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**SEMINAR ON HUMAN RESOURCES AND TRAINING  
SESSION I**

Statistical excellence through capability development and planning – ABS Organisational People  
and Learning System<sup>1</sup>

Submitted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)

**I. INTRODUCTION**

1. About every 5 years the ABS revises its Corporate Plan. This is the culmination of an extensive strategic planning process that involves consultation with all staff.
2. Not surprisingly, staff development figures highly in all strategic planning processes. But in the most recent strategic planning exercise, it was agreed that workforce planning, including staff development activities, shall increase in prominence. Why is this so? There are a number of reasons:
  - (a) The nature of the work of National Statistical Offices (NSOs) is changing. The demand for staff with specialist skills (e.g. statistical analysis, information modeling and management) is increasing.
  - (b) At the same time,
    - (i) The number of staff retiring is increasing (baby boomers reaching 60);
    - (ii) The demand for staff with these type of skills is increasing. NSOs are not the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has been prepared at the invitation of the secretariat.

- only organizations requiring staff with these skills; and
- (iii) the supply from tertiary institutions is not keeping up with the demand.
- (c) There is need to develop many of these skills in-house. Furthermore, it is important to give current staff the opportunity to develop new skills. They have the advantages of loyalty and experience, and, without reskilling, their ability to contribute to the organization could diminish quickly.
3. The focus of this paper is on the steps that have been put in place to improve our staff development activities and set us up for the future, not just the present. Some of the activities are innovative which is why we thought they might be of interest.
4. This paper sets out the ABS' people capability development strategy. Recent initiatives demonstrate how capability development planning is integrated into workforce planning. Capability development planning also provides direction and focus to the formal and informal development activities offered to employees.

## II. THE CORPORATE PLAN AND HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

5. One of the key strategies for the ABS to achieve its mission, in the changing and dynamic environment in which it operates, is to build and leverage the capability of its people. Developing ABS employees to have the right capability to respond to and capitalise on these demands into the future is increasingly important and critical to the sustainability of the ABS.
6. In recognition of its strong learning culture, the ABS affirms its commitment to developing its employees in the ABS Corporate Plan. One of the most important objectives of the Corporate Plan is for the ABS to be:
- "An organization that builds capability to continually improve its effectiveness".
7. The Corporate Plan sets out a series of strategies to achieve that objective. Some of the key strategies are around providing learning and development activities and include that the ABS will:
- (a) ensure we have a capability framework that provides a clear specification of the skills expected of employees;
  - (b) support ABS employees to acquire new skills and knowledge throughout their career with the ABS;
  - (c) ensure learning and opportunities support the development of required capabilities;
  - (d) provide opportunities and support for ABS employees to develop leadership abilities;
- and
- (e) aim to continually improve our learning and development systems and processes.

## III. THE ABS CAPABILITY FRAMEWORK

8. Over the last decade, there have been numerous attempts to develop capability systems in the ABS. Corporate efforts in the early to mid nineties focused on developing competency models, however these models were not widely accepted as relevant to the workforce and were

only partially implemented. The ABS' Business Divisions have routinely developed role and skill profiles as part of their internal performance development strategies, with moderate success.

9. In 2003, a project team was formed to develop an ABS-wide capability framework. The project goals were to have an agreed organization-wide framework which defined the skills, capabilities and knowledge required of employees to achieve the ABS' work program. By defining the capabilities required by employees, the ABS would take a systematic approach to the definition of key capabilities and developing them in its workforce.

10. Structured and clearly defined capabilities also assist employees in the identification of individual capability gaps and provide a framework that supports performance management, personal development and career management.

11. In consultation with all business areas of the ABS, the project team defined a framework consisting of Core capabilities applying to all employees, and Job-specific capabilities applying to particular roles and business areas.

12. Stakeholders involved in the development of capability framework include all ABS employees, supervisors, team leaders, managers and union representatives. Focus groups, workshops and drop-in centres were utilised to make the process truly consultative and focused on client expectations and requirements.

13. The capability framework is dynamic and evolutionary. It will be reviewed every 6 months to ensure alignment to the business and to incorporate new and emerging skill requirements and disciplines.

#### A. Core Capabilities

14. Core capabilities are defined as those capabilities required of all employees in the ABS, regardless of role or business unit. These are generic capabilities defined by classification level, and form the foundation for statistical excellence. Core capabilities were researched widely, and ultimately drew heavily on the Australian Public Service Commission's leadership capabilities (Integrated Leadership System). A brief example of the Core capabilities is included in section X. The ABS Core capabilities are:

a) People and Communication

This capability details the required level of knowledge, skills and abilities associated with such concepts as interpersonal communication, negotiation, written communication, leadership, teamwork, people management, employee development, professionalism and development of internal and external client relationships.

b) Achieving Results

This capability includes project management, corporate governance, meeting deadlines, adjusting to change, task prioritisation and completion, time management, appropriate meeting behaviours, sharing planning between strategic and operational tasks.

c) Thinking

This capability groups a wide range of thinking skills and behaviour including conceptual thinking, analytical thinking, strategic thinking, research ability, decision making skills, professional judgement, problem solving and application of theory to practice.

d) Understanding the Business of Statistics

Behaviours associated with this capability would include basic statistical cycle knowledge, general awareness of ABS statistical business and knowledge of basic statistical principles, tools and methods.

e) Understanding the ABS Environment

Behaviours associated with this capability would include corporate knowledge and awareness, ability to operate effectively within the ABS technical environment and alignment of work behaviours with APS and ABS values.

B. Job-Specific Capabilities

15. Job-specific capabilities are applied to specific roles, job groups and functions and have been developed after extensive consultation across the ABS. Focus groups and individual work teams contributed to the development of these capabilities which cover Statistical and Methodological, Information Technology and Client and Corporate roles. These capabilities are endorsed and reviewed by business areas in partnership with HR.

16 The most critical set of Job-specific capabilities are the statistical capabilities which aligned to the ABS' Statistical Cycle.

a) Stakeholder Engagement

This capability relates to identifying information needs and understanding the broad context in which information is required.

b) Statistical Planning

This capability relates to assessing information needs, how these needs can be addressed and how decisions made at different parts of the process flow through.

c) Methodology

This capability relates to using information and decisions made during Statistical Planning to finalise a collection. Where appropriate, this includes assessing methodological parameters, designing and allocating a sample, and non-sampling considerations such as frames, editing and imputation.

d) Collection Development

This is the link between methodology and the implementation of samples, collections and forms.

e) Data Collection

This is the process of bringing data into the ABS. It includes collecting information as well as accessing administrative data sources.

f) Processing

This involves getting the data into a more useable form. This includes estimation, editing, imputation, sample maintenance and frame maintenance.

g) Data Analysis

This includes analytical techniques such as summarising, exploring and identifying issues; reconciliation/validation with other sources; interpretation of concepts, data sources and methods; and where appropriate using analytical techniques which require application of theory, such as modeling, time series and demographic techniques.

h) Dissemination

This involves turning the data into information, which may include: tables, graphs and publications; providing a framework in which data is collected; or application of time series.

i) Decision Support

This involves evaluating statistical collections and outputs to determine if they have met information needs.

j) Managing Quality and Processes

This relates to managing those processes which impact throughout every stage of the statistical cycle and ensuring objectives are met, including data management and application of the data quality framework.

#### IV. ABS' ORGANISATIONAL PEOPLE AND LEARNING SYSTEM

17. Officially launched on 14 February 2006, the ABS Organisational People and Learning System (OPALS) brings the organization-wide ABS capability framework to life.

18. For employees, the system enables them to identify their capability strengths and development needs, and access formal and informal learning linked directly to their individual capability development requirements.

19. One-on-one discussions between managers and employees are encouraged in order to assess employees' capability, including the identification of skill gaps, and development opportunities to meet those gaps. Prior to these discussions, employees and managers are encouraged to review their capabilities in OPALS to form a consistent basis for the development planning discussion.

20. At an organizational level, these individual capability development requirements form a complete picture of the organization's strengths and weaknesses, and can influence workforce planning, learning and development investment and succession management.

21. Within OPALS, employees have a capability profile consisting of Core capabilities at their classification level, and Job-specific capabilities drawn from their role or job function. Employees identify their development requirements against the framework using the following scale: Can't do at all, Requires development, Can do, Can do well, Expert.

22. Employees can view related learning for each capability. For example, if an employee indicates they required development in Collection Development, OPALS offers learning options specifically tailored to that capability. This learning might be a combination of formal classroom training, e-learning and/or reference material.

#### V. STRUCTURED FORMAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES LINKED TO CAPABILITIES.

23. The ABS provides learning and development opportunities aligned to our Core capabilities and Job-specific capabilities. OPALS allows employees to access these development opportunities through linking courses with particular capability development needs.

24. The Learning and Development Section is responsible for the provision of learning and

development opportunities against the Core capabilities and non-statistical Job-specific capabilities. The scope of the work covers management and leadership development, business and general professional skills and information technology training.

25. These programs are integrated to provide development options focused at each level of management responsibility, from frontline supervision, through middle management to executive leadership.

26. In June 2003 the ABS created the National Statistical Training Institute (NSTI) to focus and deliver statistical skills development in the ABS. The NSTI created a framework for delivering and developing a cohesive curriculum based statistical program to provide people with knowledge, understanding and skills to meet the organization's current and future statistical needs. It works in conjunction with the Learning and Development Section to provide address the whole of agency capability development needs.

27. One of the primary objectives of the NSTI is to provide a "learning pathway" for economic and social statisticians. The NSTI offers ABS employees opportunities that can enable them to progress from the entry level statistical skill set, through a series of intermediate and practitioner development activities, up to the most sophisticated advanced professional/statistical leadership learning activities.

28. Section IX details the Formal Learning Activities offered by the ABS through the Learning and Development Section and the National Statistical Training Institute.

## VI. UNSTRUCTURED INFORMAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES

29. In order to equip ABS employees with the skills required to meet business priorities, formal development opportunities are accompanied by increased investment in learning support strategies such as coaching, job rotations, mentoring and project work within the statistical program areas.

30. The coaching process is a familiar concept to the ABS. The basic principles of utilising coaching to improve performance is a common theme in all national Leadership and Management development programs and in various specific coaching products available within the ABS.

31. By developing the overall skills of managers, the benefit is the enhanced effectiveness of work areas to develop skills on-the-job. Effective coaching skills of team leaders and team members return the focus of on-the-job development to "helping to", rather than "telling how".

32. The Senior Executive Coaching program is offered as a one-on-one process where participating senior managers and an Executive Coach, sourced from outside the ABS, will work towards identified development needs.

33. This type of informal development is becoming increasingly popular because of its tailored and specific approach to develop needs, and particularly the ability to enhance strengths as well as address deficiencies.

34. Mentoring is also encouraged through the ABS leadership and management programs. Participants on programs are encouraged to identify and establish relationships with mentors before participation on the programs.

35. The ABS has tried to establish formal mentoring programs. The ABS experience, like many organizations is that this process is difficult, including but not limited to finding the right 'fit' between mentor and mentee.

36. With the release of OPALS, employees are able to explore the capability requirements of areas elsewhere in the ABS, providing a useful tool for career planning. This may facilitate internal job rotations, possibly on a temporary basis, balanced with the need to maintain high degrees of skill in particular areas. It is hoped that this will enable people to gather a broader set of skills to bring to any job they hold within the organization.

37. Another development initiative that the ABS has invested in is e-learning. At present, e-learning is provided as an adjunct to many face to face training programs and has not yet been integrated into formal blended solutions. The ABS has made a significant investment in e-learning, with over 100 hours of content available to employees through the OPALS system.

38. E-learning is presented through the OPALS system as a valid form of learning activity alongside traditional formal courses. The e-learning being used by the ABS moves beyond traditional e-book style e-learning and encourages interaction and engagement with real-life scenarios utilising audio and video simulations. Topics covered by the ABS e-learning catalogue include task and time management, coaching, interpersonal skills, business skills and planning.

## VII. OPALS AND INFORMED HUMAN RESOURCES PLANNING AND DECISION-MAKING IN THE ABS

39. OPALS provides a useful tool for the organization to define the capability requirements of the workforce into the future. It also focuses our attention towards investing in the right learning and development areas to build agreed capability needs.

40. The structure and clarity of the ABS Capability Framework provide a framework for their individual development and career management. This approach will also assist Learning and Development and the NSTI in consultation with Business Units to design and implement relevant learning activities for ABS employees to build individual capability. This bottom up identification and addressing of capability requirements will complement and offer validation of the top down succession planning initiatives.

41. The workforce capability information that is provided by OPALS gives the ABS great scope and opportunity to shape its workforce into the future. The ABS is about to commence a workforce shaping project, looking at developing a robust workforce planning framework and strategy. While it is too early to pre-empt the outcomes of this project, it is fair to say that the

ageing ABS workforce means that a more strategic approach towards managing the ABS workforce is required. By combining capability data with workforce demographics, analysis of the workforce capability and probability can be undertaken.

42. Succession planning is expected to be further strengthened by the implementation of the OPALS, which will provide an enhanced capacity to identify the capability gaps of the current workforce against anticipated future requirements. While knowledge of workforce capability is, to some extent, retained anecdotally at the business and work group level, implementation of the OPALS will provide a more strategic, organization-wide view of current capabilities and future requirements.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

43. The paper briefly describes formal and informal activities we are undertaking to improve the capability of our staff. Our staff are our most important asset – most NSOs would expend more of their budget on staff costs than other items. Accordingly, we need to invest to enhance the value of this asset. Informal development is particularly important. You should not forget the value of excellent mentoring and coaching. Nor the value of different work experiences. When we reflect on our own careers, these are often the things that are most important.

44. It is also important to emphasise “mutual obligation”. Whilst it is important for NSOs to provide the environment and facilities to support staff development, there is also an obligation on staff to take advantage of these opportunities. In particular, a lot of the initiative for staff development lies with them. One of the advantages of OPALS is that it provides a framework for staff to understand what capabilities are expected of them and how to go about enhancing those capabilities.



## IX. FORMAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES

**New Starter Suite**

Discover the ABS  
Employee Responsibilities  
Work Teams in Action  
ABS Desktop Fundamentals  
E-learning compliance courses –  
Code of Conduct, Harassment and  
Bullying Workplace Diversity  
ABS Statistical Process  
Basic Statistical Analysis  
Collecting Data in the ABS  
Introduction to Population Surveys  
and Statistics  
Introduction to Statistical  
Collections

**Leadership and Management****Suite**

Personal Development Program  
Supervisor Development Program  
Management Development  
Program  
Strategic Management Program  
Leadership Program

**Intermediate Statistical Suite**

ABS Information Warehouse  
Cognitive Interview Workshop  
Economic Collection Design  
Introduction to Questionnaire  
Design for Household Surveys  
Overview of ABS Dissemination  
Process  
Accounting for Non-Accountants  
Economics for Non-Economists  
Introduction to Macroeconomic  
Statistics:  
Module 1-5  
Making Quality Informed  
Decisions  
Research Skills Training Package  
Statistical Writing Training  
Program  
Thinking Analytically, Problem-  
solving & Story-telling  
Understanding Demographic Data

**IT Desktop and General****Training Suite**

Microsoft Office  
Lotus SmartSuite  
Lotus Notes

**Advanced Statistical Suite**

Advanced Questionnaire Design  
Advanced Questionnaire Design  
for Household Surveys  
Economic Collection Design in  
Practice  
Professional Statistical Program  
Labour Statistics Training  
Systems for ABS Social Statistics

**Project Management Suite**

Managing Projects for Outcomes  
Project Management Estimation  
Project Management Managing  
Risks

**Business Learning Suite**

Preparing For Promotion  
Implementing Workplans and  
Goals  
Coaching in the Workplace  
Training & Presenting in the  
Workplace  
Systems Thinking  
Introduction to ABS Business  
Process Analysis and Mapping  
Designing Recruitment and  
Selection processes  
Recruitment and Selection  
essentials for panels

**X. EXAMPLE OF THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CORE CAPABILITY DESCRIPTIONS FOR DIFFERENT CLASSIFICATION LEVELS OF EMPLOYEES**

<p>People and Communication Interpersonal Skills ABS Officer Level 6</p>	<p>People and Communication Interpersonal Skills Executive Level 1</p>
<p>Demonstrates strong oral communication skills.</p> <p>Ensures self and others are informed on progress and issues.</p> <p>Listens carefully to others, checks to ensure their views have been understood and is prepared to respond.</p>	<p>Demonstrates strong oral communication skills, enabling effective communication in a wide variety of challenging situations.</p> <p>Ensures self and others are well informed on progress and issues.</p> <p>Listens carefully to others, anticipates their reactions, checks to ensure their views have been understood and is prepared to respond.</p>

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