

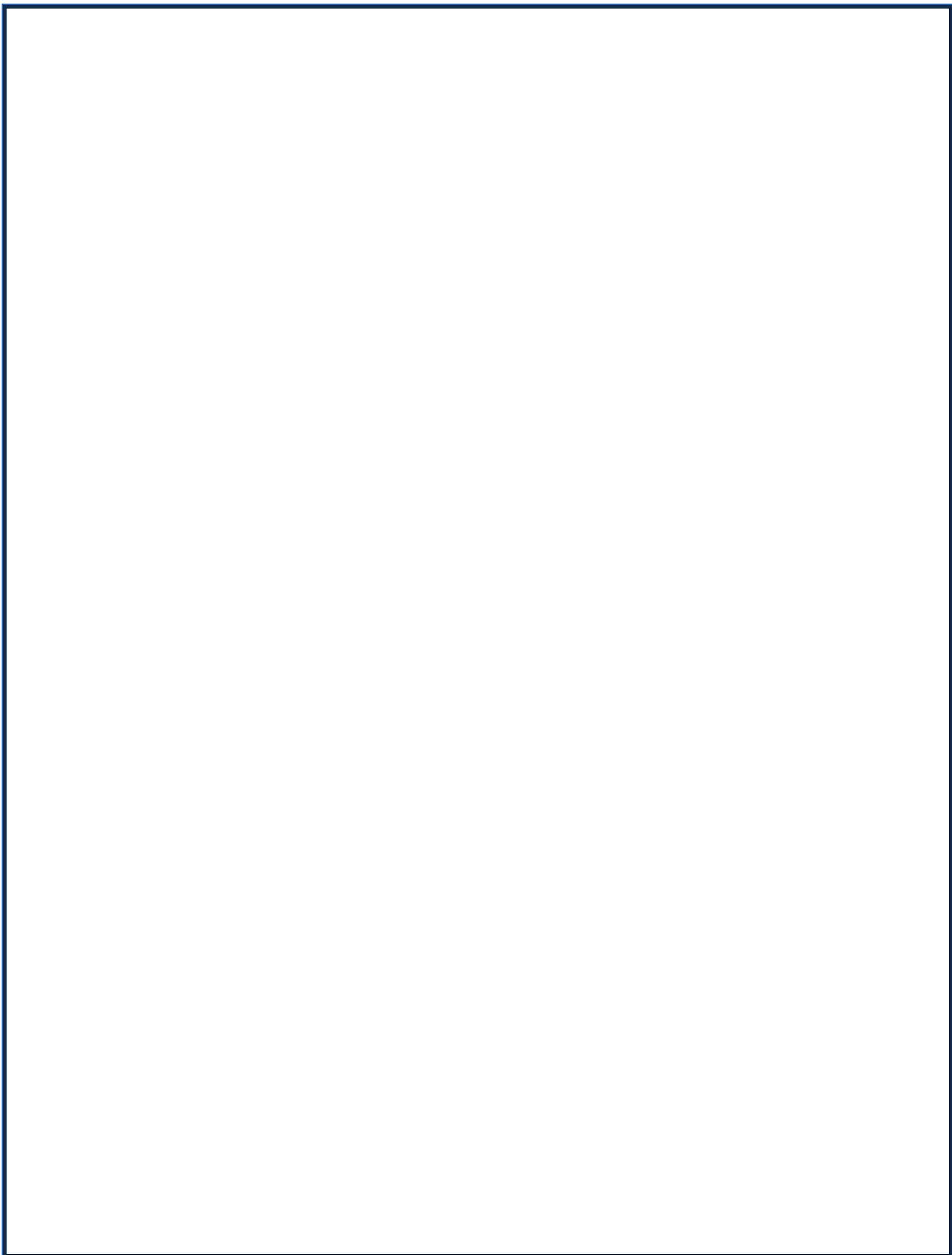


2013-14 ANNUAL REPORT  
ADVISORY SERVICE FOR EXECUTIVES  
(ASE)



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Advisory Service for Executives (ASE) is a confidential service available to all executives in the federal Public Service, across Canada and abroad. The Senior Advisor provides service via phone, Skype, e-mail, and in person. Over the reporting period April 1, 2013 to March 31, 2014, the Senior Advisor tracked the number of clients, the number of client interactions and the reasons clients turned to the Senior Advisor for support.

Two hundred and two (202) executives used the service in 2013-2014, a decrease of 33% from 2012-2013. These numbers are in line with those seen prior to 2012-2013, a year during which several executives were affected by deficit reduction initiatives.

The number of client interactions reached 302: 68% were one-time only visits; 25% of clients came 2 to 3 times; and the remaining 7% used the service 4 to 8 times during the fiscal year. The percentage of repeat visits increased from 44% to 50%. There continued to be a representative mix of departments, with executives from 56 organizations contacting the ASE, compared to 62 the previous year and 58 the year before.

The following are the top reasons, in order of frequency, that executives sought the support of the ASE in 2013-14: (1) terms and conditions of employment; (2) career management; (3) career transition; (4) health (including re-entry/duty to accommodate); (5) relationship with their superior; (6) harassment; (7) performance management; and (8) retirement. The top four issues were raised in 50% of cases and the bottom 4 in 25% of cases.

The following recommendations flow from the Senior Advisor's interactions with executives over the course of the fiscal year. It is recommended that:

1. *The National Standard on Psychological health and Safety in the Workplace be adopted by the public service as a whole or, in the absence of an enterprise-wide commitment, by departments and agencies.*
2. *The Treasury Board Secretariat develop a workplace civility and respect policy for implementation by all departments and agencies.*
3. *Departments and agencies better support their executives who become the subject of a harassment complaint, a grievance or an investigation.*
4. *The disability management initiative be implemented in a compassionate, fair and respectful manner, recognizing the difficulty of the situation for the employee.*

# INTRODUCTION

This is the tenth Annual Report of the APEX Advisory Service for Executives (ASE), a service that provides confidential advice and support to members of the executive community across the federal public service. The Report provides data on the number of clients served during fiscal year 2013-14 and summarizes the top issues raised by clients. It also highlights areas of concern, identifies trends and makes recommendations aimed at improving the well-being and productivity of executives.

The Senior Advisor for Executives is a Visiting Executive at APEX whose salary is paid by the Deputy Head community. The service provided by the Senior Advisor is seen by Deputy Heads as an important part of APEX's mandate. It provides a safe space for executives to discuss sensitive workplace issues and is available free of charge to both members and non-members of APEX. The Senior Advisor provides advice and guidance to clients and refers them, as appropriate, to trusted professionals and specialized services. The data collected by APEX and presented in this report provide a unique perspective on the collective needs and concerns of federal public service executives.

## ASE - Quick Facts

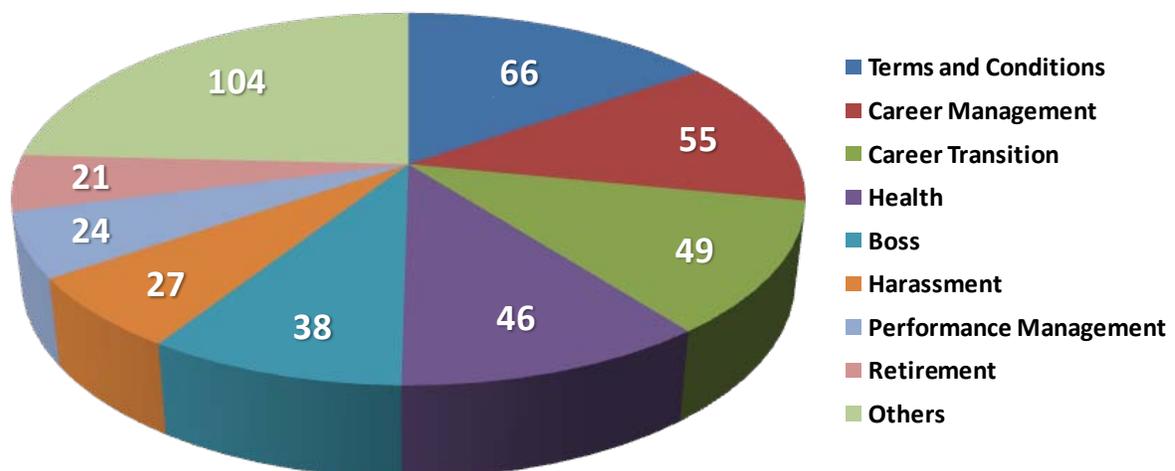
- Confidential service available free of charge to all federal executives, across Canada and abroad.
- Deputy Heads recognize the ASE as an important contributor to workplace well-being and provide financial support.
- Established in 2003 in response to needs expressed by executives for an objective and confidential ear to deal with difficult work-related situations.
- Single window for arm's-length advice and referral to a specialized resource network.
- Complementary to other services for executives such as the Public Service Commission (PSC) Executive Counselling Services.
- 2013-14 top issues: (1) terms and conditions of employment; (2) career management; (3) career transition; (4) health (including re-entry/duty to accommodate); (5) relationship with their superior; (6) harassment; (7) performance management; (8) retirement.
- ASE annual reports available at [www.apex.gc.ca/en/services/advisory-service/asereports](http://www.apex.gc.ca/en/services/advisory-service/asereports)

## CONTEXT

In June 2013, the Clerk of the Privy Council launched a dialogue on a vision for a world-class Public Service. This important initiative came on the heels of major deficit reduction initiatives aimed at constraining costs and increasing efficiency. A new performance management regime was also introduced a few months ago and there are plans to replace the existing sick leave system with a short term disability scheme in the near future. The executive community supports the objectives of Blueprint 2020 and understands the tight fiscal environment in which we currently operate. It is important to note, however, that the series of new measures introduced in the last three years continues to affect executives across the public service. Executives are still feeling the effects of these changes and finding it difficult to muster the energy required to build the public service envisaged in Blueprint 2020. More must be done to create healthy workplaces and to provide the support executives need to perform at their best.

In the last fiscal year, some changes were seen with respect to the nature and frequency of issues raised by clients of the ASE. There was a 66% decrease in the number of requests for advice on career transition and a 60% increase in the number of times performance management was raised as an issue. There was also a significant increase (53%) in the number of executives who question whether or not they want to continue working for their department or even for the federal public service.

### Reason for consulting the ASE 2013-2014



The drop in the number of requests for advice on career transition is not surprising. Because the impact of the deficit reduction action plan was felt chiefly in 2012-2013, an unusually high number of executives came to the ASE seeking career transition advice. The past fiscal year marks a return to more usual levels (approximately 50 per year).

Requests for advice pertaining to performance management centered on executives' own performance. Clients reported that the results of their evaluation came as a surprise and that they did not have the opportunity to develop a plan, in consultation with their supervisor, to address areas requiring improvement. Most of them were simply told that they did not meet the requirements of their position and advised to look for work elsewhere.

As mentioned earlier, an increasing number of executives are considering seeking employment outside their department or the federal public service. The number of requests for advice on career management jumped from 5<sup>th</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> place. The reasons given by clients include: the ever increasing demands of their position; tension in their working relationships, especially with their supervisor; lack of support, especially when facing grievances and complaints; and health concerns. These appear to be areas of concern particularly for executives joining the public service in mid-career.

There is also a perception among executives that their terms and conditions of employment have eroded over time and become less advantageous than those of their non-executive colleagues. This perception of inequity and lack of support are having a negative impact on the morale of the executive cadre.

## CONFIDENTIALITY AND DATA COLLECTION

Confidentiality is a key principle of the ASE and is crucial to the success of this service.<sup>1</sup> In order to ensure confidentiality, names of clients and case notes are destroyed at the end of each fiscal year (or at any time upon the client's request). Key demographic data, such as gender, language and classification level are collected, kept in a secure database and used solely to prepare the annual report.

Every time the Senior Advisor meets with a client, he notes the reason for the appointment and the nature of services provided. Because clients often give more than one reason for seeking the assistance of the Senior Advisor, the support provided may cover more than one topic and take different forms. For example, helping a client deal with a difficult situation may require advice on career management, conflict resolution and/or referral to a legal counsel.

Since its inception in 2003, the ASE has used this data collection method to identify and assess clients' needs. This approach enables APEX to provide the appropriate support at the individual level and identify trends that can assist in developing policy recommendations. Annual reports are posted on the APEX website and sent to the Clerk of the Privy Council and all Deputy Heads.

The information is also used by APEX to establish priorities and develop measures to better support executives. For example, the Senior Advisor has designed a unique learning program entitled *Effective Leadership through Self-Awareness*. This program is based on the premise that self-aware executives develop ways of leveraging their strengths and mitigating their weaknesses. As a result, their credibility increases, they develop stronger relationships, they become more effective decision-makers and they are more open to differences and new ideas. The first group of executives is scheduled to begin this six module program in September 2014.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Confidentiality and the ASE - What You Can Expect at*  
<http://www.apex.gc.ca/en/services/advisory-service/aseconfidentiality>

## CLIENT SATISFACTION AND QUALITY CONTROL

The Senior Advisor receives feedback from clients throughout the year. Executives have said on countless occasions that they appreciate having access to a “safe space” where they can obtain objective and confidential service.

When asked how they found out about the ASE, clients say they learned about the service from a colleague or human resources specialist, from the APEX website or through APEX outreach activities. Some clients say they were already familiar with the service because they are members of APEX.

### Sample of feedback received from SAE clients

- I just wanted to let you know that things are looking and feeling much better these days. Thanks for the role you played in helping me improve my situation.
- I just wanted to thank you for taking the time to meet with me yesterday. I really appreciated it and it was very helpful to discuss options with you and to get your perspective on my situation.
- Merci de l'écoute, avis, et des renseignements. Je suis confiant que l'expérience fera de moi (une fois vécue) une meilleure personne et gestionnaire.
- Thank you for your insightful and well rounded advice yesterday. It was a pleasure meeting you, and will keep in touch as I move forward with the strategies.

## CONSULTATION AND OUTREACH

Communicating the concerns of executives to the relevant central agencies continues to be a priority for the ASE and is done with a view to meeting the needs of the executive community.

The Senior Advisor has regular exchanges with senior officials from the Office of the Chief Human Resources Office (OCHRO) and the Public Service Commission's Executive Counselling Services to discuss the impact that various policies and directives are having on executives. The Senior Advisor also draws on the expertise of the Executive Management Policy and Executive Workforce Management groups at OCHRO and the Priority Administration group at the Public Service Commission. These groups' quick response to questions, availability and support is greatly appreciated. Working in partnership with central agencies helps everyone better serve executives.

Other outreach activities include the promotion of the ASE at APEX events such as the annual Executive Induction Ceremony and Symposium, professional development sessions, meetings of departmental representatives and events hosted by departments. Information about the service is also posted on the APEX website.

## PROFILE OF CLIENTS SERVED

The executives who used the service were representative of the executive community, except with respect to levels and gender.

Sixty-six percent (66%) of executives seeking advisory services were EX-01s compared to a representation of 52% across the federal public service. Twenty-one percent (21%) were EX-02s (compared to 25% across PS) and thirteen percent (13%) EX-03 to 05 (compared to 23% across PS).

As was the case in previous years, more female clients (58%) used the service than male clients (42%). This represents 13% higher representation for female clients than in the public service (compared to 16% in 2012-2013) and 13% lower representation for males (also 3% less than in 2012-2013).

Our clients' language preference is similar to the overall representation in the Public Service with 69% in English vs 31% in French.

Similar to last year, 27% of clients who used the service during the reporting period were from a region other than NCR or were from outside Canada, compared to a representation of 25% across the Public Service. The recent efforts by the CEO to reach out to the regions have no doubt had an impact on this new distribution.

## CLIENT ISSUES AND OBSERVATIONS

As noted earlier clients can, and often, do raise more than one issue in meetings with the Senior Advisor.

Compared to 2012-2013, the Senior Advisor saw a number of changes in the frequency of the top eight issues raised by clients. The profile of issues raised this fiscal year is more like that of years prior to 2012-2013.

2013-2014	2012-13	2011-12
1. Terms and Conditions	1. Terms and Conditions	1. Career Management
2. Career Management	2. Career Transition	2. Terms and Conditions
3. Career Transition	3. Relationship with a Superior	3. Dismissals (including career transition)
4. Health (including re-entry/duty to accommodate)	4. Health (including re-entry/duty to accommodate)	4. Reorganizations
5. Relationship with a Superior	5. Career Management	5. Relationship with a Superior
6. Harassment	6. Investigations	6. Performance Management
7. Performance Management	7. Harassment	7. Health (including re-entry/duty to accommodate)
8. Retirement	8. Staffing	8. Investigations

- 1. EXECUTIVE TERMS AND CONDITIONS.** Terms and conditions of employment continue to be the top issue of concern to executives. Clients have requested meetings with the Senior Advisor to seek information on their rights and entitlements under the *Directive on Career Transition for Executives*, the PSC Priority Administration Program, and other policies, including those related to performance management, compensation, leave and retirement.
- 2. CAREER MANAGEMENT** has become the fastest growing area of demand. This broad category encompasses topics such as advice on resume writing and job search strategies. It is important to point out that the vast majority of clients seeking career management advice also require support with issues such as performance management, conflict with a superior and health-related problems.

After providing some advice and guidance to clients looking for other positions, the Senior Advisor usually refers clients to the PSC Executive Counselling Services or specialized firms.

- 3. CAREER TRANSITION** deals with executives who are directly impacted by departmental deficit reduction action plans or reorganization initiatives. It includes executives who received surplus letters and those who have been informed, verbally or in writing of their affected status. Approximately 50 executives made appointments with the Senior Advisor to obtain independent information on their entitlements under the *Career Transition Directive for Executives*. This is a significant decrease from 2012-2013, when 150 ASE clients were informed that their services were no longer required as a result of a work force adjustment situation.

Although many of the issues raised in last year's annual report appear to have been addressed, a large number of executives still feel alone and unsupported. Several clients also feel that represented employees who are affected by budget cuts receive better treatment than executives in the same situation, particularly when it comes to lump sum payments and the length of surplus periods.

- 4. HEALTH** continues to be a source of concern for many executives. Health is identified by the Senior Advisor as the reason behind a meeting request only when the client clearly articulates that their mental and/or physical health is a source of concern to them. In many situations, the executive is under the care of a physician or on sick leave for workplace health-related matters such as increased work demands, reduced resources and/or an unhealthy work environment. These pressures reduce executives' ability to achieve some level of work life balance with serious consequences. According to the 2012 APEX Executive Work and Health Survey, one in four executives is at severe risk of burnout and the number of executives who have been medically diagnosed with – and are being treated for -- anxiety or depression has nearly doubled since the last survey was conducted in 2007.

The recent focus on disability management has translated into what appears to be increased emphasis on “regularizing” the situation of executives who are on disability status rather creating the conditions for their successful reintegration into the workplace.

Executives on disability status who turn to the Senior Advisor for help report that they receive little or no support from their organization. They express disappointment and hurt over the impersonal manner in which they are treated after having given the best of themselves to the public service for many years.

We can expect more instances of this nature to arise in the months ahead, now that the management of disability and sick leave has been identified as a priority by the government.

- 5. RELATIONSHIP WITH SUPERIOR.** The number of clients who complain of problems with their supervisor continues to increase and now constitutes nearly 9% of the total client population. Executives report that they are being harassed, humiliated in front of others, isolated and disrespected by their supervisor. They express disappointment and frustration over the “system’s” unwillingness to deal with these senior executives, especially given how well known their behavior appears to be. Clients say that there is no person or service they can turn to, within their organization, when faced with abusive behaviour from a more senior executive.

Clients express frustration over their inability to develop a better working relationship with their supervisor. They say they have tried to deal with the situation in a variety of ways but to no avail. As a result, the situation is having a negative impact on their health. Some are under the care of a doctor or on sick leave. In the past, executives could more easily move to another position. In the current environment, however, this is less of an option.

We know from the 2012 APEX Executive Work and Health Survey that these are not isolated incidents. In 2012, 22% of executives reported being verbally harassed and 10% claimed that their workplace was disrespectful. The survey also showed that direct supervisors are the principal source of verbal harassment and uncivil behaviours. Harassment and lack of civility are measures of the type of workplace interactions that are having an increasingly harmful effect on individual and organizational health outcomes.

- 6. HARASSMENT** includes both situations where the executive is being harassed by a superior, as described under the previous issue, and cases where he/she is the subject of a harassment complaint.

Clients report that harassment complaints are the result of executives attempting to manage an employee's performance. Executives who are the subject of a harassment complaint feel that they receive little or no support from senior management. The Senior Advisor can provide some assistance during the investigation process but not to the degree needed. This puts executives at a significant disadvantage since they do not have the same support system and access to representation as unionized employees. Moreover, executives report feeling that the principles of natural justice and procedural fairness – particularly the right to be heard by an impartial decision-maker – do not apply to them. They question the quality and objectivity of investigations and report that some processes have taken years to conclude. This has led some executives to retain legal counsel at their own expense.

If the new performance management regime is to be successful, executives must be supported in their attempts to manage performance-related issues. This includes the provision of assistance to deal with harassment complaints filed by disgruntled employees.

- 7. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT** refers mainly to requests for advice related to the way in which executives' own performance is managed by their supervisor. With an increase of 60% over last year, performance management is back on the list of top eight issues of concern to executives.

Generally, the issues raised in this area pertain to the lack of ongoing communication between executives and their supervisors and the lack of support from senior management. When executives have very little interaction with their supervisor over the course of the year, negative comments made by the supervisor in the context of a performance evaluation at the end of the fiscal year can come as a surprise. The situation is made worse when the supervisor advises the executive to look for another job rather than working with him/her to develop an action plan to address problem areas.

- 8. RETIREMENT** is the other issue that is back on the list of top eight reasons executives ask to meet with the Senior Advisor. Although this may not come as a surprise given the aging of the executive population, it is important to note that in one third of cases, retirement was being considered as a way of dealing with difficult situations such as conflict with a supervisor, performance and health concerns.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In his *Twenty-First Annual Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service of Canada*, the Clerk said: “Ensuring that we have a strong and high-performing Public Service means that we must continue to create the conditions that enable employees to perform at their peak.” Both the Clerk’s report and the *Seventh Report of the Prime Minister’s Advisory Committee on the Public Service* stressed the importance of employee engagement.

Creating the conditions that foster engagement and that enable employees to perform at their peak is at the heart of the recommendations outlined below. The Senior Advisor’s experience and the analysis presented in this report point to the need for a concerted effort to address workplace issues at a systemic level and to provide the necessary support at the individual level.

It is important to recognize that many issues raised by clients of the ASE are similar to those identified in the *2012 APEX EX Work and Health Survey*. The APEX survey revealed that executive distress levels and mental health conditions are rising while levels of commitment and engagement are falling. In 2012, 25% of executives reported symptoms of severe burnout and more than half said they were thinking monthly or more frequently about leaving their current position.

Survey findings also identified factors in the social and interpersonal work environment that are leading to deteriorating organizational health. Over 20% of executives reported being verbally harassed and 10% said their workplace is disrespectful. Direct supervisors were the main source of both harassment and uncivil behaviours. Harassment and lack of civility are measures of the type of workplace interactions that are having an increasingly harmful effect on both individual and organizational health outcomes. Consequently, the recommendations below are aimed at addressing health-related issues both from a systemic and individual perspective.

It is recommended that :

- 1. THE NATIONAL STANDARD ON PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AND SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE BE ADOPTED BY THE PUBLIC SERVICE AS A WHOLE OR, IN THE ABSENCE OF AN ENTERPRISE-WIDE COMMITMENT, BY DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES.***

The National Standard on Psychological health and Safety in the Workplace provides a systematic approach to developing and sustaining healthy workplaces. In 2013-2014, the 26 largest departments and agencies received reports outlining the results of the *2012 APEX EX Work and Health Survey* for executives in their own organization. These reports provide the foundation for departments and agencies to foster the growth of a culture and implement practices that promote psychological health and safety in the workplace, not only for executives but for all employees.

- 2. THE TREASURY BOARD SECRETARIAT DEVELOP A WORKPLACE CIVILITY AND RESPECT POLICY FOR IMPLEMENTATION BY ALL DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES.***

Such a policy would underscore the Treasury Board Secretariat's commitment to creating a culture of respect and civility across the federal public service. This policy would be accompanied by a guide that includes practices to promote civility in the workplace and processes to deal with incivility. The new policy and guide would complement the existing *Policy on Harassment Prevention and Resolution*.

Some organizations in Canada and elsewhere have adopted civility and respect policies not only as a way of reducing incivility and harassment in the workplace but as a means of strengthening the recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff. It is expected that a new workplace civility and respect policy for the federal public service would lead to a reduction in the level of interpersonal conflict, particularly between executives and their supervisors, and result in higher levels of commitment and engagement.

Departments and agencies should also take full advantage of their Informal Conflict Management Systems (ICMS) and provide conflict coaching to executives at all levels to help them improve their ability to resolve conflicts. Organizations

would also benefit from adopting concrete measures aimed at fostering a greater sense of belonging and collegiality among their executives.

**3. DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES BETTER SUPPORT THEIR EXECUTIVES WHO BECOME THE SUBJECT OF A HARASSMENT COMPLAINT, A GRIEVANCE OR AN INVESTIGATION.**

The 2012 APEX EX Work and Health Survey reveals that social support scores are at an all-time low. Support from supervisors has fallen from a high of 3.6 out of 4 in 1997 to 2.8 in 2012. Social support has been shown to be one of the most important buffers against adversity and stress. The absence of support from one's supervisor is a significant risk factor for illness and absenteeism. The APEX Survey also shows that fairness, including equitable treatment, is a key protective factor. Unfairness can have a negative impact on commitment and engagement and lead to burn-out.

Both these factors are at play when executives become the subject of a harassment complaint, a grievance or an administrative investigation. As mentioned earlier, clients of the ASE who found themselves in these types of situation felt abandoned by their superiors. They also complained that they did not have access to the same resources as managers and that they had not been afforded the same rights as the complainant in the case. This perceived bias and lack of support had serious negative repercussions on their morale, their ability to get their work done and their health.

It is critical that departments and agencies deal with executives facing harassment complaints, grievances and investigations in a fair and transparent manner, provide them with complete and objective information about the process for handling the situation, and continue to work with them in a collegial and respectful way. Consideration should also be given to creating support groups so executives in these situations receive the emotional and practical support they need. APEX may be ideally positioned to play a helpful role in this regard.

**4. THE DISABILITY MANAGEMENT INITIATIVE BE IMPLEMENTED IN A COMPASSIONATE, FAIR AND RESPECTFUL MANNER. , RECOGNIZING THE DIFFICULTY OF THE SITUATION FOR THE EMPLOYEE.**

The new disability management regime places greater emphasis on prevention, return to work and workplace accommodation with a view to reducing the incidence and duration of medical leave and disability claims and promoting employee health and wellness. Unfortunately, the experience of executives accessing the ASE suggests that disability management efforts may be more about “regularizing” employees on long term disability and “cleaning the books.” Clients reported that they had to undertake a series of administrative measures and in some cases, obtain a second assessment even after having provided a detailed report from a renowned expert. Other clients mentioned that they were not provided, after their return to work, with the accommodations they required or were entitled to under the *Canadian Human Rights Act*.

It is important to remember, as new policies and tools are being developed by the Treasury Board Secretariat to assist departments in proactively managing disability, that at the centre of each “case” or “file” is an employee with real health-related problems. Employees who are ill must be treated with respect and compassion and not as cases needing to be resolved. It is incumbent on departments and agencies to provide the support required by employees on disability and the accommodations required for them to successfully reintegrate into the workplace.

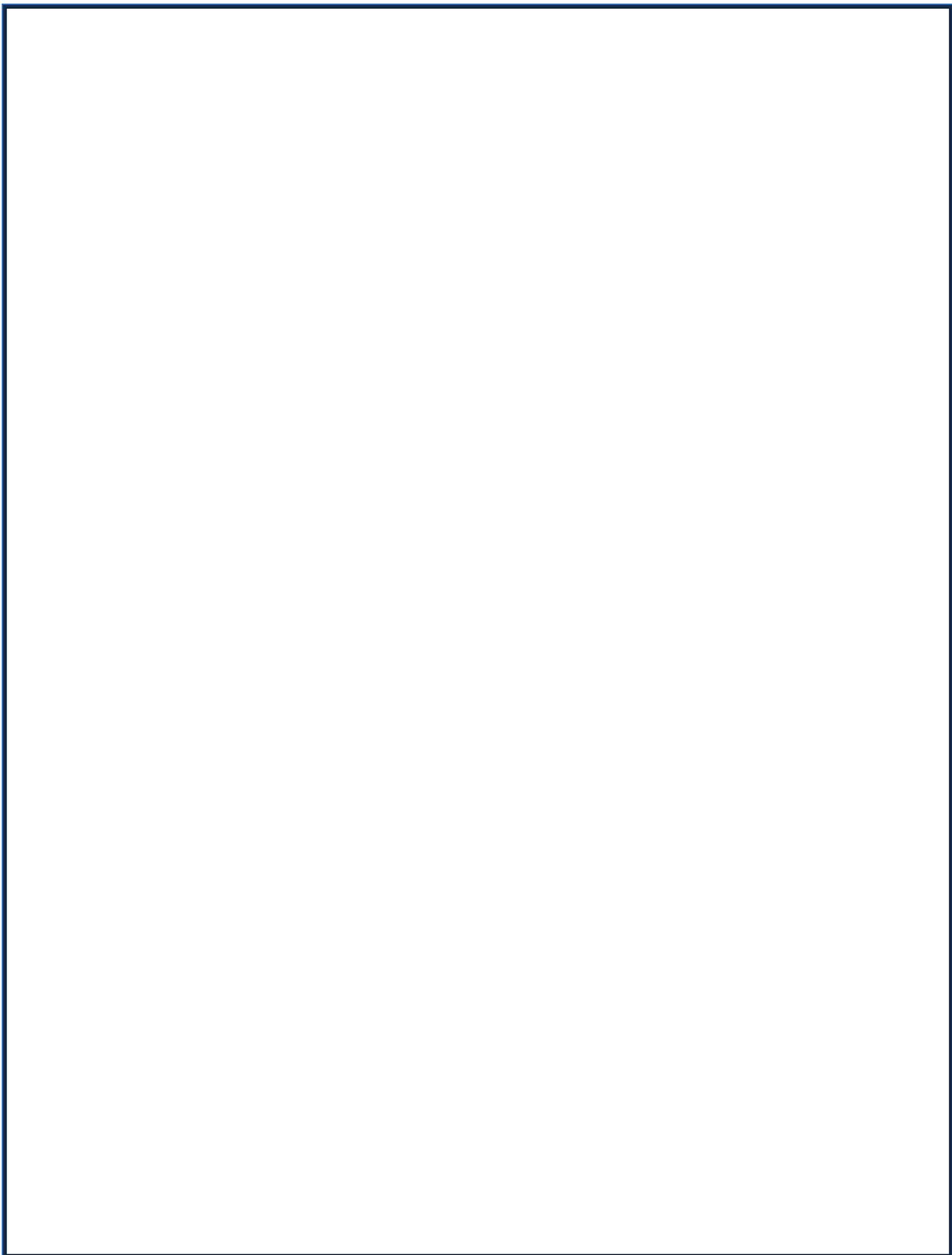
*Please note that this recommendation was made in last year’s report. However based on the clients met over the last fiscal year, no noticeable changes have been implemented.*

## CONCLUSION

The ASE would like to thank Deputy Heads, on behalf of the executive community, for providing the financial support needed by APEX to offer this service. This support is a testimony to the importance Deputy Heads attach to the service. The ASE is seen as a safe place where executives can obtain objective advice and support to help them deal with difficult issues.

During the past year, the Senior Advisor has been assisted by colleagues at the Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer and the Public Service Commission. Their support has helped ensure that executives are provided with the best service possible. We wish to thank them for this valuable partnership and look forward to continuing to work together in the years ahead.

In *Blueprint 2020*, both the Prime Minister and the Clerk referenced the need for change. The Prime Minister noted, in the opening message, that “an agile, efficient and effective Public Service is essential to the well-being of Canadians.” In his own message, the Clerk mentioned that “we're working in an increasingly global and connected world, and the way we do business has to keep pace with ongoing change to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.” The objective is clear and so is the context in which we will be working over the next few years. As change agents, executives have a critical role to play in leading this change. This requires that we pay attention to their needs and provide them with adequate support. APEX will continue to promote a quality Public Service by strengthening leadership excellence, promoting the health and well-being of executives and their working environments, and supporting executives in their quest for high performance, productivity and professional growth.





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