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Perceptions of Government Service Delivery

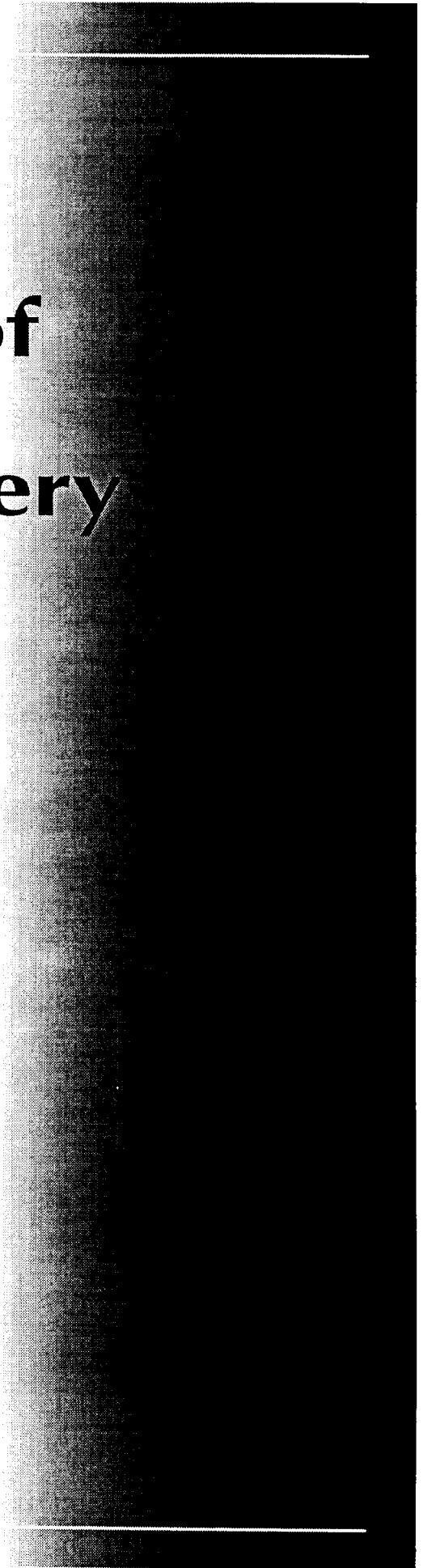




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APPENDIX A Details of Survey Methodology

OVERVIEW



Smiling as You Bail: Service in An Era of Hostility and Restraint

There is little need to deliver a further body blow to the reeling institution of government in Canada. Yet the current research on internal and external perceptions of service vividly reinforces the thesis that there is a crisis characterising the relationship between citizens and governments. There is strong evidence that the fundamental breakdown between citizens and governments evident in recent years continues unabated. In this research project we examine the citizen-government relationship through the lens of "service delivery". Although there are some difficulties in reducing the citizen-government connection to the realm of a service transaction there are some important insights on this problem, and the deeper problem of citizen disconnection.

The research examines the nature and quality of service interactions from the perspective of

both public servants and the clients they serve. It includes a random sample of 1,200 federal public servants representing the front line, middle management and senior management. It also includes a parallel sample of 700 "clients" of these same departmental staff composed of both individual citizens and representatives of organizations (public and private sector) who have recently dealt with the departments included in the staff survey. In addition to extensive telephone surveying there were also 12 qualitative focus groups conducted with clients and public servants. Finally, these results are situated in the context of broader findings drawn from our ongoing *Rethinking Government* project.



Resilient Commitment to Service: A Two-Edged Sword

The surveys reveal a mixture of positive and negative findings. Running throughout this research is a disturbing gap between the views of public servants and the clients they serve. Although the gap often favours a flattering self-

image of public servants — and particularly the quality of their service efforts — there are important exceptions where public servants maintain exaggerated notions of client antipathy. A number of crucial gaps characterise this area: gaps between self-rating and client-ratings; gaps between client expectations and client experiences; and gaps between management and front line views on service. These differences are not merely curious; they define some of the crucial challenges interfering with a healthier client-government correction.

One of the more striking findings of the study is the apparent strength of the commitment to excellent service to the public. In several survey items, and in the focus groups, we found public servants united in a virtual consensus that service to the public was the essence and *telos* of their job. This notion that serving the public is what their job is all about is also linked to a conviction that, given the practical constraints, they (personally) are doing an "excellent" job of serving the public. This strong service ethic appears to be resilient compared to our 1990 Service to the Public (STP) study. In fact there is some evidence that public servants feel that service to the public, and their commitment to client service, have improved in the past several years. Other survey indicators suggest that public servants believe that they are more open and transparent and placing more emphasis on consultation than in our 1990 research. This commitment to service is clearly genuine. There are, however, some non-trivial problems underlying this broad service ethic.

There is a growing sense that the public servants feel themselves under seige. The broad based hostility to governments which has become an entrenched public mood in the nineties has clearly registered on public servants. Worse, public servants have seriously exaggerated public hostility to public servants such that almost eighty per cent believe that their clients think of them as "lazy and uncaring". In fact, slightly less than one in five clients really hold this view. Our most recent public research suggests that while public servants are not immune to the broad resentment to government, the greatest anger and alienation from government is directed to politicians and the entire institution of government. In fact, trust in federal public servants is significantly higher than trust in politicians. About 60 per cent have little trust in politicians versus only 25 per cent who have little trust in federal public servants (29 per cent have little trust in provincial public servants, suggesting that federal public servants are slightly more trusted than their provincial colleagues).

In addition to perceived public hostility, public servants are acutely aware of the impacts of retrenchment and restraint. Downsizing and other resource constraints are salient concerns raised in group discussions. All of these forces have coalesced to produce a significant decline in the overall morale of the public service. Yet in spite of these difficulties commitment to service has remained strong and perhaps even strengthened. Nearly 90 per cent of public servants agreed that "providing excellent service is what my job is all about". Many focus group participants took it as a point of honour or pride that they maintained this focus despite the travails of

public service. There was a sense that many public servants, particularly at the front line and in the regions were transferring allegiance from their Minister, Deputy or manager to their client or the public.



The Client Perspective: A Reality Check

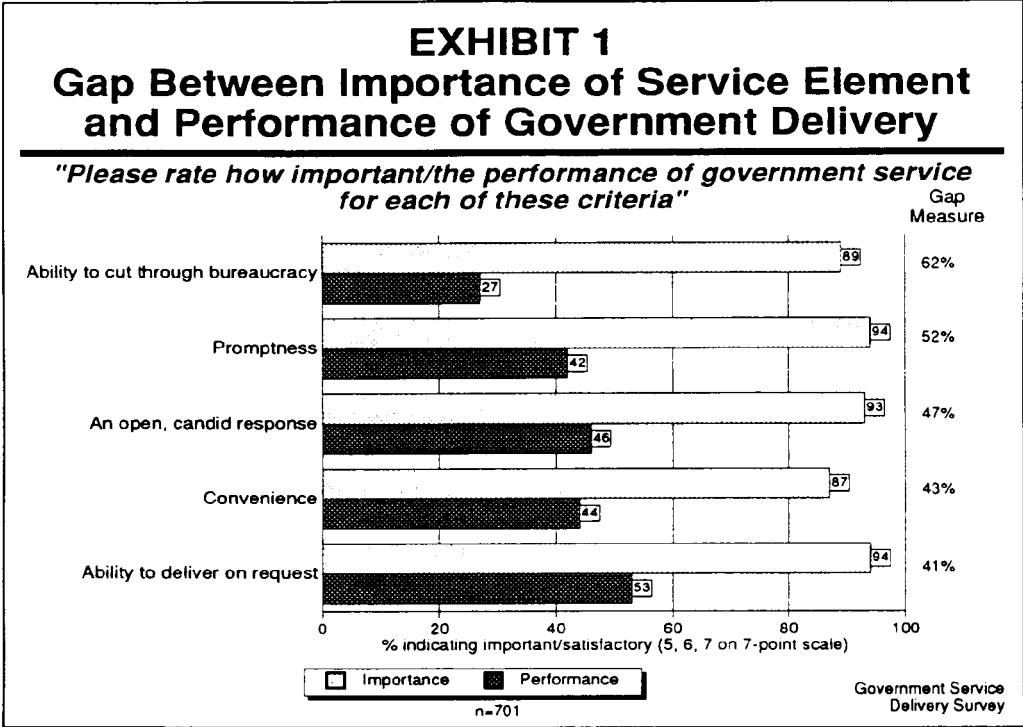
Although it is impressive that this service ethic is so resilient there is also reason to be concerned by this finding. The key problem is that *the current system is not working*. Despite the sense within the public service that progress is occurring, and that service performance is great given constraints, clients do not share this flattering self-image. For whatever reasons we find that the experiences of clients mirror broader public disaffection with government as an institution. Most clients do not agree that public servants are doing an excellent job — even recognising resource constraints. In fact, when comparing client expectations on the key dimensions of the service transaction rated by clients, there is a huge gap between recent experiences and going in expectations (Exhibit 1). Clients place a premium on cutting through red tape, timeliness, transparency and openness and getting results. On all of these crucial dimensions of the service transaction client satisfaction levels are depressingly low (25 to 50 per cent satisfaction).

Without exploring demographic variations in satisfaction with government in any depth here (see the full report), it is important to note a particularly strong and disturbing age effect. Younger Canadians have a *much* more

negative view of the federal government, and the quality of service delivery. In past research we speculated that lower rates of contact and political literacy may have accounted for this antipathy. It is disconcerting to note that in a sample of clients who have recently dealt with the federal government, the negativity of young clients of the federal government may be even more pronounced (than those who have not recently dealt with government).

Even when comparing satisfaction levels on these same dimensions with the concrete example of one's last visit to a bank we note a sizable deficiency (about 30 per cent lower satisfaction). Recognizing that banks are not the most popular institutions in Canada today it is quite discouraging to note this wide performance gap. Some of the gap can be attributed to the paper burden and accountability requirements of government but this can't explain all of this shortfall (or any of the 21 per cent shortfall on "courtesy").

It is possible to chart the gap between client expectations and the record of real world delivery in greater depth. It is, however, also important to note that if only two per cent of public servants rate their personal service performance as less than "excellent" this may be an obstacle to fixing the problem. There should be no doubt about the nature and severity of the problem itself. The public perspective on the federal government, whether judged from the specific vantage point at the last service episode, or from the broader perspective of public attitudes, reveals a level of disaffection which can only be characterised as a crisis. This crisis cannot be addressed, much less solved, in a world where it is seen



as unavoidable and unrelated to the efforts of public servants.



Linking Morale, Planning and Innovation: Creating an Organizational Service Edge

It is useful to examine the internal connections between service and other human resource and organisational issues. Beginning with the issue of morale we offer the unsurprising but clearly documented conclusion that poor departmental morale is a ubiquitous feature of the current federal public service (with some very sizable variation across different

departmental settings).

Morale in the public service was examined on both a departmental and a personal basis. Only 35 per cent of participants feel that morale in their department is good. Middle managers are particularly pessimistic in their view of departmental morale (Exhibit 2). Departmental morale varies significantly across government departments.

It is also possible to make conclusions on the state of personal employee morale and where it is going. Only a minority (26 per cent) of participants indicated that if faced with the same career decision they would not choose to become a public servant. However, tracking this question from the 1990 Service to the

Public survey reveals a significant increase in the percentage of both front line staff and middle managers indicating that they would not choose to become a public servant if given the same career decision.

It is instructive to note that while morale has clearly declined according to this indicator it also appears to be somewhat higher than for the average ratings across all other occupational groups. In a recent national survey, 30 per cent of Canadians agreed that they would *not* choose their career area again (Exhibit 3). Of those currently in employment the number is 29 per cent which is still higher than for federal public servants.

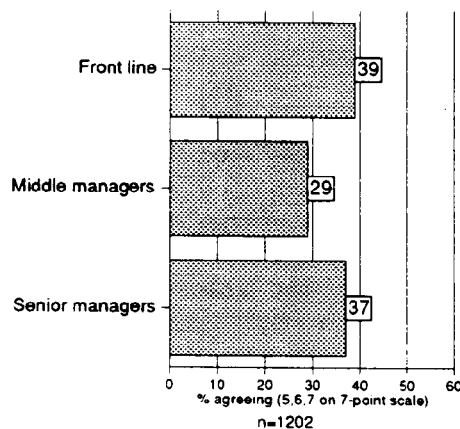


Technology, Innovation and Human Resources

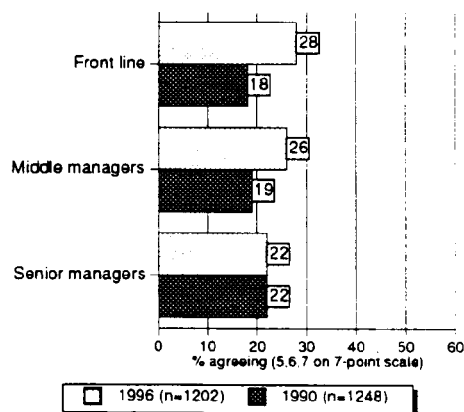
There is a strong constellation of recurring organizational features which tend to appear together. This bundling of planning and human resource factors is linked to organizational settings which reveal both higher morale and a stronger service ethic. The 1990 Service to the Public research referred to these features as the PVK factor (for *people knowledge and values*). Once again, we find a similar virtuous organizational circle at work.

EXHIBIT 2 Morale in the Public Service

"Morale in my department is good"



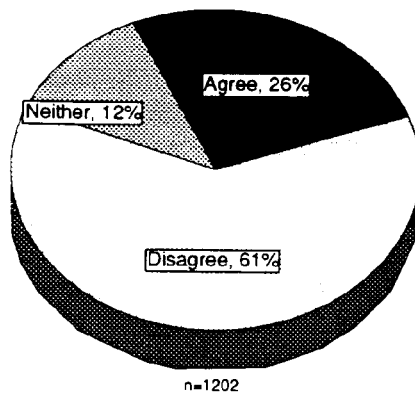
"If faced with the same career decision again, I would NOT choose to become a public servant"



Government Service
Delivery Survey

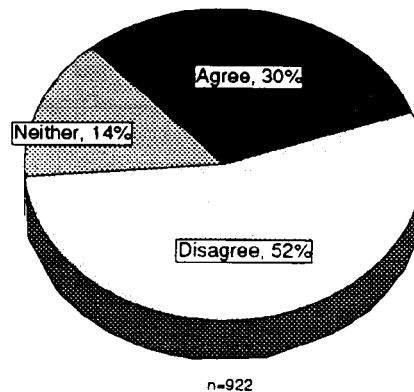
EXHIBIT 3 Satisfaction with Career Choice

"If faced with the same career decision again, I would NOT choose to become a public servant"



Government Service
Delivery Survey

"If faced with the same career decision again, I would NOT choose the career I am currently pursuing"



Rethinking Government 95-3
(preliminary spring data)

Public sector organizations which place a greater premium on innovation, technology, consultation and formal planning for better service tend to feature these elements in a mutually reinforcing pattern. Furthermore, these elements are linked to better departmental morale and a higher service ethic in our analysis of the current survey.

There are opportunities for making further gains because many of these elements are either underdeveloped or non-existent in many departments. For example, 40 per cent of departments do not have a written service plan. In itself a written plan will not transform underperforming departments into high performance organizations. On the other hand, formal planning is part of a relatively

clear constellation of better service culture ingredients. We should be seeding these practices and cultures more broadly in the public service, and reinforcing them where they are already rooted.



The Technology Dilemma

Another theme emerges from the research. The demographic skew to an older public service workforce is also linked to a mixed level of comfort and commitment to the use of new information technologies. The surveys show that public servants recognize the advantages of new technologies in improving service delivery. The research also shows that

there has been a significant expansion of technology-driven service and an expectation that this trend will continue.

There are, however, some tensions interfering with the move to more modern delivery systems. The public service is now dominated by aging survivors. Although they are not particularly technophobic this cohort does carry notions of ideal service delivery which are increasingly anachronistic. For example, the vast majority of public servants believe that in-person service is the model *par excellence* of ideal service. All other models are seen as pale emulations and most public servants believe clients would prefer in-person service (even if it is slower or more expensive).

It is the case that most clients do prefer in-person service *but* their preference is much weaker. Eighty-seven per cent of public servants believe the general public would rather deal with a person than a computer or voice mail even if it means slower service; only 68 per cent of the general public actually express such a preference. Furthermore, this preference for in-person service weakens for younger, more technologically comfortable clients (63 per cent for under 30 versus 83 per cent for over 60 years of age). It should also be noted that clients comparatively rated their last service episode at a bank much more highly than with the federal government, notwithstanding the fact that many of these transactions were with Automated Banking Machines.

There is an uneasy mixture of interests and values at work here. The notion of in-person service as the reference standard reflects the culture of an era which is passing. There is

also the recognition that new information technologies are alternatives for human labour (47 per cent of public servants are concerned that recent technological advances in servicing the public could result in their losing their job). It is not surprising that one's enthusiasm for new service technology may be muted by the recognition that the new electronic kiosk may replace you next year.



Next Steps: Repairing the Structure and the Surface

Clearly all is not well in the world of government. It is important to note that the specific transactions between citizens as clients and the federal government generate the same general reactions as the overall impressions of government as a whole. With little difference overall reactions/approval of the federal government are the same whether based on general impressions or most recent transaction.



Service in the Public Sector

The concept of service is at the heart of this discussion. The term is often treated as a primitive, a concept which is fundamental and somewhat obvious. After all government is synonymous with civil or public service. Most employees agree that service to the public is the essence of their job. But is the concept that obvious? Are discussions of service in this context somehow different than in other settings?

The answer is both yes and no. The key transactional elements of modern service are fairly obvious. They really don't vary that much whether we are talking about mufflers, fast food or legal advice. The key transactional service model is basically common to the modern consumer society. The research shows that both clients and public servants agree on the dimensions of the service model (if not the performance achieved). As the single greatest expenditure area citizens should expect at least as much of this sort of service when they visit their government office as they do when they deal with a restaurant, a courier or a bank. Clearly against these yardsticks, the results are woefully deficient.

There is, however, no doubt that there is a crucial additional element of public service which is fundamentally different than other parts of modern consumerism. The essence of public service is representing the public interest. This is the basis of Hegel's notion of the historical shift from a mercantile to civil society. According to Hegel the essence of civil society was the focus on *public interest* and the rise of a new universal class, the civil service. Clearly a more prescient notion of a universal class than Marx's proletariat, Hegel's civil service was focused on public interest and knowledge, not property, was the basic fuel of this model. Interestingly, civil servant was defined broadly to include the professional class (e.g., doctors). We find the notion of an impersonal, rational bureaucracy developed into a much more chilling conception in Weber's notion of the "iron cage". The modern world has seen a remarkable growth in the influence of the civil service. There is, however, mounting evidence that the influence

of modern bureaucracy and statism may be in decline in the post-modern world.

This post-modern era shows government and public service to be undergoing a fundamental transition. There is widespread hostility and disaffection with government. But it remains the case that the state plays a universally important role in the post-modern world and the essence of this role still revolves around the notions of public interest, reason and knowledge. The future of government may be smaller, but not necessarily less significant. Our broader research shows that Canadians remain committed to the goals of government but not the results (or value for money equation).

Is service essentially about results or the quality of the transaction? From the public's perspective both are important and they fail to see these as choices. Nearly 90 per cent of Canadians believe that "higher quality customer service" is important to producing a "result-oriented" federal government. "Accountability for measured results" is seen as the most important criteria of a list of five ideas that might improve governance in Canada (transparent decision-making was second most important).



A Foundation of Core Values and Roles

It is also important to recognize that results/goals mean something different in the minds of the public than they do in the minds of the senior decision-makers running the show. The public continues to look to the federal

government as a source of moral community. Goals and values like freedom, health and security are at the top of the public's list of core values for government. For those in charge the problem is seen in more rational and economic terms. Perhaps this is why about 85 per cent of Canadians agree that government leaders are disconnected from the values of ordinary Canadians. Any attempt to rebuild confidence in the federal government must broach the normative rupture which continues to alienate citizens from government.

Improvements to service delivery systems are important. They must be built on a solid foundation of core values and roles. Ironically, the public are less attached to the federal government as a delivery agent. As governments begin to row less and steer more they must ensure that they preserve the core roles that the public sees as crucial — guardian-protector (of public interest); partner-broker (coordinating different sectors/players); goal-setting (in cooperation with other players); and economic steward. New alternative service delivery systems must approach the client in recognition of these core roles for the federal government.



Further Suggestions

Turning to the more specific problems of service delivery it is possible to offer some more specific recommendations:

- (i) The overall service culture needs a major shake-up. The system needs to be shocked out of its current state of complacency and resignation. The ubiquitous image of excellent performance (given constraints) has become a comfortable illusion. Coupled with an exaggerated sense of public hostility this work ideology is preventing recognition of the severity of the problem.
- (ii) The service problems are systemic in nature and will require a radical transformation of organizational culture and delivery technologies. It is important to recall that the study shows the most alarming service shortfalls are in the areas of red tape, timeliness, openness and results. These problems are reflective of the current culture of the bureaucracy and possess enormous organizational inertia. We suggest broadening the virtuous circle of innovation, formal service planning and measurement, and openness. Top-down leadership and stressing the value and power of individual employees are also crucial elements of this transformation. Corrections to flagging employee self-esteem, and a sense of possible progress to measurable goals are part of the solution.
- (iii) Benchmarking and monitoring of service performance is essential. Vague nostrums about service commitment and performance are unhelpful. This study provides a reasonable (global) benchmark of current performance levels. The government should use this as a foundation for charting improvements in service performance. These performance reports should be shared with staff and the public. They should include a real diagnostic capacity to identify causes of both poor and distinguished performance.

- (iv) The government should initiate a high profile youth internship program. There are a number of compelling reasons for doing so. First, there is alarming evidence of youth disconnection from the federal government. A youth hiring program will help redress the current demographic skew to greying survivors. Young federal employees can bring vitality and innovation, technological agility and a more credible perspective on the problems of younger Canadians. Younger Canadians brought in in sizable numbers will help in shocking the system out of some of its inertia and antiquated delivery systems. Younger workers are also cheaper and contain greater representation of key equity groups. It also will render federal appeals to corporate conscience in youth hiring more credible.

CHAPTER**1****INTRODUCTION**

1.1 Background and Study Objectives

The Task Force on Service Delivery Models — one of six Deputy Minister Task Forces established by Privy Council Office to address issues facing the federal public service — has a mandate to explore new ways of delivering government services to citizens. The present research was conducted to support the Task Force's examination of models of government service delivery. Specifically, the primary purpose of this study was to examine federal public servants' understanding and perceptions of client service, in order to determine what these perceptions are, the influences that shape them, and whether perceptions have changed or evolved in any way in recent years, particularly since Public Service 2000. A comparison with client views about service and their interactions with public servants rounded out this exploration.

Examinations of public service delivery date back to the 1960s when it was suggested that policy making and service delivery are different activities. In light of the current fiscal situation, this differentiation is of even greater significance for the public service of the 1990s.

Recently, the Public Service 2000 (PS 2000) initiative placed a strong emphasis on the provision of better service to the public as a part of public service renewal. In our 1990 *Survey of Public Service Perceptions of Service to the Public*, conducted for PS 2000, we found that the federal public service exhibits several key elements of a strong service culture. For instance, the survey results indicated: a strong level of commitment to serving the public, particularly among front line staff; considerable departmental support for serving the public, though the notion of exceeding clients' expectations for service quality was not widely encouraged; and strong support among managers for consultations with the public. On the other hand, there was evidence to suggest that: the communication of departmental values regarding service (from senior management down to middle management and front line staff) was not consistently effective; there was some confusion regarding *who* public servants serve (the public versus their Minister and the government) and uncertainty with respect to the best strategies for improving service; and there was a lack of clear departmental standards and systems for evaluating quality of service and client satisfaction.

Moving beyond the PS 2000 initiative, political and fiscal pressures have demanded both increased efficiency and better service, as well as a rethinking of the role of the federal government in service delivery. Ekos' recent research indicates an openness on the part of the Canadian public to new forms of government service delivery. Single wicket offices, some forms of user pay and sectoral partnerships are three of a series of innovations which are quite acceptable to citizens (*Rethinking Government* 1994). Subsequent research suggests that Canadians' expectations of the federal government are declining and that Canadians expect the federal government to form smarter partnerships with the provinces, businesses, and other players. Indeed, when asked who should be primarily responsible for various activities traditionally performed by government (i.e., determining policy and goals, providing funding, providing services) across 13 priority areas (e.g., unemployment, health care, job training), Canadians assigned a high level of responsibility to non-traditional

players, such as business, non-governmental organizations and individual citizens (*Rethinking Government* 1995).

These findings suggest that other levels of government and non-traditional players have an important role to play in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of service to the public. The findings also indicate that a rethinking of traditional public service delivery systems is necessary and that new models, relationships and partnerships are required. A shift in attitude must be made with respect to public service delivery which focuses efforts on the client. This involves changing both structure and reward systems in the public service to create an environment which cuts across departmental and jurisdictional boundaries and provides services from a client point of view.

In trying to achieve this horizontal, client-focused service environment, the Task Force on Service Delivery Models can draw upon the models already in place in both the private and the public sectors. The experiences of retail and manufacturing firms in the area of service delivery (e.g., Total Quality Management, Integrated Checkouts) can be instructive. Recent initiatives in the public sector, such as special operating agencies and single window offices, can also offer useful information in the Task Force's quest for superior public service.

In addition to drawing on the many experiences and lessons about service delivery models already in existence, there was a need to collect data on federal public servants' attitudes toward service, and whether these perceptions have changed in recent years. In this research, the views of public servants were compared with the perceptions of a sample of clients of public sector service, and any gaps between those providing and those receiving government service were identified. The specific issues examined in this study are presented in the next section.

1.2 Study Issues

The Task Force on Service Delivery Models required research to support a thorough examination of the following issues:

- ❑ public servants' and clients' personal understanding of elements of service to the public;
- ❑ elements of service that are encouraged by management within government departments;
- ❑ commitment, values and attitudes toward service to the public;
- ❑ perceptions of senior bureaucrats, middle managers, and front line staff regarding public sector service;
- ❑ expectations and key service criteria of the public/clients of government service, and the degree to which these are congruent with the expectations and criteria of public servants;
- ❑ changes in perceptions of client service since 1990;
- ❑ morale and self-perceptions of public servants, the public's perceptions of public servants, and their effect on service delivery;
- ❑ forces that help or hinder the development of a client service culture in the federal public service; and
- ❑ visions of the future of government service delivery, including the role of technology, the one-stop shopping concept, partnerships and other models of service delivery.