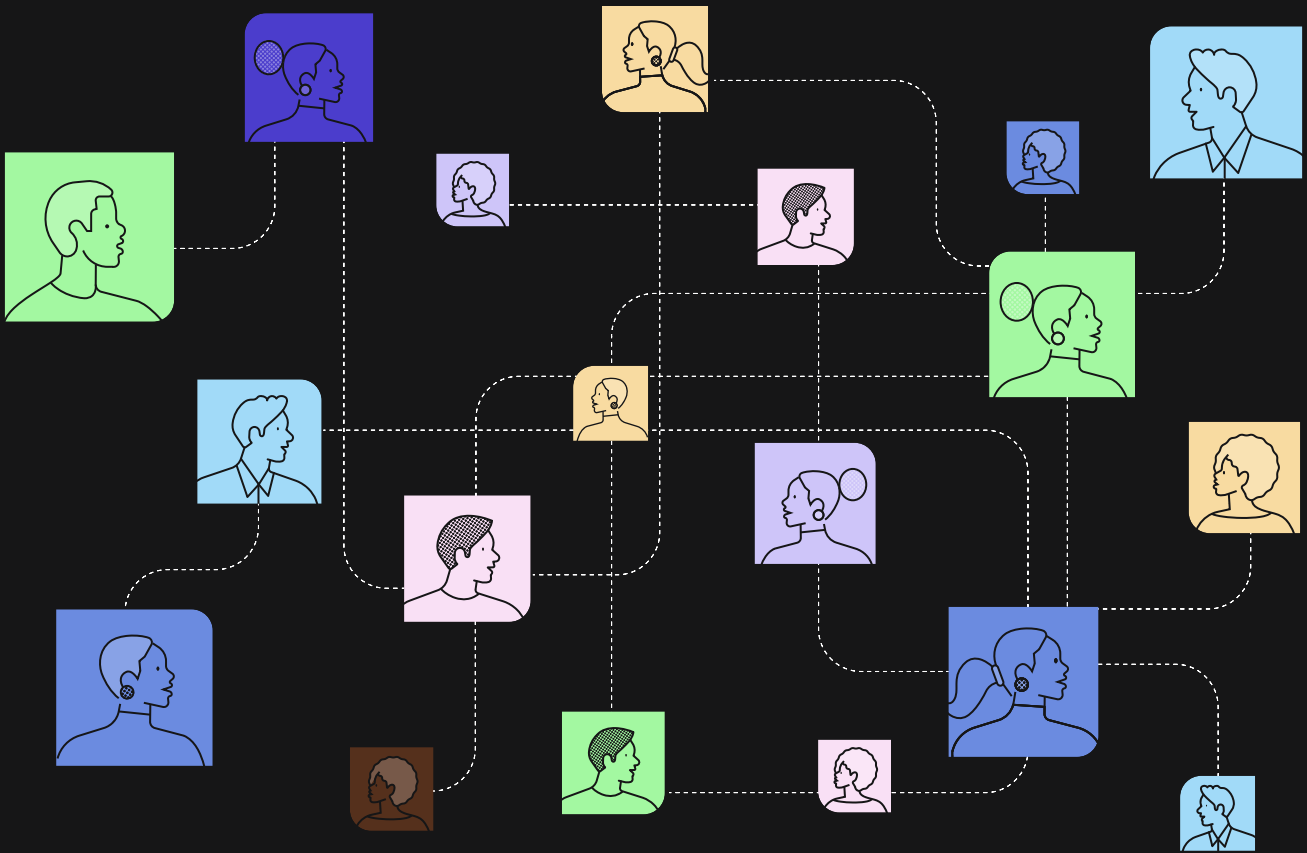


What's top of mind for public servants in 2026



Insights from Apolitical's global network of

500,000+

public servants

What's top of mind for public servants - at a glance

01. Career Development

Public servants are eager for training and guidance to sharpen their skills.

02. Artificial Intelligence

The force reshaping every conversation and rewriting expectations for government.

03. Efficiency

What would it *really* take for government to work better?

04. Systems Thinking

The skill public servants are turning to as complexity challenges old ways of working.

05. Climate

Still the hardest challenge in government.

Listening to what our network told us

Apolitical's mission is to make government smarter for people and the planet. That starts with listening to our network of more than half a million public servants. Our "What's Top of Mind for Public Servants" report reflects what we heard in 2026.

Over the past twelve months, we spoke with public servants across 170 countries. We ran 250 qualitative interviews, 150 polls, nearly 400 surveys, and tracked 95,000 event sign-ups and 62,000 course enrolments. We listened to what public servants were articulating, asking, worrying about, and reaching for.



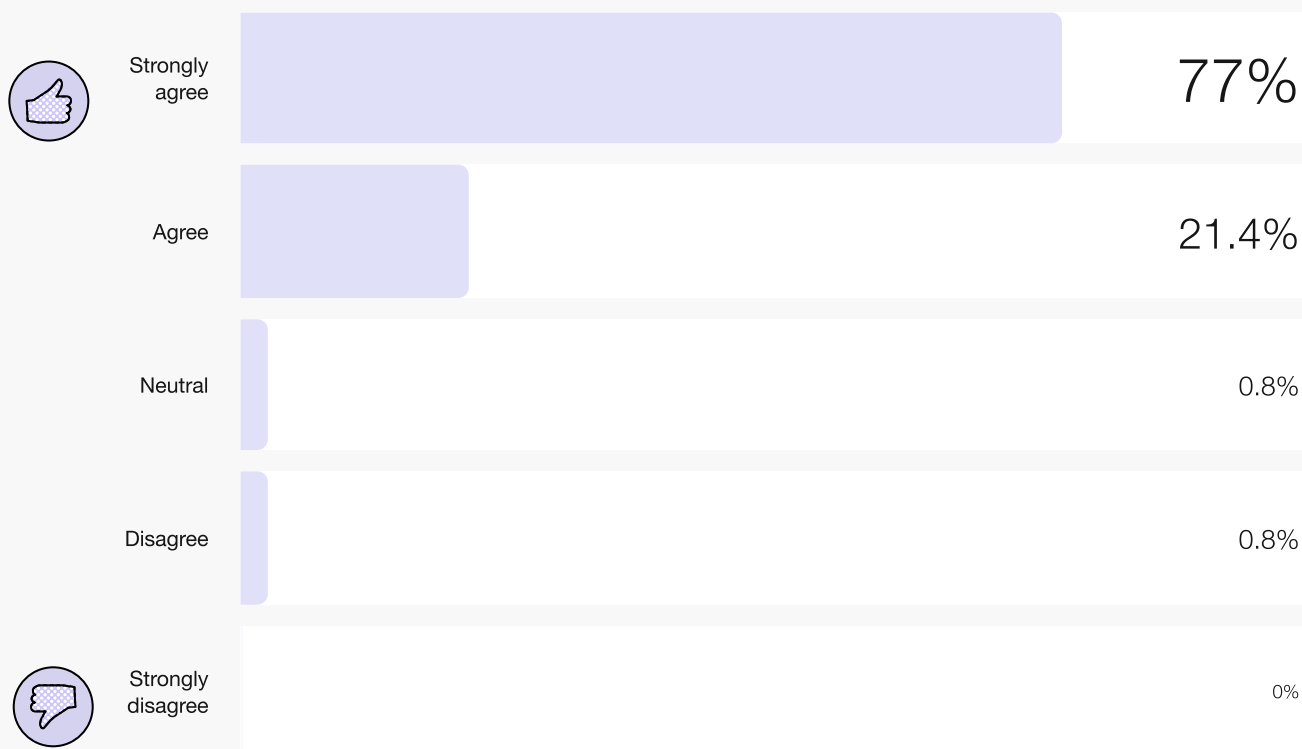
The five clear themes structuring this report are what emerged.

A birds' eye view shows the pressures facing public servants in 2026 are personal, organisational and planetary. They're also connected. We heard public servants wondering whether their skills will be enough, about government teams trying to do more with less, about institutions that can see the problem but can't shift the system, and about a rapidly warming planet.

77% of the public servants we surveyed strongly agree that government is experiencing a lot of change right now.

How would you rate your agreement with the statement: "Government is experiencing a lot of change at the moment"?

n = 126



Change has become the daily condition of work for our network. This report uses that reality as its starting point and explores each pressure through data and the voices of public servants themselves, and asks what it would actually take to respond.

The five themes that follow move from the intensely personal to the truly global in scale. This year's report starts with the individual public servant — their career, their confidence, their ambition — and zooms out, through the tools reshaping work, the organisational challenges and the thinking required to navigate complexity, to climate, the

hardest challenge of all: the one that connects every level of government to every corner of the world.

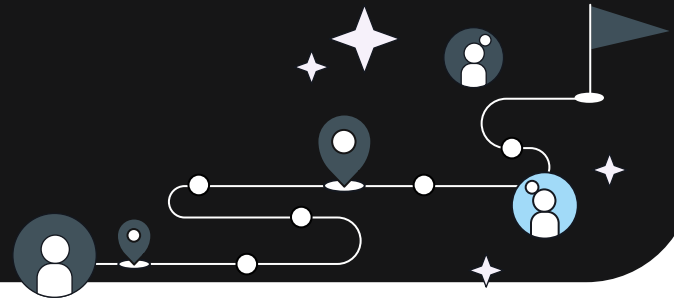
This is what's top of mind for public servants in 2026. At the end of this report, you will find a carefully curated table of free resources and references from Apolitical, to support you on your journey in government.

To ensure public servants can speak candidly, quotes in this report have been anonymised unless they were shared in the public domain.

Career Development

01.

Public servants are eager for training and guidance to sharpen their skills



The last 12 months have been shaped by accelerating change, from technology to geopolitics. Against this backdrop, members of the Apolitical network say it's learning that gives them a sense of purpose. Skills one didn't know existed can become core to delivery seemingly overnight, and as the volume of information and demand for actionable insights grows, so too does the demand for analytical skills and sound judgment. Public servants describe the key to learning as no longer carving out time for it, but making it a constant part of their daily routine - 'learning in the flow of work.'

Skilled and capable public servants are also a necessity for building connected, capable and efficient governments. Capability underpins every theme that follows in this report: public servants need to be confident in harnessing AI to work more efficiently, in thinking about systems and efficiencies, and in understanding how to drive real impact on climate.

The growing pressure for more capable civil servants applies to all career stages and all levels of government. Many worry that entry-level roles will disappear as AI and automation replace repetitive tasks and shrink traditional career pathways. Those further along in their career journey fear fewer available positions or stalled progression.

"Not only are you not having your entry-level folks doing [tasks that can be easily automated], we're hiring fewer entry-level folks and interns because we don't need people to absorb that layer of front work."



Vice President of Learning
Public sector supplier
United States

Leaders are trying to navigate today's novel challenges without a playbook, while also preparing the next generation for a landscape that will be more complex still.

"We need more strategy, better skill mapping, stronger behavioural intelligence, and sharper business IQ."



Public Servant
HM Treasury
United Kingdom

This pressure on teams, and their growing workloads, has made training and learning feel less optional and more urgent.

That includes knowing how to use AI well: which tasks to delegate to AI and which parts of a workflow require human judgment.

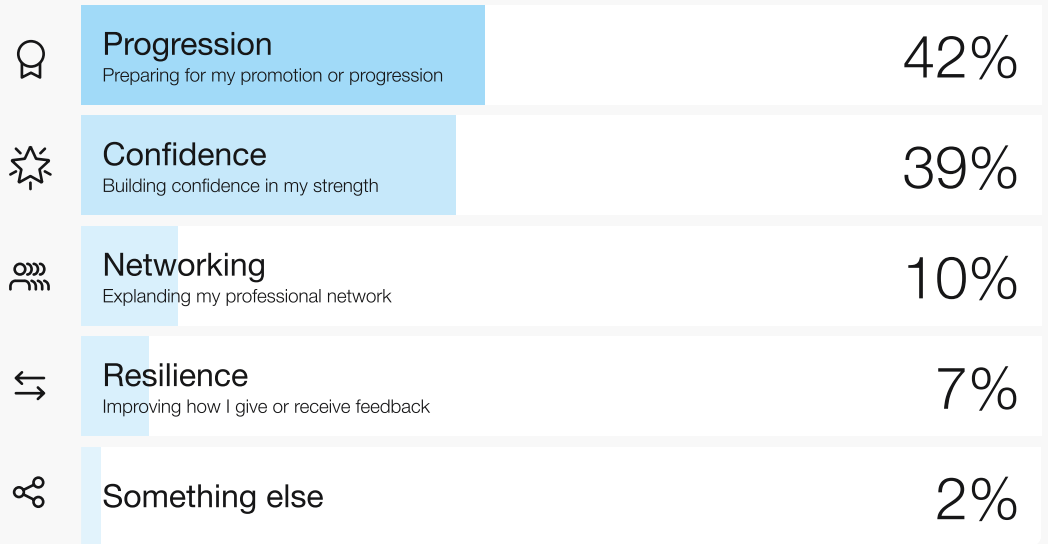
It also means finding dedicated spaces where leaders can share hard-won experience and work through problems together with other leaders. And it means building the habits and networks that keep people learning long after any formal training ends.

The data backs this up. In a recent snap poll, the most common career development priorities for public servants were progression and building confidence, a sign that even in an uncertain environment, ambition isn't going anywhere.

What's your biggest priority for career development right now?

(n = 165)

165
VOTES



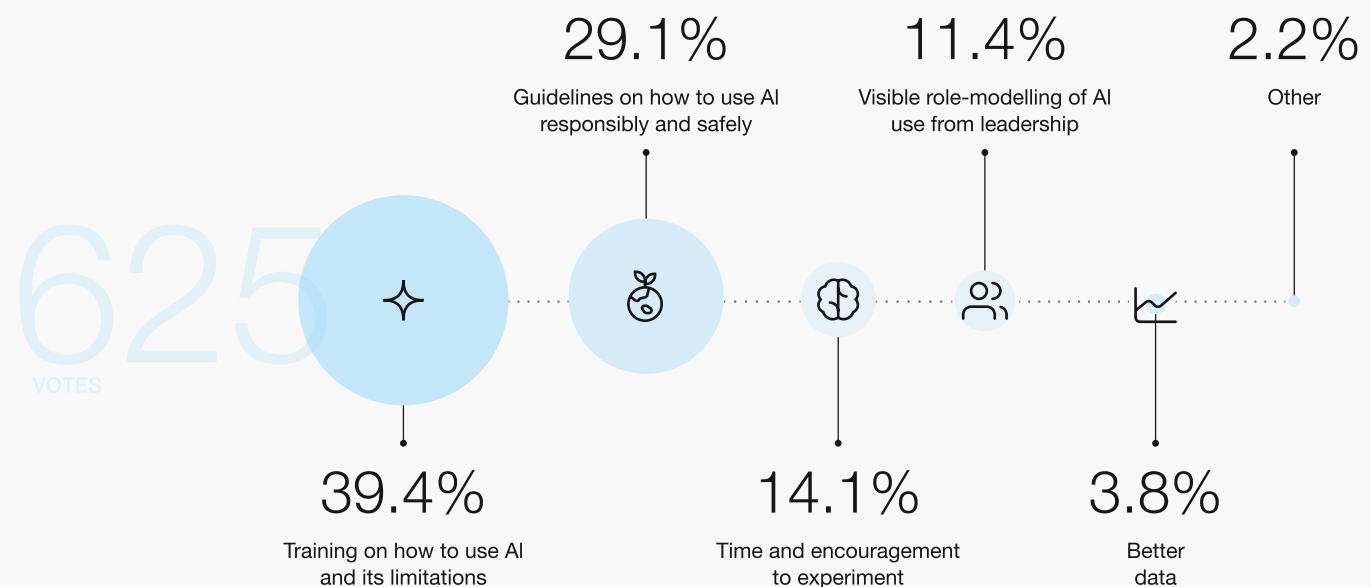
Polls run across the last 12 months offer a closer look at what's top of mind for public servants. By regularly taking the pulse of the Apolitical community through a mix of methods and questions, a larger story emerges, one that only surfaces when people are given the space to speak honestly about the challenges they face.

Public servants are calling for training and guidance on new technologies

In the rush to embrace AI, governments sometimes appear to have skipped a stage: the investment in training and skills that might have made it possible for public servants to keep pace. The cost of that training gap is already visible. In a poll of 625 public servants, nearly 40% said training on AI and its limitations was their top ask, while almost a third called for clearer guidelines on responsible and safe use. Apolitical's qualitative interviews with public servants offer an additional insight: people feel like they're already expected to be good at this new technology, without ever having been given the space or support to figure out how.

What do you need from your department lead to help you feel more comfortable, confident and informed using AI in your ways of working?

(n = 625)

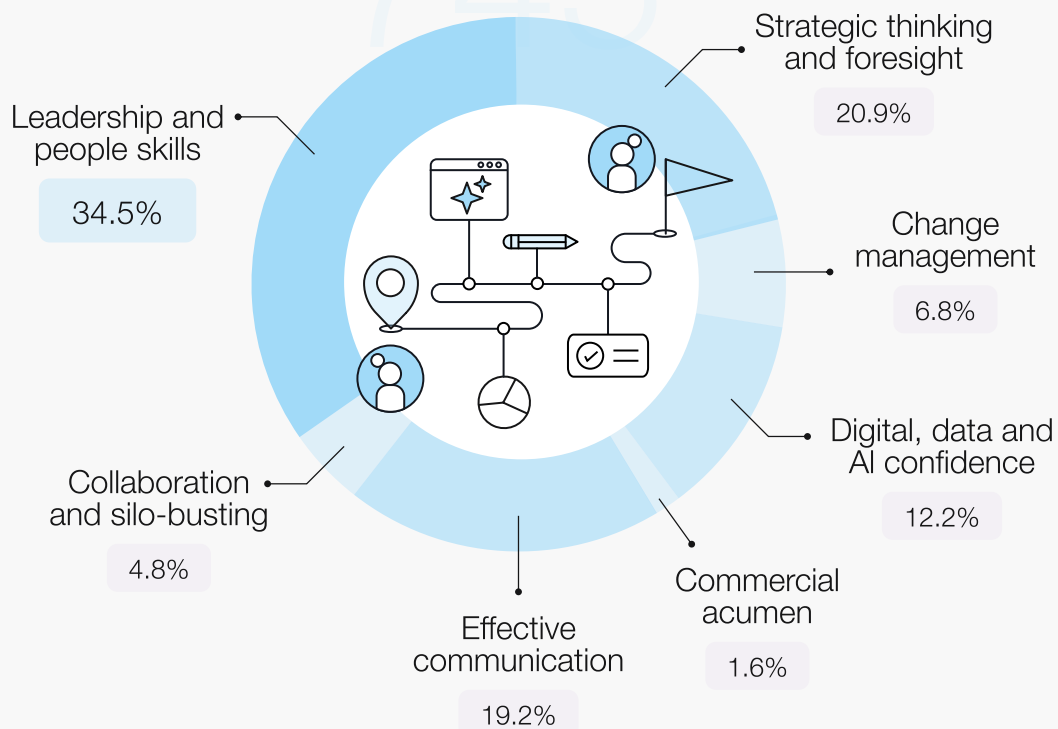


'Power skills' remain the bedrock of an effective public sector

As the world places increasing emphasis on AI and digital skills, there's a risk we overlook the ones AI can't easily replicate. Problem-solving, creativity and effective interpersonal communication are seen as difficult for AI to replace. Those who hone and sharpen both their technical and human skills will be better positioned for progression in their jobs. In fact, for public servants looking to advance their careers, the skills in most demand on a daily basis aren't always digital or data-related: they're leadership, strategic thinking and effective communication, the so-called 'power skills'.

Which skill do you think is most critical for career progression in today's public service?

(n = 745)



It's not a case of choosing these skills over technical skills. The modern public servant understands that technical literacy and power skills aren't in competition with each other. But this only works if systems and managers actively reward the development of both. Too often, public servants told us, they don't.

As Taki Sarantakis, the President of the Canada School of Public Service put it, leadership comprehension of skills-building is sometimes a blocker:

"My manager won't let me go. My Director won't let me go. Or even worse [they ask]... Why do you want to take training on subject X? That has nothing to do with your job."



Taki Sarantakis
President, Canada School of Public Service, Canada

7 *“The same thing happens every time you see a big general-purpose technology being introduced. In my research, I've studied a number of these, and you see the same pattern replaying itself, often over years or even decades, before you get the full benefit. With computerisation in the 1990s, initially, there wasn't a big gain either. And what we found was that literally 90% of the investment was not in just hardware or software. It was in complementary skills, new skills for the workforce, and complementary business processes, reinventing the way companies were organised. When companies invested in that intangible organisational capital and skill, that's when they got the big payoffs from computerisation.*

And we expect the same thing to be happening with artificial intelligence.

This need for major investment in rethinking work is what leads to what we call the productivity J curve. [...] What you see is that initially, not only does productivity not take off, it can actually fall a bit. Why? Because that's the period where you have to invest in skills, you have to invest in reorganising work.”



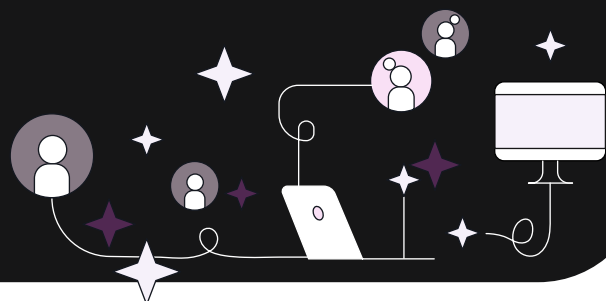
Professor
Stanford Institute for Human-Centred AI
United States

In many cases, the onus falls on public servants to manage their own career progression and upskilling, and many are already stepping up. A public servant in 2026 isn't waiting to be enrolled in a training programme; many are figuring it out on their own terms. Leaders need to harness that drive, create the conditions for it to flourish and recognise that a workforce with genuinely new capabilities won't just save time, but will deliver better outcomes for citizens too.

Artificial Intelligence

02.

Public servants have one clear message: show me how AI works in practice.



It is perhaps little surprise that artificial intelligence (AI) emerged as the defining theme for the Apolitical network over the last 12 months, amid ongoing debates about how governments can balance efficiency with systems-oriented approaches.

For many public servants, AI promises relief from the resourcing and time pressures described earlier.

As AI tools gradually become more embedded in government, expectations are beginning to extend beyond improved service delivery speed to a deeper understanding of the systems shaping government work.

The conversation is moving beyond whether AI belongs in government at all, to how it will actually transform workflows, policymaking, decision-making and even core models of governance in time.

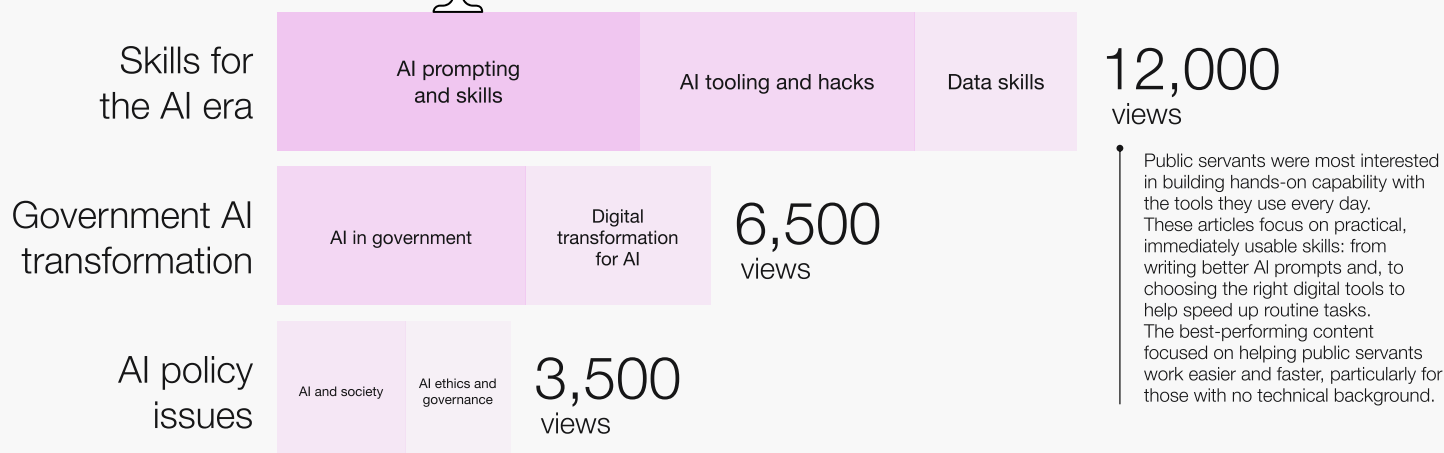
Practical AI skills remain a top priority

Data from Apolitical's platform show public servants are hungry for practical, hands-on guidance on using AI in their everyday work. Across Apolitical's regular events programme, the strongest engagement consistently came from highly practical AI upskilling opportunities. The standout event in our 2025 AI series ("Hacks for Working with Copilot") attracted more than 2,700 registrants and over 1,000 attendees, with the next best-performing session focused on using AI to speed up routine tasks.

This need was echoed in articles published on Apolitical. More than 20,000 public servants read Apolitical's digital, data and AI content in 2025, and the most-read pieces were those offering concrete skills and real-world application.

What AI issues were public servants most interested in 2025?

Analysis of article views on Apolitical from January - November 2025




Amid this trend toward highly practical training and content, [the best-performing article](#) was a guide to getting higher-quality outputs from Copilot, the Microsoft AI tool favoured by the majority of governments around the world.

Data from Apolitical's [AI Readiness Check](#), a simple six-minute assessment that offers personalised feedback and resources, reinforces this focus on practical help. With almost 9,000 submissions at the time of publication of this report, the Readiness Check has rapidly grown into the single largest global dataset of government AI capability.

The data shows that many public servants still need support in building confidence with prompt engineering for using AI models, and in getting the most out of AI tools.

35% The proportion of public servants who say they can use prompt engineering techniques to manage the quality of outputs – an essential basic skill for deploying AI – is still low.



Source: Apolitical AI Readiness Check (Sample: 3,229), December 2025

Public servants are starting to see how AI could reshape how government works

As the practical applications of AI become easier to grasp and explore, public servants are increasingly turning to deeper questions about how AI could reshape the way government itself works.

This shift was clear when a senior UK civil servant published [Rethinking Civil Service Value in the Age of AI: How AI Could Transform Civil Service Work](#). The article drew more than 1,000 views and sparked a discussion on the Apolitical platform about how AI might redefine core skills and competencies in the public sector.

“If writing is how value is demonstrated, then it’s also how identity is formed... If AI can take on the writing, what happens to the rest?”



Deputy Director

Ministry of Justice, United Kingdom, writing in “Rethinking Civil Service Value in the Age of AI”

The article argues that generative AI is set to automate many of the visible tasks through which civil servants have traditionally demonstrated value, especially drafting and formatting written products. Because writing has long shaped identity, influence and progression in government, its automation forces a reassessment of what counts as meaningful contribution, judgment, expertise and leadership.

Public servants responded to this debate with a mix of enthusiasm and concern. Some worried that automated writing could erode critical thinking or increase AI’s environmental footprint. The latter is a recurring theme in public sector scepticism, and one that our evidence shows governments are not yet fully addressing.

Others noted potential opportunities, including more accessible and effective communication for people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.



Public sector leaders echoed the shift toward deeper reflection on skills. Watch the interview with Adil Zainulbhai.

[YouTube](#)

In conversation with Apolitical, Adil Zainulbhai, former Chairman of India’s Capacity Building Commission, described efforts to embed AI awareness across the world’s largest public sector workforce, including encouraging 1.5 million civil servants to take an AI fundamentals course.

Taki Sarantakis, President of the Canada School of Public Service, emphasised the importance of strengthening the “soft skills” public servants will need to thrive in the AI era.

“Those soft skills are leadership, communications, empathy, listening for what's not said... those are the ones that are going to win in the age coming forward.”



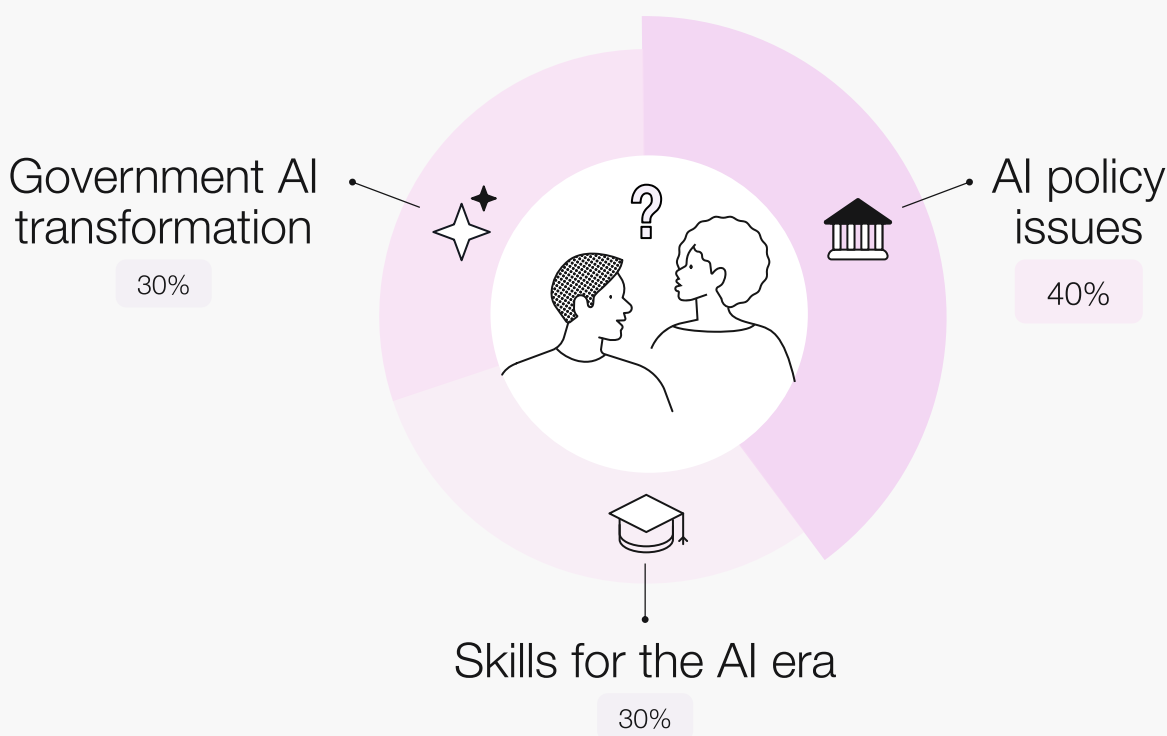
Taki Sarantakis
President, Canada School of Public Service, Canada




What questions are public servants asking each other about AI?

Apolitical's [AI in Government Community](#) has rapidly grown to 30,000 members, spanning a wide, global and influential network. What sets the AI in Government community apart is the profile of its members – a significant proportion of which are senior leaders and policymakers. Conversations in the community have focused more on policy issues around AI, particularly ethical concerns.

The graphic below categorises some of the most prominent themes and questions public servants asked in the AI in Government community over the last year. The conversations reflect public servants grappling with a changing set of expectations for work in government, to thinking about the policy implications, and the recurring theme of skills to successfully harness this rapidly evolving new technology. The table on the next page offers a deeper dive.

What were public servants' biggest questions about AI in 2025?



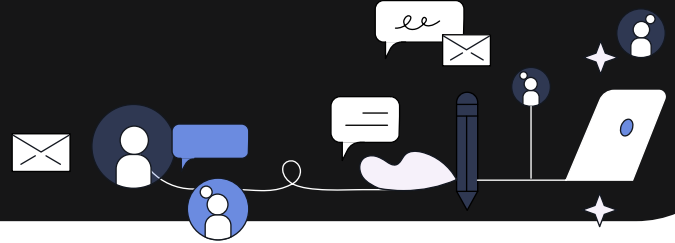
CATEGORY	NEED FOR KNOWLEDGE AND INSIGHTS	EXAMPLES FROM THE COMMUNITY
 AI policy issues	Concerns about fairness, privilege, trust, disinformation, preventing harms and ensuring equity in how AI is used by governments.	<p>"I've been thinking about disinformation and what that is doing to trust in public services"</p> <p>"How can AI help rebuild trust?"</p> <p>"How can we ensure that AI is always dependable and secure?"</p>
	Big-picture reflections on AI's societal trajectory, geopolitics and long-term risks.	<p>"Are we ready to accept challenging conversations about identity and relational intelligence in the age of AI?"</p> <p>"Should we be more excited about a future of abundance instead of dystopia?"</p>
 Government AI transformation	Interest in new AI approaches (e.g., agentic AI), adaptive systems and global case studies.	<p>"Any good resources on agentic AI transforming government?"</p> <p>"Thoughts on Ukraine's government AI agent?"</p> <p>"How have you introduced AI tools in government and built trust with staff?"</p> <p>"Does anyone have experience with digital sandboxes in government?"</p> <p>"What are some automation case studies across [Government of Canada] and beyond?"</p>
	How AI can make services faster, more accountable and more people-centred.	<p>"How can we use AI to improve efficient and transparent service delivery in developing countries?"</p> <p>"How is your organisation making services more people-focused during economic challenges?"</p>
 Skills for the AI era	Questions about actually using AI tools, agents, Power Apps, Copilot, RAG etc.	<p>"Has anyone used Power Apps for officer development tracking?"</p> <p>"Who has experience using Copilot Studio as a RAG (Retrieval Augmented Generation) replacement?"</p> <p>"Any experience with AI Calendar tools in government?"</p>
	Using AI for training, scenario simulation, people management and organisational readiness.	<p>"How might AI act as a 'practice partner' to build organisational resilience?"</p> <p>"Examples of using AI in Customer Experience (CX) analytics or an Extract, Transform, Load (ETL) pipeline?"</p> <p>"Which conversations feel more human with an AI sparring partner?"</p>

The immediate future of AI in government will be practical. The biggest demand is not for more debate about the technology itself, but for the skills, examples and confidence needed to apply it in everyday work.

Efficiency

03.

Public servants are asking what it takes to build a high-performing state. More time and cultural change are among the answers.



If 2024 was the year of elections, then 2025 was the year efficiency dominated the headlines.

The Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) in the United States grabbed news headlines by defining “efficiency” in terms of reducing headcount and spend. The question remains whether this is the whole picture. On Apolitical, public servants took the topic seriously and explored the following question: What would it actually take for governments to be more efficient?

The feedback from our network was that governments can, and should, strive to be more efficient. They should maximise returns on investment in government, including the investment of time. They should deliver better, faster

public services. Public servants told us they believe that the fastest route to an efficient government is one which invests in their capacity. And it is by examining systems, blockers and problems, not simply cutting budgets or reducing headcount, that efficiencies can most quickly be realised.

Inputs vs outputs? Or efficiency vs effectiveness?

One consideration we heard from the network was whether it is the inputs or the outputs of government work that truly make public services more “efficient”. Another was whether governments should be striving for efficiency at all, or whether “effectiveness” is the more appropriate north star.



“Maybe by focusing on ‘effectiveness’, you can create an efficiency dividend”

Chris Ferguson

Former Head of the Digital Profession for the UK Government,
Chief Partnerships Officer, Apolitical

Discussions across Apolitical’s events and communities considered whether workforce reductions weaken, rather than strengthen, efficiency: public servants argued that cuts can drain institutional knowledge, create backlogs, slow delivery and degrade service quality, and risk undermining the very goals that efficiency is meant to serve.

So, what do public servants see as the path to government efficiency?

Public servants told us that effectiveness is about outputs, and governments that prioritise what they deliver to

citizens tend to make smarter choices under pressure.

This was evident in conversations among members of Apolitical’s [Systems Thinking Community](#) (which has almost 7,500 members at the time of publication). For example, one such conversation examined outcome-driven budget reductions in the communications department in Alberta, Canada, which cut costs by 18% in 2020.

Reflecting on this achievement, one public servant asked [in the community](#): “Can government processes become efficient enough that, when money is tight, we aren’t forced to lose our most experienced or most engaged staff?”

Practical recommendations for greater efficiency shared in Apolitical's communities included:

- beginning with clear goals, then redesigning tasks around them
- identifying and eliminating redundancy in systems
- tracking outcome metrics (service quality, client satisfaction) rather than headcount.

The conclusion from public servants was that strategic, evidence-based redesign can produce budget savings and service improvements simultaneously.

Focusing solely on inputs (budgets, human resources, physical infrastructure) can ultimately undermine efficiency goals. If the aim is to reduce costs, considering systems as a whole, is essential. At one Apolitical-hosted event dedicated to the topic of government efficiency, the discussion explored how some of the initiatives that deliver the greatest efficiency gains can initially appear the most involved, such as policy designers co-creating net-zero or safe-streets policies with end users. Although this work is intensive, contributors emphasised that it can lead to

greater efficiency in the long run by reducing rework and preventing misalignment.

“You can have perfectly efficient, well-delivered, well-administered programmes that don't accomplish very much.”



Former senior civil servant

Faculty of Social Sciences, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Ottawa, Canada

These reflections point to a larger truth: meaningful efficiency isn't about cutting more, but about redesigning how the system works.

And that raises the bigger question: What does it take to make the system itself more efficient?

Improving the system as a whole requires a different way of thinking

Improving the system means building a public sector capable of doing more with what it has by reshaping how government operates under real-world constraints. A common narrative emerged across Apolitical's research: the system sometimes rewards or incentivises behaviours which can ultimately impede efficiency.

With slower economic and revenue growth, rising security costs, increasing debts and an affordability crisis in many contexts, public servants told us they understand the political imperative to speed up government. However, government is unique, with risk aversion baked into its role as a guardian institution. Productivity is notoriously difficult to measure and many of the the citizens government serves are high-need and high-cost by definition.

“Sometimes having too many people or too complicated a setup for delivering a service can actually make it inefficient both for the organisation and for the people receiving the service.”



Head of Office

HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC),
United Kingdom

System improvement as a whole requires a different kind of efficiency.

Practitioners told us they want leaders to create space for innovation in the core business of government. But they also need to prepare political actors for the reality that meaningful innovation sometimes involves risk and occasional failure.

Without this cultural shift to accept occasional failure in certain circumstances, governments cannot pursue the experimentation needed to deliver better results at lower cost.

Ultimately, improving the system means measuring and rewarding staff for outcomes rather than rule-following. It requires flattening hierarchies to enable faster decision-making, expanding access to data and deploying responsible AI and digital tools to remove friction from everyday tasks.

Above all, improving the system requires treating this transformation with urgency.

Speed is required because the gap between what governments are asked to deliver and the systems they operate within is an efficiency crisis, particularly when considering increasingly pressing economic and geopolitical contexts. Innovation, then, must move from the edges to central decision-making if governments are to be capable of meeting the challenges of today and tomorrow.

Making the time to unlock opportunity

The system change required to build a high-performing state also hinges on unlocking the existing capacity and capability of public servants.

Capacity - quite literally, how much time public servants have - is too often treated as a background issue but the data shows it is one of the most significant constraints on

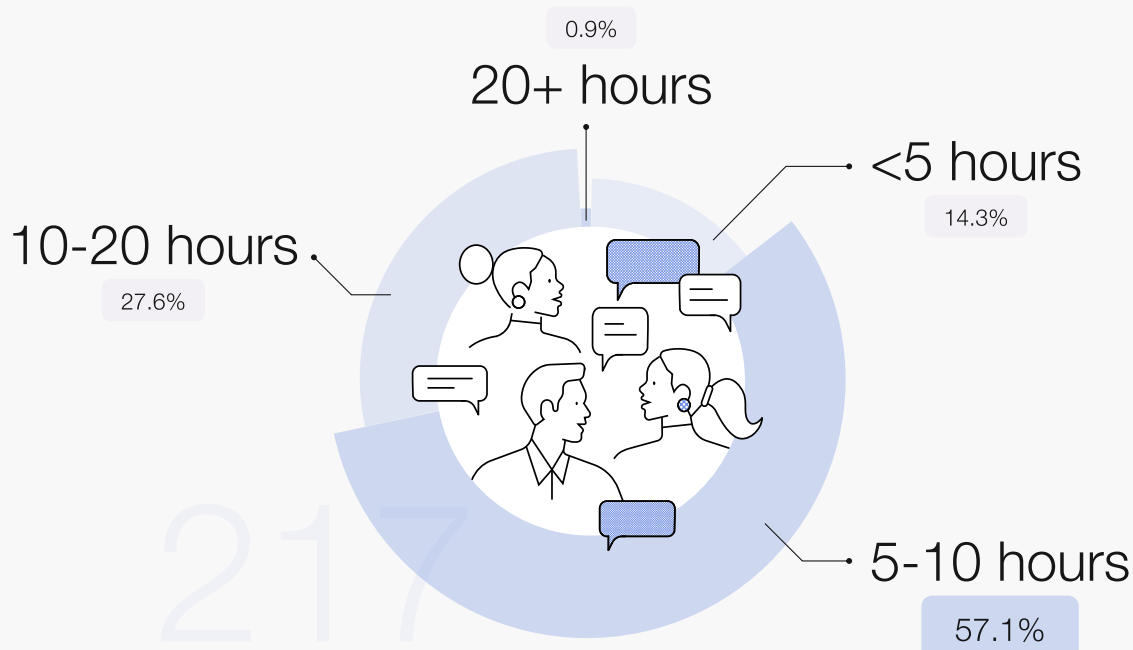
public sector performance. Despite high levels of expertise and ambition, public servants are often trapped in workflows that leave little room for the strategic, transformative work governments increasingly depend on them to design and deliver.

Simply put, they are just too short on time.

Two polls from the Apolitical community illustrate this capacity crunch - see below.

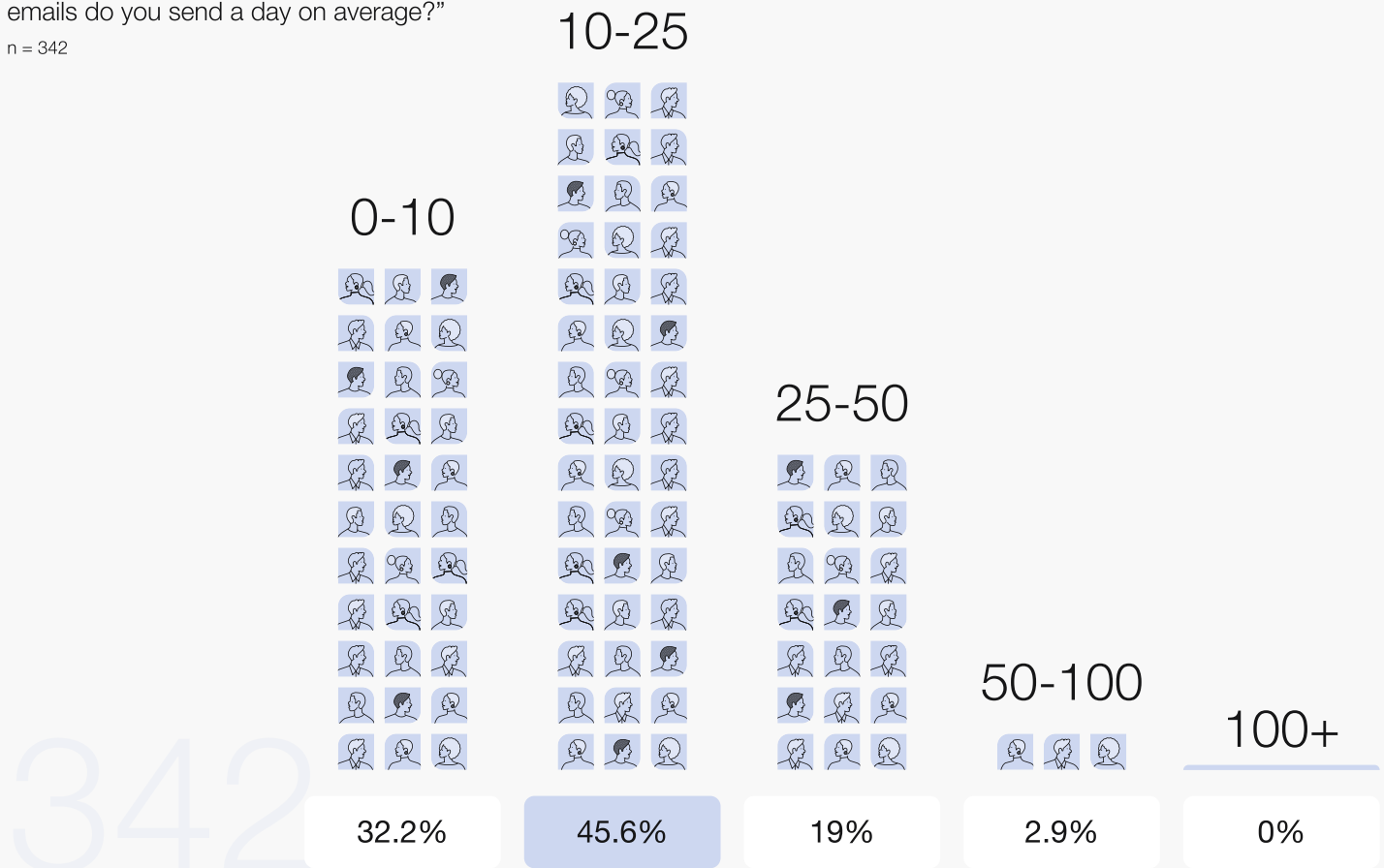
How many hours per week do you spend in meetings?

n = 217



We asked public servants, “How many emails do you send a day on average?”

n = 342



On email

Two thirds of respondents send between 10 and 50 emails a day. Even at the lower end, the cognitive switching costs are significant. Email traffic at this scale is not just a communication burden, but a structural signal that public servants are acting as coordinators of complex, fragmented processes, leaving less time to be designing solutions and solving problems.

On meetings

Over 85% of respondents spend five or more hours a week in meetings, and more than a quarter spend 10 to 20 hours. This is equivalent to a full working day, or more. Such a significant meeting load eats into uninterrupted time, making reflective or analytical work harder. When meetings become the default mode of decision-making, there is little room left for the deep work required for policy innovation, service redesign or strategic planning.

Taken together, the emails and meetings data paint a strikingly consistent picture of how public servants spend (and lose) their working hours.

Many public servants experience a persistent tension between the work they are expected to deliver and the time available to deliver it. A large proportion of their effort is consumed by coordination overhead, including managing high volumes of manual communication. When this coordination burden becomes dominant, it limits the space for policy innovation, service redesign and long-term strategic thinking that modern public administration depends upon.

Unlocking capacity starts with recognising the invisible architecture of the working day – the emails, the meetings, the micro-tasks — and redesigning it. Our network told us this could be a small but important step towards governments redirecting human talent toward the ambitious, complex challenges that define a high-performing state.

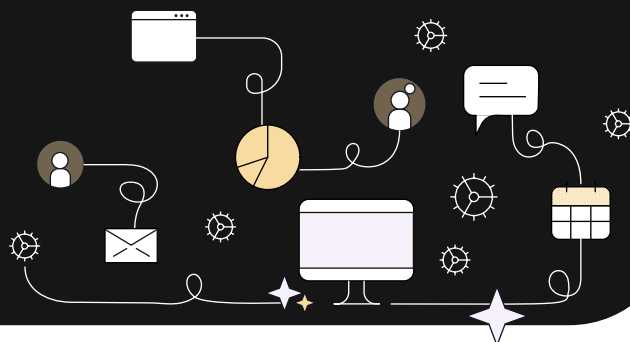
What next for government efficiency?

Is efficiency a topic public servants will reclaim? Done right, addressing efficiency in government speaks directly to the everyday frustrations public servants describe themselves: silos, time poverty and a skills or capability gap. Efficiency requires highly skilled, highly capable public servants collaborating with the public to deliver effective public services.

Systems Thinking

04.

How can smart people inside rigid systems effect change?



Apolitical's interviews, polls and events with public servants have pointed again and again to systems thinking as a crucial skill for the future of government. When we asked, "What support would be most useful?", the answer "systems thinking" surfaced consistently as a priority.

This interest translated into behaviour on the Apolitical platform itself, where a new [Systems Thinking and Portfolio Approaches course](#) (co-designed and developed with the UNDP's Strategic Innovation Unit) quickly became one of our top performing courses in 2025: thousands of public servants enrolled within just a few months of launch.

Systems thinking is increasingly being embraced as a core skill for public servants.

Public servants describe the growing need to join the dots between policies, partners and communities, even as the structures around them remain siloed. They can see the connections and interdependencies, but struggle to act on them when people, processes, mandates and incentives sometimes pull in different directions.

This "insight-action" gap, understanding the system but not being able to move with it, is a notable challenge.

Systems thinking offers a way to create agility and adaptability by translating an understanding of the connections across the system into action. This action would then, in turn, help address the efficiency question addressed in the previous chapter of this report.

Yet data from our network suggest that while many value this approach, few can fully practise it within existing constraints.

Systems thinking is valued, but not yet embedded in everyday government work

Public servants recognise that many problems they face are systemic, yet the expectation to narrow focus and manage only what falls within immediate responsibility continues to be incentivised. Even when issues are widely understood to be interconnected, day-to-day pressures often push efforts back toward short-term, contained solutions.

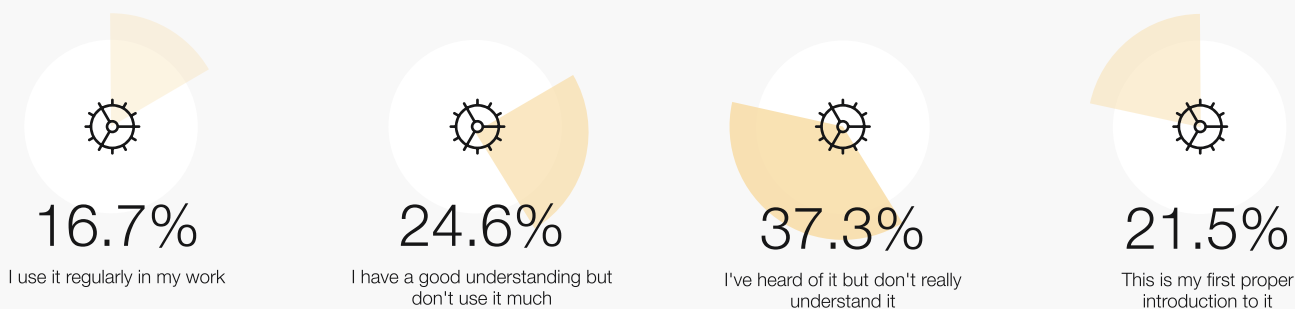
"In my experience, [focusing only on what you are responsible for is] invariably the default position of most government efforts to address public policy issues. Even when many issues are well understood to be systematic, the natural tendency to break problems into bite-sized chunks and tackle them through well-intentioned but poorly designed interventions quickly overrides those arguing for a systematic analysis."



Former Executive Director
Province of Manitoba
Canada

Public servants report a gap between grasping systems thinking, and being able to use it. When asked about their understanding of systems thinking, most public servants said they were aware of the concept but they report rarely using it in practice. Another quarter described having a good grasp of the idea, but a limited opportunity to apply it in their work.

How well do you understand systems thinking?



Most public servants see this constraint as structural rather than personal, with the system itself limiting how much systems thinking occurs.

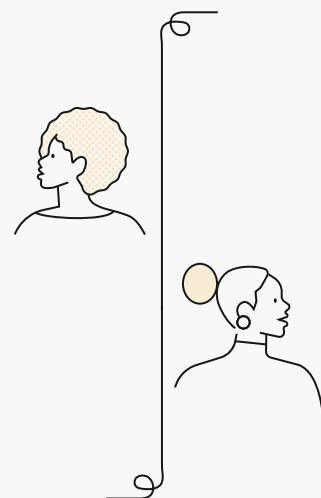
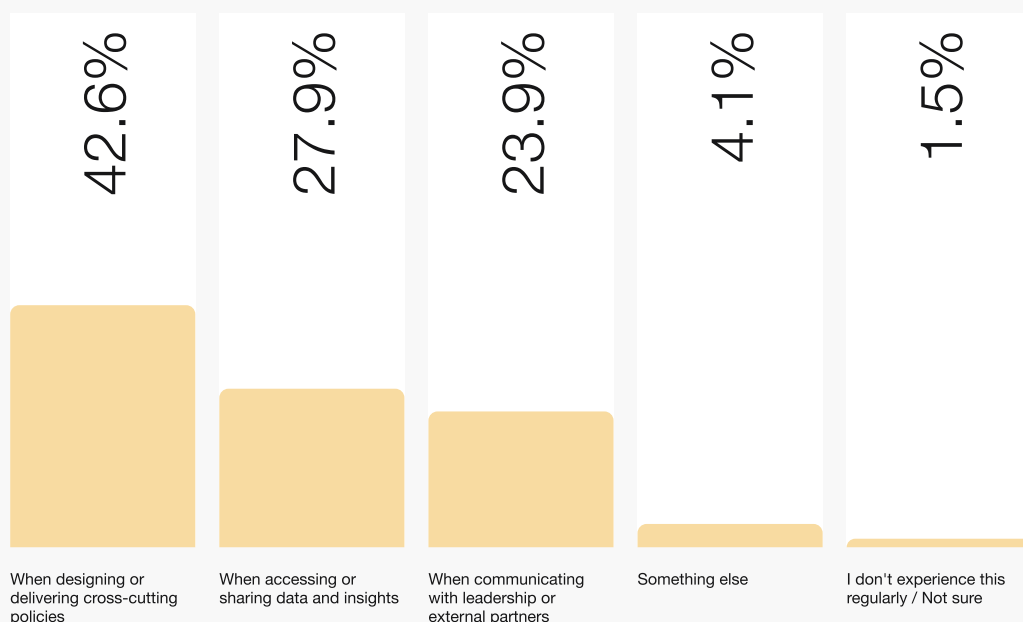
What's stopping systems thinking from taking root? Public servants described three obstacles.

1. Siloed structures

Silos remain the most apparent and persistent barrier. Public servants often recognise how their work connects to other teams, policies and communities, but governance, legal, management and cultural structures around them can make collaboration slow and difficult.

Where do you most often feel the impact of silos in your work?

n = 197



Even when people hold a systemic view, the environment does not always reward it.

2. Lack of shared understanding

For many public servants, systems thinking feels abstract or inconsistently defined. Different teams use different terms for similar ideas. Without a shared language and frame of reference, collaboration quickly becomes misaligned. This leads some to understand systems thinking as an explanatory rather than action-creating tool which is helpful for understanding complexity but harder to use in time-pressured environments.

“You have something in mind when you think of [systems thinking] and I have something in mind. We're not talking the same language. Don't underestimate the importance of it. When I draft guidance notes, I always put a lot of effort into clarifying what it is that we're actually saying.”



Stabilisation and Reintegration Advisor
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

3. Despite an informed understanding, institutional inertia is a blocker

Even when public servants see systemic solutions, they often lack the authority to act at the scale required. Processes, reporting lines and procurement rules constrain them to narrow mandates. The result is a gap between awareness and action: individuals can diagnose systemic issues but cannot shift the system itself.



Innovation Specialist
Western Cape Government, South Africa

“If my permissions cycle is longer than the lifespan of an emerging opportunity, I can never act on it. If I need to prove something before I can access funding, I will never be able to prove it. If I am only allowed to buy what is already on the procurement code, I can never try new things. It is not just about having routine capability and adaptive capability separately. Without connection, routine teams are stuck in a doom loop where they want change but can never execute it, while adaptive teams produce promising ideas that never translate. The gap in between is the real problem.”

What would help? Support from leadership

Across interviews, public servants emphasised that systems thinking only takes root when leadership creates space for openness, trust and learning. Change is created from sparking curiosity and linking systems ideas to the problems leaders already care about, as opposed to simply persuading people to adopt systems thinking.

“These days I never try to convince [people about systems thinking]. I try to be helpful, and I try to create some curiosity. And in doing this, the most important step is listening to the person you are thinking about introducing it to. Where are their heads currently at? What are the problems they are trying to solve or their biggest concerns? Be curious yourself, and through that you might create some curiosity.”



Continuous Improvement Officer
Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea
United Kingdom

Systems thinking is not falling short from a lack of interest from public servants. Institutional endorsement or support makes all the difference. Governments are now able to describe and document complexity, but have not yet built the corresponding capacity to work within it. Closing this gap - aligning awareness and organisational support - is essential for public sector systems to adapt and evolve.

Climate

05.

Still the hardest challenge in government



The skills required to deliver the transition are evolving faster than most governments can train for.

When we asked 219 public servants to name the most complex policy challenge they face, the answer was clear. 32% selected climate change, placing it ahead of economic inequality (29.2%) and healthcare (18.3%), the answer was clear.

"We are at the cusp of the largest economic transformation in human history, and public servants are its primary architects. Yet the gap between national commitments and delivery on climate has never been wider. The problem is rarely one of ambition; it is one of capability."

7

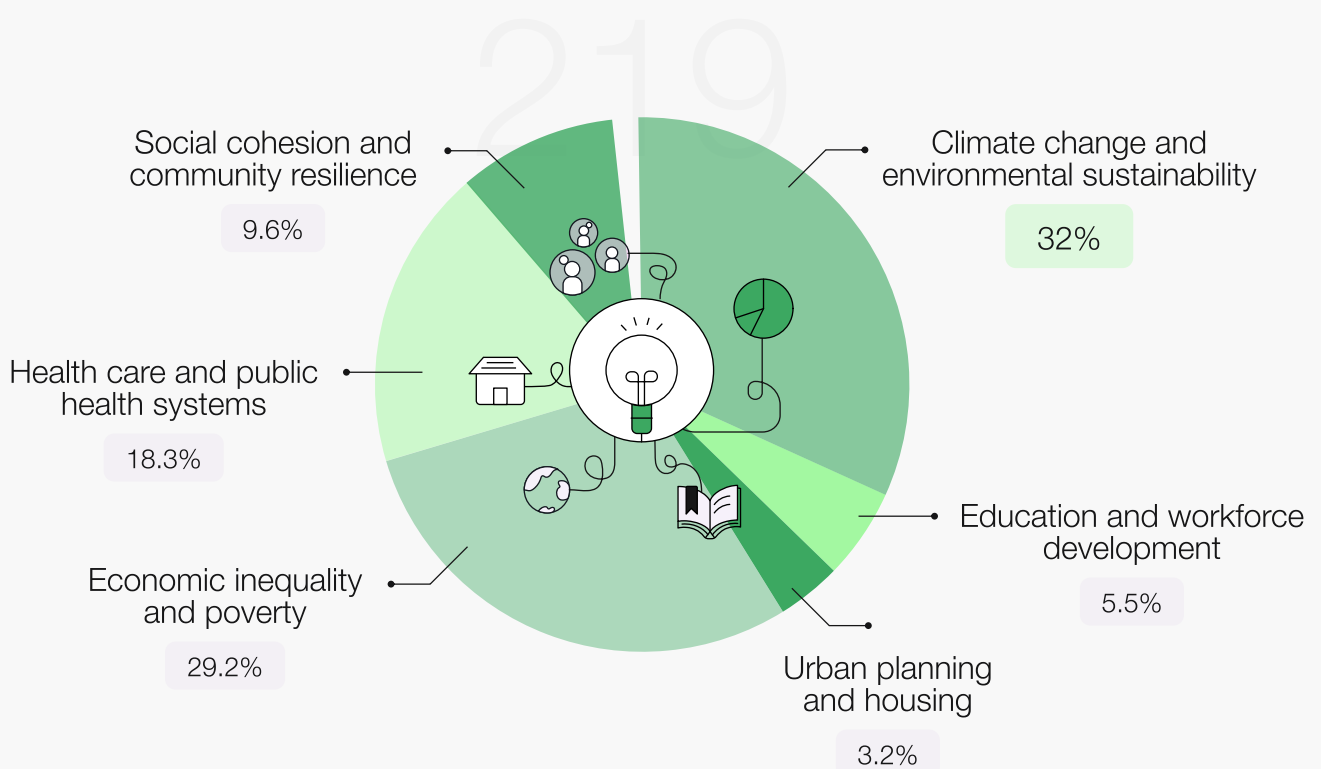


Fiona Macklin

Head of Climate,
Apolitical

Which policy area or problem do you think is the most complex and difficult to address?

(n = 219)



The skills required to deliver the transition to a clean, resilient economy are evolving faster than most governments can train for: from green procurement and carbon budgeting, to nature-based finance and climate-resilient infrastructure design. Navigating this turbulence decisively is becoming increasingly challenging - but the impact of doing so will be transformative for governments that get it right.

As public servants in [Apolitical's communities](#) consistently put it: even well-understood tasks become difficult to deliver when responsibility for climate action is this fragmented.

Several structural trends make this moment particularly urgent.

1. Significant headwinds

Governments are battered by multiple pressures at once, from budget cuts to aid and a retreat from climate ambitions, to the political volatility of a polarised era. This makes it all the more vital that governments equip their public servants to work more efficiently and effectively on the transition.

“With the ... growing backlash to net-zero goals, and signs that climate action is losing momentum globally, it can sometimes feel like progress is slipping away.”



Policymaker
Natural Resources Canada, Ontario, Canada



2. Increasing impacts

Public servants from different countries told us in many interviews about significantly hotter summers and greater instances of flooding. Warming trajectories are exponentially increasing the speed and scale of climate-related disasters, battering economies, health systems, food supplies and infrastructure. This is not a distant future risk: it is a present challenge which creates urgent demand for resilience capability at every level of government, not just in dedicated climate teams, but across finance ministries, planning departments, health agencies and beyond.

3. A race to shape the future

Countries that cannot deliver on their climate commitments will miss targets irreversibly. More importantly, they will miss the economic opportunities the transition provides. The window to shape that new economy, rather than just respond to it, is shrinking fast.

4. The arrival of AI and its energy requirements

Governing is increasingly being shaped by the arrival of AI. Climate capability and digital capability must be built together, not as an afterthought, if governments are to have the technology ‘fluency’ needed to build a sustainable new economy at the speed required. The civil servants who can work fluidly across both technology and climate will be the ones who can deliver impact.

“The data centers are coming. Is anyone dealing with data centers in their community yet? Major implications for our already strained energy grids, water supply, and public health.”



Senior Public Servant
Portland, Oregon, USA



Whilst the dominant narrative on climate over the last 12 months has been gloomy, there continues to be meaningful momentum in terms of tackling climate change:

➤ The renewable energy transition continues to gain traction.

In the 10 years since the Paris Accord, the world has exceeded forecasts for solar capacity by 1,600%, wind capacity by 300% and electric vehicles by 40%. Twice the investment is going into clean energy technologies versus fossil fuels, which is set to hit a record \$2.2 trillion this year. Solar and wind generation have outpaced electricity demand growth this year, and renewables have overtaken coal in the global electricity mix.

➤ Nature investment is profitable today.

Brazil alone has mobilised over \$3.6 billion in nature-based solutions in the past three years; 40% of this in the last nine months.

➤ A 'clean' industrial revolution is underway.

More than 1,000 clean industrial plants are in development. 144 projects have reached Final Investment Decision (FID). There are 19 in the past year alone, and 70 more are investment-ready.

Climate is no longer a siloed work stream for governments: it is foundational for a new, cleaner and more resilient economy.

"When all else fails, I turn my focus to the community scale - there is evidence right here in my neighbourhood of the reasons to stay hopeful."

I see it in the increase in pollinator gardens, in more people cycling, in the rejection of fast fashion, in people attending marches and community events that previously did not prioritize these spaces, but I especially see it in my peers, who have connected the dots and understand now that struggles, like climate and housing, and their solutions, like higher density living and transit, are interconnected."



Public servant

Environment and Climate Change Canada
Montreal, QC, Canada

What's top of mind for public servants - next steps

What this means, and what to do next

The five different pressures this year reflect a common theme: the gap between what governments are being asked to deliver and what they are currently equipped to do cannot be closed on its own.

But public servants are not waiting. Across every theme in this report, the same quality kept surfacing: curiosity.

A workforce under strain that is still asking better questions, still reaching for new tools, still looking for peers who are figuring it out alongside them.

Here's how Apolitical can serve as a resource on your journey in government.

01.

Career Development

THE PRESSURE

Progression and confidence are the top priorities for public servants, but training time is scarce, or opportunities are limited.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Explore Apolitical's [course catalogue](#), which consists of 80+ free short online courses. Topics include artificial intelligence, digital and data, and energy and climate, among others. You can also join one of Apolitical's [weekly events](#), where you can learn from experts in and outside government.

02.

Artificial Intelligence

THE PRESSURE

AI is moving quickly, and most public servants are still finding their footing. 65% can't yet use prompt engineering to shape AI outputs, not because of a lack of interest, but a lack of opportunity to build the skill.

YOUR NEXT STEP

If you're not sure where to start with AI, take the [AI Readiness Check](#). It's a six-minute assessment and the largest global dataset on government AI capability. Over 8,800 public servants have already taken it globally. You can also explore resources, from free courses to events to insights reports, on the [Government AI Campus](#).

03.

Efficiency

THE PRESSURE

Public servants are under real pressure to do more with less. But efficiency isn't primarily a headcount problem. It's more often about sharing and learning in smarter, better ways from your own government and others.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Watch the highlights of Apolitical's online debate "[Government Efficiency: No Pain, No Gain?](#)" with senior leaders including Graham Flack, Former Secretary of the Treasury Board of Canada.

Want to help your peers learn from each other around the world, faster and more efficiently? Launching later in 2026 with 150 case studies from governments across the world, the [Government AI Navigator](#) will give public servants direct access to how their peers are deploying AI in practice, and to the people behind each project. Co-designed with public servants from the outset, it is built around how government practitioners actually learn: from peers, not reports.

04.

Systems Thinking

THE PRESSURE

Only 16.7% of public servants use systems thinking regularly. The barrier isn't interest or understanding. It's the difficulty of applying it without others around you doing the same.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Join Apolitical's [Systems Thinking Community](#), 7,500+ members working to close the gap between insight and action. You might also find the [Systems Thinking: Tackling Complex Challenges with Portfolio Approaches](#) course helpful. It's a free course co-designed and developed with the UNDP Strategic Innovation Unit.

05.

Climate

THE PRESSURE

Climate cuts across every part of government, but the skills to act on it are unevenly distributed. Many public servants want to contribute more.

YOUR NEXT STEP

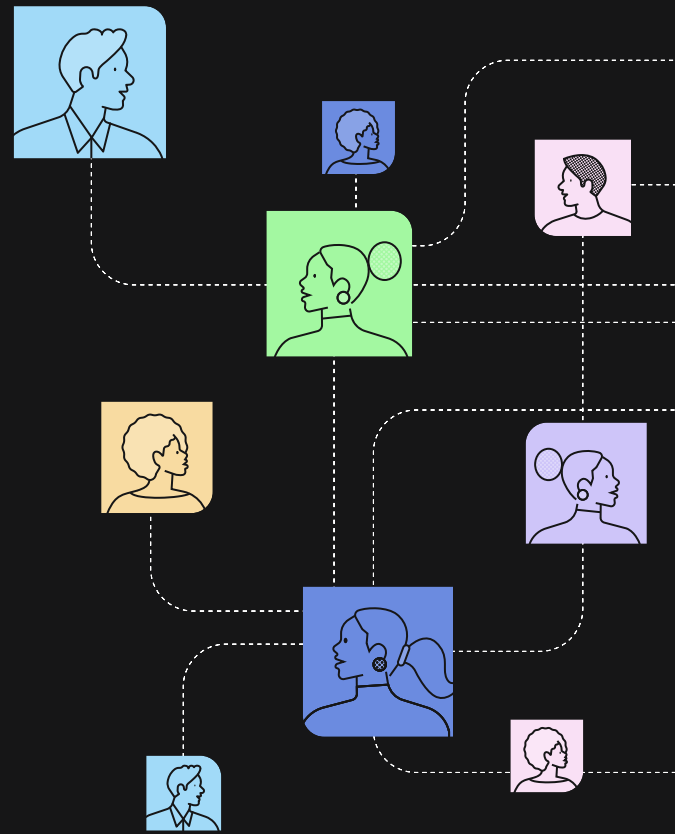
Explore the [Government Energy and Climate Campus](#), built for public servants wherever they sit in government. [The Climate Frontline](#) newsletter delivers valuable and insightful climate resources straight to your inbox.

About Apolitical

Apolitical is the world's largest online network of public servants, with a mission to make governments smarter.

It is used by half a million public servants and policymakers across 170 countries, providing governments with the tools, skills and networks they need to become more effective and tech-enabled organisations. Apolitical is a strategic partner to governments, helping them prepare their workforces for the future.

We achieve this by upskilling government workforces through short online courses focused on government priorities, enabling them to find and share best practice through peer communities, and building innovative tools designed for and with governments. Apolitical partners with leading universities and research institutions, including Oxford, the London School of Economics and Georgetown.



What are you going
to do differently in 2026?

apolitical