

2018 Susan Ryan Age Diversity Award

WINNER: Department of Finance

Career Starter Program

Origins and principles

In 2006, the Department of Finance identified a significant workload requirement at the entry-level classifications (APS 1 and APS 2) for which there was a shortage of internal staff. At this time, the department's traditional recruitment method was not attracting staff at these levels well and they recognised the need for a more targeted approach. Generally, the work requirement at the entry-level classifications included administrative support; project assistance and contribution; providing client service; drafting basic communication pieces and undertaking general and routine processing work. The work provided a unique opportunity for those looking to enter the workforce and begin to develop their skills and experience.

The department required an innovative approach to addressing this workforce gap and a targeted approach to attracting suitable candidates for this level of work. This challenge, combined with the department's commitment to strengthening the diversity of its workforce (and age profile), presented an opportunity to develop a solution that could generate a pipeline of entry-level talent into the department through an effective attraction, recruitment and development program.

Traditionally roles in the modern Australian Public Service (APS) workforce require applicants to have demonstrated professional experience and/or education higher than a Year 12 certificate. The Career Starter Program was developed to target high-school graduates with a Year 12 certificate or equivalent, with the intention of providing them with a sound development program and workplace experience that would assist them in building their career path within Finance and the APS more broadly.

The Program is the only initiative of its kind in the APS. It was born from a niche requirement within one business area of Finance and has been expanded and adapted to address the broader needs of the department. Finance is now piloting an expansion of the Program across five other agencies in the APS.

Implementation

Finance established the Program as a cost-effective workforce planning solution to address the entry-level workforce gap and to attract, develop and retain future talent. The Program exclusively targets recent high-school graduates who have completed their Year 12 certificate (or equivalent) within the last 12 months. The Program has provided an avenue to address workforce needs, as well as creating opportunities for young Australians to secure permanent employment in the APS.

The Program aims to attract quality candidates through a robust, competitive recruitment process that assesses candidates against a set of capabilities and skills. The process is refined each year to ensure it is specifically aligned to current and emerging business needs. Human Resources (HR) works closely with Finance business groups to identify skills and suitable roles and support their nomination for a Career Starter, noting that business areas are responsible for funding these positions. This is a successful approach, with all identified vacancies successfully filled through the

recruitment process. HR liaises with schools across Canberra, conducting information sessions for students and attending career fairs. For the first time in 2018, HR also provided targeted information sessions for Career Advisors, as well as potential applicants and interested parties providing an opportunity for students to visit the department, receive information and ask questions. This aims to enhance retention by helping potential candidates to establish a connection with the department from the outset.

HR provides a comprehensive briefing session and ongoing support throughout the Program to those directly involved in managing a Career Starter. This ensures supervisors are managing and developing the participant effectively and ensuring Career Starters receive adequate support and are offered relevant and meaningful work to develop their skills. Support to managers includes tailored communication, information, resources and regular check-in as part of the performance management process, with support and intervention where required.

Career Starters are assigned a 'buddy' from the previous year's cohort. Buddies and business area supervisors are encouraged to contact the Career Starter prior to commencement, to introduce themselves and to provide support as the participant transitions into the workplace.

Induction training takes place in the first week and includes an introduction to the broad working of the department and the APS, tips to transitioning to professional life, compliance training and an overview of what to expect from the development program. During induction Career Starters meet their supervisors and spend time in the workspace with colleagues. A key objective of induction is to facilitate the introduction of participants to one another and for them to establish a bond that is achieved through a range of interactive exercises. This approach is continued throughout the Program, in recognition that the cohort provides each other a fundamental support network, both during the Program and beyond completion. Finance's senior leadership team actively supports the Program and participants have an opportunity to hear from and meet the department's Secretary and the Deputy Secretaries during induction as well as other entry-level program participants, including the graduate cohort. This provides a unique opportunity to hear from the senior leadership team in a comfortable setting as well as broaden their network to include others new to the department.

Career Starters are placed in roles where there is an identified need and where the business can provide meaningful on-the-job work experience. A dedicated Career Starter Coordinator and a formal learning program complements the on-the-job learning and supports participants as they transition into full-time work and the APS. To assist participants with the challenge of transitioning from school to full-time professional work, there are a number of other activities in place, including access to formal tertiary education through the Studies Assistance Program, monthly check-in emails and one-on-one meetings with the Coordinator, face-to-face meetings with the cohort providing a forum for information sharing and discussion, performance conversations, EAP, additional learning and development offerings and ongoing pastoral care.

The formal learning program is aimed at developing participants' skills, capabilities and understanding of government and the business of Finance more specifically.

The Program also provides participants with networking and development opportunities outside of their role. A key activity is managing a major fundraising project to support the department's Flagship Charity – Communities@Work. It is through this fundraising project that they assist in raising the profile of the Career Starter Program and demonstrate the potential of young employees. At the completion of the Program a graduation ceremony is held. Participants are awarded a statement of attainment, recognising completion of the core competencies that can be attributed towards a Certificate IV in Government. Participants also have the opportunity for promotion to the APS2 level through an internal recruitment process. Following the completion of the Program, participants are invited to act as 'buddies' for the subsequent year's cohort. Past participants can continue to access development opportunities and engage in extra-curricular departmental initiatives.

Over 13 years, Finance has employed 187 high-school graduates through the Program and it has continued to grow in strength and provides a consistent source of high-quality entry-level employees. The cohort of participants has increased steadily each year and is now regarded by senior leadership and business areas as a highly effective workforce planning solution, providing high performing staff for many years following graduation.

Workforce data confirms that Career Starters establish successful careers in Finance and the APS, and experience higher retention rates when compared to other departmental entry-level programs.

The Program has contributed to achieving a diverse age profile for the department. As at December 2017, Finance was above average in comparison to the APS for staff under the age of 25 years (4.6% and 3.6% respectively). Further, the program addressed the broader objective of government to support youth employment by providing an avenue for young Australians to secure jobs with potential career longevity. To this effect, Finance plays a unique leadership role within government by having the Program in place.

The Program is significantly more cost effective than other entry-level programs..

Challenges and Opportunities

The department is leading by example, demonstrating to other agencies the benefits that can be achieved by supporting school leavers into the workforce. While the initiative was born from a business area of Finance, it has been easily transferred and adapted to address the broader needs of the department and other APS agencies. Finance partnered with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in 2017 to pilot the expansion of the Program. This success has led to scoping an extension of the Program as a whole-of -government initiative, in the hope that benefits can be recognised across government.

The department will continue to monitor and measure success through surveys of participants and business areas, ensuring the ongoing effectiveness of the Program.

Summary

The Department of Finance Career Starter Program is a workforce planning initiative providing entry-level APS career opportunities to recent high-school graduates. Since its inception in 2006, the program has provided APS career opportunities to 187 participants and helped to address workforce gaps and diversity objectives within the department.