

Government Spotlight

Diversity in the Boardroom and Civil Service

We ask Kru Desai and Edwina Dunn, OBE, about the opportunities and challenges that face diverse talent on public sector boards and in the civil service.



Kru Desai
Commissioner, Geospatial Commission

Kru Desai's career spans 30 years as a management consultant working with public and private sector organisations in the UK and internationally. Her executive experience combines general management in growing professional and technology organisations and leading complex digital and transformation change programmes in the public sector. She has held various leadership roles at KPMG, Atos, Hedra and Mouchel. Kru is currently the Chair of Zinc Network, a privately owned communications agency, a member of the Council at City, University of London, where she is a Chair of the audit and risk committee. She is also a Commissioner at the Geospatial Commission and an NED at Buro Happold.



Edwina Dunn, OBE
Founder of The Female Lead

Edwina Dunn OBE is one of the most successful leaders in the data industry. dunnhumby revolutionised the retail world when they pioneered Tesco Clubcard and other global loyalty programmes, eventually selling dunnhumby to Tesco in 2011. In October 2018, Edwina was appointed to the The Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation; an advisory body set up by Government. In July 2019, she was appointed to The Geospatial Commission to provide expert, impartial advice to the government on geospatial data. Previously, Edwina chaired the Your Life campaign to encourage more young people to study maths and science, and founded The Female Lead, a non-profit project celebrating the achievements, endeavours and diversity of women.

Do you think the civil service is viewed as a diverse organisation/place to work?

Edwina: I think that the civil service is diverse, but to what extent is diversity equally represented across all levels within the civil service? It's not immediately apparent to me if diversity is as prominent or present across more senior grades. It can at times be hard to tell what the grades are and what they mean for people looking from outside. Perhaps more transparency would be of value.

Kru: It is well known within the public sector that gender diversity specifically is being addressed. There are also numerous campaigns focused on bringing in other types of diversity (both physical and diversity of thought/experience). It is less well known outside the public sector. One issue is that people don't identify the civil service as its individual parts/departments - those outside of it tend to see it as one organisation. This impact of viewing the civil service as just one large entity means good (or bad) practice tends to be missed.

What barriers have you observed that might put off a more diverse candidate from joining public sector boards? Are these barriers specific to the public sector?

Edwina: I do not think that the civil service is any worse than the private sector. If I am specifically thinking about public sector boards, one of the most obvious things is there are not many female Chairs. Why are there not more female Chairs? That is the question public sector boards need to ask/reflect on. I have had the privilege of working with two female CEOs at HMRC and the Geospatial Commission - both excellent!

Kru: Many public sector boards tend to recruit internally for senior appointments - advertising to their own networks. This then attracts people within their networks and sympathetic to their agenda. However, there are some areas/departments within government who have successfully appointed a more diverse range of people outside of those networks, I think this adds to the quality of debate and decision making. The role of headhunters who widen the traditional talent pool is also important to help identify suitable candidates based on skills, experience and commitment. The pro-bono nature of many public sector board positions can also put off people who want to professionalise/pursue a portfolio.

A government commissioned report last year suggests leadership and culture are two of the main barriers to diverse talent entering/staying within the civil service. Is this a topic of conversation featured at your board meetings?

Edwina: I would have to say very rarely. There is a culture within the civil service where it is hard to exit poor performers, which can mean it is hard to achieve high quality leadership and a winning culture. Perhaps boards will need the powers to be stricter and to hold execs to account on delivering/achieving high quality leadership and creating a winning culture.

Kru: No, it's not a standing agenda point. All the board members at the Geospatial Commission also sit on other boards elsewhere, and so there is continuous effort to discuss it. In my opinion, if boards are serious about supporting their executives, all things should be considered, including D&I. There are other sector boards, such as universities, who have a regulatory requirement to report/discuss both culture and diversity. Overall, I haven't seen leadership intent as a barrier within the civil service - the barriers are in how things get implemented and embedded throughout the organisation.

Do you think boards know how to attract and retain a diverse pool of talent for NED roles?

Edwina: I think so. Boards across government are becoming very aware of how important diversity is, with many strengthening their diversity commitments. The issue isn't always attracting and retaining, but the pool of candidates. Everyone is fishing in the same pool, and if you look at technology, the diversity pool is even smaller!

Kru: Those individuals who join the civil service who don't historically come from the public sector are better tooled in general to help think about how to attract diverse talent pools. As someone who has been an independent panel member on several recruitment panels, my experience is that people are often looking for skills that don't always map to diversity.

In the public sector, the most important skill sets are stakeholder management, policy, political impact etc. Because of this, there is a risk of hiring those sympathetic to government and, as a result, not getting talent who will challenge/change policy. The role that headhunters can provide is acting as an arbiter to help executives think about what/who they need. Within the civil service it can be harder because not everyone uses headhunters or role-specific process; they are more likely to follow the general civil service recruitment process over what specifically works in each case.

How important is it for NEDs to have prior experience of boards to be effective on a public sector board?

Edwina: I don't think so, what they need is training and support by experienced NEDs. They need to be taught the role of a NED; that you are there to advise, provide good governance, challenge, hold the executive to account - not to do the doing. Considering first-time NEDs would help widen the pool and inject more diversity. If we take technology for example, there's an opportunity to develop the next generation of NEDs, and there is a lot of talent coming through. The question is, are boards willing to invest time in a more junior candidate who's highly skilled over an experienced NED?

Kru: From my experience, it's important to join a public sector board to develop NED skills. Prior experience is not important, but awareness, understanding and context of that board/department is. You need to be prepared because there will be frustrations, as is the nature of the public sector, but civil service leaders are genuinely interested in diversity of thought. Going forward, what will be more important for public sector boards are concrete examples of someone delivering change in a complex environment, and not just enforcing policy. All of government have become more hands on, delivering change and thinking of 'citizens as like consumers', and that is a different skill set. It should now be easier for people with consumer, retail, financial services etc. skill sets to bring that expertise into the civil service to deliver these large complex programmes. As such, the public sector is a good starting point for those who want to join a board.

How does greater diversity within your organisation enhance innovation?

Edwina: It has a massive impact. If organisations, including the Geospatial Commission, are to be successful in the 21st Century, then diversity of thinking and diversity of skills is crucial. The commission thrives on innovation and a lot of that comes from the range of people, data and applications they engage. "You don't know what you don't know" until you see the difference.

Kru: For the Geospatial Commission to deliver, we need to understand the diversity of the businesses and people that rely on geospatial data; valuation, hydrographics, Ordnance Survey. The diversity of the people within the commission is very important; we all come from different disciplines, all six of us commissioners have different backgrounds, and therefore there is always at least six different perspectives. As a result of that, we can better reach government departments, SMEs, the private sector, big corporates etc., all of which we have done well at, as a result of our diversity.

How does your board composition compare to that of your executive team? If one is more diverse than the other, why do you think that is?

Edwina: My own board is full of male/non-diverse investors, although there is some movement in the right direction. My executive team is diverse, and functions more efficiently for being so. A lot can be done to widen the pools if boards are willing to be flexible when thinking about experience. My experience within government roles is much more balanced, especially among the NEDs.

Kru: Within both our executive and board, we have representation for the main characteristics for gender, race and skill sets. However, this is an area where we can't look at the civil service as one entity, as every department, ALB etc., represents different groups. From what I've seen, there tends to be better representation at both board and executive level within the NHS and local government. Within the central civil service, it can be patchier depending on the department.

In what ways is the board looking to expand its collective cultural awareness and sensitivity?

Edwina: By becoming more diverse... In the civil service, we need more coaching for senior women to help them with promotion and, of course, leadership skills. We also need the time and space in which to practice/gain experience.

Kru: Everywhere I have been, I've seen EDI regularly on the agenda, but merit still needs to take precedent. I'm conscious to ensure D&I doesn't become a tick box exercise. Primarily, boards need to raise awareness on cultural sensitivity based on their end customers (citizens, customers etc.). Even technical boards need to be conscious that their work impacts society, so they need to be reflective of that society. We now have opportunities to deliver diversity, but boards need to think about it within context and not treat it like a tick box exercise, or performance indicator.

From your experiences on public sector recruitment panels, do you think enough attention to diversity in all its forms is paid when recruiting senior execs into government as a whole?

Edwina: I am not sure, mainly because the process is not transparent. For commercial sector candidates going through a public sector NED recruitment process, the process is hard to understand and at times can take a long time. You may also find political interest in appointments which makes the process more complex.

Kru: Every industry has seen big events affect their board agenda, such as Black Lives Matter. What I haven't seen enough of across all sectors, including the civil service, is a 'this is the way we need to do business' approach. More focus is needed on attracting external diverse talent, but equally, how we are progressing internal talent. I've seen in areas of the civil service diverse talent feeling they have hit a ceiling.

What advice would you give to someone considering applying for a NED within the civil service?

Edwina: I believe that the public sector is a place where you can still have a huge impact and be recognised for your role in transformation. There is a willingness to learn and grow, a great talent pool and an opportunity to help make a big impact. You won't get rich in the civil service, but you will get noticed.

Kru: If you want to learn, to see something different and can bring external perspectives, whilst being resilient in your advice/views, it will give you that. It's easy to get frustrated by the way things are done, but it's harder to understand why it's done that way - before then helping to develop and improve. These departments and people have been here (and delivered) for many, many, many years - you can't question their integrity and passion for delivering. You need to understand them first and help/challenge second.

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