

apolitical

• **Public Servants' Learning and Skills
Trends Survey 2024**

Global Insights

The state of learning in government



About Apolitical

Apolitical is the world's largest community of public servants, with a mission to build 21st century governments that work for people and the planet.

Apolitical is used by 250,000 public servants and policymakers in 160 countries to find and share best practice through communities of peers, and to upskill with flexible online learning on 21st century government priorities. Members range from mayors and ministers to policy pioneers and digital innovators. Apolitical's courses are co-developed with partners at leading universities and research institutions, including Oxford, the London School of Economics and Georgetown. Our flagship programmes include climate and sustainability, digital and AI, and the 21st century state.

At a glance

➤ **Skilled public servants are the bedrock of effective government action.**

Understanding how – and how much – public servants learn is crucial data for governments looking to build capable workforces that deliver better outcomes, faster.

➤ That's why Apolitical asked 2,064 public servants about the state of learning in government in 2024.

Respondents came from 66 different countries, with the highest representation from the UK and Canada. This report outlines key insights from the survey.

➤ Learning in government is not getting the attention and resources needed to support smart action.

We found public servants:

- pressed by urgent priorities;
- trying to adapt and make space for the important work of learning;
- often confused about priorities for skills development.

➤ Governments urgently need the ability to develop new capabilities.

Artificial intelligence (AI) throws this requirement into sharp relief. Government teams around the world are grappling with how to adopt AI at scale and preparing for the impact it will have on tens of thousands of roles. Leading this exercise will be impossible without public servants and policymakers rapidly upskilling around generative AI, its potential and its limits. Climate action is another area demanding new skills across the whole of government. And the potential and risks of emerging technologies will continue to put pressure on governments to build capability in rapidly advancing fields such as quantum computing, space exploration and synthetic biology.

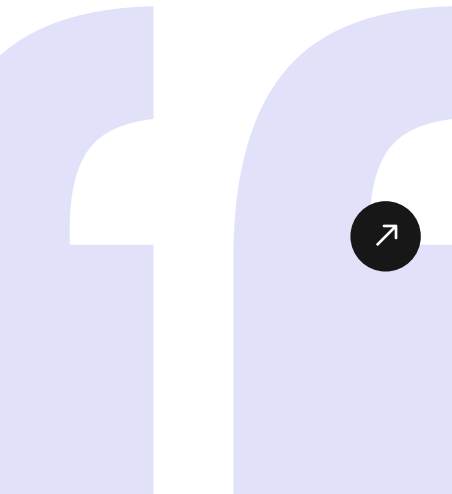


Governments know they can't confront this wave of challenges unless they are supporting public servants to do the same. But the action is missing.

Understanding and increasing public servants' opportunities and capacity for learning will be critical for governments to develop new capabilities, but there's a gap between rhetoric about learning and rollout.



We asked senior public service leaders to share their perspectives on learning in government.



"[Learning] should be integral to the everyday life of government, and in some countries it is. But in some countries it's often treated as a kind of luxury add-on... Unfortunately government and politics have fallen behind the leading edge sectors of their societies."



Sir Geoff Mulgan

Professor of Collective Intelligence, Public Policy and Social Innovation,
University College London

"There has to be a recognition at all levels that the public service is evolving, and so is the demand for skills."



Myra Latendresse-Drapeau

Director General, Transferable Skills,
Canada School of Public Service

"As Cabinet Secretary, the skill set I was most interested in developing is what I call systems leadership... My approach was to build this capability within departments."



Sir Mark Sedwill

Former Cabinet Secretary (2018-2020)
UK Civil Service

Key insights and recommendations

- There are easy wins. Public servants are already learning for millions of hours every month. Maximising that effort can inexpensively unlock productivity and action.

Our survey shows public servants engage in 9 hours of learning in a typical month. Crucially, only 3 hours of this is formal training; the rest is unstructured and self-directed informal learning. The result is millions of hours worth of unrecorded learning happening in governments every month. This is not a new trend but new technologies and behavioural patterns make it more important, particularly for younger workers. Governments need to find ways to maximise the value of this learning time.

We recommend: More formal institutional support for communities of practice as a platform for high-impact, cross-government informal learning to drive action.

- 1 in 3 public servants lack clarity about what they need to learn. Providing support and direction could help.

We found that 1 in 3 public servants lack clarity about which skills they need to develop in order to be successful. A smaller cohort, around 1 in 10, display high levels of uncertainty about their learning and career path. We call these 'lost learners'. Work is more volatile; the relevance of knowledge and skills drains more quickly as technological innovation gets faster and faster. Governments need to support public servants and their learning journey to navigate this constant change.

We recommend: Promoting intelligent, data-driven individualised learning plans.

➤ Online training is necessary and can deliver real impact, but quality is critical.

The vast majority of public servants' training happens online — just 2% access in-person training. While the value-for-money argument for online training tends to dominate, there is also a positive case to make about its extraordinary potential for flexibility, social learning and easy customisation for different departments and roles.

We recommend: Developing new standards for online learning in government.

➤ The link between learning and better job performance is clear for most public servants. Governments should take greater advantage of this positive attitude and leaders should make clear they support learning.

Around 70% of public servants surveyed believe that their recent training has contributed to improved job performance and career advancement. Managers and leaders also emphatically agree that investment in training enhances the impact of their team. This goodwill towards learning should not be undervalued. It is a strategic lever governments can pull to accelerate action.

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How we generated these insights

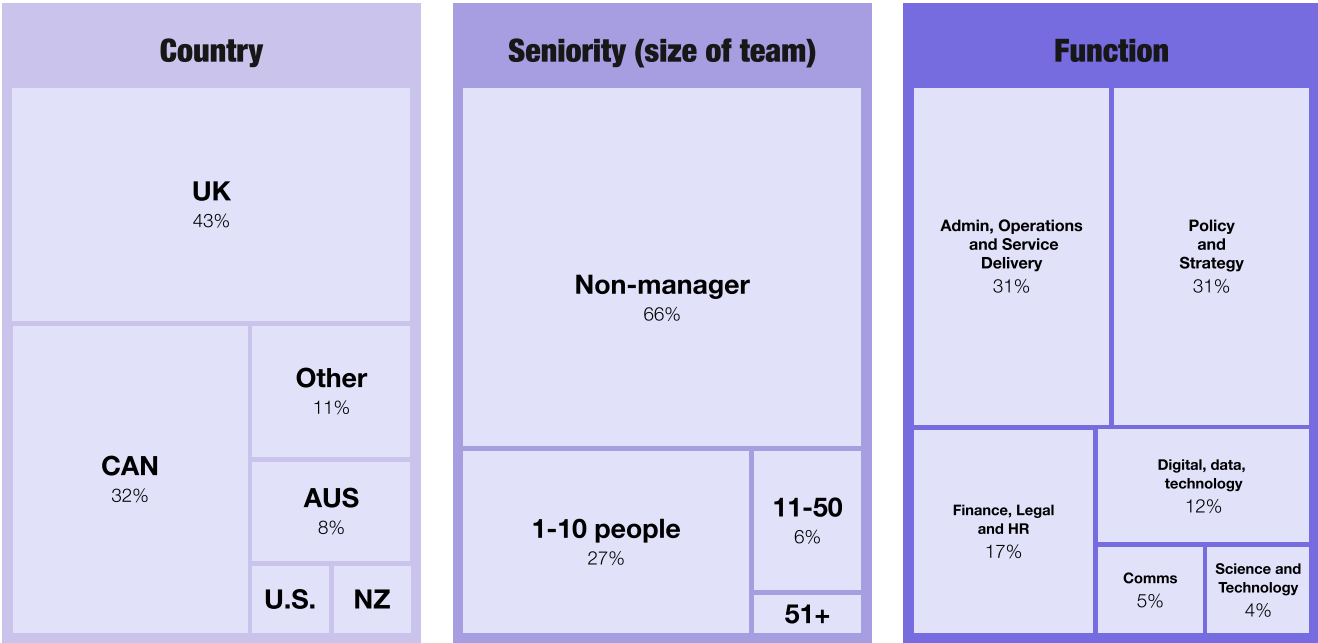
The data presented in this report was collected from a global survey of around 2,100 public servants conducted between March and July 2024.

The survey questions focused on four themes: how public servants engage with learning, how they like to learn, what they want to learn and their perceptions about the impact of learning.

Survey respondents came from 66 countries but most respondents were in the UK (43%) or Canada (32%), with (8%) from Australia. In this report, we analyse responses across six different functions in government: policy and strategy (31%) and operational and service delivery (31%), followed by finance, legal and HR, digital, data and technology, communications and science and engineering. Respondents either selected their function from a predefined list of 13 options or submitted their own. For more streamlined analysis and reporting, Apolitical has synthesised all of these responses into six categories.

The survey was anonymous so there is no independent verification of participants’ responses. Given the respondent demographics, the findings are considered highly representative of learning trends in public administrations in high-resource settings. The sample is statistically significant for the UK and Canadian national public services (99% confidence level, 5% margin of error). However, the sample may over-represent those in high-information, knowledge-based work (like policy, strategy and digital) and under-represent those in operational and delivery roles. The analysis in this report does not apply any weighting to responses. However the [raw data is publicly available](#) so independent researchers can analyse trends for more specific sub-populations, such as countries, function or seniority.

Overview of respondents



INTERVIEW

‘Will governments ever learn?’

In February 2024, **Sir Geoff Mulgan** wrote a short paper reviewing the state of provision in government learning. It was titled ‘Will governments ever learn?’ Apolitical asked Mulgan, who is a member of our Advisory Council on 21st century government excellence, about his thinking on and experience in government capability building.



Sir Geoff Mulgan,
Professor of Collective Intelligence,
Public Policy and Social Innovation
University College London

Q: How much attention should governments be paying to learning as a tool to help achieve their priorities?

“It’s very hard to be competent in anything without learning — keeping up with new knowledge — and even the most automated processes depend on good learning. So this should be integral to the everyday life of government, and in some countries it is. Chinese public administration, for example, has a very long tradition of respecting education and requiring it for even the most senior roles in government. But in some countries it’s often treated as a kind of luxury add-on.”

Q: Would you say that there are different traditions and cultures of learning across governments?

“It’s uneven across the world. Singapore is an example of a competent civil service which integrates learning to the highest levels. France has done it very seriously in the past, too, though its methods fell a bit behind. The English-speaking world, like the UK and the U.S., has more of a culture of the ‘gifted amateur’. There’s perhaps an implicit assumption that you just put someone smart in the job and they work it out along the way.”

“But it’s also true that both the UK and U.S., for example, have fantastic universities and fields in which they do really well. Take high-level sport, for example. That is all about continuous and intensive learning, coaching, trying and reflecting. Science, likewise, has a very deep culture of continuous learning and peer review. Unfortunately government and politics have fallen behind the leading edge sectors of their societies — and politicians in particular are often very ill-equipped for the decisions they have to take.”

Q: How do you see the mix of different modes of learning that governments need in the 21st century?

If you’re designing an entire system, then it needs to operate on different registers. So one end, increasingly, is very short ‘just-in-time’ learning on something you’re grappling with, it could be a new piece of software or how to reform planning legislation. That can be achieved in short bursts with online content. You need a lot of that now, and the tools are dramatically better than even 10 years ago.

On the other end of the spectrum are the foundations; learning underlying disciplines like law and economics, statistics or psychology. These are more in-depth, they take longer and may be better suited to more classical, classroom-based pedagogy. And then there’s lots of things somewhere in between. Some will be specialised and others will be more cross-cutting.

How do public servants learn?

Public servants lack the time for learning. Managers and leaders need to help.

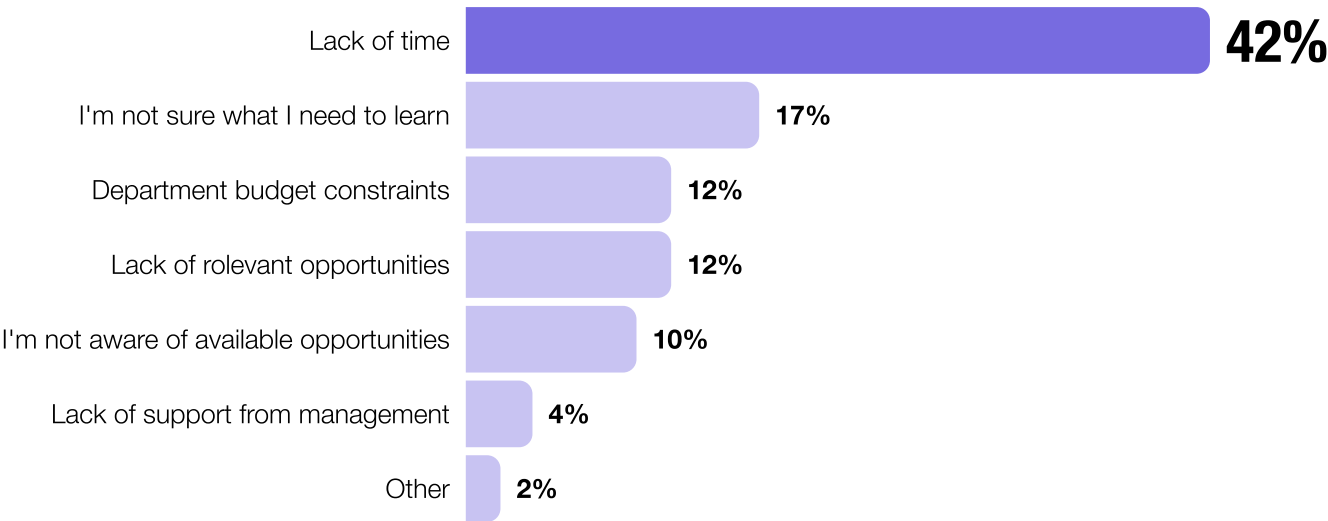
Public servants are pressed for time. With increased workloads and urgent delivery priorities, it doesn't come as a surprise. But that reality is making it harder for them to participate in learning. Our survey data shows that a lack of time is by far the most significant barrier public servants face to engaging with learning. That is consistent with other research in this field.¹

Of the 900 respondents citing time as their biggest barrier to learning, nearly 75% said that learning during work hours helped them to accomplish more learning, and about two-thirds said that blocking out dedicated time while at work (e.g. a half-day) was also helpful. By contrast, respondents made it clear that putting the onus on them to learn in their private time is neither helpful nor effective.

This highlights the important role that managers and leaders play in unlocking the resources (both in terms of time and money) to enable public servants to participate in learning.²

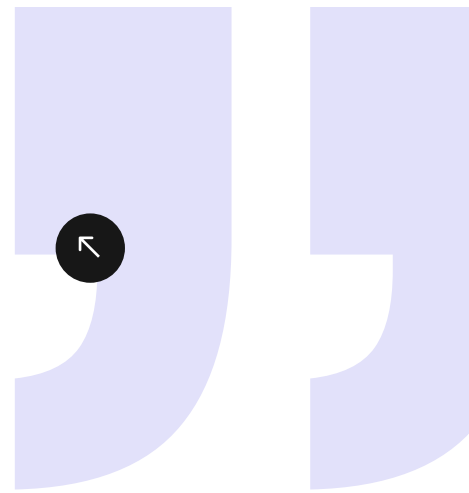
A lack of time is by far the biggest barrier to public servants engaging with learning.

What is your biggest barrier to participating in skills development opportunities?



Despite the clear benefits of learning to public administrations, training budgets in OECD central public administrations seem to be among the first items cut when fiscal stress hits.

OECD Public Governance Review, 2016



Managers and leaders need to create the conditions for learning

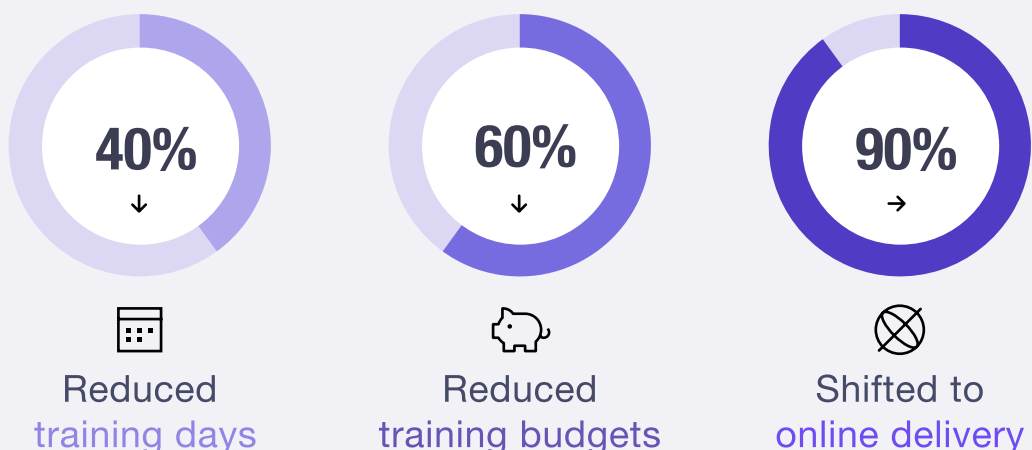
Public organisations can't develop new capabilities to respond to difficult problems unless the people within these organisations do too. If they lack the capacity and culture to enable learning, they will be fundamentally less equipped.

Training is often deprioritised when resources are tight or there's a lack of time. It's true for individuals as well as institutions. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, for instance, many governments made significant cuts to training investment.³ But that may be a false economy, given its long-term benefits.⁴

While it's difficult to quantify the impact of a lack of investment in learning, there are clear examples of governments struggling to develop new capabilities and deliver. In the UK, for example, the National Audit Office has often cited a lack of technical fluency among senior leaders as a factor in the poor delivery of digital transformation programmes.⁵ Across Europe, a dearth of environmental assessment skills is preventing local governments from delivering investment in climate resilient infrastructure.⁶

When times are tough, governments cut training budgets first.

In the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, that's what governments across the OECD did.

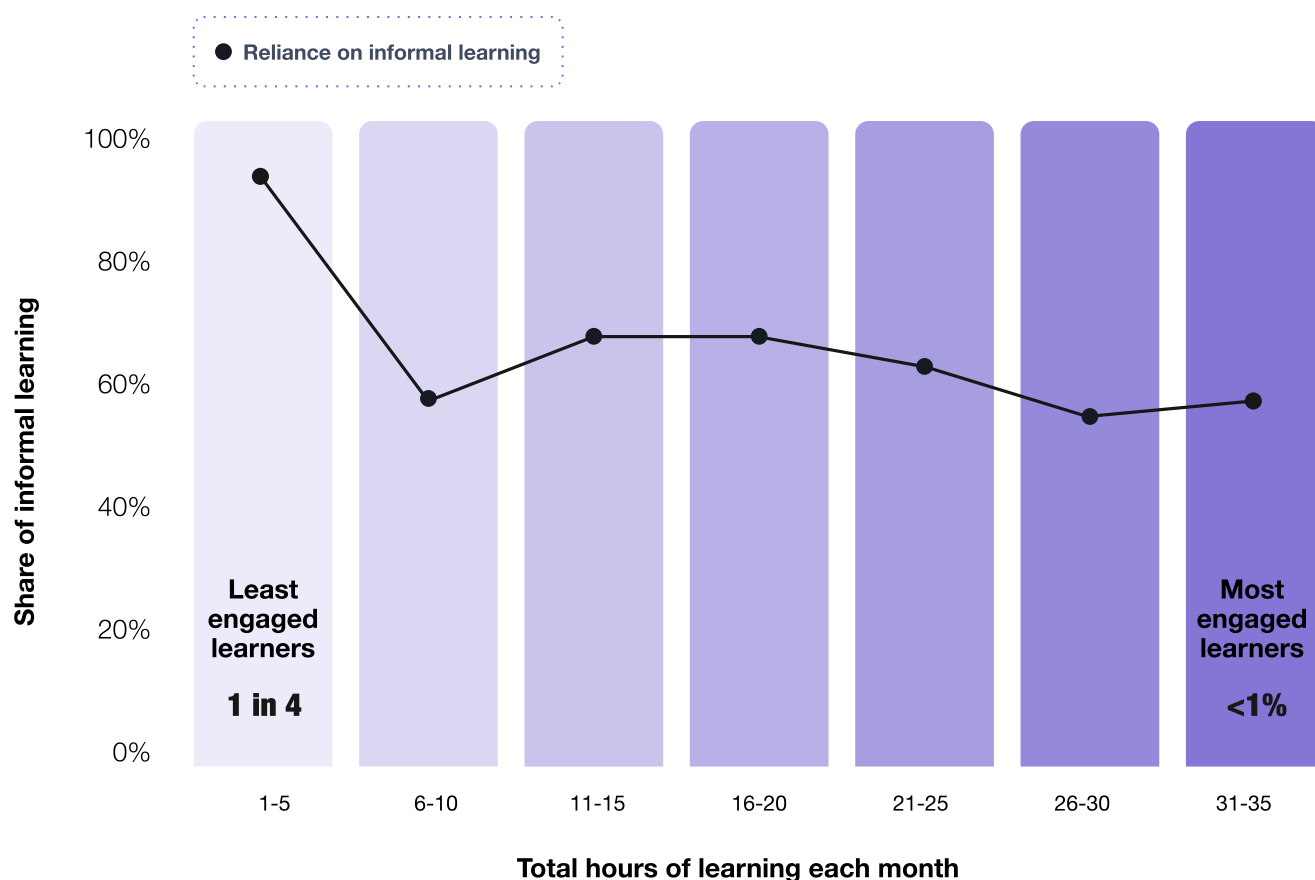


Millions of hours of learning are unseen and unstructured. Governments could maximise them.

Our survey data shows that public servants engage with around 9 hours of learning in a typical month; of that total, 6 hours are informal and 3 are formal.⁷ Formal learning was defined as structured learning experiences that typically include some form of assessment or certification, such as online courses. Informal learning was defined as unstructured, self-directed learning, such as reading articles or participating in peer groups.

The less time public servants have, the bigger the role informal learning plays. Our analysis shows that, on average, informal learning accounts for 70% of public servants' monthly learning time. That figure jumps to 92% for those who spend less than 6 hours a month on all learning activities (which is nearly 1 in 4 public servants).

Who relies on informal learning the most?



7. Survey respondents told us time ranges for formal and informal learning. We used the midpoint value to represent each range. For example, 1-5 hours is represented as 3 hours.

Governments need to get informal learning right.

The importance and impact of informal learning in the workplace has been long-established, with an evidence base stretching back several decades.⁸ But new technologies and behavioural patterns are shifting this into overdrive, particularly for younger workers, and evidence suggests that getting it right can lead to significant increases in performance.⁹

What drives informal learning in government?

- **Time:** Our survey data shows that public servants with the least amount of time rely most on informal learning. The flexibility can reduce disruption to busy professional and personal schedules.¹⁰
- **Immediacy:** Informal learning can often provide access to more directly applicable knowledge and skills, rather than more theoretical content.¹¹
- **Cost:** 12% of respondents to our survey said that budget constraints were their biggest barrier to learning; for resourceful public servants, informal learning can act as a free or low-cost alternative to formal training.

Given its significance and the evidence of its impact, government leaders should be focused on maximising high quality, impactful opportunities for informal learning. Communities of practice can help achieve this by providing curation of content and connection to colleagues that can help public servants solve specific problems quickly.

Communities of practice for curation and collaboration

Learning is fundamentally a social experience, even when it's done alone.¹² Whether it's formal or informal modes of learning, research shows that social interactions enhance the impact of that experience by opening up new perspectives.¹³ For public servants, grappling with challenges that cut across departmental silos in a faster moving world, a collaborative approach to learning is essential. So, too, are flexibility and relevance; public servants want to access highly applicable knowledge and insight when they need it.

Communities of practice can meet these demands. They create groups of peers with relevant knowledge and networks that can support each other to learn and solve problems. They provide a flexible and informal way to engage with relevant people and content.¹¹ There are high-profile examples of communities which have enabled governments to build new capabilities, as the following case studies demonstrate.

Has anyone used Gov Notify with Microsoft PowerAutomate? We're looking at a use case where we need to send text messages to citizens... Currently we're sending letters and it costs about £10k a year, if we could get a mobile number that could drop to £350 a year...

Excerpt from a question posted in Apolitical's **AI in Government** community, initiating real-world learning and problem solving.

How governments can build new capabilities through communities of practice



Government
Digital Service

The UK Government Digital Service is widely recognised as a global leader in public sector digital transformation. An important pillar of its success was the ability to spread new ideas and ways of working throughout government. Communities of practice for designers, engineers and others were essential to this approach. These communities served as a platform for a relatively small central team to expand its influence and impact across a much wider system, breaking down traditional silos.¹⁵

GSA

In the USA, the General Services Administration (GSA) is using its AI Community of Practice (AI CoP) to develop AI capabilities across government. Launched in 2019, the AI CoP has grown to include over 4,000 members from 90 federal and local agencies. This community has enhanced AI literacy by providing access to up-to-date training resources. The AI CoP also helps share important resources like the AI Governance Toolkit, to support responsible AI adoption. There are collaborative working groups and projects like the 'Applied AI Challenge'. It also helps connect emerging AI technologies from the private sector to specific government programmes.¹⁶

Nearly all training in government is online now. Quality matters more than ever.

The vast majority of public servants engage with formal learning online; less than 2% primarily learn in-person. About 30% of managers participate in hybrid learning (blending virtual and in-person delivery), a significantly higher rate than non-managers.

98%

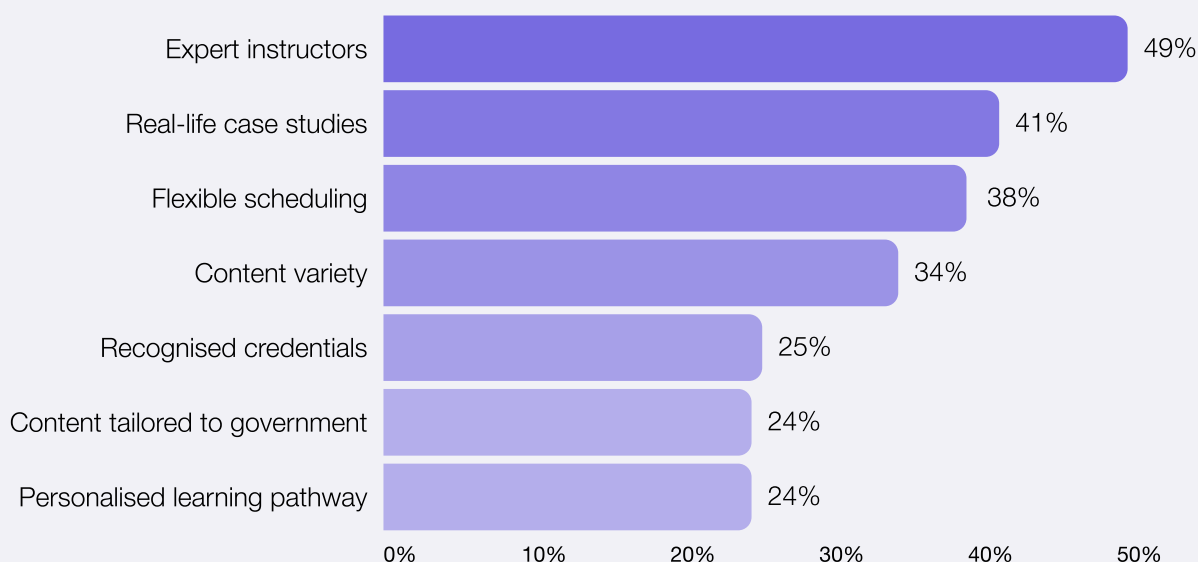
Public servants who say they mostly access **formal learning** through **online delivery** (including hybrid learning).



Public servants want expert-led, relevant and flexible learning experiences

We asked public servants what features of a high quality learning experience matter most to them. Expertise and relevance were their top priorities, alongside flexible scheduling (alluding to the earlier insight about a shortage of time). In written responses, many respondents expressed frustration with content that was too broad, theoretical or generic, which made it difficult to apply the insights in their work. There was a clear desire for more practical examples, real-life case studies, and content that aligned closely with the responsibilities and requirements of their daily work.

What are the key features of a high quality learning experience for public servants?



Maximising the value of online learning

Online learning can include and facilitate a wide variety of experiences, from structured courses and live events to discussion forums and collaboration on projects. At its best, it can blend the technicality of formal learning with the practicality and application of informal learning. The technologies and platforms to enable this kind of multifaceted learning have improved significantly over the last decade and new generative AI capabilities promise another period of exponential improvement.

Given its ubiquity, the perception of ‘online learning’ as a separate mode of learning delivery seems outdated. All learning happens online now. Traditional degree-level education programmes, for example, involve a significant component of virtual experiences.¹⁷

Governments should embrace the unique potential of digital technologies to create rich, expansive learning experiences that offer flexibility, speed, customisation, connection and accessibility. While scale and efficiency are a core part of the value proposition for online learning, that’s not all it can offer. Particularly with the emergence of generative AI, governments can be more ambitious about pushing the frontiers of online pedagogy forward.

Enhancing online learning in government



More customised content: Adapting learning content to specific policy, departmental or professional contexts.



Embedding social learning with cohorts and communities: This will increase completion rates and provide an additional layer of insight and application as public servants can learn from their peers.¹⁸



Faster cycles of content development: New generative AI capabilities could transform learning content creation. Governments will be able to create learning experiences much more rapidly in response to emerging priorities. For example, designing micro-courses around new legislation or topical issues.

Do public servants want in-person training?

There is a vibrant debate about the appropriate mix of in-person versus virtual/online training in government. Conventional wisdom suggests that specialised and technical training, particularly for senior public servants, is better-suited for in-person experiences.

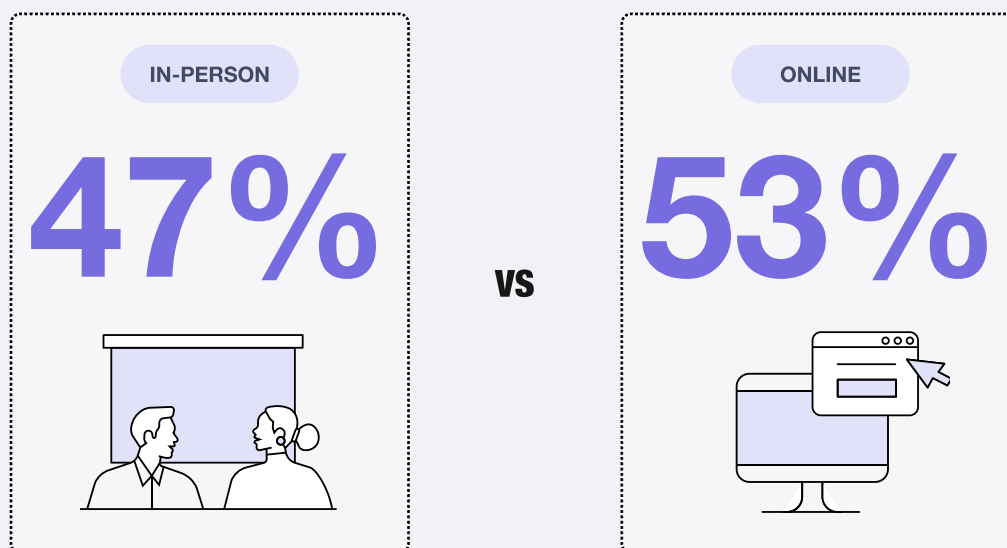
The evidence suggests that public servants see the value of different modalities.

In our survey, for example, we asked an open-ended question about how public servants would improve their most recent learning experience. From 1,600 responses, fewer than 300, around 20%, cited a desire for in-person delivery.

Analysis of a 2023 survey from the Canada School of Public Service (CSPS) shows that public servants prefer online courses and 'Zoom-style' virtual sessions to in-person classroom or workshop experiences. However, there are slight nuances when considering whether the learning is skills- or knowledge-based. It's also worth noting that, according to the CSPS survey, public servants prize on-the-job learning over any other type, reinforcing the need for all learning content to be designed for real-world application and practice.¹⁹

Do public servants prefer in-person or online training?

Overall, for formal learning, public servants show a preference online over in-person delivery.



Apolitical analysis of Employee Identified Learning Needs Survey 2023, Canada School of Public Service (n=8,728)

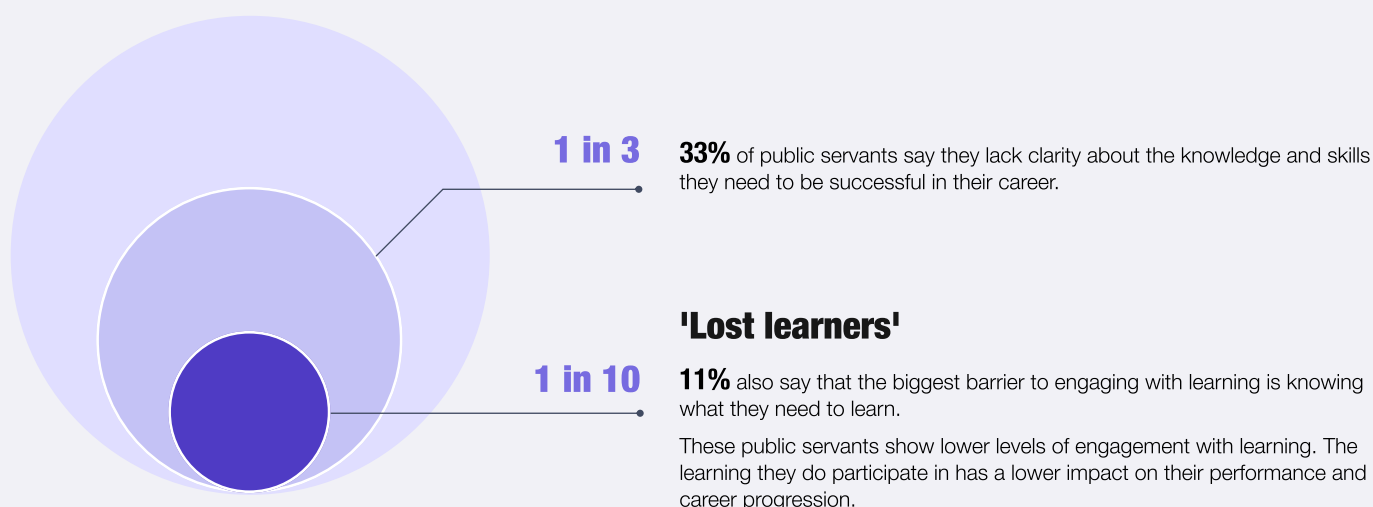
What skills do public servants want to develop?

1 in 10 public servants are 'lost learners'. Who should help them?

When asked, 1 in 3 respondents to our survey said they lack clarity about the knowledge and skills they need to develop to succeed in their careers. Within this cohort, we also identified a smaller group — around 1 in 10 — of 'lost learners' who also say that lack of clarity is a major barrier to them participating in learning.

Uncertainty about learning priorities can be frustrating. With so little time for learning, public servants want impactful experiences; that's harder to achieve if you don't know what skills you need to develop.²⁰ In our survey, 'lost learners' on average spent around 20% less time engaged with learning activities than their peers. They were also less likely to agree that their recent training had improved their job performance or helped develop their career.

1 in 10 public servants are 'lost learners'.



Great line managers are critical in a more demanding skills environment

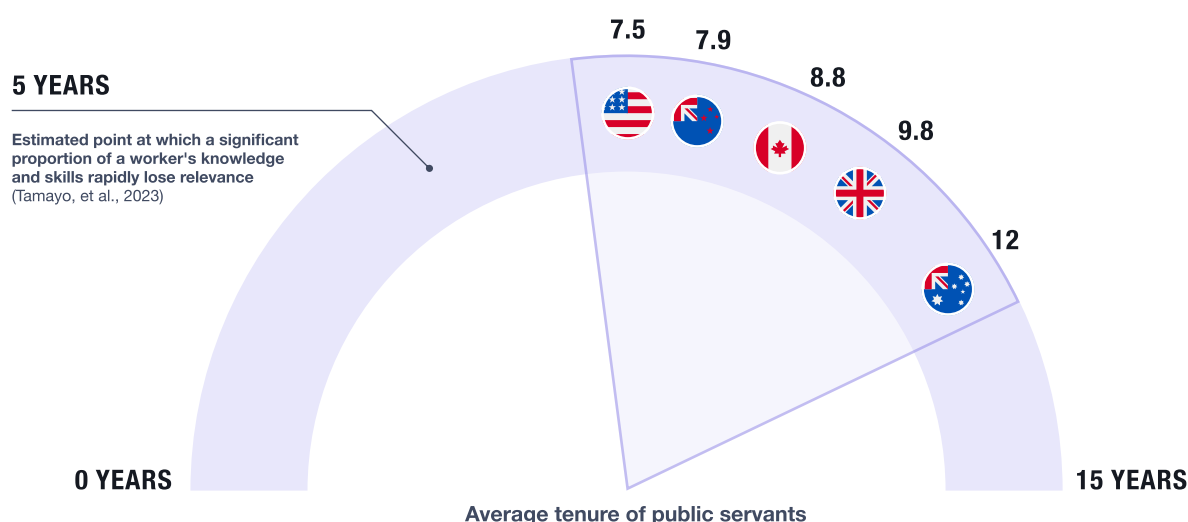
In our sample, 90% of ‘lost learners’ were non-managers, compared with 66% of respondents overall. That raises questions about what support and direction they need to clarify their learning and professional development priorities.

Across sectors, organisations are paying closer attention to the impact of line management on organisational performance. Line managers play a crucial role in facilitating employees’ engagement with learning and development, both in terms of enabling them to participate in opportunities as well as helping them identify which skills they most need to develop.²¹ Some governments are following the trend to professionalise line management. The UK Civil Service, for example, has plans to develop externally accredited standards for line management and ensure that 70% of those in priority roles are working toward the standard by 2025.²² Capability frameworks for this work must reflect both the increasing importance of continuous learning as well as the more fluid and fast-moving nature of skills development.

Avoiding the risk of skills stagnation

Knowledge and skills don’t stay relevant forever. As technologies develop, organisational processes change and society transforms, workers, managers and leaders need to evolve to keep up. Today, however, the speed of change is faster, and the pace will only increase.

Governments need to invest in continuous learning for public servants to avoid the risk of skills stagnation.



Reskilling in the Age of AI (Tamayo, et al., 2023). Tenure data from government sources.

Whereas workers could once rely on their knowledge and skills for as long as 10-15 years, now it's estimated that relevance drains rapidly within five years; it's even shorter in technical sectors.²³ These factors mean that learning and development pathways must be more adaptive and responsive to the changing world around them.

It's particularly important in government, where public servants enjoy longer tenures than their private sector counterparts. That places a heavier onus on public organisations to invest in continuous training to avoid the risk of skills stagnation within government.²⁴ Stagnation of capabilities could hamper government's ability to innovate in areas like AI and digital transformation or address emerging challenges like climate change.

Not all public servants are interested in learning about AI. That could be a problem for some.

Governments process hundreds of millions of manual and repetitive transactions every year. The largest departments employ tens of thousands of public servants to manage this work. That work is increasingly automatable.²⁵ As generative AI becomes more powerful, it will be able to automate a wider range of tasks more successfully, from policy research to legal analysis and writing code.

However, automating a task is not equivalent to automating an entire role. In many cases, AI systems can augment the more complex work that public servants have to do. But that future won't emerge seamlessly. Governments need to equip public servants to manage this technology effectively and keep up with its constant evolution. If they don't, public servants may be ill-prepared to support safe, reliable AI adoption at the kind of scale policymakers are eager to see.

14%

Public servants who identified artificial intelligence as the most important issue in government that they want to learn more about. Digital transformation came first, with 18% of votes.



There’s an AI gap emerging between public servants.

Apolitical’s polling since early 2023 consistently shows comparable levels of generative AI adoption among public servants with their peers in the private sector. A majority are optimistic about its future use in government.²⁶

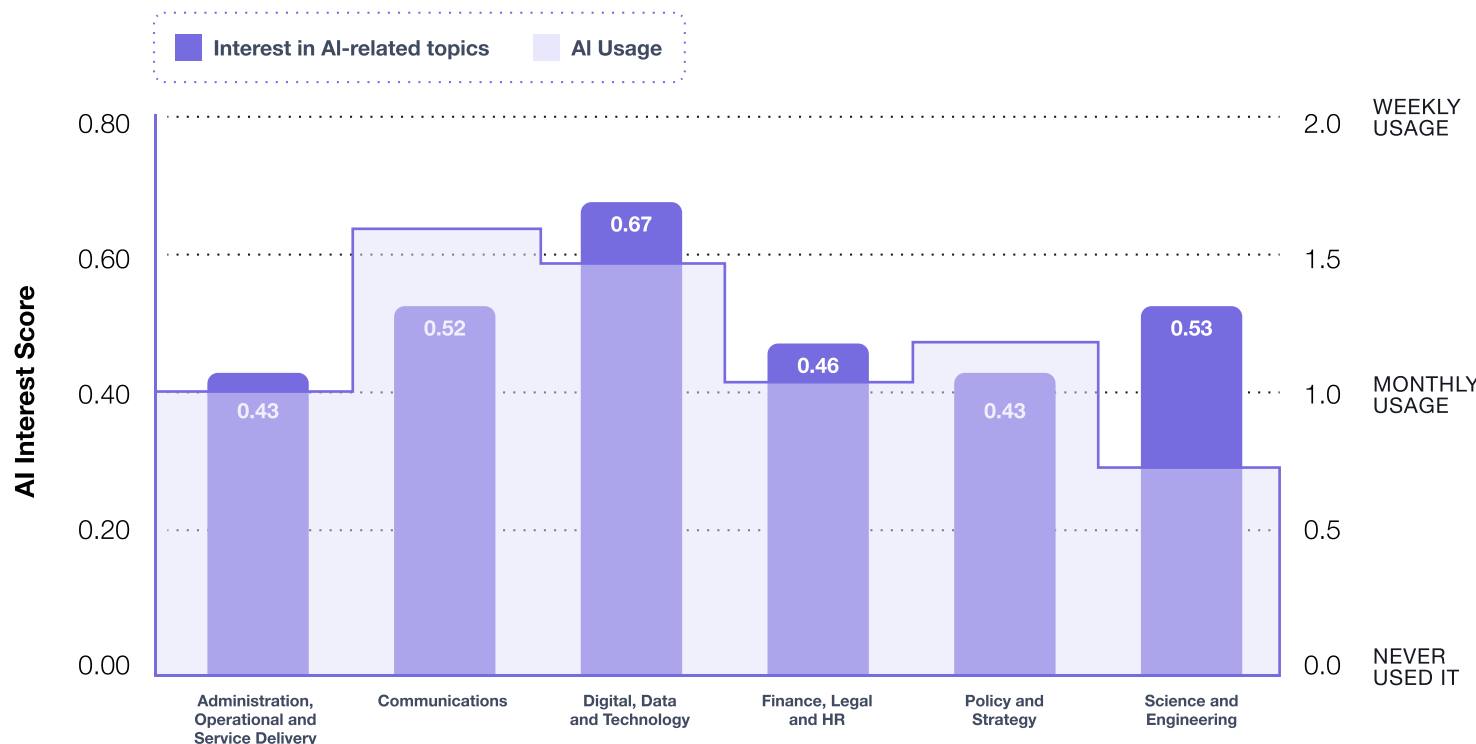
However, there is a gap emerging between public servants across different roles. Those in administrative and operational roles are less interested in learning about AI and they are using it less frequently in their work, often because they are not allowed to use it or they are unsure how to. Policy professionals are also using generative AI much less frequently than their peers in communications or digital roles.²⁷

The graph below illustrates that gap by comparing data from the Learning and Skills Trends Survey with another Apolitical survey on generative AI in government. Levels of interest in AI (and related topics, such as digital transformation) were measured by scoring responses to questions about priority areas for learning. Data on generative AI usage has been overlaid.

Every profession or function within government needs to provide tailored guidance to help public servants prepare for how their work could be transformed by AI.

Which functions are most interested in AI; which use it most frequently?

Sources: Apolitical Learning and Skills Trends Survey (June 2024, n=2,064); Apolitical AI Survey (May 2024, n=593)



INTERVIEW

Why governments need a learning culture

Myra Latendresse-Drapeau leads a multidisciplinary team that curates, designs and delivers learning for Canadian federal public servants. She argues that change is the only constant in government, which is why she believes public servants must take a continuous approach to learning.

There has to be a recognition at all levels that the public service is evolving, and so is the demand for skills.



Myra Latendresse-Drapeau
Director General, Transferable Skills
Canada School of Public Service

Q: Why do you think so many public servants lack clarity about the skills they need to develop?

Latendresse-Drapeau: I think this issue has a few root causes which are not easily fixed. One is how we hire in the Government of Canada. It's often based on generic positions, we recruit people that meet a generic profile rather than specific people for a specific task, and then we move them around.

I also think there's an almost unspoken part of this work which is that public servants are supposed to know how to do it before they get into government. That's a premise that's usually not true but has huge implications for knowledge and skills.

Q: Would you say governments underplay the importance of knowledge and skills?

Latendresse-Drapeau: I think in some respects it does. I'm not referring to the specialised functions but I think this mindset exists in other parts, especially in policy. There's a perception that if you're in policy and you just know how to write, think and communicate, you're going to be fine. But that's not the case.

Q: How could governments address this?

Latendresse-Drapeau: I think it's all to do with learning culture. I don't think we've yet figured out the pillars of a learning culture in government. We offer lots of courses through the Canada School of Public Service, but does that define a learning culture? Every employee has a performance agreement which has a learning section — is that a learning culture?

For me, it's about moving the system to acknowledge that learning is constant. There has to be a recognition at all levels that the public service is evolving, and so is the demand for skills in particular. I've been in government for a little more than 15 years. The skills that you needed to navigate the system in an efficient and savvy way are very different to what's required now and it keeps evolving.

Q: Where should responsibility lie for setting public servants' learning priorities?

Latendresse-Drapeau: I really do think that is something that has to be negotiated. In a lot of cases, it's for employees to tell their managers: 'This is what I need to know to do my job.' In other cases, it'll be the other way around. But I think it's something that should be one of the first conversations between an employee and their manager, and it should be a two-way conversation. But if it's not being negotiated, if it's not being made explicit in a shared space, you run the risk of misalignment, and that will impact the employee's performance and trajectory.

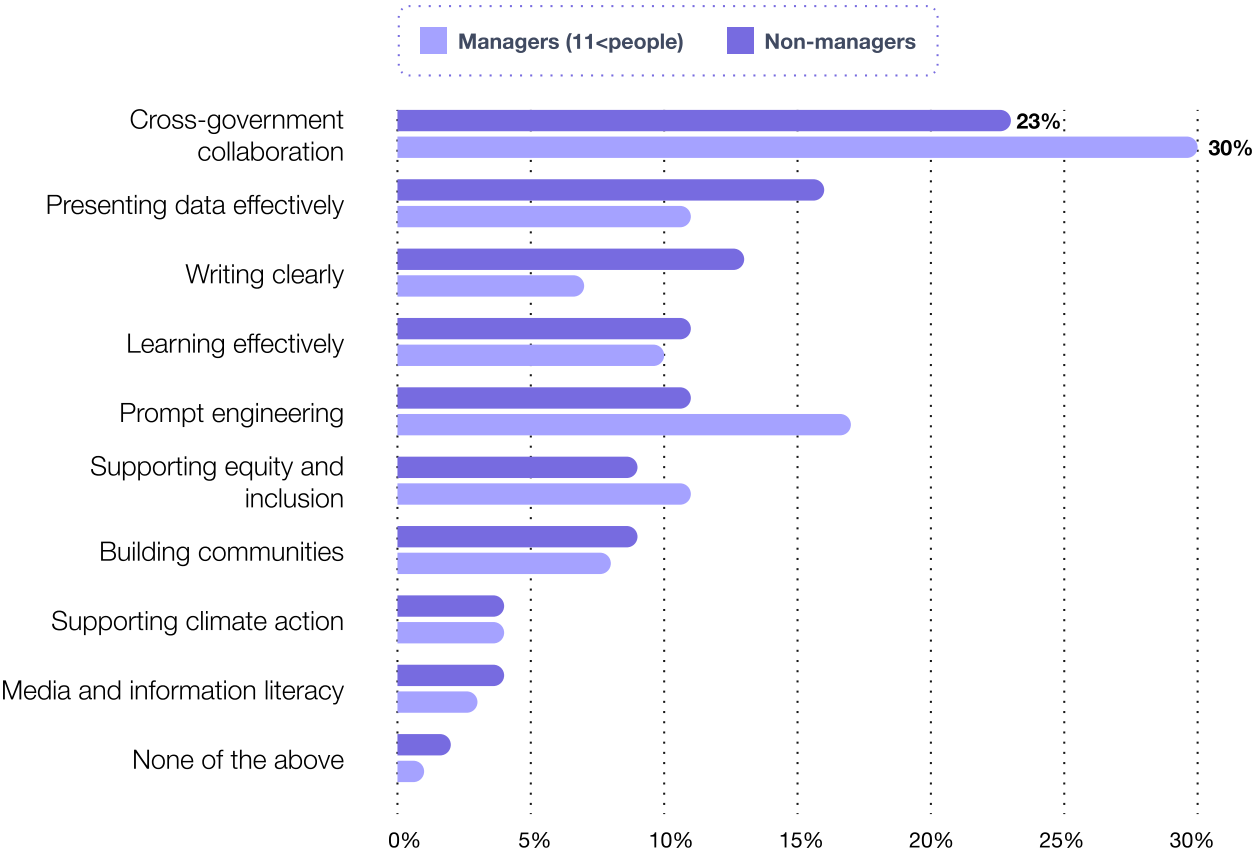
Public servants are ready for mission-driven government. There's one skill they really want to develop.

Public servants see breaking down silos and collaborating across departments as the essential skill for modern governance — more than working with data, being an effective learner or using generative AI tools.

Managers (including those with teams of up to 100+ people) and non-managers share the same instinct. That reflects the realities of a world where policy challenges are increasingly interconnected and more governments are adopting a mission-driven approach to address key priorities.

Public servants at all levels see collaboration as an essential skill for 21st century governance.

Which skills for 21st century government do you most want to develop?



Governments will need to elevate the status of collaborative skills

As more governments embrace a mission-driven approach to address complex challenges, there is increased attention on what new capabilities public servants will need to make it work.²⁸

One obvious starting point is enabling more effective collective action across government — or ‘silo-busting’. In a January 2024 Apolitical poll, 72% of public servants said that they encounter silos ‘very frequently’ in their work, which underscores how widespread this issue is.²⁹

There are underlying governance and technological factors that lure departments to look and act inwardly, but there is also a capability element. It takes a particular mix of skills — including flexibility, creativity and interpersonal communication — mindsets and strong networks to push past these barriers.³⁰

In the context of the deep-seated traditions and culture of most government bureaucracies, silo-busting is a relatively new idea.³¹ Alongside structural reforms, there needs to be a concerted and consistent effort to position collaboration as a prized capability — much in the same way data skills have been promoted — and support public servants with training and opportunities to practise it.

Why government needs 'systems leadership' to deliver on missions

As Cabinet Secretary between 2018 and 2020, **Sir Mark Sedwill** was the UK's most senior civil servant. His tenure included some of the most challenging months of the coronavirus pandemic, giving him a privileged insight into what it takes to get government to respond decisively to big challenges. Sedwill believes that systems leadership is the essential capability that governments need to develop to address complex challenges.

What I really wanted to get into the minds of the core leadership was that your key function is not just to provide policy advice... it's to figure out how to manage... an ecosystem



Sir Mark Sedwill
Former Cabinet Secretary
UK Civil Service

Q: As Cabinet Secretary, how did skills and capability building factor into your approach for leading the Civil Service?

Sedwill: I'd put it into two baskets. There was a lot of effort to improve the professional institutional management skills of the civil service in areas like human resources, digital, commercial and so on. That work started in the early 2010s and I was closely involved with that agenda when I was leading the Home Office.

As Cabinet Secretary, however, the skill set I was most interested in developing is what I call systems leadership. What I really wanted to get into the minds of the core leadership was that your key function is not just to provide policy advice to ministers or draft legislation. In fact, it's to figure out how to manage what, in most cases, is much more like an ecosystem than an engineering solution. To lead those systems in a way that achieves the government's objectives. It's quite hard to teach but it's something you can learn.

Q: How is systems leadership relevant to the delivery of missions?

Sedwill: The only way you're going to achieve these big missions is if you create a sense of national endeavour around them — not just government endeavour and certainly not just departmental endeavour. And that is effectively systems leadership.

But that culture of systems leadership needs to be embedded in a political effort that is driven by the prime minister. So you need the formal mechanisms that will enable government to focus on its priorities. It could be mission boards or cabinet committees. Whatever they're called, they need to be chaired by the prime minister, providing that impetus and accountability. Below that, that's where you need the systems leadership approach to actually deliver. Otherwise, you just sit in Whitehall talking to yourself.

Q: How can governments cultivate systems leadership as a capability?

Sedwill: My approach was to build this capability within departments. It's not me as Cabinet Secretary trying to manage these systems, because then you're trying to boil the ocean and it's impossible. So I was trying to influence the management and leadership philosophy of departments.

One of the practical steps I took was to expand our regular meeting of the 'Top 200' leaders in government to become the 'Top 300'. So it was senior leaders in the Civil Service alongside a wider network of public service leaders, from the police, fire service, health service, prison service and beyond. So it's about creating a community of leadership across the public service as a whole, not just the civil service.

THEME 2

How does public servants' learning benefit government?

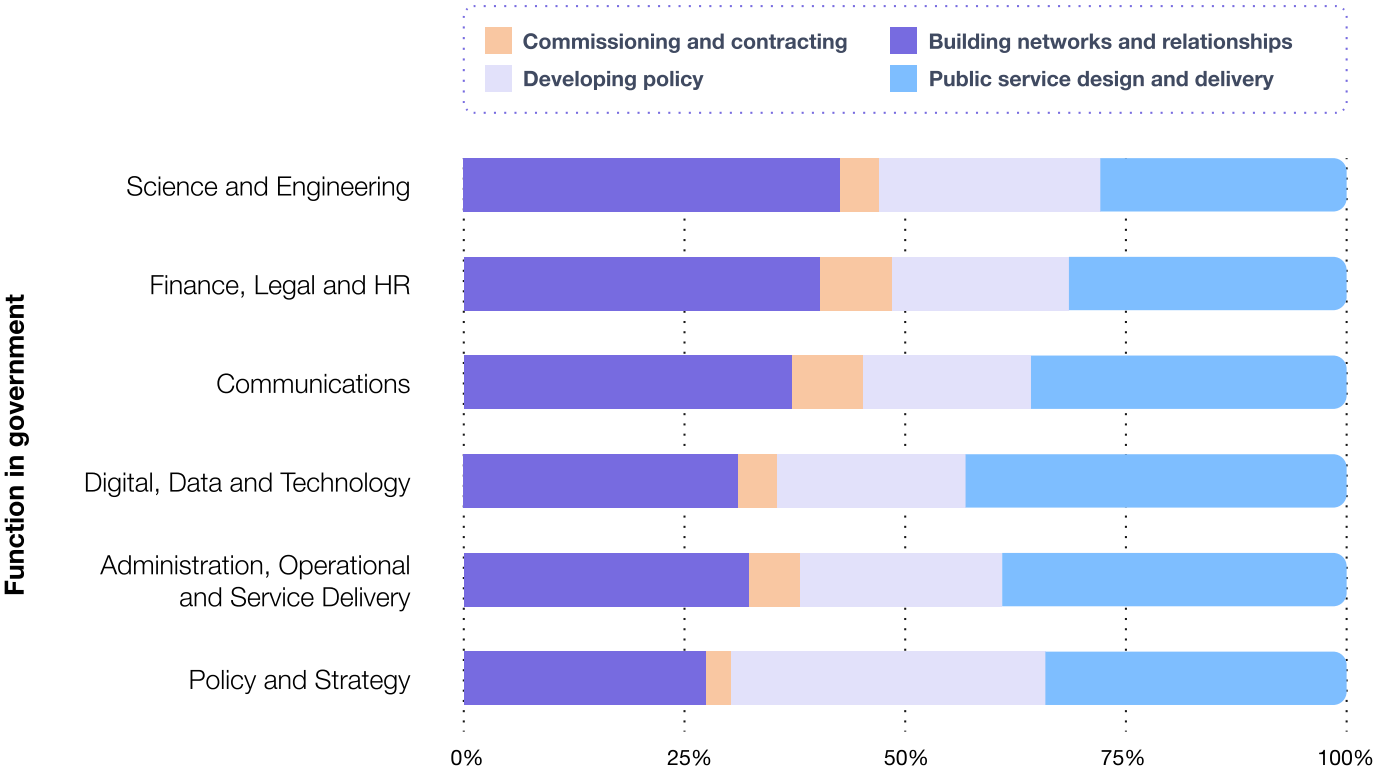
Delivery in government is increasingly complex. Public servants want new knowledge and skills to keep up.

We asked respondents to identify key areas in which they were interested in developing their skills. They were presented with four high-level areas, adapted from the OECD's 'Skills for a high-performing civil service' framework. Public service design and delivery was the most selected option by nearly 60% of all respondents, followed by network and relational skills (54%).

Their answers provide insight into where public servants see the most significant barriers and opportunities for improving outcomes in government.

Public servants most want to develop skills for delivery and building networks

Which areas are you most interested in building your abilities?



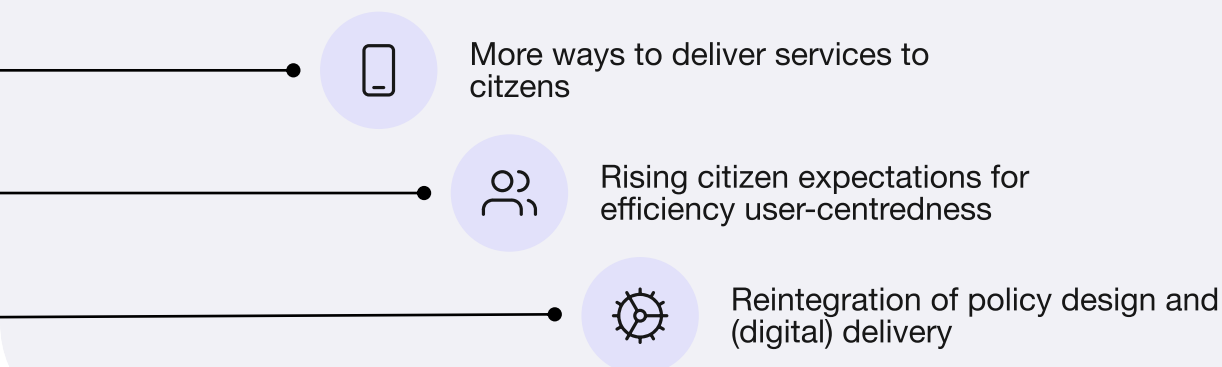
The changing challenge of delivery

Public trust in systems of government is linked directly to the effective delivery of policies, programmes and services. During the pandemic, for example, countries which were able to mobilise the public sector quickly saw increased levels of public trust.³²

That is not a new dynamic. What is changing, however, is the landscape in which public servants need to plan and deliver services. They face increasing complexity driven by a less siloed, more user-centred approach to service provision. Citizens' expectations for the quality and efficiency of services are rising, in part due to the hyper-personalisation and convenience they experience with private sector services.³³

Governments increasingly recognise that a 20th century-style divide between policy design and delivery isn't fit for the complexity and volatility of the 21st. A more integrated, adaptive approach — particularly where policy implementation is bound up in delivering digital services and solutions — is what more teams want to achieve. Getting there will require new mindsets and skills across the system, as practitioners like Pia Andrews have argued ³³

How is the challenge of 'delivery' changing?



Getting it wrong, getting it right

Governments increasingly rely on digital solutions to address policy problems. It's a novel way of working: new technologies and platforms, even a cultural shift, to user-centred design and faster cycles of testing and improving.³⁵

The early experiences of this shift were very challenging. Unsuccessful rollouts such as Healthcare.gov in the United States, Universal Credit in the UK and even the Robodebt scheme in Australia are damaging illustrations of what happens when government fails to adapt to this new mode of delivery.

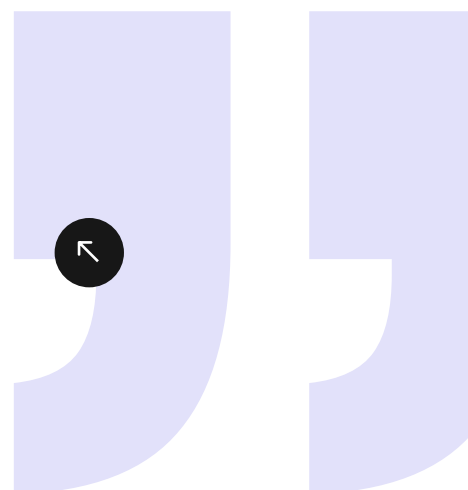
The pandemic, by contrast, provided extraordinary examples of what's possible when they get it right. In the UK, for example, the national tax authority delivered a digital service to pay out £70 billion in employment support to more than 11 million people, with a 90% customer satisfaction rate, in just four weeks.³⁶

A wide range of public servants will need new knowledge, skills and mindsets to thrive in this changing landscape. In our survey, respondents prized traditional delivery skills like project management (36%) and stakeholder engagement (24%). So, too, were newer capabilities like applying behavioural insights (31%), data literacy (22%), and agile working (19%).

Some governments have started to roll out more inter-disciplinary training to adapt to this new environment. For example, the training provided through Apolitical's [Digital Excellence Programme](#) is specifically designed for senior civil servants from non-digital backgrounds. Learners recognise that professional boundaries are blurring and they need to be more adept at collaboration.³⁷

I constantly tell my team that life has changed... We can't afford to be purists anymore, we've got to get better at collaboration.

Project Delivery leader in the UK Civil Service [speaking about](#) their experience on the Digital Excellence Programme.

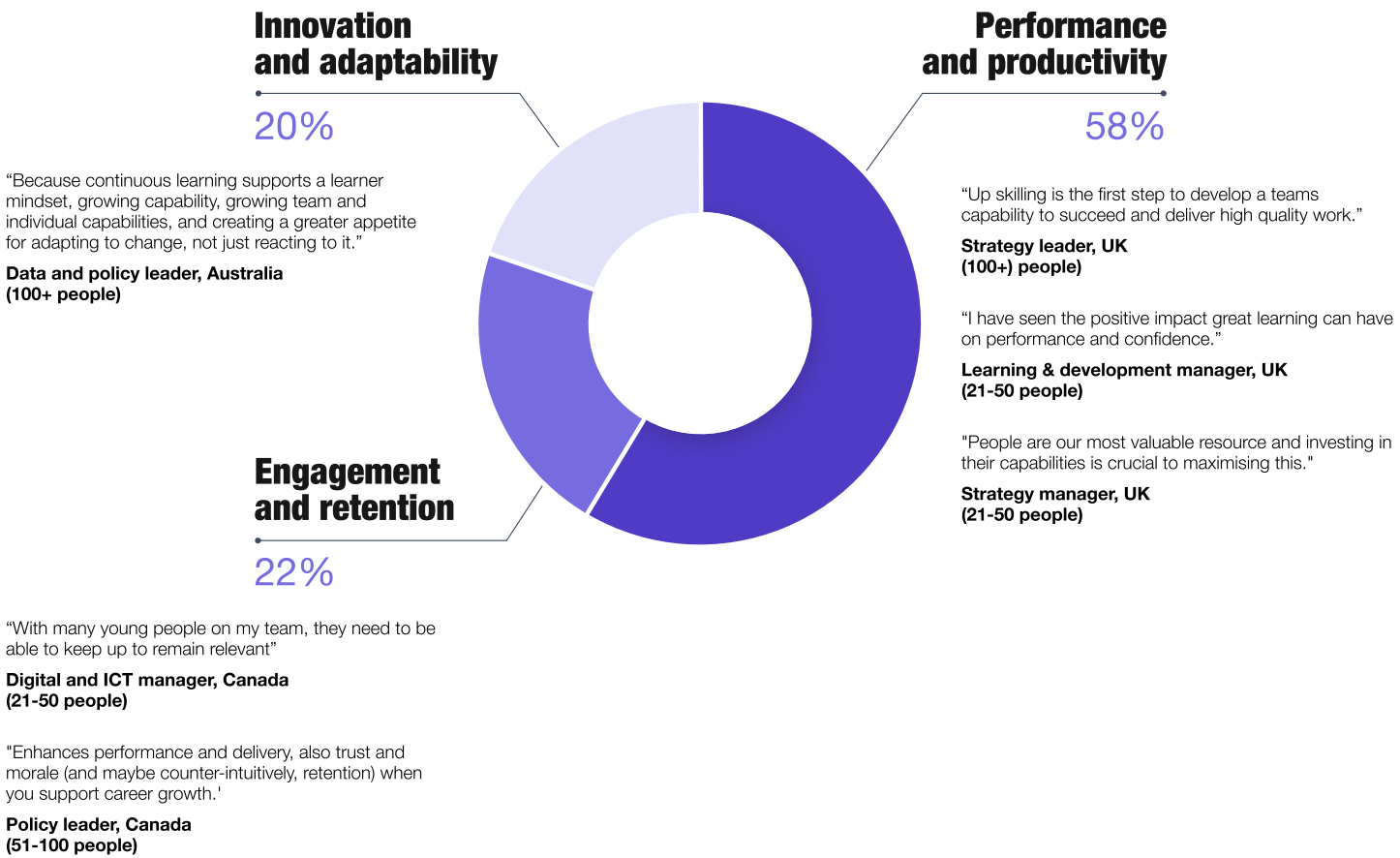


The market for talent is tight. Learning could be a smart retention tool.

More than 95% of managers and senior leaders agreed that investing in training and upskilling ‘significantly’ enhances the impact of their teams through improved performance and productivity, higher employee engagement and greater innovation and adaptability within their teams.



Where do leaders see the impact of investment in learning?



Preparing younger public servants with AI and climate training

Many governments face the long-term challenge of an ageing workforce.

Across the OECD, for example, the share of civil service workers aged over 55 is around 40% higher than that of 18-34-year-olds.³⁸ Unchecked, this can create long-term challenges for developing a new generation of public servants.

Younger workers have shifting priorities for their working lives. They place a higher value on flexibility and social impact, both of which government can offer. Career development matters, too.³⁹ Investing in skills development for younger staff can improve their engagement and retention, as well as benefit their organisations. There are two areas where government can make this impact.

Artificial Intelligence



Younger workers will have to work with AI for the rest of their lives — they want to be ready.

Deloitte's 2024 global survey of millennial and Gen Z workers showed that they feel uncertain but cautiously excited about the future of the technology. Around 50% don't believe that their employers are doing enough to prepare them for the capabilities of generative AI and they want the training.⁴⁰ Apolitical's May 2024 survey showed that 87% of 18-34 year old public servants had received no AI training at work.⁴¹

Green skills



They'll also have to live with the impacts of climate change, and they want to do something about it.

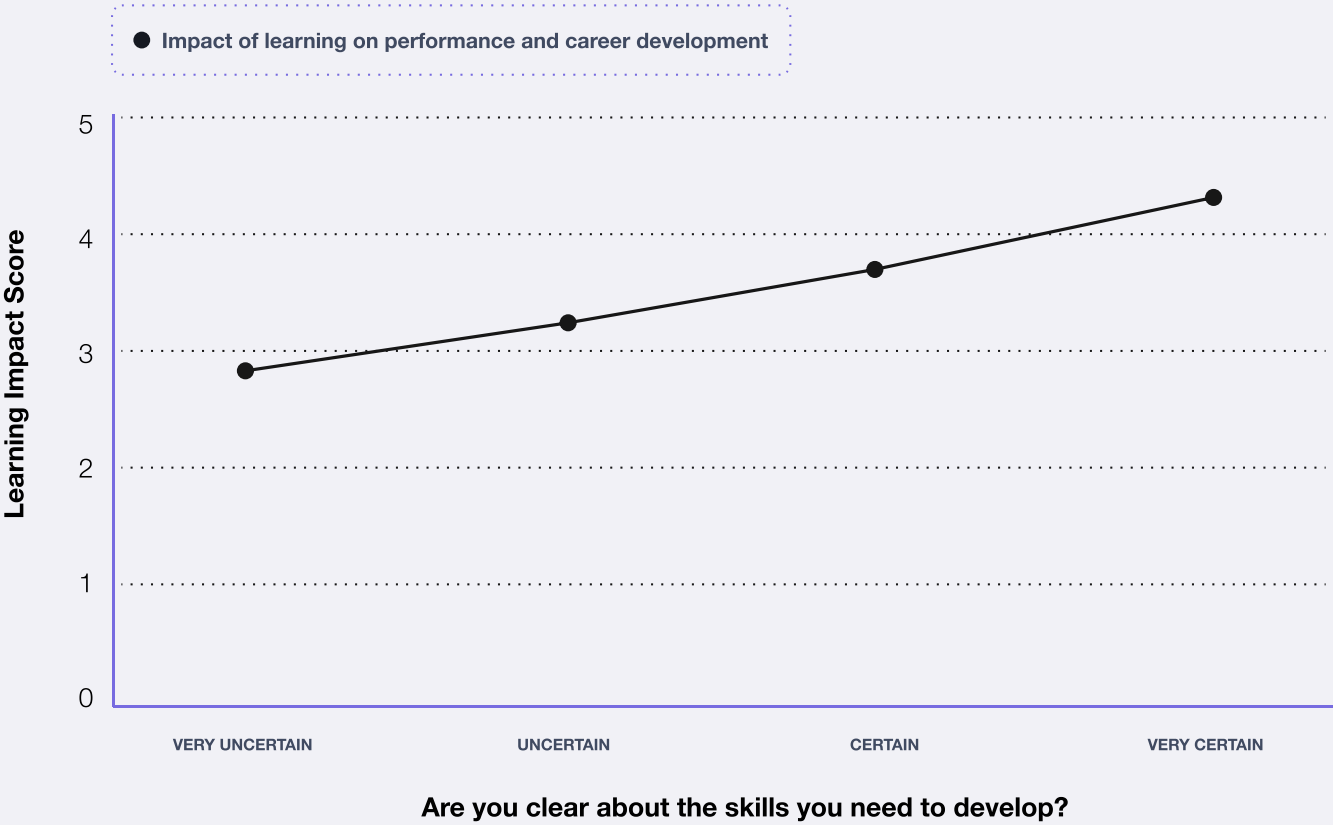
Younger people tend to be more emotionally engaged with climate issues.⁴² Deloitte's survey showed that as many as 25% of younger workers have either changed jobs or plan to do so to better align their work with their environmental values.⁴³ Apolitical's surveys consistently show that public servants across government want to be more involved in climate action, with 73% saying they'd benefit from specific training.

7% of public servants are high-impact learners. This is what they share in common.

Public servants were asked to respond to two statements evaluating the impact of recent training experiences on their job performance and career growth. Across both questions, around 70% of respondents agreed that it was positive. A smaller cohort (7%) of ‘high impact learners’ strongly agreed with both statements.

The most important thing high-impact learners share in common is a high-degree of clarity about their priorities for learning. More than 80% of this cohort ‘strongly agreed’ that they are clear about their long-term priorities for skills development in their career. That’s more than double the rate for participants with the lowest impact scores and 25% higher than the overall sample.

Focus matters - how clarity about learning priorities contributes to more impactful training.



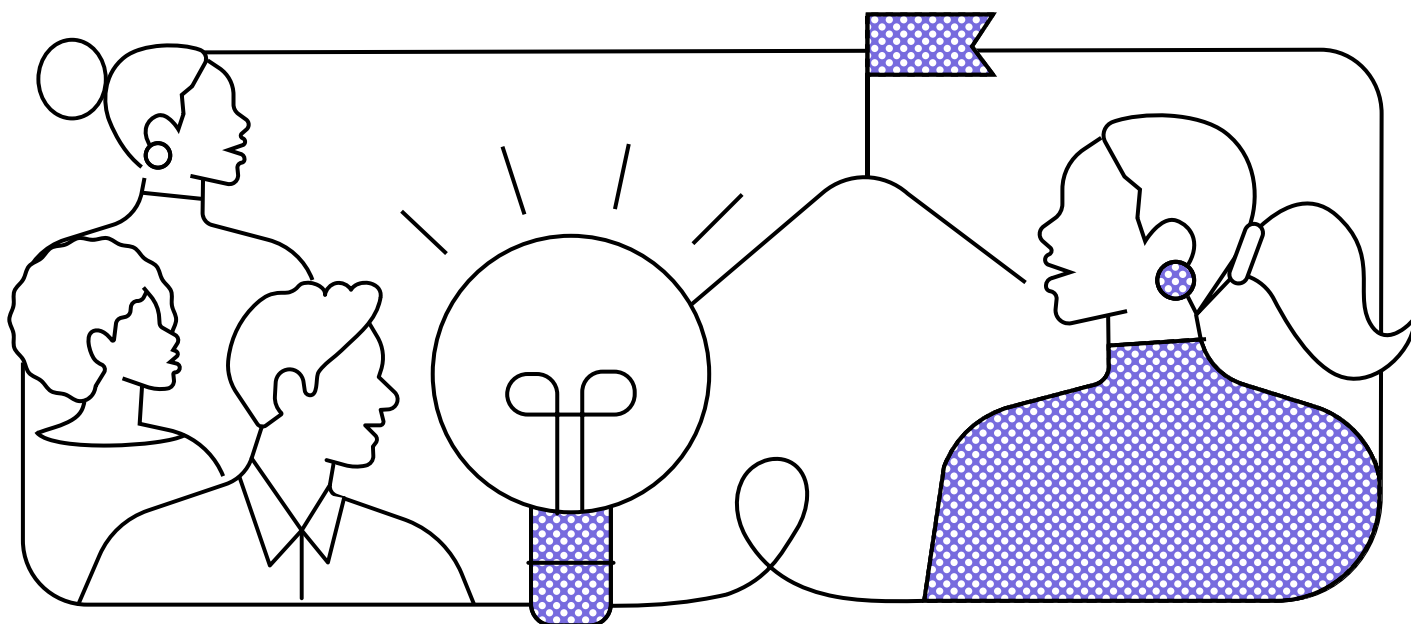
Public servants need learning pathways

Learning pathways can provide public servants with a tailored plan to help them progress toward a larger goal. They should be designed to provide individuals with a structured set of learning priorities that contributes to their career progression while also meeting the skills needs of their organisation.⁴⁴

Capability frameworks, which are widespread throughout governments, provide the structure for this kind of support, but they need to be combined with the curation of highly relevant content and specific opportunities that will support public servants to meet specific goals.⁴⁵

The UK's data analysis function, for example, has a series of learning pathways linked to improving analysts' competencies in areas like data linkage, visualisation and statistical analysis. Singapore's GovTech agency also designed a series of pathways to support its AI capability- building strategy, which has engaged more than 60% of public officers.

These pathways should be dynamic and responsive to changing organisational priorities and wider sectoral developments, so there is maximum benefit to government and learners.



What can governments do to improve the state of learning?

Public servants’ learning and development should be seen as an essential component of any government’s capacity to address its biggest challenges. There are thousands of learning and development practitioners in governments around the world, doing the important work of supporting public servants to develop knowledge and skills that will contribute to the delivery of their organisation’s priorities. Leaders at every level should recognise that work is a vital strategic effort.

Based on the insights from this survey and our observation of wider trends, Apolitical is contributing the following recommendations to improve the state of learning in government. More detail on these suggestions is presented below.

- 1. Provide more institutional support for communities of practice
- 2. Promote the use of more dynamic, data-driven learning plans.
- 3. Develop quality standards for online learning provision.

	Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
SUPPORT COMMUNITIES	Open up funding for capability building to provide more formal support for communities in government.	Provide more formal recognition of and guidance for community leadership work in government.	Adopt more advanced platforms to support richer cross-government communities.
ENHANCE LEARNING PLANS	Widen access to training for line managers and continue professionalising and formalising this work.	Develop AI training and career guidance across different job roles.	Develop more data-driven approach to tracking skills and capabilities across government. Use this data to provide staff with up-to-date insights about priorities for skills development.
IMPROVE ONLINE LEARNING	Ensure that line managers are ring-fencing time during working hours for their teams to engage with learning opportunities.	Develop quality standards for online learning provision in government	Promote a stronger culture of cross-departmental learning, where recent case studies are incorporated into learning content and experts share experience.

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