

H4 Consulting Brief

Deep Policy

We create public value by investing public funds in public works, aligned with the written and unwritten laws, rules, and principles that define public policy. Political work sets priorities and allocates resources. Delivery work provides or commissions public goods and services. Policy work informs decisions and directs delivery. These types of work draw on different pools of skills, but some of the wells of deep public policy expertise are drying out.

Reduced internal policy expertise within publicly funded organisations is a long-term trend in the market for policy ideas. As the market grows more contested, the arguments for in-house policy expertise have seemed weaker. In-house experts and collaboration between them can be expensive and difficult, often without an immediate payoff. Policy decision makers also value the opportunity to hear more diverse views.

There are trade-offs between seeking new insights from focused work by experts, and insights gained from the collision and cross-pollination of ideas across domains. As specialists working in silos have become less dominant, the emphasis on consultation to combine a wider range of perspectives in search of new and better ideas has increased, and the emphasis on deep policy expertise has decreased.

Wide consultation is necessary but not sufficient for good policy. Over-reliance on consultation can lead to shallow understandings that are excessively influenced by a narrow sample of views.

Capacity for deep policy work that used to be concentrated in publicly funded organisations is now spread across many policy communities in academia, think tanks, lobbyists, and consulting. Policy communities take time to build, but capacity built up over decades, or even centuries, shrinks quickly.

Outsourcing policy depth also has risks, such as reduced timeliness or relevance, partisan sources displacing impartial sources, and reduced access to real world data and the practitioners who will ultimately implement policy innovations.



Even in an open market for policy ideas, publicly funded organisations still have an important role in policy work. To do this well, publicly funded organisations need to maintain sufficient depth of expertise, the critical mass for a healthy policy community, and collaborative practices to participate effectively in wider policy and practice networks.

This means recognising the value of time and other resources allocated for building and maintaining expertise, and for information sharing and networking within silos, across silos, and across sectors. It also means new functions and roles for facilitators and content translators who can help different types of experts to understand each other and work together.

Public policy problems that do not have simple answers are often called 'wicked problems'. They usually are not just one problem, but the influences of complex factors across contexts, domains, and administrative silos. Experts in silos have not yet solved wicked problems. Neither have generalists aggregating diverse opinions.

Publicly funded organisations with the internal capacity for deep policy work can both influence and participate in an open market for policy ideas. They also increase the benefits and reduce the risks of seeking external advice. We need to invest in the skills to participate meaningfully in broader networks of ideas, and not poison the deep wells of policy expertise that remain.

To find out more about how you can use this approach in your organisation, contact us: info@h4consulting.com.au
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