and manage environmental standards in shared physical facilities. I draw your attention especially to the complex strategy and multiple partners involved in the Marbella project. My ability to understand what was critical to each party resulted in a proposal that all occupants accepted, allowing the plans to complete the project to proceed. Since then, I have been assigned as a member of the larger negotiating team on multiple, complex real property management projects.  *E2. Recent and significant experience in providing strategic advice and recommendations to senior management (Director General and above, or equivalent executive in the private sector) on complex issues*:  I appreciate that you have not always agreed with the recommendations I have made or the advice I have provided when we have negotiated complex sharing arrangements for real property. However, my advice and recommendations have always been based on sound research and an appreciation for the perspectives of the various parties. My recommendations address significant business risks and impacts that are multi-dimensional, sensitive, and affect many partners or stakeholders. Further, my suggestions, when followed, have resulted in resolutions, usually that are precedent setting and that affect Public Services’ public profile. Of the seven shared facilities projects I have been involved with over the last three years, six have relied, at least in part, on my proposals for environmental management. The seventh—the small bureau established on First Nations land in northern Saskatchewan—succeeded because of my understanding of the issues in rural Saskatchewan.  *E3. Significant experience managing large complex projects or in the delivery of a diverse program*:  My work for the Real Property Services Branch has involved complex projects from the time I was hired in 2012. When assessing environmental standards for a building, I must take into consideration local, provincial, federal, and international environmental expectations and regulations. My work since 2016 has required that I add to these considerations the needs of community, corporate, and public stakeholders. Again, I draw your attention to the Marbella project, which not only involved all of those elements but also, because of the location of the building, involved considerations of historical significance that were attracting media attention.  *E4. Experience in building, empowering, and managing multidisciplinary teams*:  I manage a team of at least eight people, some of them engineers and engineering technicians and others administrative staff fulfilling a variety of roles. All members of my team move on to other positions, almost always with a promotion—evidence of my ability to nurture talent and develop skills in the people who report to me. As you recommended, I also focused on developing my leadership skills by taking courses on human resource management in my MBA program. I graduated from the program with honours, with my marks in the human resource management courses being among the highest marks I achieved.  The government’s program to update its science and technical facilities will take 10 to 20 years to implement. Appointing me as a senior director in this program as a temporary EX-01 will compromise my ability to establish a solid working team with experience and momentum to carry the project forward over the long term. Further, being appointed as a temp will change how others view me in my position, undermining any credibility or authority I might carry forward from my current work and establish in my new position.  Accepting a temporary position with the federal services will also place my professional growth at risk. While I recognize that I can accept a temporary position and be guaranteed some work later at my current employment level, there is no guarantee that I will be able to pick up where I left off in a field where I have amassed considerable expertise and established a noted reputation for successful outcomes. I have invested heavily in my career—backed by the government’s support of my continued education—and believe that my potential will be best realized with a permanent appointment as Senior Director, EX-02, in the new Science and Technology Infrastructure Project.  Forgive me for being so forward, Landon. You have been a motivating supervisor and I enjoy working with you, but offering me a temporary appointment like this compromises my future in this field and with the federal service and cheats the federal program of the skills and expertise I bring. I hope that you agree with my evaluation of my contributions and will advocate on my behalf for a permanent appointment as an EX-02.  I look forward to talking to you more about making this transition on my future path with the Government of Canada.  Mattie |

Source: Created by the case author.

1. “Public Services and Procurement Canada,” Government of Canada, accessed November 14, 2020, www.tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca/comm/index-eng.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Real Property,” Public Services and Procurement Canada, accessed November 14, 2020, www.tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca/biens-property/index-eng.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Evaluation of the Real Property Services Program, Exhibit 17: Revenue per Full-Time Equivalent—Real Property Services Program,” Government of Canada, accessed November 14, 2020, www.tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca/rapports-reports/evaluation/epsi-erpsp-eng.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kim Mackrael, “Tory Budget Axes 19,200 Public-Service Jobs,” *Globe and Mail*, March 29, 2012, accessed November 9, 2020, www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/tory-budget-axes-19200-public-service-jobs/article4096640. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)