

Annex D – Career pathways discussions: Topic Guide

Background

This topic guide was part of a Government Office for Science project to learn how scientists and engineers in government can best be supported and developed so that they meet the future needs of the civil service.

The questions below are intended to guide short discussions with experienced GSE members enquiring into their experience working in and outside the civil service, the types of profession functions they have undertaken, the broader experience gained and reflections of being both customers and providers of science and engineering advice.

Objectives of discussions

To learn about the experiences and career pathways of senior civil servants with a science and engineering background.

To encourage individuals to disclose positive and negative experiences, and pivotal decision points in their career.

To encourage individuals to reflect on their experiences and suggest practice improvements.

Broader context

In the light of the civil service reform plan, to consider how scientists and engineers in government can best be supported and developed so that they meet the future needs of the civil service (especially the aspiration that specialists and experts are visible, contactable and deployable across government).

To identify from real life experience whether there any specific barriers or important prerequisites to progression for scientists and engineers working in the civil service.

To gain enriched understanding of what the characteristics of typical career development pathways look like (and could look like in the future), to help develop approaches to supporting and informing individuals' self-development and suggestions for talent management within the profession.

To build understanding of the functions that people with a science and engineering background are performing in the civil service and how/in what circumstances they are applying their professional knowledge, skills and experience.

However, interviewees may suggest other terms and characterizations and these should be recorded and explored.

Review of the science and engineering profession in the Civil Service

Suggested opening statement

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for our research project.

The purpose of this discussion is to learn more about your career in and outside the civil service; your reflections on the way you have used your science or engineering background; the functions you have undertaken as a scientist or engineer; broader experience gained; and pivotal decision points in your career.

The views you express will be held in confidence, but anonymised comments may be used as part of our report into how we should be developing scientists and engineers to ensure the profession meets the needs of the future civil service.

I would like your permission to take notes and / or tape record the interview. If we use a tape recorder I will use the tape to transcribe detailed notes after which I will return it to you if you wish.

We hope to use some of the details of these discussions to help illustrate typical career pathways open to scientists and engineers working in the Civil Service. Would you be willing to let us use your career profile?

We estimate discussion on these issues should take around thirty minutes in length

Please provide us with some basic information before we start

Your department, agency or NDPB?	
Your primary discipline or area of expertise?	
Your current level or grade?	
Grade at which you joined the civil service?	
Years experience in the civil service?	
Age band?	30-39 40-49 50-59 60+
Experience outside the civil service	Y/N
Other departments you have worked in (with dates)	
Science and Engineering Fast streamer?	Y/N

Review of the science and engineering profession in the Civil Service

We would like to discuss your career history in more detail

(Use individual's CV as starting point)

[SAME SET OF QUESTIONS AS SURVEY]

For each role please state which of the following professional functions you performed (if any)

- Practitioner or topic specialist using unique and valuable skills and experience in a specific science/engineering area.
- Portfolio holder with a detailed knowledge of a particular topic or industry sector, acting as a focus for your organisation's business in that area, pulling together evidence across a range of science, technology or engineering disciplines.
- Project and programme manager in a technical, scientific or specialist area, responsible for managing major science or engineering-based projects or programmes of work and use their STEM background to be an "intelligent customer".
- Technical manager or team leader with responsibility for the effective application of technical capability in your organisation.
- Policy maker applying science or engineering background to policy and strategy development, combining your technical knowledge and skills with knowledge and understanding of government and policy making, decision making and scrutiny processes to ensure that legislation and policy are informed by a sound evidence base.
- Profession manager with responsibility for developing or assuring the quality of professional skills in your organisation
- Non-science or engineering function

[Show chart and ask to tick box, fill in chart for each role]

How would you describe yourself now? [use text from survey]

1. Informed advocate
2. Facilitator
3. Practitioner

1. We would like to understand the drivers and motivations behind your career:

What has been the main driving force behind your career choices?

How much has your background as a scientist or engineer shaped the career choices you made?

Did your background as a scientist or engineer affect the options open to you? (generally, and in the civil service specifically)

Did your background as a scientist or engineer affect your interest in particular employers, subjects or sectors?

2. Support for career development

Have you received any personalised development guidance or mentoring during your career?

What were the most useful sources?

Any linked to professional development as a scientist or engineer?

What was the best piece of careers advice you received?

Were you advised for or against taking certain types of role?

What other support have you received for your career development that you would highlight?

4. Barriers to career development

Have you experienced any barriers to your career development in the civil service? (check related to profession or not)

If so, what helped you overcome this?

What other barriers to career progression are you aware of that you think we should consider tackling?

5. Drawing on your own experience, what are the important most important prerequisites for scientists and engineers to progress within the civil service?

Qualities, skills, experience of the individual?

Opportunities or support provided by department or by profession?

6. Were there any pivot decision points in your career?

Choice to move away from practitioner role?

Promotion to particular grade?

Experience gained that opened up wider opportunities?

Change in personal life that altered career focus?

[For ex-science and engineering fast streamers only]

7. Please tell us a bit about your experience as a SEFS:

What was your situation when recruited?

What if any involvement in science or engineering issues did you have while an SEFS

Did you receive any personalised support for your career development (eg mentoring) while on the fast stream? Was any of this related to professional development as someone working with science/engineering issues?

8. What are your views on the future of SEFS?

What value do you think the SEFS scheme offers [to individual, to department, to civil service]?

Do you have any views on what could be done to improve the SEFS experience for future intake?

Any other comments on SEFS scheme?

[CONCLUDING QUESTIONS FOR ALL INTERVIEWEES]

9. Do you have any further thoughts on how scientists and engineers in government can best be supported and developed so that they meet the future needs of the civil service?

Is there anything you were expecting to be asked which has not been mentioned?

Is there anything we have skimmed over which needs more attention?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

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