

# What do other agencies do to lift quality?

## Scope and objective of this paper

The question we get asked the most when we speak to NZIER Policy Advice Benchmarking Club members is: “what do other agencies do to lift quality?”

**Spoiler alert: there is no simple recipe for success.**

What works varies by agency, by team, by Minister and over time. So you need to discover your own critical success factors.

This note identifies some of the strategies and actions agencies have taken to lift the quality of their papers.<sup>1</sup> Not all of the best performers have all of these features all of the time, but they have enough of the features to stand above the rest.

You can use this note as a prompt to consider applying others’ strategies to improving the quality of your papers.

## Develop a trusting relationship

The provision of high quality advice over time results in the Minister having a high degree of trust in your guidance. This comes about through consistently delivering client-focused papers that have their needs at the core.



Source: <http://dilbert.com/strip/2013-03-06>

This doesn't mean writing only what the Minister wants to hear – that's advocacy rather than advice, and is not a sensible strategy. Rather, it means understanding their priorities and shaping papers around them.

And where your advice *doesn't* align with these priorities and you suspect the Minister will do what they want, always try to outline the trade-offs, risks and mitigation strategies around such choices.

## Consistency and commitment is key

If you want the Minister to recognise your agency's papers and trust their content, they need to be consistent in terms of their tone, presentation and client focus – so your 'brand' is strong every time.

This requires commitment across the organisation to promoting and celebrating quality.

It all starts at the top. Quality needs to be championed by the Chief Executive and senior management team. Someone needs to take – and be recognised as taking – the responsibility for owning and leading quality improvement initiatives. Without this demonstration of the real value to the agency, quality improvement is subject to slipping down the priority list. And unless it is clearly a high priority it is always going to be subject to second class attention and effort.

## Incentives matter

We know it's not always possible to incentivise staff in budget-constrained government agencies to strive for success through the promise of financial rewards.

But the better performing policy shops manage to do it by using other incentives.

One is to develop management and analyst KPIs that relate to the quality of policy advice, which are built into the annual performance management framework. Others are less formal like group celebrations of top pieces and tough assignments. What counts is reinforcing the importance of always striving for outstanding work.

<sup>1</sup> We will produce further papers on some of the more structural organisational features common to policy shops with strong policy capabilities: people and resources, policy processes, stewardship (leadership and culture) and relationship

management. Also see the DPMC Policy Project website: <https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/policyproject>

## Cull the tail

Our focus when advising agencies that are new to having their advice reviewed is almost always the same: focus on getting rid of the poorer papers (scoring 6 and below).

The Minister and other readers remember these papers for all the wrong reasons, usually because they expose him/her to some degree of risk, or just don't have their priorities (including the need for brevity and clarity) at their core.

The best policy shops have high standards in their production and don't let a tail of poor papers (re)emerge. This is largely a reflection of a quality assurance or sign-out process that has been designed and refined over time to focus on the client's needs.

It also reflects a culture of quality where it is the responsibility of *all* staff to keep standards up, not just the manager. And by being widely agreed, it is an automatic part of the system and thus does not create clashes over timing.

## Rigorous quality assurance, every time

We can't over-emphasise just how crucial a robust quality assurance process is for maintaining and improving the quality of papers. A single poor paper that escapes without proper review and exposes the Ministry or organisation to risk can be hugely damaging.

In contrast, good quality assurance can provide the extra polish that takes a paper from adequate to good or excellent. A fresh set of eyes combined with a healthy dose of political nous will help to bring out what matters most for the busy Minister.

For the more important papers, you might consider taking papers through a Quality Panel or similar. This is a group of senior staff that often sign out papers across your organisation, but who might not otherwise be exposed to your team's work.

We have seen this approach work well in various agencies – it adds an extra layer of rigour and tactical focus to the quality assurance process for those signature policy papers on which a lot is riding. It's also an organisational signal about what really matters.

We will produce further guidance on both quality assurance and peer review, but the key message

here is that you need to invest in your quality assurance processes. They are the guardian of your reputation. So they must be done and always allow enough time for it to be done properly – a spellcheck is necessary, but not sufficient.

## The learning never stops

Good quality papers tend to be produced in policy shops that embrace continuous improvement and never stop working on boosting quality. These shops become 'learning organisations' where:

- Every staff member feels they can provide views on papers and be listened to, regardless of experience or seniority.
- Feedback is actively sought, and is provided in a constructive fashion with a common aim: improving the quality of each and every paper to better meet the reader's needs.
- Staff are not defensive when asked about why they have done things a certain way, but have a rationale for their approach.
- Best practice papers, or aspects of papers (e.g. design features) are shared widely to help people learn from the best.
- Writing better policy advice is part of the everyday conversations that take place – you develop a culture of quality and fiercely protect it.
- Success is celebrated by having staff present at team or staff meetings on excellent papers that received glowing feedback from the Minister/Board/NZIER/other agencies: get them to explain why they took that approach.
- Policy advice improvement is on the agenda of team and staff meetings so that it is discussed frequently and key messages delivered regularly and consistently to all staff.

## Processes are streamlined

The better policy shops have simple but effective policy advice processes that perform well under duress. Key aspects to nail include:

- **Commissioning** – is it clear what is required and why? If not, go back to the source (Minister's office?) and check.<sup>2</sup> Always use

<sup>2</sup> In reality, we know the requirements of a paper can be dynamic – a week is a long time in politics and priorities change while new issues emerge. You need to be flexible enough to respond to this in the development of policy advice. This is

most often the case in rapid response pieces. In a more substantial project you have time to re-scope to adjust to changing demands.

the commissioning discussion to identify stakeholder interests and possible risks.

- **Timing** – do all staff to be involved in the paper know their roles and when they will be required? Have you left enough time at the end to add the polish? Have you planned and assigned the peer review and quality assurance?
- **Frameworks** – how will you approach the problem at hand? Has this been looked at before, or has something similar been analysed this way?
- **Making it real** – most policy issues are not covering entirely new ground. Invest in a ‘memory bank’ of ready-to-use examples and responses to commonly-asked questions.
- **The narrative** – ‘Storyboard’ key papers and get check-off from the peer reviewer and the manager signing the paper out on the outline before writing the rest of the detail.
- **The sign-out** – make sure the paper is tidy before it goes for peer review. The quality assurer should be trying to add value through improving the tactical aspects (i.e. editing to better meet the client’s priorities) rather than correcting spelling and grammar.
- **Feedback** – the best shops carry out post-mortems around key papers to learn about what went well, what didn’t and what could be done differently next time. They also share this information with the team.

## Innovation is essential

When asked to craft a paper on a given topic, there is always a temptation to look in the files at what was done last time and then recycle and re-shape it.

While this may seem efficient, it assumes that what was done last time met the client’s needs, and that neither the subject matter nor client’s needs have changed since.

By all means draw on any institutional knowledge on a topic, but treat each paper as a stand-alone exercise where you are trying to maximise the impact of your advice.

Try to innovate and take some (managed) risks to incrementally advance the quality of your advice products – a form of dynamic efficiency improvement. Present things graphically, design an A3, turn a 6-page report into a two-page aide-mémoire, etc.

We often use the phrase “**beg, borrow or steal**” when we are asked how agencies can innovate. If you know certain agencies are great at snappy design, tactical talking points or cost-benefit analysis, then take a look at their outputs and see what aspects you can transplant into your own work.

Innovation not only keeps you on your toes and keeps things interesting, it also gives you the opportunity to test what the Minister likes and dislikes.

## Summary: find what works for you

There is no simple recipe for success, but we have outlined some of the key ingredients of high quality policy shops. You need to identify which of these factors suits your agency, and prioritise accordingly.

# Policy advice MASTERCLASS



## Paper 7

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