

Opening Comments: Graduate Data Network Forum 15 March, National Data Commissioner and IPAA

Comments by Gordon de Brouwer, National President Institute for Public Administration Australia

This is going to be a great day! You have great people to engage with, and such an important topic.

I would like to start by thanking Paul House for the welcome to country, and acknowledge that I am here on Aboriginal country and pay my respect to the Traditional Custodians, thank them, and express my support for reconciliation, honesty and recognition.

I am delighted to join you in my role as IPAA National President. The Institute of Public Administration Australia is a member-based organisation promoting excellence and pride in public service across Australia. It is non-partisan, apolitical and not-for-profit. There are various entities that support people interested in public policy and public service, and I hope you see IPAA as one of those, and can experience the value to you of being an active member. Public service can be deeply rewarding and exciting, either as a career itself or as part of one, because it goes straight to how to practically and tangibly improve and protect the lives of people and our natural world. As you know, and as today's program shows, data and evidence are big parts of delivering that outcomes.

IPAA is honoured to be partnering today's event with the National Data Commissioner and her office. Gayle and I have worked closely together over many years and you are fortunate to have someone of her calibre and character as Commissioner designate. The legal, operating and cultural framework for data collection, management, sharing and use matter enormously, and they underpin the efforts of many of those you will hear from today, how they are using data in their job to make meaningful change.

The forum today was designed and brought to life by the Data Graduate Network. The Network is fantastic. So great to hear from Heshan and Zeke. Many of you will be data graduates yourselves or were recently a graduate. Many of you are data scientists and analysts, part of the APS Data Professional Stream, of which David Gruen is lead. And many in our face-to-face and virtual audience work in other roles and have other backgrounds. As we have come to know, data literacy, analysis and storytelling using the power of data are key skills, whether we have "data" in our role title or not. The building of capability across the public service is paramount to continuing to meet the needs and expectations of communities, and I really commend you for that.

As you work through the subject matter of data today, I invite you to be strategic in your data journey as public servants. There is a lot of important detail in data and data analysis. One risk of dealing day by day with complexity is of missing perspective. It's important to sit back and think about what you are doing and why, how you are doing it, and with whom. It's worth asking yourself three questions occasionally:

First, what is the **purpose** or objective we are trying to achieve in this work?

Second, do we have the right **systems** and processes in place to achieve that purpose?

Third, are we working with other **people** to achieve that purpose as effectively as can?

I'd like to briefly talk through these elements of what and why, how and with whom.

The first is **purpose**. Purpose is a big thing for public servants. The *Public Service Act 1999* establishes "an apolitical public service that is efficient and effective in serving the Government, the Parliament and the Australian public" (s3(a)) and, as part of that, "works collaboratively to achieve the best

results for the Australian community and the Government” (s10(1)) and “provides the Government with advice that is frank, honest, timely and based on the best available evidence” (s10(5)). That’s what the law that governs you says about your job. It’s hard not to be inspired by the task that the Australian Parliament has given you.

Data matters for evidence. Data matters for honesty. Data matters for the policy advice, program implementation and service delivery that underpins you achieving the best results for the Australian community and the Government, that the law asks of you.

So, with your colleagues, ask yourself periodically whether the way you collect, use and share data is achieving the best it could in improving the prosperity and security of the Australian people and the sustainability of the natural world and built environment we live in.

You should be able to link data and evidence back to something that matters for people and our natural world.

Think, for example, of data on transport infrastructure. Transport infrastructure ultimately exists to improve the quality of our lives in a sustainable manner, enabling social and economic connections that provide us with happiness and a sense of belonging, safety, and facilitate our economic lives. Data on public transport use, congestion and travel time are inputs to that but they are not necessarily ends in themselves. The approaching universality of digital technology enables us to get data on things we never could before, including outcomes that matter, rather than just inputs and outputs. Part of a reflective conversation about purpose is whether you are also identifying data that matters to outcomes, and whether data can be collected that does that better.

The second question is about whether **systems and processes** are fit for purpose. And I mean, literally, fit for purpose.

We can have processes, for example, around the preparation and clearance of briefs, access to information, engagement with stakeholders, release of information, and what is publicly available material on websites. Some of these can be weighted heavily to internal control, excessive risk aversion and denial of access, which make it harder to collaborate and focus on outcomes – noting that the law expects you to collaborate and focus on what matters to people’s lives.

The importance of collaboration and of focusing on outcomes is made greater by the power of digital technology and big data.

More and more of the data we now have is more closely available in real time rather than a picture of a distant past. And it is often closer to a census than a sample or a collection of anecdotes. Big data is a huge step. The data that was available to policy makers in the covid-19 pandemic is in a different order of magnitude accurate and timely than the data policymakers had a decade ago in dealing with the global financial crisis. A decade ago, we were looking through fogged-up glasses at the road behind us. Now policymakers have a clear view of the road they are on.

And data can now see the whole person – the economic, social and security spheres of people’s lives. The big policy, program and service delivery advances to be seized are real-time, personalised, and coherent understanding of the economic and social features of people’s lives and where they live – understanding how place, education, health, employment, safety and longevity are linked, and what works, and what doesn’t work, to improve outcomes for people in different situations.

In short, the opportunity cost of systems that make sharing, openness and collaboration hard are materially higher in our world of digital technology and big data. In addition to reflecting on whether you are focussing on the right data, is the need occasionally to reflect on systems and processes.

The third question is about the **people** you work with and how you engage with them – the ‘with whom’.

It is clear that the range of people you need to collaborate with is widening. If the opportunities of digital technology and big data are to be fully realised, the relationships that matter are not just those in your own department or agency but to others who hold or use relevant data – those across different departments, across jurisdictions, across universities, the private sector and the not-for-profit sector – and to the people and communities who are affected by policy, programs and service delivery. The idea of treating others outside your department as stakeholders to be managed, rather than as genuine partners in achieving shared objectives, should be consigned to the dustbin. The panel of the Independent Review on the Public Service (of which I was a member) went to this in detail. How do you engage with other entities and people on data? With openness, looking for the opportunity to share and collaborate?

What also matters in engaging with people is the language you use. Digital technology, big data and different ways of working in the digital world can scare people. There is a lot of in-house language or jargon about digital technology and data. There is a lot of great software that enables collaboration, like Microsoft Teams Planner, Microsoft Whiteboard, Sharepoint and Slido. And technology savvy people sometimes also talk about agile ways of working. That language, technology and thinking would be second nature to many of you.

But it is not the case for others, and that may include your boss or someone senior in your organisation who makes budget decisions. They may not be as comfortable as you in these domains. I remember that when I started primary school, we first used chalk and slates, not pencil and paper, let alone an iPad. When I started at the Reserve Bank in 1991, my computer couldn't open Word and Excel at the same time. When I did my first regressions, I was pretty happy if an estimating equation had 20 degrees of freedom. Some of the people you work with may be awed, scared, threatened or simply just not understand what you are talking about. In those situations, using normal language, explaining technology and software with generosity and empathy (not sympathy or ridicule!) will take you a long way. It may also be that you or a colleague could be a data mentor or technology mentor to some senior people in your organisation. I know that some CEOs have just such a mentor.

You have a great day ahead. Enjoy! What you do is exciting and important. Make the most of the organisations and people here. My suggestion to you is to reflect also on the purpose of your job, whether systems are fit for purpose, and how you work with people to achieve that purpose.

Thank you.