Interview Skills for the Australian Public Service

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About this workbook

This workbook is designed to help make it a little easier to interview for positions in the Australian Public Service. You can dip into sections that interest you or you can methodically work through each section to revamp your approach to interview from beginning to end.

A series of activities have been included to assist you prepare for your best possible interview.

The main thing to remember is that this publication is a guide only. You must thoroughly read any job selection documentation, policies and guidelines of the agency you are applying for to ensure you prepare well for your interview and that you understand the requirements.
Variety and structure of interviews

The structure of Australian Public Service interviews can vary. There is usually a panel consisting of at least three people and there is often a scribe taking notes. If the job has been advertised through an external recruitment agency then you may be invited to a short-listing interview. This is often presented as a coffee/chat; however, this is a crucial part of the interview process and you should attend such an interview fully prepared.

Some interview formats that you could expect may include:

- Panel interview where each panel member takes turns asking you questions relating to the selection criteria.
- Being given the interview questions on a sheet of paper when you arrive and given ten minutes alone to prepare.
- Being given a hypothetical situation and given 10 minutes to present your response.
- Being asked to prepare a 5 - 10 minute presentation on a select topic or hypothetical scenario prior to the interview.
- Being asked either before or after the interview to complete a work sample test. This involves doing exercises or activities similar to those required in the job such as a writing exercise.
- Undertaking psychometric testing. These are sometimes used to assess your abilities, personality, behaviours and interests and may include aptitude and/or personality tests.

Ask people who recently had Australian Public Service interviews about the format of their interviews.
Researching for interview

Online research

It is very rare during an Australian Public Service interview to be asked ‘Can you describe what the agency does?’ However, it is important to have a good understanding of the agency role, functions and how it fits into the broader Government agenda. You need to be able to weave this information into your answers where appropriate. It will also help you focus your answers on what is important and relevant to the agency. The higher the level you are applying for the more strategic your understanding needs to be.

Research the following avenues

- The Departmental website, get a sense of the corporate plan, annual report, portfolio budget statements, budget documents, legislation and policies, other relevant documents.
- The Ministers website, review a few of their latest speeches and media releases.
- The Management Advisory Committee (MAC) Reports. The MAC is a forum of Secretaries and Agency Heads established under the Public Service Act 1999 to advise the Australian Government on matters relating to the management of the Australian Public Service [www.apsc.gov.au/mac/index.html](http://www.apsc.gov.au/mac/index.html)

The contact officer

Before applying for a position you should always contact the contact officer. Their information can be vital. They can give you context for the position and help you anticipate interview questions and shape your responses to the questions.

If you have not been in touch with the contact officer prior to submitting your application now is your opportunity.
Below are a list of questions you might consider asking the contact officer (only ask some of these questions – not all of them).

**Information on the job**

- Can you tell me a little more about the actual position?
- What are your expectations of the person/position?
- What are the most demanding or complex aspects of the job?
- What are the key achievements you expect from the person?
- What are the challenges of the position?
- What particular skills are you looking for?
- What are the key priorities for the position in the next 6–12 months?
- Why is the position vacant? Is it newly created or is someone acting?
- How many positions are available?

**Information on the area/organisation**

- What is the strategic direction the section/area is taking?
- What are the current important strategic issues?
- What are the key priorities for the area?
- What are some of the key challenges facing the area?
- Who are the key stakeholders?

As soon as you submit your application you should start preparing for interview.
Activity – Snapshot of agency and APS

Do your research. As a minimum you should at least come up with the answers to these questions about the agency and the Government agenda.

Who is the Minister responsible for the portfolio?

What is the vision of the agency?

What are the agency goals that assist achieve the agency’s vision?

What are the agency’s key priorities?

What are the agency’s values?
Describe what the area you are applying for does, in relation to the agency’s values, goals and key priorities?


What are the key priorities for the area that you are applying for?


What are the APS values?


What are the key areas that the APS Reform Program is focused on?


Types of interview questions

There are three types of questions you may be asked at interview:

- Classic, traditional or open questions
- Hypothetical or situational (future focused) questions
- Behavioural (past focused) questions

**Classic, traditional or open questions**

These questions are often used as ice-breakers to allow you a chance to relate what you have done in your own words, to warm you up and to get you talking. They are general questions such as ‘tell me about yourself?’ or ‘why are you interested in this position’.

They may also be included throughout the interview such as ‘What would your team members say was an area you needed to develop?’ or ‘What are the differences you see between your current level and the one you are applying for?’ or ‘What are the five key challenges facing the agency in the next 12 months?’

With these types of questions, it is often a good idea to give the interviewers a brief outline starting with the most recent or most important information. Keep your answers to about 3 – 5 key points. Open questions are not an open invitation to overload the panel with all that you have done – do not regurgitate your CV or comment in detail about how you address every aspect of the selection criteria.

**Hypothetical or situational (future focused) questions**

These questions set up fictitious work-related problems that require you to come up with a solution. You are asked to describe how you would respond to, or deal with the situation. The assumption here is that people’s intentions will predict their behaviour.

For example:
- What would you do…..?
- How would you react if confronted by……?
- How would you deal with ….situation?
Behavioural (past focused) questions

Many questions asked in Australian Public Service interviews are behavioural based. Behavioural questions usually begin with a statement like: ‘Tell us about a time when...’ or ‘Describe a situation where...’ They are based on the principle that past behaviour is a good indicator of future behaviour. It gives an opportunity for the panel to see what you did, thought and said in a real work related situation. Research shows that the best predictor of future achievement is analysis of past achievement.

For example:

- Tell us of your experiences in……?  
- Give and example of........?

You need to be specific in answering these questions. By giving specific examples of what you have done, you are able to demonstrate you claims rather than talk about the skills you have.

Knowing the different types of questions you could be asked can assist you anticipate possible interview questions.
Anticipating questions

Preparing for interview is not just an internal thinking process: it is a doing process. To assist your confidence, your fluency and your ability to answer any question asked of you, you must practice out loud.

One of the best preparation techniques is to anticipate questions. Put yourself in the shoes of the interview panel and think of as many questions you can under each selection criteria. Make sure you have a mixture of the three questions types: classic, traditional or open questions; hypothetical or situational (future focused) questions; and behavioural (past focused) questions.

You should aim to anticipate at least 20 – 30 questions for each criterion. This seems a large amount of questions but if you think about it, the panel is going to ask you about 5 – 6 questions. If you anticipate a large number for each criterion then you are likely to have anticipated the majority of questions that they are going to ask you.

Once you have exhausted all possible questions, ask your family and friends to have a go, add their questions to your list. Note it is important to keep this list as a reference source to add to. Whenever you go for an interview note down your questions and add them to your question data bank. When others you know go for interview ask them what questions they were asked and add them to your question data bank.

Even if the selection criteria is not based on the Integrated leadership System (ILS) it is still worth familiarising yourself with the ILS and anticipating some questions around the framework as they are level specific and can expand your question range.

You also need to add in all those other classic, traditional or open questions that span all the criteria such as:

- What do you bring to the position?
- Why have you applied for the position?
- What would you do in the first 100 days in the position?
Also reflect on the current issues facing Australia, such as political, environmental, economical and commercial factors that may be a focus of some questions. For example, during the Global Financial Crisis, questions were being asked like: ‘How do you see the GFC impacting on the work of the agency or the APS as a whole?’

After you have anticipated questions, you need to structure your answers. Structure will be discussed in the next section following a series of activities. Then start practicing out loud – not in your head!

Vary your answers so that you are not memorising them word for word, as you will sound over rehearsed. You still need to sound natural at interview. You also need to listen very carefully at interview to the questions, as they might have a slightly different spin on what you had been practising. So be prepared to tweak your answers at interview.

You may feel silly and self-conscious, but it is better to make a mistake while practicing at home rather than in front of an interview panel.
Activity – Anticipating questions

Remember 20 – 30 questions per criterion so you will need more space than is allocated below!

Questions - Selection Criterion 1

Questions - Selection Criterion 2
Questions - Selection Criterion 3

Questions - Selection Criterion 4
How to structure answers

**Essential questions to prepare answers**

You should always prepare an answer for the questions:

- Why do you want the position?
- Tell us about yourself?
- What do you bring to the position?
- Why should we promote you?
- Why are you interested in the position?
- What is your headline skill set?

You can just prepare one answer to cover off all these questions. You may just need a different lead in for each question, however the body of the answer can be the same.

Think about the 3 – 5 key points you want to get across and link your skills, knowledge, capabilities to the selection criteria. The answer only needs to be about 4 – 5 sentences long. Also, inject it with enthusiasm and passion, get excited and animated and let the panel see how much you want this position.

Some panels do start with one of these questions as a warm up, which works well when you have prepared in advance. If you are not asked the question during the interview, then take the opportunity to add the information at the end.

You should also prepare answers for questions such as:

- What are your weaknesses?
- What would your team say you needed development in?
- What does your manager think would be an area you need to improve?

It is important you have thought about and practiced your responses to these questions, you do not necessarily want to blurt out the first thing that comes into your head. You need to answer them truthfully, although you can apply a filter and not list your most negative aspects.
**Behavioural questions**

Answering behavioural questions at interview is a lot like writing up examples in your application.

Using the **CAR** method to describe your examples during interview helps you guide the panel through your answers, substantiate your claims against the selection criteria and gives you an evidence-based response.

**Context** – Describe context briefly (set the scene with the situation).

**Actions** – Specific actions taken by you (this is about you and what you did, this is where you put most of your information).

**Results** – The impact or consequences of the actions taken by you (just a brief statement at the end of the example).

The diagram below is a visual representing how much space you should give each area. Many interviewees spend too much space on the **Context** by describing all the background information. They then do not include enough information about the **Actions** taken (this is where the real substantiation of claims occurs). Many do not even include **Results** achieved.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Results</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
It is also important to use active language when describing what you do.

*For example:*

Active language: 'I am/do/perform', 'I did/managed/administered'
Passive language: 'believe', 'I was involved in', 'I was required to'

Here are some positive action verbs to help you focus on an active language during your interview practice. Say your examples out loud using some of these words to describe what you did.

**Positive/action verbs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accelerated</th>
<th>Decreased</th>
<th>Generated</th>
<th>Obtained</th>
<th>Regulated</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Defined</td>
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<td>Operated</td>
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<td>Acquired</td>
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<td>Optimised</td>
<td>Reported</td>
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<td>Adapted</td>
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<td>Identified</td>
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<td>Administered</td>
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<td>Improved</td>
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<td>Analysed</td>
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<td>Inspired</td>
<td>Prepared</td>
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<td>Employed</td>
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<td>Approved</td>
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<td>Assessed</td>
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<td>Broadened</td>
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<td>Expanded</td>
<td>Managed</td>
<td>Recommended</td>
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<td>Communicated</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>Marketed</td>
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<td>Systemised</td>
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<td>Concluded</td>
<td>Extracted</td>
<td>Maximised</td>
<td>Recruited</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Facilitated</td>
<td>Minimised</td>
<td>Redesigned</td>
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<td>Formulated</td>
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<td>Wrote</td>
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Also look though the Integrated Leadership System (ILS) at the level you are applying for and pepper your answers with words from the ILS and the selection criteria. Make it easy for the panel to link your examples and experience to the current position you are being interviewed for.
One question that is often asked is ‘can I use the same examples at interview as I have in my application?’ You can. However, interview is an opportunity to show the breadth and depth of your experience. You can use one or two examples, but do try and vary them. You can also use the same example for one or more answers if you are looking at it from a different angle. However, again if you have another suitable answer then use it to give the panel a broader view of your skills, knowledge and capabilities.

You must also prepare to be asked questions about things that have gone wrong in the past. These questions are asked not to trap you or to highlight your failures, but to highlight what you have learnt in situations that did not go well and what you would do differently next time.

For example:

- Tell us about something that went very wrong in your work and what you did to respond/fix/restore?
- Give us an example when a project has not gone to plan: what did you do?
- Tell us about a time when a stakeholder consultation went wrong: what did you do?
- Give us an example of a challenging work relationship you have had: how did you work around it?
**Activity – Fruit bowl technique**

Once you have anticipated all your questions and structured your answers it is then time to practice out loud. If you have difficulty finding time to practice, the ‘fruit bowl technique’ has been devised to assist make interview practice part of your everyday life.

1. Anticipate your questions.
2. Key them up with spaces between them.
3. Cut them up into individual questions.
4. Put them into a fruit bowl.
5. Place the fruit bowl in part of your house/office that you regularly walk past.
6. Every time you pass the fruit bowl, stop take out a question. Answer the question and put the question aside until the bowl is empty. Then put all the questions back in and start again.

People who live with you, friends, partners and children can join in the question asking – it can become a shared event.

Some people even take the fruit bowl to the toilet to practice!

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*Preparing for interview is not just an internal thinking process. It is a doing process.*
Activity – Quick example guide

Have a strong example to talk through for each criterion. Complete this quick example reference guide for the Integrated Leadership System to help with your interview preparation.

Achieves Results

Personal Drive and Integrity

Communicates with Influence

Context

Actions

Result
At the interview

**Face to face interview**

- Arrive a few minutes early.
- Shake hands with the panel firmly (no limp fish).
- Acknowledge all panel members including the scribe.
- You may be asked by the panel to manage your own time. You may be told the format for example is: 20 minutes and five questions.
- Maintain good eye contact, not only with the person who asks you the question but also look at the other panel members.
- Answer questions succinctly and to the point. Do not try to over answer and say more than necessary.
- It is OK to take time at interview to think about your answer. It is OK to have some silence, you do not have to fill all the space.
- Try not using all the same examples that you did in your application. You can use some, not all. Remember the panel will only ask you about 5 – 6 questions, so mix up your examples.
- If you are answering a question and have more to add, but you are not sure if the panel wants to hear it – ask them. Don’t ask ‘Have I answered that enough?’ Instead ask ‘I can tell you a little more about …… if you would like’. Give the panel some options about where you could go.
- If the panel asks you a question with a few parts (double or triple barreled question) it is fine to say you will answer part (a) first and then go onto part (b) and (c). If after answering part (a) you forget what (b) and (c) are, you can always ask the panel to repeat the question.
- If you are unclear about a question you can ask the panel to repeat it or you can paraphrase it (put it in your own words) and check if that is what the panel wants you to answer.
• If you think you have answered the question incorrectly, you have not been clear in your answer, or you realise you have been rambling, it is OK to stop and ask the panel if you could answer the question again. They may not have time, but most panels will give you the opportunity to try again. After all they want to get the best person for the job.

• Do not answer questions with simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

• Do not make derogatory comments about your current or previous employers.

• Try to avoid taking notes during interview. This may assist your thinking process, however, it can be off putting for the panel.

• If you need to take notes and documents into the interview, keep them to a minimum. You should know the contents of your application, your skills, knowledge and abilities without needing to refer to written material. If you want something to hold onto, take in a copy of the selection documentation.

**Phone interview**

• Always dress like you are having a face-to-face interview. This will help put you in the right mindset.

• Find a quiet office with no interruptions.

• Using a headset can assist freeing your hands, so you can take notes if you wish or talk more naturally.

• Still smile, even though the panel cannot see you.

• If you need to have notes with you keep them to a minimum.

• As you don’t have the opportunity to read the body language of the panel, you can always stop and check if they need you to expand on a point further rather than risk rambling.
The fear of ‘going blank’ at interview

One of the biggest fear people have at interview is the fear of going blank and not being able to answer the question.

If you prepare and practice well, your risk of going blank will be reduced dramatically. If you practice the different techniques for handling nerves, your risk will be minimal. However, if you do go blank, there are a couple of strategies:

- Take a couple of moments to breathe – sit up straight and do a couple of diaphragmatic breaths (see next section) this will increase the flow of oxygen to your brain and your thoughts should flow.
- Rephrase the question yourself and ask the panel if that is what they are after – this will give your mind a chance to get going.
- Let the panel know that you have gone blank and you know you can answer the question, ask if you can come back to it later. Don’t forget to make sure that you do come back to it later.

Preparation and rehearsal are the secret to interview success.
Handling nerves

Here are a few techniques to keep those nerves in check.

*Diaphragmatic breathing*

When we are stressed and nervous we tend to breathe only from the top part of our lungs. As a result, we take shallow breaths, we feel like we are gasping for air and we limit the oxygen that is going into our brain. When our brain gets less oxygen, we cannot think as clearly and we can often ‘go blank’ at interview.

- Start with good posture: this gets air into your lungs and oxygen to your brain.
- Sit up straight, imagining a string lifting up your head. You should feel the area between your chest and your navel lengthen.
- Place one hand flat against your abdomen.
- Breathe in through your nose at an even rate.
- Allow your abdomen to expand, rather than your upper chest. You should feel the hand on your abdomen being pushed away from your body as your abdomen expands.
- Breathe out slowly and evenly through your mouth.
- Breathing out should take about twice as long as breathing in.

*Red and blue breathing*

Breathing is an important technique in handling nerves prior and at interview. The ‘Red and Blue’ breathing technique is simple to learn and easy to do at any time you are feeling anxious.

Sit and breathe deeply. With every breath you take, imagine blue cool relaxed air coming in and with every breath out, imagine red, hot stressed air being exhaled. Continue visualising the colours with your breathing. This is a fantastic technique to calm your nerves when you are sitting waiting to be called in to interview or any time you feel anxious leading up to interview.
**Conversation not interrogation**

We often go into interview with a sense that we are going into an interrogation; that the interview panel is going to question us until we crack and break. This adds to pre-interview and during interview nerves and can cripple interview performance.

Reframe your thinking. Rather than thinking of an interview as an interrogation, think of it as a conversation. You are going into have a conversation with other adults who are interested in what you have to discuss. You are going to let them know why you are the best person for the job and they are going to ask you a few questions to check out if you are the right person for the position and the agency. Thinking of an interview as a conversation, empowers you to achieve success and reduces your interview nerves.

**Negative self talk**

Negative self talk escalates our fear when it comes to interviews. Your interview experience will be the direct result of how you think about it. If you change the way you think about interviews (transforming your negative thoughts into constructive positive ones), you can regain a sense of control and enhance your interview performance.

Here are some examples of turning negative thoughts into constructive positive ones:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Thought</th>
<th>Change to</th>
<th>Constructive Positive Thought</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This interview is going to be a disaster.</td>
<td>➔</td>
<td>I am well prepared for this interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am going to make a fool of myself.</td>
<td>➔</td>
<td>I am going to do the best interview I can.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am going to go blank.</td>
<td>➔</td>
<td>I am well prepared and practiced I know my answers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My nerves always take over.</td>
<td>➔</td>
<td>I am confident and in control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can't wait for it to be over.</td>
<td>➔</td>
<td>I am going to go in there and enjoy myself.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Write down any of the negative thoughts you have about being interviewed and consciously identify the positive alternative. Every time you hear that negative thought – replace it with a constructive positive thought.

**Positive visualisation**

Positive visualisation is a technique used by elite athletes and can work for you in preparing for interview and calming nerves. Visualisation is also known as mental imagery and rehearsal. It is simply about creating a movie in your mind about you performing brilliantly at interview. Seeing yourself performing well makes your brain believe that attaining your goal is possible.

Prior to your interview take some time to sit quietly and imagine yourself at interview. Visualise: what you are wearing; confidently walking in and greeting the interview panel; answering the questions calmly, focused and giving the panel the answer they want; sitting confidently and attentive; thanking the panel and leaving.

Replay this visualisation over and over in the days prior to interview and you will walk into that room more confident, positive and prepared – your nerves will be less likely to get in the way.

The trick to interview nerves is getting those butterflies in your stomach to fly in formation.
Work sample test – Survival tips

A work sample test requires you to undertake a task, which simulates aspects of the job for which you are applying.

Some work sample tests include:

- Writing a letter
- Drafting a briefing
- Drafting talking points or a brief in response to a media article
- Summarising an article
- Undertaking calculations
- Interpreting tables, spreadsheets and charts
- Providing information about a process such as project management

You will be given a time frame to complete your work sample task(s). It is important to use your time wisely and allocate time for reading, planning, doing the task(s) and proof reading.

The first five minutes should be spent reading and understanding the requirements. Often this phase is omitted and vital information is overlooked impacting on the result.

Take a minute to draft a quick plan. If you have three tasks to complete, allocate enough time to each task so you can complete all in the required timeframe.

Leave five minutes at the end for proof reading and editing.
After the interview is over

As soon as the interview is over jot down the questions they asked you. Add them to your question data bank for future reference.

Congratulate yourself for doing the best you could at the time.

Let your referees know that you have had your interview and they may be contacted.

Post interview feedback

If you are either successful (and offered the position) or unsuccessful, you should always seek feedback. This information is vital for future applications and interviews.

Some of the questions you may like to ask:

- What areas of my application could I strengthen?
- How could I improve my application for future positions?
- What areas did I do well in during interview?
- What could I improve on for future interviews?
References, resources and further reading

Villiers, A (2010)  
How to Write and Talk to Selection Criteria  
5th edition, Mental Nutrition, ACT

Bolles, R (2010)  
What Color is your Parachute?  
Ten Speed Press, Toronto

Cracking the Code: How to apply for jobs in the Australian Public Service  

Integrated Leadership System  

APS Jobs  
www.apsjobs.gov.au

Australian Government Online Directory  
www.directory.gov.au

Entry point for all Australian Commonwealth Government authorised information and services  
www.australia.gov.au

The Australian Public Service (APS) Reform Program  

The Management Advisory Committee (MAC) Reports  
About the Author - Sue Adams

Sue Adams is an experienced executive coach, career strategist and facilitator. Drawing from over 20 years experience in Commonwealth and ACT Public Services including the Australian Embassy in Bangkok, Sue has a solid understanding of Public Sector culture, context and environment.

Sue has worked for Government funded agencies in the areas of disability, ageing and youth. She has also worked as a health professional with ACT Health.

Areas of Expertise:

- Career planning including transition and management
- Application review and interview skills
- Developing leadership, building capacity and enhancing resilience in people, teams and organisations
- Team building and people management strategies
- Delivering relationship and stakeholder management strategies
- Dealing effectively with sustained organisational change
- Communicating and delivering high quality presentations with confidence
- Developing strategies for having difficult conversations and dealing with under-performing staff
- Managing stress and work life balance, including meaningful and effective part-time work

EXECUTIVE COACHING

Coaching can be described as one-on-one leadership development. As an executive coach Sue Adams facilitates client-focused sessions. She listens, questions, encourages, supports and challenges her clients. She provides a structure where goals are set and actions are developed for maximum benefit.

Coaching works because clients are supported to set realistic work place goals and develop achievable strategies and actions to reach those goals.

Coaching can be done either face-to-face or over the telephone.
Types of Coaching

- Career development and transition coaching
- Leadership and management development coaching
- Performance coaching
- Issue specific coaching
- Combined or team coaching

FACILITATION

Sue Adams works with her clients through the facilitation process (design, delivery and evaluation) to ensure that both individual and organisational needs are met. She designs productive and dynamic group processes which focus on achieving results: injecting passion and enthusiasm into her workshops.

Types of facilitation

- Team development and team building
- Team and organisational strategic planning
- Learning circles
- Tailored training courses, specialising in application writing and interview skills for the Australian Public Service
- Community and stakeholder consultation
- Information seminars

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