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PUBLIC SERVICES CANADA (B): LANDON KOKOMO

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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Landon Kokomo was a director general in the real property services program of Public Services and Procurement Canada (Public Services). He was responsible for approximately 100 staff members, including teams of engineers, technicians, and administrative staff. Kokomo’s department ensured that the management team of buildings owned and occupied by the federal government complied with local, provincial, and federal regulations.

One of the team members who reported to Kokomo was Mathilde (Mattie) Johnsen, an engineering analyst. Johnsen joined the civil service in 2012, after graduating from the University of Regina at the top of her class in environmental systems engineering. She started with the federal service on a team that did basic compliance audits and quickly advanced through various job grades. In 2016, with a laudable record of professional growth, Johnsen was the successful applicant for a job in the management stream as part of Kokomo’s group. Johnsen led one of the multidisciplinary teams negotiating with stakeholders for shared use of facilities. Johnsen and her team 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.

In 2018, Public Services was tasked with updating Canada’s network of aging laboratories. An anticipatory job posting went up for several 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 infrastructure update was specifically intended to ensure that the government’s science and technology facilities were environmentally sound, with the latest green technology and equipment. Johnsen applied for one of the senior director positions. She had the required level of education, was familiar with the service, and had been extraordinarily successful in negotiating and maintaining compliance with environmental standards. Kokomo acknowledged Johnsen’s potential and admired her confidence and enthusiasm. However, he was also aware that Johnsen could be arrogant and presumptuous. Was she the right person for the job?

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 regional directors. The department employed more than 6,500 people. About 40 per cent of the department’s staff 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.

Mattie Johnsen

Johnsen was a brilliant environmental engineer. Born and raised in Saskatchewan, she had earned both undergraduate and graduate degrees in environmental systems engineering from the University of Regina, after which she joined the federal service. Tens of thousands of jobs had been cut from the civil service when Johnsen graduated in 2012, and the science and technology sector of the federal service—the sector with most of the jobs in environmental engineering—had been hit particularly hard.[[4]](#footnote-4) But Johnsen had excellent grades and was passably bilingual—a requirement for most federal service jobs. When she saw the opportunity for a one-year temporary assignment with Public Services, 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.

In 2016, Public Services was restructured and Johnsen joined the management team, overseeing 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.

In the fall of 2016, 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; his only requirement 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.”

The Appeal

Now Kokomo was in a bind. Johnsen had applied for one of the senior director positions in the new science and technology infrastructure project. She had all the technical skills and experience, but Kokomo was concerned about Johnsen’s lack of interpersonal skills.

Hiring decisions were made by a committee that referred to Kokomo, as Johnsen’s current manager, for an evaluation of Johnsen as a candidate for the senior director positions. He informed the committee that her performance appraisals were excellent, but he was concerned about a gap he noticed between the strengths she exhibited in her current position and the skills that would be required in the new job. He also commented on the EX-02 job grade of the new positions, in the second level of the executive classification of jobs. If Johnsen were offered the job, she would advance in the executive class of the federal service and bypass the usual entry-level executive position of EX-01, which provided senior executives with the opportunity to tightly manage an employee’s growth as a new executive.

Kokomo voiced his concerns that, based on past incidents and behaviours, Johnsen lacked the interpersonal skills that were foundational to the new positions. Therefore, he could not recommend her for the job.

The hiring committee members were impressed with Johnsen’s performance record, based on her performance appraisals. Her ability to negotiate agreements and get building managers to comply with complex regulations would be an asset in the new project. Johnsen had also presented herself well in the interview, showing confidence in her own skills and a keen interest in the program. Therefore, the committee outvoted Kokomo. However, trusting his assessment of the situation, they decided that instead of appointing Johnsen to one of the posted positions that she had applied to, they would instead offer her a secondment as a temporary EX-01 level position for one year.

When Johnsen was informed by Kokomo about the committee’s decision and job offer, she was clearly disappointed. Exercising her right to request a review of the selection process, she launched an appeal of the hiring decision (see Exhibit 1).

The next step was for Kokomo to explain to the hiring committee, in writing, his reasoning for not recommending Johnsen for the posted positions (see Exhibit 2). The committee members would then review Johnsen’s appeal and Kokomo’s explanation and reassess their hiring decision.

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 multidimensional, 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.

Exhibit 2: Email from Landon Kokomo to Selection

Committee (#2018-SVC-EA-HQ-375480)

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| --- |
| From: Landon Kokomo  Subject: Appeal from Mattie Johnsen under Selection Process #2018-SVC-EA-HQ-375480  To: Members of the Selection Committee  Date: February 13, 2019  Dear Selection Committee,  Attached [see Exhibit 1], please see an email from Mattie Johnsen asking us to review her appointment to the new Science and Technology Infrastructure Project as a senior director, EX-01 (temporary). Johnsen is asking that we revisit our decision and reconsider her for an appointment as a senior director, EX-02 (indeterminate) as the position was advertised.  When we were making our selections from the pool of applicants, I indicated that Johnsen was more than technically qualified for the position, but I had concerns about her skills in managing teams and interacting with others. Therefore, I recommended to the committee that we not give Johnsen the promotion. However, Johnsen’s performance appraisals profile her considerable successes, so we concluded that instead of refusing her the promotion, we would offer her a temporary assignment at a junior executive level with the hope that closer supervision and some time would give her the resources she needs to develop as a leader.  At the time I was circumspect about some of the details of my concerns about Johnsen; however, in light of her request for a review, I provide further details here.  *Graduation with a degree from a recognized post-secondary institution in a field relevant to the position*:  I have no challenge to Johnsen’s statement that her “academic preparation is multidisciplinary and far greater than required.” With a BASc and a MASc in environmental engineering and an MBA, Johnsen is, indeed, academically qualified for the position. Further, she undertook her MBA in French, which has elevated her language skills to CCC in both English and French.  *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*:  Johnsen has more than seven years of experience negotiating and managing environmental standards with a number of stakeholders. Initially, she was responsible for ensuring that the government’s buildings and facilities complied with environmental regulations. She travelled around the 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. Her statistics indicate that building managers complied with Johnsen’s audit; she rarely had to issue second warnings. And more often than not, she was able to make suggestions that improved a building’s environmental efficiency beyond the required minimum.  For those reasons, Johnsen advanced three job grades in just four years. However, although I was not her direct superior during this period of Johnsen’s employment, I was advised by her supervisor that building managers regularly complained about Johnsen’s approach and demands. She was impolite and inflexible and had an unreasonable sense of what could be accomplished with aging infrastructure. She adopted a superior tone and usually dismissed the challenges and suggestions building managers would make based on their experience. Her supervisor met with Johnsen a couple of times—I was also involved in one meeting—but I am not aware of improvements in her behaviour. So, while the building standards were excellent, her supervisor regularly had to run interference with the building managers to smooth relationships.  *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*:  In 2016, Johnsen was promoted into a management stream and became part of my group. She was responsible for a team of about eight people, made up of engineers, technicians, and administrative support. Johnsen and her team were responsible for negotiating with other governments (municipal and provincial), regulatory agencies, industry, and Indigenous peoples for shared use of facilities.  Johnsen was good at what she did. In fact, the more complicated the negotiations, the happier and more successful she was. Sometimes, she was sorting out environmental standards for a small federal bureau to be established on First Nations land; other times, she was negotiating responsibilities for meeting emissions standards for a large city office building shared with a provincial government. Her knowledge of issues specific to Saskatchewan and the western provinces was particularly deep and useful. Johnsen seemed to know how to approach those conversations especially. We were responsible for establishing some small bureau offices in the prairie provinces, and Johnsen was definitely an asset in those conversations.  Things broke down, however, when she was interacting with industry representatives or with senior bureaucrats from the larger central provinces. One project we were involved in, the Marbella project, was a particular problem. The challenge was the ventilation system in the building.  The Marbella, a federal government building, 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 Marbella needed a higher standard of ventilation than was required 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. Building a new segregated ventilation system was financially not even an option. Losing one or two of the office occupants could be addressed, but if the hotel backed out of the sharing agreement, we were going to have to find a new tenant for a significant amount of space that would need extended renovations to separate it from the adjoining hotel.  Johnsen’s team was responsible for sorting out the details for the ventilation system. I had five other teams also working on the project, each responsible for a different aspect of the project. The negotiations were not going well, and we were under a lot of pressure to settle the agreement as cheaply as possible for the federal government. We were to occupy about half of the space for offices, so our proportion of the costs was significant.  Johnsen just could not see the challenges with the negotiations. She regularly talked over others at our meetings, making suggestions for how they could resolve their challenges. I think she was riding high on the successes we had in Saskatchewan and believed that all of her ideas were going to be good ones. The other team leaders were frustrated and began to arrange meetings that excluded Johnsen so they had a chance to brainstorm ideas without her running roughshod over their suggestions.  She had a plan for the ventilation system, which she ran by me and proposed at group meetings on several occasions. Johnsen’s idea was for all the office occupants 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 that required for kitchens. The end result would be superior ventilation for the offices and a manageable upgrading cost for the hotel. While the plan had merit, Johnsen did not seem to understand that the federal government was going to occupy half of the building. While the other office occupants were looking at small increases for their share of the ventilation system, we were looking at a substantive increase. Her plan was taking us out of our budget.  Before one of our large group meetings with all the building occupants, Johnsen stuck her proposal into the meeting documents without telling anyone. There was an explosion at the meeting as people read over the proposal. I was flabbergasted; my team members were shocked into silence. I couldn’t even catch my breath before Johnsen jumped in to explain her proposal. Of course all the other occupants agreed to it—it was a decent solution for them—and with everyone else agreeing to it, there was little I could do except project confidence in the idea and trust that we could cut the budget elsewhere to make up the difference.  I took responsibility for the idea, knowing that, if the assistant deputy minister (ADM) got wind that someone at Johnsen’s level had pulled a stunt like that, she would be out of her job or at least on probation. The ADM was not pleased with me for what he thought was my idea, but we did pull it off. With the ventilation issue sorted out, the rest of the negotiations quickly fell into place. And we did make up the budget overrun elsewhere. But I never allowed Johnsen to go into difficult or complicated situations alone after that; I always insisted that when she was included, she was positioned as a junior member of a senior team.  *E3. Significant experience managing large complex projects or in the delivery of a diverse program*:  I have nothing to add to this point.  *E4. Experience in building, empowering, and managing multidisciplinary teams*:  Johnsen has been managing a team since 2016, and few people last on her team more than a year, if that long. She does support her team superficially, celebrating victories with them, remembering their birthdays and special events, and so on. However, she micromanages her team, failing to give them scope to make their own decisions or mistakes. The benefit is that her team meets high benchmarks because Johnsen is so driven and clever; the drawback is that no one on her team grows, and they are easily frustrated and quickly move on. I fear we have lost some people with good potential because they are discouraged by how Johnsen’s team operates. I had encouraged Johnsen to take some human resource management courses when she did her MBA, hoping that she would pick up some skills there for better managing her team. However, while she did perform well in her classes according to her grades, I’ve not seen any practical changes in how she manages her team.  My initial recommendation at our selection committee meeting was that we not promote Johnsen at all. We agreed that we would give her an opportunity at a one-year secondment at a more junior level to see how that worked out, but she is asking for a review of that recommendation. How would you like to proceed?  I look forward to your suggestions.  Landon |

Note: BASc = bachelor of science; MASc = master of science; CCC = highest of three levels (A, B, and C) for written comprehension, written expression, and oral proficiency.

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,” Government of Canada, 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)