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THE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT OF POLITICAL STAFFERS

Insights from Prime Ministers'
Advisers and Reformers

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Chapter 9

BEST PRACTICE GUIDANCE
FOR POLITICAL STAFFING
FOR POLITICAL MANAGERS,
ADVISERS AND REFORMERS

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BEST PRACTICE GUIDANCE FOR POLITICAL STAFFING FOR POLITICAL MANAGERS, ADVISERS AND REFORMERS

This chapter notes the positive and the problems in current practices in political staffing HR, recaps the research parameters and content of past chapters, and then sets out an overall vision and architecture for political staffing and why it is needed. Lastly, it provides guidance – and hopefully some inspiration too – for practitioners by covering the most important things they need to be aware of and consider doing to make the world of political staffing a better place.

The privilege of service in political staffing

Staffers feel privileged to be involved in the government. They appreciate that their roles enable them to be involved in the government, in the room when significant events occur and decisions are made, and create the potential to contribute to the government.

Their main motivation is to serve the public and make a positive difference in people's lives. They are driven by a clear sense of purpose and higher calling. They have a strong desire to contribute to the public good and serve their country.

They describe the roles as dynamic, super creative, fulfilling, rewarding, exciting, fun, amazing and unique and reflected that they got to work with great people. Those who got to experience positive team culture remarked on the mutual support, people having your back, all working towards a shared

purpose and the sense of solidarity, forging of friendships and creation of lifelong bonds.

The current crisis in political staffing HRM

However, the political staffing world is in crisis. Political staffers are an amazing professional group of passionate public-service-oriented individuals who do their utmost to help politicians represent and serve voters. They use a dazzling array of high-level capabilities to help create and deliver promised policies, create new proposals, keep in touch with ordinary people, represent specific groups in government, as well as maintain political strategies, prepare politicians, manage their colleagues and reform government systems.

But they are not treated like professionals. At its' worst, human resource management (HRM) for political staffers has unprofessional recruitment and selection, unclear expectations, ineffective feedback, confused line management, minimal orientation, opaque career progression, untrained manager, irrelevant training and poor incentives to stay resulting in high levels of burnout and turnover.

Staffers report how they get thrown into the deep end for a baptism by fire when they start, work 60–80 hour weeks and are available 24/7, are treated like second-class citizens, yet are just so vulnerable as they can lose their job in a day and have to compete in hunger games after cabinet reshuffles or an election if they want to stay in what works like an eighteenth-century feudal system.

They work extreme hours, sacrifice their personal lives and mental health to do so, and give it all until they burn out and cannot give any more.

The potential for good HRM

Despite the challenges, some political staffers, and those managing and working close to them, manage to develop remarkably good HR despite the conditions, helping to orientate, mentor and train new colleagues, building and contributing to wonderful teams, supporting each other through the trenches, achieving important political goals and pioneering effective HRM within the political workplace. But good HRM for political staffers and advisers is ad hoc. It needs to become widespread.

This research

This research therefore asked how can political staffers and advisers be more effectively managed and sought to find and highlight good practices to bring them out into the light for others to follow.

The research was built on a pragmatist research philosophy, adopting an appreciate inquiry approach to focus on finding good practice. We already knew there were problems from previous practitioner inquiries and academic research. The focus here was what works and what could be better.

Extensive and challenging collection of data produced over 260,000 words of data from 87 political practitioners including staffers and those working closely to them – in the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Sixty-seven advisers to Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Staffers for Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, SpAds for UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Staffers for New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern plus another three staffers in the new Albanese Labor Australian government.

Data analysis followed a grounded theory methodology and used Nvivo software with a two-stage coding process including open and dynamic coding followed by review and refinement to maximise interpretive validity. Findings were data-led.

Previous chapters in the book provided in-depth analysis, illustrations and examples of good practices in multiple areas of HRM that if adopted more universally would lead to significant improvement, as well as the case for change.

Chapter 2 explored why staffers love their jobs, but the problems with current practice and multiple areas of HRM ineffectiveness. It explained the exceptionalism argument – that politics is unique – but also contended that “It’s just the way it is” is an unacceptable excuse and that improved HRM would bring multiple benefits. Chapter 3 provided an overview of the roles that political staffers undertake, noting the role variance that exists across political offices and how staffers engage in job shaping. It emphasise how working with colleagues is a central part of staffer jobs, and discussed what staffers seek to achieve in their role. It identified the high-level and

diverse capabilities the roles require including specific expertise, political reasoning, strategic abilities, people skills, advisory aptitudes, coping capacity and fit with politician and political office.

Chapter 4 argued that those involved in hiring need to take into account the nature of the political staffer job. They also need to be upfront with applicants about the demands and terms of the jobs. It outlined the different recruitment sources, mostly partisan but emphasised the need to be open to non-partisan sources to achieve a diverse and capable staffing pool and ultimately offices. It then emphasises the need to ensure selection assesses candidates' actual suitability for the role.

Chapter 5 covered offering peer-driven orientation elements, providing ongoing training and development relevant to political staffers and supporting visible career paths and progression. Chapter 6 discussed setting up effective office structures, how to help staffers constrain and cope with workloads and the most effective ways to give feedback to improve performance in political offices. Chapter 7 explored the importance of building a positive office culture, specific strategies that can be used to build and maintain motivation and morale and bespoke tools for mitigating challenges and supporting mental health.

Chapter 8 discussed how to improve HRM in future, such as creating a bespoke professional infrastructure for the HRM of political staffers, improving recruitment and selection, providing better training and mentoring of staffers and their managers and instigating better working conditions for political staffers.

An overall vision and HRM architecture for political staffing

Making the world of political staffing a better place

The vision for political HRM is a high functioning fit for purpose HR architecture that enables the development of a highly skilled professional workforce whose talent is utilised much more effectively for government and provides significant benefit to the democratic system.

See Figure 9.1 for a high-level overview. This is explained in more detail in Figure 9.2.



Figure 9.1 Core concepts for a bespoke HRM for political staffers.

	<p>CUSTOMISED HR ARCHITECTURE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated permanent unit for all staffers in all roles and offices involving political staffers, HR experts and public servants, or different units connected and collaborating • Creates and maintains transparent HR processes suited to the political reality • Proactively supports effective HRM by guiding political managers, setting norms and standards, preserving institutional knowledge and best practice, organising professional development and supporting ongoing talent management • Offers safe independent space for issues such as harassment • Conveys basic information on HR rights, collects data such as staffer feedback surveys, diversity statistics and pay gaps, and conducts exit interviews
	<p>PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY FOR ALL STAFFERS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For all staffers, meets regularly for formal events and informal interaction • Enables peer knowledge sharing, support and socialisation • Covers topics such as a-political training, sharing of insights from current and former staffers, presentations from government departments or outside experts on emerging issues, new processes, statistical updates, global political developments, or research results

Figure 9.2 The specifics of a bespoke HRM infrastructure for political staffers.

	<p>PROACTIVE AND TAILORED TALENT MANAGEMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informed by understanding of what the jobs require including political capabilities but also personal attributes such as resilience, commitment, loyalty and agility. • Conveys realistic demands in job adverts and descriptions • Expanded recruitment using traditional sources such as campaigns and parties but also open to transferability of skills from outside politics and considering diversity within team and of thought and background • Selection involves both HR and political staffing expertise and assesses ability to fulfill actual demands of jobs • Proactively plans for change of government • Maintains a database of potential staffers and develops existing staffers.
	<p>INITIAL ORIENTATION WITH PEER MENTORING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer core orientation covering core knowledge to start in role such as government processes, relevant people and units, rules and norms and available resources • Facilitate formal mentoring connecting new staff with experienced staff
	<p>RELEVANT ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covering a-political and political content, including generic non-partisan skills, updates and refresher training, helping staffers cope with challenges of the job, and bespoke politically-oriented material for the roles. • Facilitated and offered by different practitioners – public servants sharing non-partisan information, parliaments on process issues, outside experts, and peer sharing from staffers. • Offering support for transition to outside politics
	<p>PROFICIENT POLITICAL MANAGERS EQUIPPED WITH BESPOKE HRM TOOLS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investing time in orientating new staff - setting clear role expectations, getting them to shadow other staffers and making it comfortable to ask questions • Offering real time feedback on work, doing frequent check ins, engaging in informal constructive dialogue and giving formal feedback yearly • Pro-actively guiding staffers on their career growth, progression and path • Helping staff cope with workloads - with clear priorities, effective planning processes, clear division of responsibilities, limit dangerous workloads, sharing work at peak times, using the public service more, utilising remote and flexible working • Maintaining morale - by setting a clear purpose, sharing evidence of making a difference, enabling staffers to feel connected to politicians and be close to the action, share information, celebrate success and facilitate a strong team spirit and camaraderie • Proactively supporting mental health – by creating rules and cultures that limit contact in evenings unless there’s a crisis, ensuring staff take complete breaks from the incessant pressure, acknowledging and discussing the pressures, checking in with staffers regularly, allocating a mental health day a month, encouraging colleagues to cover for each other and organising socialisation with colleagues to share problems, de-stress and get peer support

Figure 9.2 (Continued).

Best practice guidance for political staffers, their managers and reformers

This section summarises the most important recommendations from the research. In doing so, it just highlights core concepts and practices. Practitioners will need to read the related chapters for more detail, including reasoning, justification, illustrations and examples.

Guidance for all practitioners

The first thing that all practitioners need is an awareness and understanding of the real nature of political staffing jobs – see Box 9.1.

Box 9.1 Core guidance for political staffers, their managers and reformers

1. Learn about the potential jobs in political staffing.
2. Get a sense of what staffers are trying to achieve.
3. Ensure you understand the personal, political, people and proficiency capabilities these jobs require.

Learn about the potential jobs in political staffing

Each office will be different, and roles vary depending on the politician staffers are working for. But it's worth familiarising yourself with the different types of roles staffers play and the skills they need to do these jobs.

There are at least seven broad areas roles fall into:

- 1 Staffer and Office Management – Chiefs of Staff, Principal Secretary, Office Manager and HR advisors.
- 2 Research and Strategy – Manager of Research and Advertising, Director of Research and Advertising, Director of Strategy and Research.
- 3 Policy – Policy Advisors.
- 4 Stakeholder Management including outreach, appointments, regional advisers and parliamentary advisers, community liaison.
- 5 External event management – operations, tour or advance
- 6 Communications – includes Director of Communications, speech-writers, digital and photographers.
- 7 Media management – press secretary and media advisors.

Get a sense of what staffers are trying to achieve

Staffers work on achieving a range of goals, including creating and maintaining the overall strategy; advancing and delivering on policy promises and engaging in new policy development; keeping in touch with the public and ensuring their voice and that of specific groups is heard in government; and communicating the leader and the government's work positively, and the government's message and policy clearly.

Ensure you understand the personal, political, people and proficiency capabilities these jobs require

Skills required in these jobs include the more obvious proficiencies for the specific job, but also particular personal characteristics to cope with the demands, politically oriented capabilities given the environment staffers are working in and good people skills given these are very people-focused jobs – see Table 9.1.

Political judgement in these roles is essential. Sometimes called political nous, lens, smarts or acuity, it's about applying a political perspective to everything that is done in a political office. Staffers need to be able to appreciate what's going on behind the scenes, anticipate the different potential problems or implications of decisions and developments, navigate political currents, interaction with other issues and policies, understand how something will play with the public and stakeholders, think through the electoral implications and identify what does or does not matter politically but avoid over reacting or over complicating things.

Staffers need to be prepared to work with lots of different people internally and externally. This includes staffers in other roles, teams and political offices, but also politicians, ministers, the public or civil services, practitioners working in other levels of government and internationally, the media, party staff, as well as security staff and police. That's why good interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence are needed to be able to collaborate and build relationships with a diverse range of people and speak up when needed including challenging politicians.

On a personal level, agility is important because staff need to have a willingness and ability to learn new things, fast; adapt to constant change; and be open minded. There is also a psychological aspect to the role: staffers need to be extraordinarily resilient and robust so they can cope with highly stressful situations, uncertainty and the inevitable ups and downs.

Table 9.1 The personal, political, people and proficiency capabilities required to do political staffer jobs

Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agility and openness and creative outside the box thinking. • Interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence and the ability to speak up. • A self-starter, hardworking and willing to do long hours, with resilience to manage the pressure. • Commitment and shared ideals, loyal and trustworthy, and fit with the politician and their thinking as well as the team culture.
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying political judgement (or political nous, lens or acuity). • Risk and crisis management and checks. • Strategy and forecasting. • Thought leadership, brainstorming and puzzle-solving. • Understanding and responding to public opinion, voter views, party base views.
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External relationships and dialogue. • Horizontal cross-functional working. • Internal communication, relationship building and management. • Negotiation, legislative management and diplomacy. • Staff management, recruitment and employment issues.
Proficiencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Event management. • Expertise (policy, technical, linguistic). • External communication to the public. • Market research skills. • Media monitoring and management. • Writing empathetic, succinct, speeches, narratives. • Organising, coordinating, project management.

Loyalty and fit to the politician being served are also needed to do the job. Staffers need to understand and align with politician's views and working style, either fitting in with, or complementing their skills.

Guidance for political staffers

This guidance is for political staffers and advisers themselves, focusing on what they can do individually – see Box 9.2. It highlights what to be aware of before going into role, what opportunities to look out for or take to maximise morale and maintain motivation, what support you might seek to help cope with the demands it will place on you and how you might proactively self-advocate in the absence of effective HR from those above and around you.

Box 9.2 Core guidance for political staffers**CORE GUIDANCE FOR POLITICAL STAFFERS**

1. Be aware that these roles are high demand, low support.
2. Appreciate the demanding capabilities these jobs require.
3. Understand the different ways to get these jobs.
4. Be ready to figure out your role when you get into the job.
5. Be aware of how to learn the ropes. Be willing to work effectively with public servants.
6. Seek opportunities to grow and develop.
7. Be informed so you can navigate career progression.
8. Do what you can to maintain your morale and mental health.
9. Prepare for beyond the Wild West of Political Staffing.

Be aware that these roles are high demand, low support

Staffers have some very positive experiences; they value being in the room when significant events occur and decisions are made and the potential to contribute to government and the roles are dynamic, rewarding, exciting and unique.

However, HRM of staffers is often not a priority and whether you get a good manager or not is down to luck. There are some good practices and effective managers and colleagues who go out their way to help junior staffers. But this is ad hoc – experience across so many offices varies. Some staffers can benefit from informal positive mentorships and networks but others don't get anything. Be prepared that these jobs are challenging and there are potentially numerous downsides – see Box 9.3.

The consequence of this is that staffers are thrown into the deep end and have to sink or swim. And you will often hear it said “it's just the way it is” not least as people feel lucky to be in government.

Appreciate the demanding capabilities these jobs require

These are high-level, demanding jobs, so you also need to try to develop attributes as well as skills to help you do well in them – see Table 9.1. The personal, political, people and proficiency capabilities required to do political staffer jobs.

Box 9.3 The downsides to being a political staffer

- *High workloads, high speed, pressure and stress* – worst case 80-hour weeks, working weekends/holidays, on call 24/7 so hard to switch off, feels like everything is on fire.
- *No job security* – your job is tied to the politician and party and the exit can be swift and brutal.
- *Working conditions are poor* – staff rights and experiences can be decades behind the curve.
- *Staffers sacrifice personal time* – they give up with family, personal life, physical and mental health to do these unhealthy jobs where there is no work-life balance.
- *The job has an enormous burnout risk* – it is a relentless and exhausting treadmill, so mental health is often poor leaving staff battered and bruised.
- *Staffers are publically scrutinised yet undervalued* – the increase in media interests in staffers means they are now subject to public scrutiny.
- *Staffers have complex and disjointed line management* – staffers' rules, rights, responsibilities, legal employer and de facto line manager varies between roles and offices.
- *Those who manage you will often be untrained* – senior staffers and politicians end up in management because they are good at advising/electioneering, and may have no management skills.
- *HR practices you commonly find in other organisations are lacking* – there is often little or inadequate role definitions, guidebooks, orientation, training, feedback on performance or sense of career progression.

Understand the different ways to get these jobs

Some new governments run open calls for political advisers/staffers, but it is more common for staffers to come from political backgrounds and be shoulder tapped or recommended. Thus, being involved in a campaign or the party will help get you in the mix to be considered. But there is

some awareness of the value having worked outside politics and having transferrable skills such as project and event management can bring. Also, prospective staffers sometimes put themselves forward or volunteer and network their way to jobs.

Be ready to figure out your role when you get into the job

The precise role you carry out will depend on who you are working for – the politician/minister/PM (sometimes referred to as the principal), also the expertise of the staff member.

In the absence of role clarity and clear boundaries, staffers can seek guidance, keeping a list of questions to ask for when there is time to raise them, seeking out regular touch points with team leaders and identifying and keeping sight of the politician's priorities. If possible, ask ministers what their priorities are, especially in relation to the mandate/electoral promises.

You may also take advantage of a lack of clarity and shape your role to make it your own and set your own goals. Staffers also often pick up things as they go along and add elements to their role, as roles often evolve over time. Some roles are even completely new, so staffers have to start from scratch and create it themselves.

Be aware of how to learn the ropes

Take up any orientation on offer, but in the absence of that be prepared to self-discover the advice you need. There are a range of things you can do:

- 1 Listen and learn – at meetings, events, observing what colleagues do and how they do it.
- 2 Proactively search for information.
- 3 Go to informal or social events as this is where staff often share knowledge and offer support to each other.
- 4 Be prepared to ask questions about anything you do not know or don't understand.
- 5 Seek out advice from more experienced staffers on expectations in the office and tips of the trade.
- 6 Try to find or cultivate a buddy or mentor, even if it's not official, to have someone to share problems with and seek advice on career progress and development.

- 7 Seek information about basic HR to ensure you have as many rights and benefits as you are entitled to, because you may not get told as you would in other jobs.
- 8 Ask for assistance from the public service who can advise on basic process and pass on available information and documentation.
- 9 If they are available contact the person who did the role before you, ask them to walk you through what it involved.
- 10 Take up training on basic processes will help to understand the system you are operating in and shorten the time it takes you to become fully competent in your job.

Be willing to work effectively with public servants

There's no doubt that political staffers play a crucial role, but you will also work with a-political, non-partisan staff in the public or civil service, and there are a lot of them who are often there a lot longer than you.

You should try to work effectively with public servants. Yes, they have their own priorities and do not work at the same speed, you getting their backing helps get things done. Build a co-operative rather than combative relationship, and adapt your communication to suit them with clear bullet points rather than long detail.

Moreover, public servants can help you in your work. They provide non-partisan guidance, help locate information, advise on process, do fact checking before speeches go out, help coordinate with different governments, create briefings and provide impartial expertise. In some case, civil servants have provided advisers with useful feedback, helped identify priorities and encouraged breaks. You can learn from them and they can ease your workload.

But of course, you should always retain your political perspectives as the staffer's role is to be political, pursuing delivery of electoral promises and facilitating politician's decision-making. You may need to assert that the government has been elected to implement certain policies – this is democracy in action. And fight for politically important decisions such as when to take strong positions on new developments.

Seek opportunities to grow and develop

To develop your capabilities, you can self-learn. Teach yourself new skills through online courses, study what has been done or happened in the past and find how to work best through trial and error.

But to achieve optimum performance seek relevant training on an ongoing basis (not just all at the start). The best training to look for is a mixture of generic and bespoke.

Take up generic training on workplace issues such as respectful workplace conduct and unconscious bias training, and anything more specific that is relevant including languages, budgeting, time management, project management, mediation and negotiation. Training on political processes is important especially if you've not been a political staffer before to understand fully how things work and what the rules are, even if it seems generic when offered by parliaments and the public service.

The most valuable is training tailored to your role, individual development and coping with the challenges of doing this role. This might be available via having current and former staffers come and speak and share their experiences and tips, external experts offering sessions in topics such as building resilience and seminars on current issues in particular areas, or your own party.

Be informed so you can navigate career progression

There is no formal or formulaic career path as in other industries or the public service. However, there are definitely ways to progress, from junior to senior roles and offices, and staff often move frequently.

Once staffers are in the system, they can move in terms of roles, titles, levels and offices, upwards and horizontally. The general rule is to start low and make a vertical movement from lower MP roles to higher level roles and offices, moving up to minister's offices and then Prime Minister's Office (PMO). However, staff may move from a more junior role in the PMO to a more senior one with a minister. Or stay in the same role and office but become more senior in terms of level.

There are constraints due to budgets, less roles at the top and political cycles, and there's no perfect meritous process, but doing good work overtime that builds strong relationships and networks will help you progress. Seek out advice from more experienced staffers, though be aware there is more than one path.

Some staffers self-advocate after gathering enough knowledge. Learn what's out there, and what is in high demand, by viewing available jobs where available. Pay progression is typically problematic and lacks transparency. Attempts have been made in some places to scale the pay between

different levels, but it is not always accompanied by clear definitions. Sometimes greater responsibilities are not matched by more pay. Alternatively, development may come not through pay but by expanding their remit and taking on more responsibility, which increases job satisfaction.

Do what you can to maintain your morale and mental health

Working as a staffer is very challenging, made more so because of the lack of effective HRM. Often feedback is lacking, or only happens when colleagues want to see improvements in your work or there is a problem. But there are things you can do to help – see Box 9.4.

Managing the high workloads is a challenge. There will always be more to do than can be done. Try to identify the priorities, anticipate timelines once you get to know typical routines so you can plan a bit more, and focus on where you can add value instead of trying to do everything. It is easy to overwork in these jobs, but doing too much for too long will reduce your effectiveness and increase the likelihood of burnout. Don't stay late unless it is needed. If you have to, then go home early the next day. Utilise remote working but still go into the office to get the positive benefits of socialisation and connecting with key events.

Box 9.4 Ways that political staffers can maintain their morale and mental health

1. Hold on to your sense of purpose and self-belief, remembering why you got involved.
2. Take note and hold onto any signs of impact of your work.
3. Take up any opportunity to be “close to the action” such as interacting with the politician you are working for, attending important meetings, watching key speeches, going out in the community, meeting ordinary people.
4. Take time to celebrate success as this helps maintain energy and morale – watch key speeches or events while having drinks/nibbles, hang images of positive moments, celebrate the team getting through a difficult issue.
5. Try to help cultivate a supportive team spirit to get through the challenges, supporting and praising each other.

Once you are more settled into the role, try to set your own boundaries and protect time away from work to help you cope with the pressure when at work. Make sure you get some time without your phone on every day, or at the very least one day a week. But also take occasional breaks from the workload to reduce the pressure temporarily. Take the odd long weekend off where you do not receive notifications or check email. Take up formal vacation/leave. Don't try to be the hero who works all the time – you will be a more effective member of the team for taking a break.

Maintain your mental health by socialising with colleagues. These are unusual jobs and sharing issues and concerns with peers who understand them can be the best way to survive them. Former staffers talk about having morning tea together, sharing a cake for someone's birthday, going for coffee, lunch or dinner, end of week drinks and nibbles, a pizza party, a walk a Christmas party, creating a Number 10 cricket team, skydiving within a Minister, doing an escape room and retreats at a summer cottage. Talk casually with other people in the same pressured situation. The value of this social interaction was reinforced when staffers were not able to engage in it during the Covid-19 pandemic.

More broadly, in the absence of a formally organised staffing community, seek out connections with others in these roles including those in different offices, levels and parts of government. There is actually a big class of people in these roles and building your own informal network is one of the best ways to get advice, knowledge, insights and support.

Prepare for beyond the wild west of political staffing

Staffers also need to prepare for moving beyond the political world. The transition is not always straightforward/Work on identifying how to transfer (the many) skills from being a staffer. Develop networks with the world outside political staffing whilst still in the job. Ask for professional development to help you in the long term. Staff most likely will find well-paying jobs afterwards, but be aware of restrictions on post-staffing jobs in some countries. And understand that the change especially after a sudden exit may be really challenging in terms of mental health.

Guidance for political managers

Below is an overall guide to best practice for those who manage political staff on a practical de facto basis, that is political staffer/advisers (Chief of

Staff, Directors, Office Managers) but also politicians should read it where they are involved in political HRM – see Box 9.5. It only touches the most crucial points – you will need to read the rest of the book for a more detailed explanation, justification and examples of people who have done this – but it conveys what to be aware of and some of the things you can do to help staffers survive and thrive.

Be aware of the nature of the political staffing world

While there are some good practices when it comes to managing political staffers, they are ad hoc or luck of the draw. Working conditions are poor: high pressure, high workloads, yet without standard rights, benefits and job security. Orientation and training are lacking or limited in value for these roles; feedback practices are varied and career paths are not always clear. Retaining staff is challenging as staff burn out.

Box 9.5 Core guidance for political managers

CORE GUIDANCE FOR POLITICAL MANAGERS

1. Be aware of the nature of the political staffing world.
2. Become skilled at management in the political workplace.
3. Plan recruitment before getting into power.
4. Find potential staff from multiple sources including non-partisan.
5. Select staff with the required capabilities.
6. Create role clarity and boundaries.
7. Set up positive team-like office structures and cultures.
8. Set up positive team-like office structures and cultures.
9. Invest time in orientating new staff.
10. Enable staffers to undertake available training.
11. Offer specific, constructive, positive and regular feedback.
12. Use strategies to build and maintain motivation and morale.
13. Use tools to help staff cope with and constrain workloads.
14. Proactively support the mental health of your staff.
15. Play a role in helping staffers chart a career path.
16. Engage in ongoing recruitment.

Avoid just adopting the traditional excuse of “it’s just the way it is.” Political staffing is now an issue itself, with potential to make its way into the media, so needs prioritising. Legacy practices should not prevent improvement and this book details multiple measures that can be adopted to improve it.

Those taking on management roles in this world need to be aware of, and try to improve, HRM standards. This is not just for the individuals concerned but because it will make your office more effective and ultimately serve your politician and country better and thus lead to more effective government.

Become skilled at management in the political workplace

Even if you are the most skilled political staffer or politician, you still need training in how to manage others. No one has these skills automatically. So, make sure you seek and take up any training on offer to build tools to help you do this job and adopt more effective management practices to help staffers perform well and also retain them and their institutional knowledge.

Plan recruitment before getting into power

The first part of effective management of staffers is to use good recruitment and selection practices.

It’s easier to attract applications for a fresh government as there is a surge of energy around the new leader. But it means staffing up in a hurry as there are a high number of posts to fill all at once and more applications to review. You may start without sufficient staff, a bit like a start-up – except you are running the country.

Better practice is to carry out pre-government staff planning and set up, especially if you are in a party which anticipates a high chance of going into government at the next election. Identify potential talent, have initial conversations with them, train them in the roles and about party-specific material.

Find potential staff from multiple sources including non-partisan

Staffers are drawn from multiple sources, which most commonly are tapping the shoulder of somebody you already know or word of mouth, campaign volunteers, former or existing staffers including from other levels of government, the party, internships and ideologically aligned organisations. Using

more open application processes – which some governments have done recently – will diversify applicant pool, with staffers also recruited from public servants, non-partisan but political roles such as and from outside politics completely. You also need to make the expectations of work nature, hours, demands and pay clear in job descriptions and ads to ensure you get applicants willing to do the job.

Select staff with the required capabilities

When selecting staff, tempting though it is to rely on who you know or who someone you know knows, taking the time to ensure they are actually capable of doing the set job is essential to avoid problems further down the track. Assessment could use standard professional formats, include HR practitioners in the process, but might also include informal interaction to explore more personal types of skills. Be careful to avoid single-tunnel vision, and thus ensure those selected have specific skill sets and relevant competencies as well as passion and loyalty. Avoid relying on former experience as a political staffer, no matter how valuable it is, and be open to the value of skills gained in non-political jobs such as managing stage shows being similar to event management and business project management is useful for managing policy through the legislative process. Also consider the overall team – the best result of selection processes is to end up with a diversity of experiences, backgrounds, skills and perspectives within one office.

Create role clarity and boundaries

Define the job, boundaries and hierarchies so staffers know what work they should be doing, are responsible for and have the autonomy to do it. Set clear expectations from the start, involving politicians where needed. Outline processes within the office and clarify the standards team leaders expect to be met. Avoid extensive job creep which can lead to issues with well-being.

Set up positive team-like office structures and cultures

Create effective structures, processes and regular meetings to help manage unpredictability and ensure decisions get made and staff are aware of upcoming milestones and can raise any problems in advance.

Be aware that you and the leadership group (politician, Chief of Staff, Directors, Office Manager) influence the culture of the office the most. Try

to build a positive team culture and camaraderie where people feel included. Share information as much as possible – or explain why it’s not possible to. Delegate whenever possible to empower staffers.

Support development of a safe environment in which to work, learn, improve and share problems. A safe space to try things, and perhaps fail, or just make mistakes, but be supported to grow and learn from it. Have an open door for staff to drop in when they feel it is needed, but also proactively hold regular check-ins to continually engage with staff, touch base to see how things are going and whether there are any issues.

Adopt a sports coach mentality with everyone working alongside each other to get the win and where everyone feels they are a valued member of the team. When there is a loss, protect them rather than throwing them under the bus. And be open to and seek feedback – consider staff surveys, engage in dialogue and informal conversations. This gives staff a sense of having a voice in the office.

Invest time in orientating new staff

It’s hard to take the time to offer adequate orientation, but it’s important to staff effectiveness, well-being and retention.

It needs to provide the core knowledge to start the role – it’s nature, how to do it, who to work with and the different tasks and resources and support available. Expectations and priorities (including those of the politician) need to be made clear. Any rules and policies should also be signposted. It is valuable to create and update office manuals and staffing trees; at the very least provide a basic diagram of who does what.

You can get new staff to shadow you or other at their desk, watching them do the job to give a sense of what the work involves, listen to phone calls, accompany others to meetings and learn from observation. It’s also important to offer clear explanations of set tasks at first, both how to do it and why to help them become up to speed. Experienced staff should be assigned to mentor or buddy new staff to pass on advice. But also foster a culture where new staff feel comfortable to ask questions and there is informal peer support.

Enable staffers to undertake available training

Training helps staffers grow and improves the talent pool and overall effectiveness of political offices, but you need to build a culture where staff are

expected to do training as part of the job so they feel able to take time out. See Table 9.5 for types of content to cover in training for political staffers.

Offer specific, constructive, positive and regular feedback

It's important to take the time to give staff direct and forthcoming feedback on their performance to help them improve, reassure and recognise success. It also contributes to staff well-being, building up better morale.

Offer constructive feedback to improve and grow. Be candid and specific with them if they should change something any why, and advise on how to reflect and learn from mistakes.

Make sure to give positive feedback both to encourage repeat good performance and to maintain morale. Highlight the good work every week and note when their work was helpful and beneficial to others and politicians. Feedback sends signals, especially in a group setting. Reflect on what is important and what staff can actually control.

Facilitate feedback from key people – the MP, Minister, Prime Minister as staffers really appreciate this. They can write notes on briefs, or send a text of congratulations, say they've made a difference and just acknowledge the work every once in a while.

You will likely end up giving a lot of feedback in real time given the fast-paced nature of politics. This is through comments on draft work, briefings, requests to rewrite a speech, reflections on how things have gone after an event, discussions of a judgement call just made, or within the checks in a set process.

Even though a formal feedback process for staffers is rare, there was a strong argument that this is needed. Having a process creates a culture of feedback, and also enables discussion of wider issues such as how the staffer's experience is going, any issues they are facing and their longer-term career goals. Even if it has to keep being rescheduled due to events and developments, keep going until it can be done, because staff very much value the effort.

Feedback should be regular – with the yearly more formal review a continuation of ongoing conversations. Feedback should ideally be a dialogue between both sides, to check how staff are doing as well as give feedback on performance and enable staff to ask questions, raise concerns and make suggestions. This builds more positive relationships, development and generates new ideas.

Use strategies to build and maintain motivation and morale

Firstly, understand what drives staffers. Staffers feel privileged to be involved in government but their overwhelming motivation is to serve their country and make a positive difference in people's lives. They also sometimes come into the roles with a specific aim, such as to advocate, deliver and communicate a specific policy or position, or achieve systemic change such as diversity or better advertising process. Maintaining motivation is a crucial part of political management given then profound pressures, challenges, long hours and dark times. Managers have to play a motivating role and help keep perspective in what is a very tough business. They can use range of strategies to build and maintain motivation and morale – see Table 9.2.

Use tools to help staff cope with and constrain workloads

While no one can wave a magic wand and make these jobs have normal hours, managers can play an important role in helping staff cope with workloads by using multiple tools – see Table 9.3.

Proactively support the mental health of your staff

Instead of telling staffers to just buckle down and keep going more attention has to be placed on their well-being to help both the individuals and reduce turnover and loss of institutional knowledge.

Staffers need to be seen and treated as human beings doing incredibly difficult jobs. Political managers should proactively manage mental health

Table 9.2 Strategies to build and maintain motivation and morale

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- 1 *Set a clear purpose and sense of making a difference* – give inspirational talks, reiterate the mission, and help them see the difference their work is making.
 - 2 *Enable staffers to feel connected to the politician they are serving* – it boosts morale; it adds excitement, inspires them and reminds them why they are there.
 - 3 *Ensure staffers get to be close to the action* – staffers talk of how watching important events, being in the room and witnessing big decisions being made is very motivating.
 - 4 *Trust, involve and empower staffers* – share information as much as is feasible, open up meetings to hear discussion and debate, and delegate tasks as this will empower them.
 - 5 *Celebrate success* – watch key speeches or events whilst having drinks/nibbles, celebrate the team getting through a difficult issue.
 - 6 *Facilitate a strong team spirit and camaraderie* – share the highs and lows, engage in banter, hold informal meetings about global political events, attend talks, connect socially, create a family-like culture.
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Table 9.3 Tools to help staff cope with workloads

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1. *Ensure priorities are clear and use effective planning processes.* “Keep the main thing the main thing” by prioritising ruthlessly. Adopt effective planning and processes with clear timelines to manage workflows well and optimise use of time.
 2. *Make sure there is a clear division of responsibility* to constrain workload, avoiding more people handling an issue or submission than is needed.
 3. *Limit dangerous workloads.* Stop accepting 80-hour weeks; above 60 hours a week leads to more burnout and raises health and safety issues. Don’t expect them to stay late when not needed, identify the best value staff can add and focus on that rather than adding endless tasks or meetings.
 4. Share work at peak times, roster on-call work and use the public service more.
 5. *Be flexible about when and where work can be done,* using remote and flexible working so they can manage work-life balance and juggle career and parenting more easily.
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Table 9.4 Proactive ways for political managers to support staffers’ mental health

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- 1 *Create rules and cultures that limit contact in evenings* unless there’s a crisis and discourage a hero mentality of working later than needed.
 - 2 *Role model, encourage and even insist that staff take complete breaks from the incessant pressure* tell them to go home early after working late previous nights, take infrequent but valuable long weekends, and insist they book vacation days so they can recharge.
 - 3 *Accommodate personal lives* and avoid using the mission or cause to justify staff sacrificing their own work-life balance, being deliberate about face-to-face meetings, suggesting staff go home when not needed and avoiding evening meetings when there are family events like Halloween.
 - 4 *Acknowledge and discuss pressures* to prevent it being seen as normal, to ensure staff feel comfortable saying they are struggling or getting therapy.
 - 5 *Check-in with staffers* on a regular basis and keep an eye out for problems, unhealthy behaviours and the signs of burnout.
 - 6 *Regularise meetings* to help mitigate the chaos and enable staff to hear about each other’s work.
 - 7 *Support staffers to sustain mental health,* through access to good food for late working, allocate staff a mental health day a month, encouraging colleagues to cover for each other, share tips on maintaining work-life balance and offer training on time management and personal resilience.
 - 8 *Organise socialisation with colleagues to share problems, de-stress and get peer support* – morning tea, cake for someone’s birthday, coffee, end-of-week drinks and nibbles, a walk, staffer sports team, doing an escape room and retreats. This was reinforced when the Covid-19 pandemic eroded the usual mental health supports because human and social interaction plummeted.
-

of their staff by adopting practical ways to mitigate challenges and support mental health so that even if the jobs are challenging they are not completely overwhelming – see Table 9.4.

Play a role in helping staffers chart a career path

You have a role to play in helping staffers create a career path. Managers need to play a proactive role in discussing career path, enabling staff to share their aspirations. They should advise and guide them on how to get there, helping them plot out next steps and identify what skills they need to develop.

Shepherd their growth, making clear their ownership of a few things so they can demonstrate their contributions later. Explore the different ways to move: in terms of roles, titles, levels and offices, upwards and horizontally. Discuss the potential for development through secondments and rotations as well as expanded roles and responsibilities. Enable them to see they can progress whilst being aware it is dependent on opportunities created by staff vacating higher posts, political cycles and office budgets.

More experienced staffers can share their experiences and convey the different career paths. Invite them to meetings to learn about alternative areas or roles.

Managers also need to help staffers prepare for moving beyond the political world by advising them on how to transfer (the many) skills from being a staffer and develop networks with the world outside political staffing while still in the job.

Engage in ongoing recruitment

Political managers and their parties should be proactive about recruitment and maintain an ongoing candidate database because recruitment is harder in the second or third term as staff leave and applicants to replace them decline because the job becomes less attractive as leader popularity and the expected life of the government declines.

Proactively maintain a wide pool of potential staffers and develop existing staffers. Take a long-term approach to recruitment to maintain and grow talent. Identify good staffers, and those up and coming, and help them into new and more senior roles. Advertise all new positions internally. Support staffers who want to return (e.g., after having children).

Guidance for reformers

This guidance is for HR reformers who can and do advocate or lead reform to the systems around political staffers and advisers, including public servants working in parliaments, government departments, think tanks, and parties – see Box 9.6.

*Box 9.6 Core guidance for reformers***CORE GUIDANCE FOR REFORMERS**

1. Prioritise and resource fit for purpose HRM for political staffers and advisers.
2. Build dedicated and visible HRM units for all staffers, or have different units collaborate.
3. Ensure the HR team involves political staffers, HR experts and public servants.
4. Integrate understanding of the capabilities political staffing jobs require into any recruitment and selection you are involved in.
5. Appreciate the implications the nature of the roles has for recruitment.
6. Carry out pre-government staff planning and set up.
7. Proactively maintain a database of potential staffers and develop existing staffers.
8. Create and implement formal and transparent HR processes suited to political reality.
9. Improve the core orientation for those new in role.
10. Create formal mentoring programmes with recognised mentor roles.
11. Ensure managers of staffers are trained and effective.
12. Aim to develop and deliver an ongoing bespoke training programme for political staffers.
13. Make the content of training relevant.
14. Involve a range of practitioners in delivering of the training.
15. Develop proper support for post-staffer career paths.
16. Create an over-arching professional community for political staffers.
17. Collect and report on staffer data.
18. Advocate for fairer working conditions.
19. Don't accept the status quo. Keep making the case for change.

Prioritise and resource fit for purpose HRM for political staffers and advisers

HRM for political staffers needs to be prioritised. It requires a dedicated and well-resourced and expert team composed of political staffers, public servants and HR experts proactively collaborating to develop an overall HR vision for this group of high-performing professionals and build a modern HR architecture to match.

Build dedicated and visible HRM units for all staffers, or have different units collaborate

In each country, there is a substantial number of publically funded political staffers or advisers working for politicians. They may work in different types of political offices (electorate, parliamentary, department), for different politicians (MPs, ministers, party leaders and the Prime Minister), and be subject to diverse formal contracts, line managers and units. But they essentially all do the same thing: they work for politicians.

Ideally, they should be managed as a portfolio, preferably by one centralised, mandatory and permanent HR unit and team. At the very least, those working on staffing in different units should come together to share ideas, experiences and engage in cross-unit collaboration.

This would elevate HRM for staffers, enable faster and more pro-active improvement, including setting of norms and standards, sharing of peer wisdom, dissemination of best practice, creation of new training content, guidance for those who manage staffers, supporting ongoing talent management and sketching of career paths across different political offices.

Creating one place for all staffers will also help preserve learning and prevent loss of institutional knowledge due to change of minister, prime minister or party.

Ensure the HR team involves political staffers, HR experts and public servants

There needs to be a blend of or collaboration between different types of practitioners working together, including political staffing, HR experts, politicians and the public service.

Everyone in the HR unit – including that which is independent – needs to understand or at least be aware of the nature of the political workplace, the roles and the pressures staffers face. The HR unit therefore needs people with experience and expertise in political staffing to advocate for staffers and ensure HR is fit for purpose and be accepted by political parties and politicians.

It is also important for some of those involved – whether from the public service, parliament parties, or political staffing community – to be HR professionals, or at least be literate in HR, to be able to advise on practices and tools to adapt.

It also needs the involvement of politicians, or at least to work with closely with politicians, offering support and advice, running recruitment and selection together, liaising between staffers and MPs, helping new MPs understand what they need from their staff, and working with political parties to improve this area.

Part of the staffer HR unit needs to be independent and at arms-length to the political office they work in and the associated party to enable staff to have a safe space to go where they can raise issues such as harassment or ask questions in confidence.

Integrate understanding of the capabilities political staffing jobs require into any recruitment and selection you are involved in

Reformers need to encourage integration of professional HR practices into the recruitment and selection of political staffers in a way takes into account the realities and political nature of the roles and does actually result in getting capable people into these roles.

As with any HR process, it is important to assess who is the best candidate for the job are important to make sure applicants understand and are capable of doing the job. But these are high-level, very demanding and politically focused jobs – see Table 9.1. The personal, political, people and proficiency capabilities required to do political staffer jobs. Loyalty and fit to the politician being served are also important; they are both skills needed to do the job, so selecting on these attributes is still selecting on merit.

Work with political staffers to maintain up-to-date job descriptions so they reflect the realities of the job, so that applicants understand what is required in terms of work nature, hours, demands and pay, and the type of person or office culture you want to create. Templates could be provided that standardise core generic aspects but leave space to inject elements specific to parties and offices. In some countries, parliamentary HR staff have provided job templates for MPs for them to adapt to suit their specific office.

Appreciate the implications the nature of the roles has for recruitment

The political aspects and demanding nature of the role are why politicians and senior political staffers tend to draw on their own networks because

they believe those who have worked or volunteered in politics before will have the judgement but also motivation to do these roles.

Staffers are drawn from multiple sources, which most commonly are tapping the shoulder of somebody they already know or word of mouth, campaign volunteers, former or existing staffers including from other levels of government, the party, internships and ideologically aligned organisations. However, it is also acknowledged that those from outside politics bring useful and relevant transferrable skills and diversify perspectives in an office.

Some governments have used more open application processes which has diversified the applicant pool and helped to recruit specialists with different skills. However, this does come with a cost, as it tends to result in very high number of applications to sift through and the process still requires detailed match between applicants and politicians selecting staff.

Carry out pre-government staff planning and set up

A fresh government has to staff up in a hurry as there are a high number of posts to fill all at once. It is like leading a start-up – except it's running the country. To avoid the top offices starting without sufficient staff, the public service could support the staffing up process by new governments by having basic information ready for new staff and temporarily seconding public servants to fill gaps in recruitment.

Proactively maintain a database of potential staffers and develop existing staffers

It is important to take a long-term approach to recruitment to maintain and grow talent. Maintain a candidate pool or database of those who have expressed interest, and continue to be interested, to replace staff who leave during the term, and help offset increasing challenges in recruitment the older government gets. Identify promising junior staffers, and help them into new and more senior roles. Support staffers who want to return after leaving (e.g., due to having children).

Create and implement formal and transparent HR processes suited to political reality

Formal, robust, transparent and accessible policies, processes and structures are needed that adapt common workplace practices to suit the political workplace so they are practical and “doable” within political reality and don't just copy the civil or public service. They will never be perfect as no

process ever is. Reformers cannot dictate what political managers do, but they can make suggestions, offer advice, and create best practice guides and templates for use such as realistic job adverts and descriptions and processes for formal feedback and performance review.

Improve the core orientation for those new in role

A formal compulsory orientation programme is needed to provide the core knowledge needed to start the role. While each office has to provide specific guidance on the individual role and team, reformers – including public servants – can create and deliver more generic information, such as:

- Political landscape and government processes (legislative process, committees).
- How to interact with public servants.
- Departments, policy areas and people relevant to their role and office.
- Rules and norms including codes of conduct, workplace behaviour, employment rights, health and safety, expense rules and ethics.
- Basic HR, e.g., benefits, leave/vacations, IT and personal/cyber security.
- Resources for pastoral care.

It should provide only essentials otherwise they are too overwhelmed. It needs to be continually offered to allow for staff turnover.

Create formal mentoring programmes with recognised mentor roles

Formal structured mentoring or buddy programmes help connect new staffers with those more experienced, potentially from other offices. This gives new staff a safe space to ask questions as they arise, pass on tips, help understand the political world, and discuss career progress. The mentor role should be official, and have time allocated and remunerated.

Ensure managers of staffers are trained and effective

Dedicated training, advice and support should be available so that those who manage staffers – MPs, ministers or senior political staffer – have the tools they need to do the job in a political workplace before they start that job. They don't have these skills automatically and rarely share experiences with other people in the same position. The most common open-ended

remark on an all staff survey in Canada was the need for management training. Training, best practice guides and advice help equip those in management positions with tools and principles to follow.

However, make the training bespoke to the reality of politics. See the guidance from this research for political managers.

Aim to develop and deliver an ongoing bespoke training programme for political staffers

Move to a position where staffers are universally effectively trained, developed, refreshed and upskilled, enabling this professional group to learn, grow and thrive.

Offer developmental training for once people are settled in roles when they have more bandwidth to engage and know what questions they have. Offer at different times to maximise staff ability to attend but avoid doing late evening after what are already long days.

Make the content of training relevant

Training needs to have content that is relevant to the roles, which can be a mix of a-political and political – see Table 9.5.

Training needs to be offered on a continuous basis – a one off at the start can only offer basics. Bring in former staffers and outside experts to offer more specific content.

Table 9.5 Types of content to cover in training for political staffers

Generic skills	Respectful workplaces, unconscious bias, languages, budgeting, time management, project management, mediation and negotiation.
Political processes and policies	Foundational information about government and parliamentary processes, committees, cabinet processes and codes of conduct.
Bespoke training for political staffer jobs	Including specific skills such as video editing, writing a news release, being a case worker, as well as conduct in meetings, at events and how best to work with the public/civil service.
Responsive to individual staffer needs	Create a development plan that identifies and fills skills gaps.
Coping with the challenges of the job	Such as time management, building resilience and where to get support.

Involve a range of practitioners in delivering of the training

It would be ideal to create one training source for all staff to avoid silos, maximise resources, and put staff at the centre. But it should involve different types of practitioners to ensure appropriate content. Public servants can facilitate other politically oriented practitioners delivering content to avoid crossing the apolitical line.

Public servants can share non-partisan info and facilitate input by political practitioners – public servants can share non-political info and offer non-political advice and create appropriate training for staffers that won't disappear with change of government/leader. They can offer generic training on technical skills and discuss current issues in government departments, policy and regions.

Parliaments can offer training on non-partisan process issues – parliaments can offer training. Mostly useful for non-political imparting of information about processes, rather than effective training, but can include generic skills without crossing the line of being partisan.

Bring in outside experts and speakers – bring in external experts to train on topics such as harassment, equity or any current challenge in the staffing world or specific office. Also, bring in speakers to discuss current issues and elections.

Universities could offer appropriate material – independent academics can offer politically oriented and useful content which is informed by objective research. Unfortunately, traditional political science degrees are rarely appropriate for these roles, but the political management programme offered by Carleton University in Canada does offer relevant and practical material.

Organise peer sharing of knowledge and advice – facilitating peer sharing and learning is valuable to share partisan and role-specific advice from current and former staffers. This may be those at the same level, or in the same role – e.g., a panel of policy advisers – so it's relevant and bespoke.

Develop proper support for post-staffer career paths

More thought and effort into helping staffers find a career path after politics is needed to help ensure the skills and experience gained in these publically funded roles are put to good use in society over the long term. In particular:

- Identify the transferrable skills they have developed.
- Train them in recognisable competencies for the private sector.
- Outline options within the public sector.

- Offer bespoke mental health support to help staff adjust out of politics.
- Reduce post-employment restrictions (five years in Canada, two in the UK) to one year.

Creating better post-adviser career options will also have a circular benefit in aiding with the future recruitment of talented and experienced staffers.

Create an overarching professional community for political staffers

Staffers are left to jump into the deep end when starting, work under immense pressure, and turnover and burnout is high. But we also know from this research that staffers learn how to do their jobs from their peers and their well-being is boosted by them being close to the action and getting together.

Reformers can support staffers' well-being by creating and supporting a permanent overarching network that gets staffers together from different offices, levels and roles will create a sense of a professional community. This will in turn facilitate peer learning and support and thus help maintain morale, mental health and retention.

Staffers can be brought together for regular events covering a-political training, sharing of insights from current and former staffers, and presentations from government departments or outside experts on emerging issues, new processes, statistical updates, global political developments, or the results of new research. Public servants can facilitate offering a-political content relevant to government and these roles, and arrange for politically relevant content to be covered without delivering it themselves.

This will also facilitate informal mentoring and peer support as peers teach each other the ropes, share knowledge, discuss solutions to problems, offer alternative perspectives and share ups and downs and tips of the trade.

We also know that socialising with colleagues is a crucial part of maintaining mental health as staffers can share issues and concerns and get advice from their peers, so enable time at these events for staffers to talk informally and connect.

Collect and report on staffer data

The unit should also collect and analyse data from the staffer community. They can run and report on annual staffer feedback surveys and analyse and report on diversity statistics and pay gaps. They could conduct exit inter-

views, collecting and sharing expertise in an alumni resource to safeguard institutional knowledge that other staffers can learn from.

Advocate for fairer working conditions

Staffers experience working conditions that are decades behind the curve of most other workplaces. They have no job security and work with deep discomfort and uncertainty. They are always vulnerable to losing their job not because of their own performance but political factors. They have historically not had basic employment rights and are treated like second-class citizens and vulnerable to mistreatment. Yet, they sacrifice time with family, personal life, physical and mental health to do these jobs. Not surprisingly, their mental health is often poor and burnout is high.

Instead of telling staffers to just buckle down and keep going more attention has to be placed on their well-being to help both the individuals and reduce or slow turnover. They need to be seen and treated as human beings doing incredibly difficult jobs. The issue of staffing now has the potential to make its way into the media, so fairer working conditions therefore need to be explored, such as:

- 1 Enable pay transparency to help staffers self-advocate/equal pay.
- 2 Offer greater flexibility where possible in terms of hours but also location of work to accommodate more diverse staff.
- 3 Provide standard benefits including parental leave, vacation, pensions, ill health retirement, transferrable between different roles/offices, akin to what public servants get.
- 4 Align the pay with the demands of the roles and offer some element of job security to help attract more experienced and capable staffers and retain them, helping to preserve institutional knowledge and memory both within parties and from one government to the next.

Don't accept the status quo. Keep making the case for change

Reformers will often hit the exceptionalism argument – “it’s just the way.” Push back against this. It’s an unacceptable excuse in the twenty-first century. Political staffing is not a guild; it’s a public service. Other jobs and organisations have similar levels of pressure and complexity, yet manage to operate effective HRM processes. There’s no excuse for disorganisation or lack of respect for boundaries between work and home. Legacy practices should not prevent improvement to practices, nor should the need for

public/civil servants to remain a-political prevent staffers getting better support. No system will ever be perfect, but there are things that could be done to improve it.

These are taxpayer funded roles and we need to attract the best people to them and enable them to perform at a high level and get newly elected governments up and running. But we also need to retain them, along with their institutional knowledge, by moving to a position where staffers are universally effectively trained, developed, upskilled, supported, healthy, happy and retained, so that the government overall is trained, knowledgeable and effective.

Making the world a better place for everyone: the benefits from better HRM for political staffers and advisers

Proactive and positive HRM will yield long-term dividends both for the individual humans doing the job, and for the country. Ultimately improving the political staffing cohort in turn ensures that the government overall is trained, knowledgeable and effective. As staffers themselves explain:

In the future having quality staffers employed and keeping people and retaining that institutional knowledge is something that can win you elections. It's not something that intuitively people think of as the thing that is going to lead to the Government being successful, so people put it off...[but]. We can get people in place, train them, develop them, keep them in these roles for a long period of time, and then when you get six or seven years down the road you will have a government that is trained and knowledgeable, and able to deal with issues that come up because they have that experience and that knowledge.

Political parties want to govern, and they want to govern effectively and shape the nation in their own vision to better the lives of our fellow Australians...to get that you need people who are able to govern as well as campaign...You'll get a better return on investment from democracy – if you have better staffers you will get better outcomes.

Political staffers have a lot of influence in the decisions that are made. And those decisions affect our country, and the world in some cases. So you want to make sure that those decisions are made with the best advice possible and you want to have the best people in those roles.

If I could whisper in someone's ear into the future, I'd say really take that time on organization. One of the first things that needs to get set up... is actually that human resources and organizational piece... How you set things up can make such a difference to your success at delivery.

There's so much that we feel we can do... We want to make life better, particularly for the MPs. Because if they're feeling better about everything, that in theory could feed through to the happiness of the country... we're aspirational; we want to make things better in the future, so it's not just a sticking plaster. We want to make real change happen and to make lives better.

Not only will this benefit the individuals in the roles, it will provide significant benefit to the politicians they work for and in turn the voters who elect the politicians. Higher quality HRM for political staffers and advisers will generate multiple long-term dividends – see Figure 9.3. It will create higher calibre, more experienced and diverse political staffers who are up and running in their role sooner, perform at a higher level and are retained for longer, preserving institutional knowledge. This will lead to higher functioning offices, generating better outputs, more effectively supported politicians, more strategic decisions and increased delivery of election promises.



Figure 9.3 The benefits of better HRM for political staffers and advisers.