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TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

EA SERIES FINALE: ELECTION YEAR IN REVIEW

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KIERAN BUTLER:

It's a real pleasure to be here again. I've had the joy of attending this event previously and I think it's a fantastic way to end the year with a fantastic bunch of people. Particularly I'd like to thank IPAA and the EA committee for putting together this event. I would also like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people, the traditional custodians of the land on which we're meeting and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. So today we're lucky enough to have a fantastic panel who I'll introduce in a moment. Will then give you all a chance to ask a lot of questions and I encourage you to do so. Ask questions, share your reflections, tell us how your year's been, and then we're going to have the important refreshments and networking afterwards. So without further ado, I'm going to introduce our panel and probably embarrass them a little bit.

Ashleigh, Louise, Leigh-Anne and Lydia. So ASHLEIGH TALONI commenced as an EA in the APS in 2018 with the Department of Health and Aged Care. With the onset of COVID-19 across Australia, Ashleigh worked in the vaccination task force. In late 2021, Ashleigh worked with the Deputy Secretary in the Department of Employment in the workforce group, which involves supporting the rollout of the new National Employment Services model and the transition to Workforce Australia. Ashleigh moved into her current role as EA to the Secretary of the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations on 1 July 2022. And since commencing this role, Ashleigh has played a pivotal role in supporting the establishment of what is entirely a new department.

LOUISE MORTIMER commenced as the EA to Katherine Jones PSM, the secretary of the Attorney General's Department in August 2021. Prior to this position, Louise worked in the Department of Defence for over 14 years. While in Defence, Louise worked in the Navy, Army, Defence People Group, Australian Signals Directorate and Defence Intelligence Organisation. When Ms. Jones was appointed as the Secretary of the Attorney General's Department in August 2021, Louise was invited to accompany her across as her EA. Louise has enjoyed the transition to a new department as a senior executive assistant and is constantly looking for opportunities to continue developing both personally and professionally. Tonight's probably a great example.

LEIGH-ANNE PALMER has over 20 years' experience in administrative roles across the public and private sectors, both locally and internationally. Most recently, Leigh-Anne transitioned with Jenny Wilkinson's promotion to Secretary of the Department of Finance in August. Leigh-Anne is a passionate advocate for the EA profession, appreciating the difference, value and influence the role can bring to an executive team and indeed an entire organisation. Her growth alongside the secretary has been a career highlight for her and she hopes this inspires others to see the opportunities available to EAs as their careers grow.

Finally, LYDIA MILOSAVLJEVIC is currently the executive assistant to Deputy Secretary Simon Duggan at the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. Lydia previously supported Simon in his role as Deputy Secretary Economy, Industry and G20 Sherpa at the Department of

the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Prior to working with Simon, Lydia provided secretariat support to the regulatory reform division within PM&C delivering the Regulatory Reform conference alongside IPAA ACT in early 2022. A highlight of her career occurred in 2020 when she had the opportunity to be the EA to Nev Power, former chairman, and Peter Harris, former CEO of the National COVID-19 Commission. Lydia is proud to be in this role and very grateful for the opportunity she's been given as an EA.

So please join me in welcoming Ashleigh, Louise, Leigh-Anne and Lydia. So we've got a lot of topics to cover tonight, and I think with credit to our IPAA ACT and the committee and indeed our participants, I think we have the perfect mix of our people here tonight to talk about the challenges, the opportunities of being an EA and indeed the year that probably a lot of you have had, which I'm looking forward to hearing about. Indeed, I was just reflecting that two of you represent what are entirely new departments, which in the commonwealth is a pretty relatively unusual thing that doesn't happen that often and I'm sure brings with it a really interesting range of challenges and experiences and learnings, which I'm looking forward to hearing from you. And of course not least, we're going to talk about the fact that this has been a year with a election, a new government, a huge parliamentary policy agenda, which I know all of your departments have had key roles in, particularly whether it be new budgets or creating national anti-corruption commissions or new climate policies.

So I think all of you got new industrial relations policies that are front page news every day. So I think all of you are at really the forefront of our new government's agenda and coordinating and working across the public service and leading your department. So I think fantastic panel and really looking forward to hearing from you all. Lydia, we might start with you. Thinking about, particularly in your department, how you work with the other EAs to work across your department and support the broader EA network, building your own networks is a really important part of being an effective EA and supporting your senior executive and maybe reflecting on some challenges that you've had in that process.

LYDIA MILOSAVLJEVIC:

Absolutely. Before I get into that, I just want to say it's great to be here and thank you all for coming and to IPAA ACT for putting on the event. Good to be here with this amazing panel. As you all know, being an EA, I assume most of the people in this room are fellow EAs, and welcome to everyone else as well. Being an EA is really critical and drawing on our support team when supporting our executive in the current department having... All of our areas have been mugged across, so we have various different systems. So some people are on industry, some on DQ, all of these different ones, which provides temporary challenges in themselves. And our IT people in department are of course working furiously to get this all integrated for us. But for me, for what I've come in terms of challenges recently with this department and drawing on my EAs is to create that open and accessible atmosphere for my executive and for the group because, of course not all our staff can see his calendar or the priorities coming up.

So some examples of that, whether it's just I will send out weekly emails to all my EA outlining the group priorities and the calendar so people can see. So we're managing that risk of SES not having things in their diary. And

monthly meetings with EAs, I think it's really important to establish that community, whatever level you are, working towards that internal EA cohort because the stronger that is, the more we share information and knowledge across the department and that supports our executive and the wider department as a whole, which is really important. In terms of speaking as a deputy secretary EA supporting the secretary's office, and again, this speaks to whatever level you are, the more support you can provide to them and the stronger relationship you have will benefit the wider department as well as your executive because we're all working together and as a team to achieve the same goals. We're all in it together. But yeah, I hope that answers the question.

KIERAN BUTLER:

Yeah, any other panellists want to comment on that? Especially given that most of you are working in the secretary's office as well, supporting the EAs across your department or building your own networks or helping them build their networks.

LEIGH-ANNE PALMER:

I might build on the network part of it. So I recently moved to Department of Finance in August. New department, new role, didn't know anyone. So building those networks was crucial and fortunately for me, my SES Jenny went out to each branch to meet various SES and their teams and I built my networks through working with their divisions. So perhaps their EAs, their EOs, branch managers, and that's how I've gotten to know people and actually work out who fits with who, which is really important when you're setting up meetings, requesting briefings. We're also trying to build our EA network, so there was an EA network in place but just giving it a bit of a refresh and a new spin on things and I think we're doing pretty well.

LOUISE MORTIMER:

I'll just reiterate how important it is for networks, not just within the EA cohort but wider, particularly with your SES as well. So you can try to make sure that that EA and SES relationship works. So being approachable for not just EA as your networks but SES as well as a form or a part of your networks is also very helpful. You have to excuse me, very nervous. You can hear in my voice but I'll get there, I'll warm up. Within the Attorney General's Department at the moment, we've just completed a recruitment round and what we put in to play was to meet with the SES who had vacancies, and try to work out off the panel who would be most suited to that SES. So again, that comes back to getting to know the department, reaching out, tapping that person on the shoulder. And you know what, senior EAs or EAs in our position shouldn't be the only ones who instigate that relationship with other people or other people who we feel will be beneficial for our position.

And I would love to see more people, APS4s, APS3s approaching secretaries' EAs or dep sec EAs because they are sometimes struggling due to the job and we have so much knowledge to share. Knowledge is power but it's not powerful if you keep it to yourself and use for yourself. So I think network's really, really key. I used to roll my eyes when I first started with public service on networking, what a word, don't want to hear it again, but it is so key and fundamental to everyday function of the office.

KIERAN BUTLER: And look, Louise, you mentioned working with your office and the EOs, and from my experience having been a chief of staff, it was a real team between the chief of staff and the EOs and the EAs as well. And actually, I might pick on you in terms of your relatively new department and trying to establish that relationship with that cohort across a new department because it's such an integral function relationship with the functioning of a new and very busy department.

ASHLEIGH TALONI: Yes.

KIERAN BUTLER: How do you find that? Because it's people from-

ASHLEIGH TALONI: I was fortunate enough that when I commenced with the secretary, I did have a bit of connections already with some of the other group EAs, EOs, the other executives across the department, sorry. But in saying that there was still a lot of favours that I had to call in because it was new relationships that I had to build with whole new groups, divisions that came in. I'm sure I haven't met everyone yet, but still working on that network myself as well. But there was definitely a lot to learn in that initial stage because we didn't have... We did but we didn't. We came from a department but then it was a new department, so people changed, people moved into other roles. So I lost half of that network at the same time.

It was a very interesting time and I actually was not fortunate enough, but unfortunate enough that when the department commenced as a department, I had COVID, so it was isolating at home whilst looking after a secretary and a deputy. So I really heavily relied on the network that I did have and formed those new relationships because I had to reach out to people. Which probably helped me in some ways actually because I didn't have a choice, which sometimes made me nervous still to just pick up that phone and felt a bit like I was cold calling people asking for a favour when they didn't know who I was. So in saying that from now though, I've now formed those relationships with them and they're quite strong now that when I call, it's actually a, "How you been, how you going," and they're more than willing to help me because we've got that relationship that we've now formed just from some of those simple little phone calls that I had to make back then.

KIERAN BUTLER: And speaking of starting during a COVID lockdown, I think that might have been pretty close to Louise's situation. Not only starting during a period where there were various lockdowns again, but also in the middle of, well not the middle of, but what soon became an election year and a change of government. Interested in your reflections, Louise, on your role through that process where massive changes, MOG changes, change of government, big new policy agenda, and you were still relatively new to the role in the department and to working with Katherine.

LOUISE MORTIMER: Yeah, so ACT went into lockdown, I think it was, I could nearly remember the date, the 16th of August 2021 because that was supposed to be my leaving farewell at Defence after 14 years party and drinks and we had to cancel. But then we started Monday, a new department. Katherine and I were pretty much the only ones in the building with the exception of few IT and facilities and your security guards. And I'll tell you what, those relationships there and then, they're quite key and really valuable. So we established

those from the get go. But yeah, it was quite hard. I reached out to Esther, a former secretary's EA to AGD, and I remember week two or three and I just said, "I don't think I can do this." And she said, "Just give it a go, you'll be fine." I'm like, "Okay, I'll give it a go."

But coming in, it was COVID, no one was in the building. Katherine and I on occasion sat there and go, "Okay, I want you to do this, reach out to this person, this area." I had no one, I was fortunate enough that the COO's EA was my stability during that time. She was amazing. And thank you, Shannon, she's here today. But she provided me with some real solid guidance, and that position is really key to the department and any department or organisation I feel because they do have that touch point into every aspect of the organisation. So COVID was a thing and people started gradually coming back to work and that's great, wonderful. The hallways are getting busy, the lift's actually gone up and down and then, oh election, okay. Super. Not only do I not know what people look like or where they actually sit, now we're going to have look at an election and possibly a new government, which was the case, and a new agenda.

And that was really tough as well because I put expectations on myself, and if you don't really have that support network and you do put expectations on yourself, that can be quite damaging. So I tried to limit those expectations and just reset and just do day to day and just get through it. But election came and went. I think biggest research or tool that I was able to help me through that was to look at the incoming government briefs and just have a skim. There's no reason why we can't look at documents or read into and try to get some information in there, so that enables us to be able to support our SES. So that also helped form the priorities. So when a government did come in then, I knew that these top three I think the attorney generals had of the labour government.

So we hit the ground running with the National Anti-corruption Commission, Voice to Parliament, and the Robodebt Royal Commission. So we hit the ground running. It has been a enormously busy year, excuse me, constantly learning, and I don't think I'll ever stop learning in the department. We had, I think Katherine said, about four mugged in across and was just completed. I think we nearly just finished with OSI coming across. Enormous amount of work for the department. And if anyone knows Katherine Jones like I know Katherine Jones, she will get out there, she'll want to meet people, she'll want to do the standups and make sure everyone's comfortable and welcomed into the department. So that in itself was challenging when you're trying to also balance the ministerial clearance of subs that go up and the everyday sign offs and the finance, and you got to travel here and meet this person and go into state.

So it was quite a challenge. But I think really good support team coming back to the EO and chief of staff roles. Had various, but we have an amazing open relationship and they were relatively new as well with the new government, but setting those clear boundaries of your roles and responsibilities was really key in the beginning. Yes, you need to go over and have that redundancy, but that's how our office worked really well and to help get all this done, how the government wanted by the end of this year. So we'd get

a little bit of a break over Christmas. I hope everyone does and then we start again.

KIERAN BUTLER: Makes me feel a little bit stressed just hearing your-

LOUISE MORTIMER: Yeah. No, it's good. I think EAs, we don't thrive off stress but I think we are driven by doing that something different every day. And I've gone out of EA roles and come back and out and come back. And when I've gone out and got bored, so I come back. Want to do something different. Sorry, talking too much. See, that's what happens when I get really nervous.

KIERAN BUTLER: No, that's okay. That's some fascinating tensions and your suggestion about read the incoming government brief, understand what the focus is of the secretary, but also you've got a secretary who wants to get out and do everything and you've got to manage those tensions at the same time as well as supporting the EAs across the department. So it's a lot to navigate but I also like your reflection that you've also got to be a bit realistic with your own expectations and you can push yourself, but you've got to look after yourself as well.

LOUISE MORTIMER: Absolutely.

KIERAN BUTLER: Especially in the context of everyone's probably stressed and busy and you've got to be a bit of a centre of calm as far as you can be for the secretary's office. And Lydia, you're also in what is a new department where, putting politics aside, a very big agenda for a new department in terms of the climate change in the middle of a energy crisis globally. So some pretty big ticket items for a new department and probably also a lot of stress and pressure. In terms of your reflections on your role and how that's gone through a change of government and some pretty big priorities that a lot of them have been achieved over this year impressively.

LYDIA MILOSAVLJEVIC: Yes, absolutely. I mean, a lot of what you were saying was, yeah, very similar in the terms of learning the new department and getting your head around all of that work. Because when the change of government occurred, Simon and I were still at PM&C so we went through that and getting areas moggging out and getting that group under wrap, and then we ended up moving to what is now DQ and that comes with its own challenges. Not only are you learning a brand new department, you're getting your head around all the new priorities of the government and supporting your executive in that aspect as well. So yeah, I think it's very close to what Louise was pointing out.

KIERAN BUTLER: And talking about spending a year, Louise, you talked a bit about being pushed outside your comfort zone pretty quickly, and Lydia, the same reflection. Actually interested in your take on that concept about how you have pushed yourself or just being pushed outside your comfort zone. Again, relatively new to that role, new department, huge focus for the government was the IR reforms that again have gotten through parliament this year. Geez, that's a real success story this year, isn't it? That's a big undertaking and a lot of stress, I imagine, for you and a lot to manage in a new department. And how have you navigated or push yourself or managed the challenging environment?

ASHLEIGH TALONI:

I will say the biggest thing that's pushed me out of my comfort zone is actually this. Incredibly nervous. It was a very interesting but difficult start to the department because there was myself and an executive officer trying to set up what was brand new. There was nothing in place. We had to set up new processes, new groups that needed to be created. There were committees, there were boards, then there was the juggle of trying to actually fit all that into the timing that we had where you don't have 20 hours in a day that I had to emphasise some days just because there was that juggle of what was the priority at the time and what wasn't. Some of those comfort zones for me being new into a secretary role was actually the involvement that I then had with the minister's office and with other secretary offices, which speaking to other secretary EAs now, I've formed those relationships. But I was petrified the first time I had to call another secretary office because that was something that was brand new to me. Seemed normal to call another deputy office, but secretary was that next level.

Getting the involvement from the minister's office was incredibly uncomfortable for those first couple of weeks. How do they prefer their contact to be made. And it was just a different vibe and it wasn't bad, it wasn't that anyone had said, "You're not to do this or you're not to do that," it was just, I got into my head a little bit with it because when I commenced as an EA it was a bit of a, "You don't speak to these levels and you don't do this." It was a bit of a stigma that as an EA, you're not allowed out of this zone. And I think a lot of EAs now have actually worked very hard to break that a little bit because it is encouraging to... You step out of that comfort zone and you form a relationship with any number of people, which I feel like a lot of the EAs that I do talk to now are very much on the same thought. But it was a bit of just an uncomfortable train there for a while, feeling a bit more settled as the months went on. Yeah, I don't quite know how else to emphasise some of those scenarios.

LOUISE MORTIMER:

EA secretaries are just people too.

ASHLEIGH TALONI:

Yeah, I discovered that.

LOUISE MORTIMER:

Yeah, it was exactly the same. Picking up that phone call and talking to other department secretary EAs was like, "Uh," and then you'd stumble over words like I'm doing now, and then you couldn't get your message out. Yeah.

ASHLEIGH TALONI:

And it was initially as well, before we had mugged, there was a bit of a request to reach out to somebody. So I was still with my deputy, still with the secretary trying to manage whatever it was, but we were still technically DESE, so I was calling going, "I'm calling from... That's wrong, really sorry. We're actually next week going to be this and I'm calling for Nat, but I'm not calling for Nathan." And so it was this huge jumble in my own mind trying to navigate it. It's all same scenario. I'm sure other people have gone through it as well and everybody that answered the phone was absolutely lovely, giving me any number of advice that I've asked or not asked, but then has been the most helpful advice ever. So I guess some of that comfort zone is don't be afraid to ask those questions because it's definitely helped me progress to here. I'm on a stage, don't know how I feel about it yet. I'm sure I'll think about it later, but it helps you progress so much further. Just

sometimes that's saying that yes is your career development, is your progression to that next level is meeting those other connections that you might not have thought you'd make.

KIERAN BUTLER: I mean, I guess because you haven't had someone who said, "Here's the way the minister likes it, here's what the secretary likes, here's how things run." A lot of you I just said, "I don't know, figure it out," because there's a new minister and a new secretary and a new department or-

ASHLEIGH TALONI: It was all brand new.

KIERAN BUTLER: Yeah. So I guess all of you must get comfortable having to say, "I don't know, I'm going to have to either ask someone for guidance or figure it out myself and have a go at it."

ASHLEIGH TALONI: Yes, there was a bit of figuring it out, proposing a couple of options, discussions with my EO to try and figure it out. Even still now, there's discussions with the chief of staff. There's still different things that might pop up as a new scenario for us as a department, us as an office that hasn't come up before and I go, "Oh I don't know, I've still got to have that process in place." A bit more confident now with preferences of the secretary, which was brand new at the time as well. And my fun little story there was that I actually whilst in my isolation, lost a very bad bet that I made with my deputy on Origin and turned up in a onesie because that was the bet. So my first meeting with my Secretary was in my Blues onesie. So great impression to have made, but I held my end of the bargain and bought them all a birthday cake in first day back in the office. But I think I got a little too brave making that bet whilst at home isolating with nobody to talk to. So it was definitely out of the comfort zone for that scenario as well.

KIERAN BUTLER: And in terms of navigating, figuring out new practises or the preference of the secretary, I'm interested in what mechanisms any of you might have. Do you have regular sit downs where you say, "How are things going or how am I working?" Do any of you have particular practises, whether it's daily, weekly, fortnightly meetings, or chief of staff or someone gives you feedback on how they're travelling, or whether they'd like you to do different things or you make suggestions about how they could do things differently?

LEIGH-ANNE PALMER: So for me, fortunately, I came across with Jenny, so having worked as a deputy secretary to a secretary, I could then help people with her preferences. And I found a lot of people in finance now have asked, "What does she prefer? How does she like her meeting briefs prepared? Dot points, double sided, whatever." But it's just we know our SES, unfortunately for me, I did, it wasn't a brand-new person. And then you can put forward their preferences, which I've shared with, we had a chief of staff as well as our executive officer, and it just comes with time. Obviously there's little tweaks along the way, but overall I think it remained the same for me.

KIERAN BUTLER: Yeah. You would get to be the fountain of all knowledge about the preferred practises. What about anyone else who's had to figure that out as they go and develop that relationship and get feedback?

LOUISE MORTIMER: Yeah, yeah, definitely with Katherine. I came from Defence, which is considered quite structured. So my previous Deputy Secretary I worked to,

you'd sit down, you'd go through the week daily, you'd have your daily catch ups. Even with the military major general I worked to, he was exactly the same, daily catch ups. Work it out, you could move forward and then just adjust during the week. And then I came across and worked with Katherine and it's 5:00, "What have I got on tomorrow?" And I'm like, "You've got this." "I don't want that. Can you move this one?" Which is fine, she's got priorities, the phone's going, so she's got other things that we don't necessarily have visibility of because all these secretaries get on and they use WhatsApp and they text each other and make these arrangements.

But going from what I said, structured in a sense, but minimal catch up. So this is where that relationship in the executive is really key with the chief of staff, your executive officers or advisors or staff officers or EOs, whatever your support bases is called and you bounce and you feed off each other. I don't like saying you got to listen out to every conversation, but you need to know what's happening because they won't necessarily have the time to relay it back to you. So although you might not get that structured time in the diary, keeping your ear to the ground and asking those questions, I said in our EA group chat today, "Ask questions. Doesn't matter what forum, someone else is going to want to know or have the same thought about that question." So again, circling back because I do that, I get off track, not so structured in this one. However, the door's open and I can go in and just approach anytime.

LYDIA MILOSAVLJEVIC:

I think, if I can, jumping off that, what you were saying about keeping your ear to the ground and what's going on because the day can get away from you and then they want all of these things at the end of the day. I think that the EO partnership comes into play there. In our office, our EO tends to attend most of the meetings with my boss, so that's really helpful for me checking in with him, who relays, "This came up in this meeting, we need this set up." And that's that good channel throughout the day. And then at the end of the day we can come back saying, "We've done this, is there anything else we missed?" Yeah, I thought that was a really good point.

LOUISE MORTIMER:

Yeah, we do similar in our group chat, which is what it's there for, to bounce ideas off each other or correct what you might have thought was going to happen. Yeah.

KIERAN BUTLER:

That's a very good point, Louise, about the modern practise of all our agency heads, they have their own communication channels, but we're not really across at the time, so things are developing on signal. Turning briefly to the old chestnut of how do you all do your very demanding, important, stressful jobs, but actually maintain some level of balance? I hate to say work-life balance because really, there are ebbs and flows, but overall maintaining a bit of balance and managing your workload, managing the office and the balance of your offices generally as well. Interested in your thoughts on that question.

LEIGH-ANNE PALMER:

Sure.

KIERAN BUTLER:

Some tips you might have for all of us and then we can get some tips from anyone else up as well.

LEIGH-ANNE PALMER:

So we obviously all have commitments both in our personal and our professional life, but I think with open and effective communication it can assist us in balancing and in creating a harmony. For me personally, I have three children, I have a very busy life. But a few years ago when I started working for Jenny, something that was important to me was I wanted to leave work one day a week and pick up my daughter from school and take her to swimming lessons. We had a conversation about it, we did a trial to see if it would work for us. It did. I then can have that freedom to go off and not actually worry about work for two hours. I'll obviously then go back and check in on my emails, and if something's blowing up, I would probably reassess my priorities. But I think that we can have that work-life balance. It's all just about being organised and working with your team. I have a fantastic executive officer who I know always has my back. I've just been off for a week, I wasn't well. I didn't worry once about work because I knew she would have my back and I would do the same for her. So I think if you just have that communication all the time, you can definitely achieve a good work-life balance.

KIERAN BUTLER:

Anyone else got any tips or tricks or managed some flexibility or dealing... I mean, I guess as my former boss always said, we're all people who come as our whole selves to work and we have lives and families and things going on, and a good officer or a good boss will recognise and manage those as well. And as you said, it's about talking to your CEO or to your secretary and communicating. But anyone else have any experiences or tips that they've employed over their careers to date?

ASHLEIGH TALONI:

I'm getting a call, sorry. Recognising that potentially the teams that we are working in are also the same, so maybe taking that opportunity to point that out that, "Oh, you're in early today." Just drawing it to attention. Sometimes, "Guys, it's 6:00, should we all still be here?" Or having not the focus on what the time is but just having that awareness that we may not all be looking at the clocks and suddenly it is 7:00 at night and you're still there but you didn't know it was 7:00 until someone's calling going, "Where are you? It's dinner time," or whatever it might be. Helping each other be accountable for that is quite useful. I certainly find that sometimes I've had that little reminder of, "Okay, let's pack up. We're done for the day," sort of thing.

Just having that awareness that our colleagues are also probably under the same amounts of stress and pressure and might not have realised that that's the time or somebody might bring up that they want to leave at a certain time on a certain day. Being really supportive and encouraging of that for our colleagues, it helps them to encourage you to do the same. So I think just being aware that we all do have lives, we're all entitled to have lives as well as work. We're not soldiers to be here working all the time, but just being really encouraging of that. And just like you've touched on, the communication there is quite key. If people are aware of it, they're more likely to be supportive of it. So not hiding that fact that you want to go because it's 5:00 and it's leaving early, it's not early for some. It shouldn't be, but.

LOUISE MORTIMER:

It's nice to have that day off every now and then. If it's for your own mental health, that's even better because I'm a strong advocate for mental health.

But if you have that day off during the week, I'm sure all EA can attest, geez, they miss you. They really, really miss you. Everyone wanders around with paper in the hand going, "Where do I put this? What do I do with this?" But I think you want to talk about wellbeing. I think it's really important to be open and honest with the immediate people that you work with. Tell them, "My son just got his licence and rode off his first car. Sorry, got to deal with that, boss. Is that all right?" I was driving out the other day, she was coming back from a national press club and I was, "Got to go pick my son up from school. He refuses to walk back." So we've all got those bits and pieces in our lives and work's going to be there. It'll always be there when you get back.

KIERAN BUTLER:

And do you also try to play a role in doing that for the Secretary or others in your office? Because sometimes might be good for you to try and have some flexibility, but the others might forget that they also need to take some time off or go to something in their family or do those things. I mean, that's a tricky thing to navigate as well in terms of trying to say, "You really should just go home, you look really tired."

LOUISE MORTIMER:

... in a polite way.

KIERAN BUTLER:

Hence I don't do this job because that's...

LOUISE MORTIMER:

I think having that chat and then grabbing them and sitting them down saying, "What have you got on that I can help you with? Or let's have a look at why you now were overwhelmed and I've got a little bit of capacity on a Friday afternoon to put the weekend pack together or something like that. I can do that for you." But some people won't tell you because they're too scared that it's perceived as failure if they can't do what's being asked of them. You can always say no. There's a way of saying no without saying no. And this is a lesson I'm still learning with the diary request that keep coming in. It's, "Okay, I can put that meeting in for you because you're telling me it's a priority. However, that request you asked for yesterday is going to have to move another week."

So you can adapt that approach to your work balance as well I think. But that's self-awareness, and talking and having that open communication and being vulnerable in your workplace is not a bad thing either. You're allowed to have bad days and ride the highs and you're allowed to have those lows, and as long as you've got a really good support base you can bounce off. But again, circling back, because that's what I said earlier, I do that I get off track and then I have to come back on. Having a chat about the duties, like I said earlier, we have clear duties, but if someone's overwhelmed, then there's nothing wrong with saying, "Hey, what have you got on that I can take off your plate? I notice you're over on the printer. I can do that. Just let it print and I can hole punch it for you." Because sometimes they do get overwhelmed, so it is tough to try and make people take that time off, but I think just the talking is going to help them navigate through that, hopefully.

KIERAN BUTLER:

Yeah. Thanks, Louise. We're going to start throwing to the audience so that we have time for lots of questions and answers. We will have a microphone

roaming around that get sanitised between each person, so you don't have to worry about sharing COVID around. If you can when you ask a question, if you could let us know who you are and where you are from. Feel free, I encourage you all to ask questions of these excellent panellists and feel free to also share your own experiences or tips on any of the things we've discussed or anything else related to the forum. So really, it's a very comfortable, pleasant room full of lovely people, so don't hold back. Feel free to ask any questions you have and I think we can have a good open discussion. Who's going to volunteer to be first up? That's always the tough one. Oh, thank you. Over here.

- ANASTAZIA: Hi, my name's Anastazia and I'm from Border Force. I'm actually brand new. This is my fourth week I think. So my question is probably going to be very, very low, but I struggle with you were talking about keeping your ear to the ground and obviously reading emails. How do you overcome that you're allowed to do that, and that that's important to be able to do your job? Because I'm really struggling with that because I'm like, "That's not really any of my business," but it is for me to support. So how do you overcome that?
- LOUISE MORTIMER: Eyes on me. Go for it.
- LEIGH-ANNE PALMER: So you really have to be reading the emails because that'll determine what meetings you might have to set up, what briefing you could possibly put in train. That's your job, you just have to be in there. Sometimes it does feel invasive, but you soon get over it and you're just like, "Let's go."
- ANASTAZIA: I feel like it's just protected and top secret and you're like, "Oh no."
- LOUISE MORTIMER: I think when it comes to arranging meetings, you need to know. So I might ring Ashleigh's office and go, "Hey, Katherine asked me to set up a meeting with your secretary half an hour next week, what do you got?" And she'll go, "What's it about? It's really jam-packed diary." And I'll go, "I don't know." You don't want to be doing that. You want to go, "Well, Katherine wants to talk about 1, 2, 3. It's a priority because of..." So you do need to do that reading, you need to skim across documents, not just emails. I always try to read the, they call it bluff bottom line upfront. So you read that first paragraph and then you read normally at the back of recommendations. So you don't have to read the whole document, just read those two, it'll give you a good sense of what's going on and the urgency of it. Because if it doesn't have a due date, it needs to go back too. So it's a need to know principle and you'll be told if it's something we should be told, if it's something that you shouldn't be accessing. So you'll get there. It's a confidence thing and that'll come. But you need to talk to people as well. Yeah. Just if you're really unsure, if you said it's classified document, just say, "Hey, is it something I need to know?" Yeah.
- HALEY: Hi, my name's Haley. I'm from the Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water. I work under Lydia.
- LEIGH-ANNE PALMER: Question for Lydia.
- HALEY: Yeah. So who's your favourite EA that works under you? No. So my question was, you guys were talking about work-life balance before, how do you guys

go about setting boundaries at work and making sure you're not taking too much on board for those around you trying to support them as well?

KIERAN BUTLER: Lydia, why don't you kick off with your department?

LYDIA MILOSAVLJEVIC: Absolutely.

KIERAN BUTLER: With a very long title, so well done. That's a-

LYDIA MILOSAVLJEVIC: Absolutely. Thank you, Haley. So answering the question about how we keep our own balance and people that we're supporting as well, making sure they're getting work-life balance. I guess it's about, if it's for that personal aspect, it's having that discussion with your SES. As you know, Haley, I take study leave once a week and my boss is very supportive of that and Haley as well as other EAs have on occasion acted for me, so it's giving them that opportunity. But I guess it goes back to checking in with your EAs and your support staff to making sure that they're going okay and travelling okay. Sometimes it's tricky to navigate that because they've got their own SES that they report to, but just checking in and if you can sense that maybe they're overworked or there's something troubling them, then that's potentially a discussion that you can have with their SES, depending on the level that you're at, just to make sure that we're looking after each other and supporting each other. Anything to add?

KIERAN BUTLER: Ashleigh, you want to offer any?

ASHLEIGH TALONI: I did just have a thought and then I went, "Oh," and it's gone. I coming back to the communication piece there I think is quite key with just making sure that your coworkers are actually going okay. So it can sometimes just be that simple question of, "How you doing?" If we're looking like it's getting onto five o'clock and they look a bit stressed, you can usually pick up on those sorts of feelings from those around you. And just sometimes doing that check in and seeing if there's anything you can actually do to help. It might just be as simple in the morning, "Let's go grab a coffee," because that mental checkout sometimes, I mean, that helps me and I usually need a coffee, but sometimes having that minute to just breathe, chat to a colleague actually helps, I guess, balance again might be that we've had a bit of a discussion and it's actually solved a few of those queries that might have been a worry for some of the EAs, other coworkers there.

I've certainly had some of my EAs reach out just to go, "Hey, not sure about this." So we grab a coffee and then suddenly a few things are actually solved then in the space of a coffee run. Because sometimes it is that fear of not being able to get this done but also needing the coffee but not being able to leave your desk because you've got all this stuff and it's just a vicious circle. So sometimes I find that's a key component to my relationship with them. And also I love that there's that avenue that they feel comfortable to come to me with something that sometimes has started and I do it myself with a, "I've got a silly question." It's never really silly, if you're worried about it and there's obviously that concern that you might not be coping with it and you stew on it for a while. It can sometimes just be that really quick simple conversation and then it's actually less of a stress I think. Not sure that added much, but.

LYDIA MILOSAVLJEVIC: Yeah, and jumping on very quickly on that, I think it's really good when your head EA gives you that permission to leave your desk and have that coffee. Sometimes it's hard to do it yourself because you feel like you can't leave and you've got to be on call, which as an EA, we tend to be, but yeah, when your head EA takes you up for coffee, it's good because you're still working but you're taking that break as well.

ASHLEIGH TALONI: And networking.

LYDIA MILOSAVLJEVIC: And networking.

ASHLEIGH TALONI: Tick.

KIERAN BUTLER: Actually I might just pick up on that actually because you've mentioned that what you talked about there was really your leadership role in your role in taking the time out to meet with other EAs and give them support. And I imagine that's quite powerful, the mere fact of saying, "How are you doing? Is everything okay? Can I help in any way or can I offer any thoughts?" I'm interested in how many of you and how often you are able to take the time to do that because you probably don't necessarily realise that people really look up to you and value the time that you give them. And I know, Louise, you're chairing the EA network and AGD and I imagine many of you are doing similar types of things in your organisation. But maybe, Leigh-Anne, I'll pick on you to in terms of if you get time to think about and proactively try to do that and meet with people and as you say, encourage them to say, "It's okay we can take half an hour away from our desks and talk about these things."

LEIGH-ANNE PALMER: Absolutely. I think those relationships are extremely important. My SES is very supportive of me leaving my desk and going to have those coffees or catch up with a branch or walk around the block with somebody. That's how you build your networks, that's how you build your relationships. And when you touched on just now, but somebody saying it's a silly question, nothing's ever a silly question. And even by them just speaking to you, sometimes it's just a sounding board that somebody needs, so I think it's just really important just to make the time for it.

ASHLEIGH TALONI: And people expect it to. I have titled myself at times with my chief of staff a friendly level 11 pest because I'll have a deemed silly question in my eyes, but it's then the flow on of what might then come from that question that we have that solution. And I often get people, their first instinct is to message me or to call and say "sorry to bother you", and it's not a bother because in you being able to answer your questions, you actually are feeding into assisting me with my role, assisting my secretary or the deputies, whatever it might be. It is all working together with that, so I do think that's quite valuable and never a bother. It's still coming, but we're getting there. Take a little while for them to know that they can call and obviously if we're unable to, I will always just say, "Look, can I give you a call back?". Because there's not always the perfect time, but making that time to make it known that if there is those questions or the stress talk that they might need, I am there for that and happy to, and yeah.

LOUISE MORTIMER: I didn't drink coffee when I started AGD.

ASHLEIGH TALONI: Neither did I.

KIERAN BUTLER: Oh wow. That's a...

LOUISE MORTIMER: Now I live for it. Yeah. Yeah, it's good catch up. I tried to get to know the department after COVID as well when everyone started coming back by. I tried two EAs a week. Someone different to just go out for coffee and you can do it during the weekly committee meetings the boss might have with her SLG or something like that. You're allowed to get away from your desk. You're allowed to get away from your desk because, like you said, Ash, it does benefit the relationship and that networking. Yeah.

KIERAN BUTLER: And imagine you've all been through MOG, so there'd be people who are literally brand new to the department and don't know anyone and don't know the processes. So those conversations would be really valuable to them particularly. I think we've got time for one more question. No, that's okay. Please. Thank you.

AMANDA: Hello, my name's Amanda. I look after Roxanne Kelly at the Treasury. Just wondering if anyone, for all the panel members, if you want to share any particular highlight from your EA career so far?

KIERAN BUTLER: Oh, good question.

AMANDA: Or lowlight, if you want to be-

KIERAN BUTLER: I swear that wasn't a staged final question, but it really should have been actually. Thank you. I feel like each of you surely has something that we can highlight from your respective careers. Can we start down with you, Lydia?

LYDIA MILOSAVLJEVIC: Absolutely. I mean, maybe it's cliché, but what I'm doing now, I love. I love my job, being a part of this new department as well as the time in PM&C was very cool. I hadn't been an EA to a deputy secretary prior to PM&C, so that was amazing. But also going back to my time at the COVID Commission, that was a once in a blue moon lifetime, it sprung about, and that had challenges in itself. We were setting up meetings, it goes back to drawing on your EA cohort to book in meetings with the prime minister and all the secretaries as soon as possible. So that was really cool. So yeah, I've been very lucky to have two great experiences in everything else. But yeah, those are probably the two highlights.

KIERAN BUTLER: Because we were going to go around and offer final reflections, but actually that question is just a perfect segue into your experiences, but somewhat final reflections you might have as you're recounting your career highlights.

LOUISE MORTIMER: I have a lot of highlights and a lot of self-reflection, aha moments and light bulb moments over the growth period in 16 years I've been in the public service. So I've hit rock bottom and I've learned a lot from that. But what I've learned mostly is it's okay to stop. You're in the flurry of the day, I think it's okay to just stop and just take stock of what's going on. And really enjoy those times that are the good times because they far outweigh the bad times. I think the bad times are just a bigger cloud that shouldn't be there. But if you sit and you just write everything that is good or the relationships that you've built and the people that you get to meet and the laughter that you hear out of the office, I think that's wonderful highlights. I've always wanted to be a secretary's EA. It's hard to get in these positions because it is naturally attached to the person who is in that position. But I encourage

people to take risks. I put my hand up and said to an EA, "If you ever want to go on leave, I'm happy to take your spot." She went on leave.

I took her spot and now I'm where I am. Do you know what I mean? But it's all about that relationship working. It's not necessarily about taking advantage of someone going on leave. The relationship's got to work. But yeah, being asked, I remember Katherine said, "I'd like you to come across the AGD for me." And I said yes. And then I said no. And then I said yes. She goes, "What do you mean no?" And I said, "Well, there's so much in Defence we wanted to kick off and we were just getting going on the learning pathway for EAs." But how could you say no? Yeah. But it was good, so that was a real highlight. I remember sitting there after hours and she comes sneaking in from Secretary of Defence's office and just sat down there like a little kid swinging on a chair. So it was a real highlight, to be honest. That's probably my biggest.

KIERAN BUTLER:

Ashleigh, highlights or final reflections?

ASHLEIGH TALONI:

I think some of what you've just mentioned is also the fun and having the relationships that we have now and all the little things, but sounds very silly that I'm about to say this, but sometimes my little highlights turn into, they should be little, but they're quite big in that day where I've ticked off all my list. Or one of them in this particular case was that I managed by pure luck to align 17 people for the one time slot that I had. And they all said yes. And I went, I'm done. It was a good day. So it was a little win, but for me it was huge. That day was then this is the best day ever. I'm on such a high, I can do anything today. I was brought down to Earth very quickly, but it was a highlight on that particular day. So it's those little wins that turn into the big ones on any given day.

I mean, I've had a short lived, I suppose, career here, but I've loved every minute of it I've had, you have your good SES, you sometimes have some relationships that are a bit of a struggle there. I've cried on some of my SES, I've laughed with them. They've very quickly discovered they needed tissues in their office because that was bad day and they didn't have tissues. So the next day came into tissues and chocolates. So there's, he's prepped then and it was Ash. Did you notice the shelf? And thank you. So it's those relationships that you've built along the way that I do find, I still have contact with my previous SES, so I've still got contact with the previous officers. We do end of year catch up, we do lunches. I love that social aspect. So I think that's been a really big highlight for me there. And I guess just trying not to focus on some of those. There's always going to be bad days. I came from a childcare background, so there were bad days. Rain days were horrendous. So it was just that balance of-

KIERAN BUTLER:

To bring with you, I think.

ASHLEIGH TALONI:

Yeah, yeah. A lot of patience.

KIERAN BUTLER:

Not throwing food at you, so that's good stuff.

ASHLEIGH TALONI:

Yeah, there was nothing being thrown at me really, so it was great. But just those highlights have definitely outweighed the bad days and keep coming in. It's always fun. Find yourself a good group of people and you don't mind doing it. You want to come in again, and yeah.

KIERAN BUTLER: Thanks, Ashleigh. Leigh-Anne, to wrap us up with any highlights or final thoughts from you. You've had obviously a long career in the public service, so-

LEIGH-ANNE PALMER: Not that long in the public service, actually.

KIERAN BUTLER: Oh, okay. Sorry.

LEIGH-ANNE PALMER: Probably about five years in total in the public service.

KIERAN BUTLER: Oh right, okay.

LEIGH-ANNE PALMER: But a highlight for me would be Jenny asking me to go with her to Finance. So she came back, well, very secretive, close the door, and said she'd been asked to be the secretary and would I come with her. So I was more excited for her, but then it dawned on me that I was actually moving departments with her. So just knowing that you are the person and you're there to support them, it's very important. I mean, it's actually a big win. That relationship is something that's really important. And I think each and every one of us actually, we're all wonderful. We've all been asked to go somewhere because of our organisational skills. And I just think, yeah, you got to take those wins.

KIERAN BUTLER: Yeah. Well, thank you very much, and unfortunately, we're going to have to wrap up. If I might just start by saying, can everyone join me in thanking our fantastic panel, Ashleigh, Louise, Lydia. I won't even try to recapture all the insights you've gain from the excellent panel. I think it always comes up, but it's a really important in terms of the relationships that you've all built together and that you will build with those in this room and across the EA network and with EOs and other agencies and the importance of those networks and actually taking the time out to work on that. A lot of you reflected on the need to actually just ask for help sometimes or to offer help and how powerful that can be and to actually take the time out to do that. To ask questions, I think that's a good lesson for all of us, actually. Don't be afraid to ask questions because the chances are someone else has got the same question and you'll help build the capacity of your department at the same time.

And I really like a lot of you reflect on the fact that have fun and have some laughter and enjoy your work and enjoy your colleagues. And actually I think that a lot of your roles is so important in building the culture and the atmosphere of a secretary's office or a dep sec's office or a whole department actually, and I think often undervalued part of your role and to put your hand up to do things like being here tonight. So thank you very much for coming and offering to be here tonight and share your thoughts. For all of you, obviously sign up to the EPA mainly list, so what's going on over the next year. And just quickly like to thank IPAA ACT's partners who are KPMG, Hays, Telstra, MinterEllison, the Commonwealth Bank and Microsoft. Really great that you could all be here tonight and hope you can stick around for some refreshments and catching up with everyone and hope you all have a safe and happy Christmas and new year, and thanks for coming.