

IPAA Public Sector Excellence Model

DIARY OF A NOMINATION WRITER

This is the fictional diary of someone involved in writing a nomination for the Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Public Sector Management. It shows one approach for writing a nomination. There are many other ways that a team might wish to approach writing a nomination. However, we hope that this diary helps a nomination writer develop a realistic appreciation of the time and effort required to write a nomination, as well as some of the common pitfalls.

At the beginning

First entry

You wouldn't read about it! This morning a pile of stuff arrived in my inbox about some Award program or other that the Branch Head thinks the team and I should have a go at. Is she kidding? We've got so much on our plates right now. I'll have a flip through it tomorrow – right now I've got more pressing things to do.

Second entry—a couple of days later

OK, so maybe the Branch Head was right. These Awards sound just the ticket for us. We were planning to undertake a major review of the project in the next couple of months, so we can use the preparation of a nomination for an Award as a way of doing the review. The whole thing looks quite well-structured, although I'm a bit fazed by the assessment dimensions. PIMMS. I mean, I ask you – who dreams up these silly acronyms anyway?

I've been flipping through the Nomination Guidelines and it seems like there's a lot more stuff I need to read before I can get going with the team. And apparently there's some stuff on the IPAA website as well, and the nomination itself is done through some sort of web portal. I've asked Tonia to print it all out for me and copy it to everyone else so it can be discussed at our team meeting on Tuesday, next week.

Third entry—a week later

Well, this morning's team meeting was a bit hectic. Everyone had so many questions about the Awards process and what we need to do to prepare a nomination. We brainstormed a whole heap of things on the whiteboard – Do we fully understand the criteria and assessment model? Who's going to do what? What's our story? What data do we have and who is going to compile it? What's our timeline? Do we have enough resources to do this while we are chugging away at some other big tasks over the next month or so? Who's going to do the plan? What support can we get from other areas or from the Branch Head? Who else in the Department is putting together a nomination? Could we work with them? Who's good at writing in the team?

My head was spinning by the end of the meeting. Generally, most folk in the team are fairly enthusiastic although I'm a bit worried about the whole workload thing. At least there's a two-stage process, and we can use the first stage to really check that we're ready for this before diving right into the deep end and doing a full nomination. This should help with workload management as well. The Branch Head was still really supportive when I reported the outcome of the team meeting to her. She said she'd do what she could to shift some of our workload into another team for a few weeks. Yep, that'll make me really popular – not!

Fourth entry—a couple of days later

We had another team meeting yesterday and handed out the different tasks for preparing the first pass of the nomination to different people in the team. Tonia is going to compile all our data – she's good with numbers so that will suit her talents well. Caroline is steadily working her way through the nomination guidelines and template etc and putting together some questions for us all to discuss – we're not sure if we've got everything that they're looking for, so this will be an important first step. Mahmoud is hunting through the files trying to find any tangible evidence that we can use, although my guess is that we'll only use a small part of what he finds. My job is to coordinate the whole thing, but also to pull together the high level stuff – goals, objectives, principles that kind of thing. Heck, we started this project so long ago now that I've forgotten half that stuff and I'll have to do some digging myself.

Fifth entry—a week later

I knew it – the flack has already started. My colleague Alex is getting a bit thingy about his team picking up some of our work. We've been down this road before so I know I'm going to have to manage his sensitivities throughout this process. However, when I explained to him that the main reason we were nominating for an Award was to use the process as a way of doing our normal review and evaluation, with the added bonus of potentially winning something at the end, he got quite interested. I explained that really all that was different was that we had to do the review in a more compressed time frame than usual and that's why we needed support from his team. I think I've smoothed him over for now. Anyway, I gave him a copy of the paperwork so that he could see what it was all about. Maybe he'll be inspired to have a go next year. Who knows?

Sixth entry—the following week

We had our ready, set, go! team meeting this morning. We've done a thorough stock take of the information we have about the project, the evidence we can use to support our claims and Caroline has been through the Awards paperwork with a fine-tooth comb. She's ferreted out a whole heap of things that we've now worked through and made some decisions on. She even registered and jumped onto the web portal and had a look around. We've all realised now that our project may not be old enough to get us up with the winners. We just don't have enough data against a couple of the criteria, particularly the one on governance. Darn, I wish we'd thought of some of this stuff earlier in the project but we just blithely sailed on without really giving too much thought to whether or not our working group structure was the best way to govern the project. So surprise, surprise, we didn't have indicators and we didn't collect data. Our customer satisfaction stuff is top notch and so is our leadership and change management stuff. The innovation stuff is a bit flabby but at least the implementation was good – we monitored that quite closely (for once!).

So, we've decided to set our expectations about winning an Award a bit lower, and now that I think about it, we're really doing this mainly so that we do our own evaluation, so an Award would be icing on the cake, but we're not betting on it now. We're really in this to learn, so we're not kidding ourselves. There was a bit of a soul-searching discussion and I'm not sure the Branch Head was so thrilled when I told her that we were going to take a "learning" approach rather than a "winning" approach to writing our nomination.

We've now got a Nomination Compiling and Writing Plan – boy, that sounds formal doesn't it? For all the flash title, this just means that I'm doing Criteria 2 and 3, Caroline is doing Criterion 1 and Tonia is doing Criterion 4. Thankfully in Stage 1 we only have to respond to one of the four assessment dimensions. Mahmoud is our resources man and he will be pulling all our inputs into a master document. We're going to get together in a week's time to pull together our rough draft for the first pass entry. Here's hoping!

Seventh entry—a few days later

I really thought that I'd get right on top of my two criteria quickly because Tonia had pulled together some great data and Mahmoud had left me a pile of documents and reports that he thought matched my criteria. Tonia has finished her first draft and I know Caroline isn't far off finishing hers. I'm a bit behind, but the team is really pulling together and I think we are really close to a finalised first pass nomination – which is really good, because Stage 1 is due for submission in less than ten days!!!

The biggest hiccup we had was when we suddenly found out that only one person can log onto the nomination in the web portal. Caroline had set things up for us, but then with time slipping away from us, Tonia was just going to work on refining bits in the portal, but she couldn't access it! It hasn't really slowed us down, but we did have to re-think version control and the best way to manage who was doing what.

On top of all that, Alex has been on my case again! Can't he see how busy I am? Once I cool off, I think I'd better have another coffee with him and just keep him on side. And I better give the Branch Head an update and let her know I've been struggling a bit.

Eighth entry—a week later

We have a first draft (beautifully compiled by Mahmoud – what would we do without that guy?) for our Stage 1 nomination. But it's still quite rough, and is it just me, or is it a bit repetitive in places? It's thin on the evidence in some places too, especially governance. I feel like we did all the right things, but somehow we just got carried along on the project, and I think maybe we weren't as good documenting some of the decision processes as we thought we were. Anyway the Branch Head did a great job getting the Secretary to endorse it for Stage 1, and we got it submitted in time (including organising the payment of the entry fee), and now we just have to wait until the full nomination invitation is made and see if we made it through to the next stage. Here's hoping.

On top of that, yesterday would have to win a prize for surprises. I had lunch with Alex and we thrashed through his "issues" about his team picking up some of our work. As it turns out, he's not peeved about that at all. Actually, I think he's just a bit bored right now and looking for something to stretch himself, but nothing new is coming up in his area so he's just grouching off at everyone.

In the middle

Ninth entry—three weeks later

Yesterday's meeting with the Branch Head was interesting too. I thought she'd bite my head off but instead she asked me if I'd like someone else on the nomination preparation team if we get through to the next stage. You bet, I said, and guess who she suggested? Yep! Alex! And he said yes he would be thrilled to be doing something a bit more interesting. We're supposed to find out on Monday if we have an invitation for the full nomination process.

Tenth entry—a few days later

No Invitation to Stage 2 Option

Well, the notification came through and we have not made it through to a full Stage 2 nomination. I'm pretty disappointed even though I was fairly sure that we weren't quite ready for this. I think the bits around governance and perhaps even measuring our innovation were not developed enough. Anyway, we were always going to use this for our own evaluation process, and I think we still get a feedback report from the official process at some point, so we're not going to chuck all this effort away. And who knows, if we work on the thinner bits now, maybe we can be in really good shape for next year!

Tonia, Caroline and Mahmoud have now pulled together all our nomination material into an evaluation report for our internal use and the results have been quite interesting. Those assessment dimensions really made us look at the governance and innovation parts of our project with a much more critical eye. Needless to say, we've identified some interesting improvements that we're going to trial later in the year. We're also going to get much smarter about documenting our goals, plans and indicators so that we can really test our processes. It's a bit more work all round but I think it is an important way for us to value-add for our clients.

Invitation to Stage 2 Option

Yes! We've got an invitation to proceed with a full Stage 2 nomination. I almost can't believe it. It's going to be a busy few weeks to finalise and polish the first pass nomination, but I've been thinking about the bits we were most concerned about, like the repetition and how we can minimise that while still telling the story we want to share. We need to make sure the evidence we give to support the nomination really demonstrates the points we are making too.

It will be great to have Alex on the team as well, with such a short timeframe. I'm briefing him tomorrow morning before introducing him to the rest of the team. He's going to pick up Criterion 3, which is one of our better criteria and I'm going back to slogging away on Criterion 2.

We're really going to have to ramp up as there's only a few weeks to go and somewhere in there we've got to get the nomination up to the Secretary for approval. Things can sometimes languish in his in-tray – sigh, but I do have to admit that the Branch Head did a great job last time of getting it through in time.

Eleventh entry—a couple of weeks later

Okay! We're really cooking now. Tonia had a brainwave after Alex came onto the team. She reminded us about the schematic in the Awards paperwork and we've been using that to check how we're going in preparing our content. We're leaving updating the Outcome Statement we prepared for Stage 1 for the end, just to see how the story flows in the rest of the nomination.

We've brought all the changes back into a single document now but its way too long. We're still struggling with repetition too. Have we missed something in the guidelines that means we're saying the same stuff over and over? And boy does the hole in our governance criterion data look like its got bells on it. The other big thing that's emerged is that it looks like our approach for innovation was really flabby not just a bit flabby. We'd had great implementation (of something!) but once we started diving back in time, we couldn't find any goals or objectives for our innovation process. It was just something that happened because someone had a good idea. The guidelines talk about three different types of innovation:

- Something completely innovative and novel and had never been used anywhere else before.
- Something that used an existing approach from another organisation or sector in an innovative and novel way.
- Something that other people/organisations had used but which was completely new to your organisation.

I guess our innovation probably falls into the second category but it's hard to tell since we don't appear to have documented this part of the project very well at all. Hmm, unlikely to impress the assessors especially since they seem to have some specific views about innovation in the nomination guidelines.

Stop. I can't believe I just wrote that. After all our talk at the beginning about being in the Awards process to learn something, I've just realised that we've all slipped into a competitive mindset and we're beating ourselves up about the stuff we haven't done, as opposed to the stuff we have done. Aaargh! Must not do this, must not do this. Repeat after me – in to learn, in to learn. Aaah, that feels better. I think we should talk about this at our next team meeting and just refocus on our reasons for doing this whole thing.

Twelfth entry—a week later

Last week was hard work and this week may be just as hard. I completely forgot to take account of the parliamentary sitting calendar. Oh brother – I spent last week doing question time briefs and all the other running around that's part of sitting days. And this week will probably be just as bad. Star note to self – check parliamentary sitting calendar at beginning of planning process. Still, at least I had the sense to check the Secretary's availability – he's available and the Branch Head has already briefed him on progress for our nomination. That way he knows that it can't grow mushrooms in his in-tray and that he has to turn it around quickly. We'll be running right to the wire to get the darn thing ready in time.

The team has been doing some great work this week and having Alex on board has been a real bonus. He's a great writer – much better than me – and he's made some top suggestions about massaging the content of the nomination to knock out some of the repetition.

At the end

Thirteenth entry—nine days to go

We're on the homeward leg now – phew! All we have to do over the next few days is update the Outcome Statement, go through our checklist and then get it off to the Branch Head and then the Secretary. Easy peasy!

Fourteenth entry—seven days to go

I can't believe I was feeling so cocky the other day. Talk about cruising for a fall! The Outcome Statement is proving to be much harder to update than I thought, especially as we have now told a more comprehensive story across the four criteria and four assessment dimensions in the remainder of the nomination. I wish we'd started this a week ago. We've had to put the brains trust (the whole team) to work on this as my brain is just devoid of ideas. I know we need to make the most of the Outcome Statement because it's the only chance in the nomination where we can locate our project in its broader context and talk about its wider impacts on the community and our clients. This is worse than writing a high school essay.

Fifteenth entry—five days to go

Right, the nomination is finished now, bar the updated Outcome Statement, which is with the Branch Head. She wasn't happy with our collective efforts so now she is having a go. Mahmoud has given the document a final polish and it looks great. Thank goodness we kept using the Word Template supplied by IPAA on their website to compile all our inputs. It'll be no problem to add in the updated Outcome Statement when it's done, as well as upload all the new content. Caroline has organised all the supporting evidence and saved them to a single folder, so they're all ready to upload to the Awards submission website. We can add the rest of the nomination once the updated Outcome Statement is finished.

Sixteenth entry—four days to go

The Branch Head has sent back the final Outcome Statement and I must say I'm impressed. She's got a much better grasp on the policy drivers and bigger picture than me and she certainly has a way with words. Heck, this'll knock the socks off the assessors. Mahmoud's going to paste it into the document then it's off to the Secretary's office via the various approval routes. I can't believe we're travelling so well. What can still go wrong?

Seventeenth entry—one day to go

Well, I didn't tempt fate on the other day. Nothing has gone wrong. The nomination has been approved and signed by the Secretary and the supporting material is all uploaded to the Awards website in time for me to hit the "submit" button before the deadline tomorrow. I'm going to check it all over one last time first thing in the morning and then push the button.

Eighteenth entry—deadline for nominations

Signed, sealed and submitted this morning. Actually it's a bit of a letdown just pressing that little "submit" button on the page, but I feel like we've done the best job that we can. I'm taking the team to lunch so that we can celebrate.

Waiting, waiting, waiting.

Nineteenth entry—a month later

I can't believe a month has already sped by since we lodged our Stage 2 nomination. I wonder how the assessment is going? I know things have been moving on here.

Tonia, Caroline and Mahmoud have pulled together all our nomination material into an evaluation report for our internal use and the results have been quite interesting. Those assessment dimensions really made us look at the governance and innovation parts of our project with a much more critical eye. Needless to say, we've identified some interesting improvements that we're going to trial later in the year. We're also going to get much smarter about documenting our goals, plans and indicators so that we can really test our processes. It's a bit more work all round but I think it is an important way for us to value-add for our clients.

Alex is going back to his team soon. Funnily, although we've had some rough patches, I think I'll miss him. Actually, I think he's keen to take some of the things he learned with us back into his own team. An unexpected bonus from writing our nomination.

Twentieth entry

We received our invitation to the Awards Presentation Event today. The Branch Head was really great about it. She says we can all go and that the Department will pay – choice! Actually, she'll be going too, along with another Branch Head and team and, heaven forbid, one of the Deputy Secretaries. It turns out we weren't the only team in the Department to lodge a nomination.

Recognition

Twenty-first entry—Awards presentation event

Well, last night was a night to remember. The Awards Presentation Event was a great night out for our team. Believe it or not we were Commended! Sure, we didn't win a Gold or a Silver Award, but then we weren't expecting to, so the Commendation was a real surprise. The Branch Head was really chuffed and the team were ecstatic. This morning at morning tea the other Sections gave us a big hooray. Very nice indeed.

What now?

Twenty-second entry

We got our Awards feedback report yesterday. It made for interesting reading. The assessors had identified some strengths that we weren't aware of, so that was rather nice. And the opportunities for improvement really came as no surprise because we'd already identified most of them when we found the holes as we wrote our nomination. We've already got a plan in place to implement several of them before the end of the year and I think I'll take the remaining suggestions forward into our team planning day early next year.

The team are already talking about putting in another nomination next year to see if we can win something this time. I think we could win something soon, but not next year. Some of the changes we need to make are going to take time, and if we're going to do them properly then we also need to choose our indicators and get our data collection stuff working properly as well. And to be honest, this process took a lot of energy out of us all, and I'd like us to consolidate a bit next year. But after that – watch out! We'll be back!