

**Personnel is Policy: Exploring Social Markers of Career Advancement for Current  
Ontario Public Service Senior Executives**

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### **Introduction**

Senior executives in the Ontario Public Service (OPS) play a pivotal role in shaping public policy, implementing government priorities, and managing ministry performance. Forming the “public-service elite” (Evans et al., 2007), they navigate complex political, institutional, and organizational dynamics while maintaining governance in today’s democracies. Despite their outsized influence on public sector strategy and operations, there remains a lack of empirical data about how these leaders come to occupy their roles. What professional and academic achievements tend to characterize their rise? What factors make promotion into the senior executive ranks more or less likely to happen? These are just two of the many unanswered questions in this space.

In a world of increasing complexity in public administration and declining trust in institutions (Statistics Canada, 2023), the composition of senior public sector leadership matters. Putnam (1995) warned of the erosion of social capital and institutional trust, arguing resilient democracies require competent and representative institutions. If access to employment within the senior executive ranks is governed by implicit expectations or exclusionary norms, the public service would not be well positioned to reflect and respond to the province it serves. This is a public policy issue, not just a human resources consideration.

This study is the first step towards understanding social markers that may correlate with advancement into senior leadership in the OPS. In doing so, it sheds light on the informal pathways, implicit prerequisites, and unspoken rules that shape the senior executive talent pipeline.

The analysis will draw on social capital theory and portfolio theory. Lin (2008; 2001), leverages the former to conceptualize professional advancement as a function of one's access to, and investment of, relationship assets. Career success is therefore partly determined by the social markers one accumulates – past work experiences, academic credentials, professional and personal networks, affiliations with allies, and more – and how effectively these are leveraged to land promotional assignments. Shin and Gordon (2024) use portfolio theory to reframe strategic human resources as a sociological and systems design challenge, uncovering four interrelated mechanisms that govern how talent travels within and across organizations as part of an integrated ecosystem. Taken together, these two frameworks allow us to analyze career progression as both a social phenomenon and a talent management process.

This paper makes two contributions to the literature. Firstly, it offers data-driven insights on who holds power in the OPS and how they got there. A systematic study moves the conversation from scattered anecdotes to focused analysis. Secondly, it raises critical questions about access and representation within the provincial public service. By surfacing the informal rules that govern career advancement amongst senior public servants, the study invites reflection on how to best build more diverse, transparent, and meritocratic leadership pipelines.

## **Literature Review**

This section discusses the theoretical underpinnings across two dimensions: the importance of senior public servants to the democratic system and key concepts related to social capital theory and portfolio theory.

### Senior Executives' Roles, Responsibilities and Career Trajectories

Senior public servants play a key role in our democracy and have wide-ranging policy, implementation and leadership responsibilities. In his seminal paper *Bowling Alone*, Putnam

(1995) advocates for the importance of institutions on “the consolidation of democracy” (page 65). In a world where some institutions are receding, others must step up to fill the gaps. The public service can be one of those backstops.

Kingsley (1944) coined the term “representative bureaucracy” to explain how “[t]he democratic State... requires at every point... insight and wisdom [from] the pooling of diverse streams of experience..” (page 613). Building on this work, Van Riper (1976) argues public servants must reflect the demographic and attitudinal characteristics of the populace. Applying this logic, the OPS’ senior executives should be as diverse as the communities they serve.

Representative bureaucracy conveys several benefits. Evans et al. (2007) highlight how it increases diversity of perspectives at decision-making tables, improves engagement between governments and historically marginalized communities, and broadens the public service talent pool. Organizations that foster equity, diversity and inclusion are more innovative and are better able to identify and address previously unseen problems (Thomas and Ely, 1996). Senior leadership commitment is key. Applying Ng’s and Sears’ (2018) findings that “visible CEO support is essential... to advance the corporate agenda” (page 438), it follows the makeup of the OPS senior executive cadre plays a key role in effecting positive policy and delivery outcomes.

There is broad convergence but nuanced divergence in senior public servants’ roles and responsibilities (Dutil and Migone, 2021). While scholars agree on the key categories of duties, they differ on their relative salience, extent of political involvement, and modernization of the public service job description.

Senior executives are seen as political advisors or CEOs. Proponents of the former, like Aucoin (2012) and Evans et al. (2007), assert they are VIP service providers for government, potentially doing so at the expense of ministry leadership responsibilities. On the other hand,

Plumptre (1987) argues they are CEOs running businesses, not politicians in public servant clothing. This latter model is supported by the increasing complexity of government (Plumptre, 1987) and stability of the public service vis-à-vis the political class (Evans et al., 2007).

This paper builds on limited public-sector career trajectory literature. Evans et al. (2007) conducted the only systematic study of senior public servants at a point in time, while Spicer and Chatha (2024) did an analogous though more limited one of political staff over time. Both papers identified an environment where leaders cycle through jobs to broaden their professional experiences, with these effects more pronounced amongst non-partisan staff. The former also documented how senior executives rise through the ranks over time.

### Social Capital and Portfolio Theory

Social capital theory explains how networks help people build and use relationship assets to achieve their goals (Lin, 2008; Putnam, 1995). Since Putnam's (1995), Coleman's (1988) and Bourdieu's (1986) work popularized it, "the range of its application... progressively broadened" (Brunie, 2009, page 252). The result is divergence on its underlying mechanisms, whether these dynamics are unique across contexts and cultures, and the extent to which it is real or just a perception that fuels a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Lin (2008; 2001) conceptualizes social capital as access to, and leveraging of, relational resources towards individual and group ends. The presence or absence of social capital affects achievement of desired results. Individuals with high levels of relevant social capital are better positioned to secure jobs and promotions (Pinto et al., 2024; Ashtiani and Feliciano, 2018; Brunie, 2009; Lin, 2008). Lin (2008) argues individuals seek to optimize social capital along three dimensions: status, power and wealth. This study aims to identify OPS senior executive specific status and power markers to explain their career trajectories.

Brunie's (2009) describes social capital along three paradigms: resources (equivalent to that just discussed), collective, and generalized. The collective worldview sees social capital as a resource to be developed and invested for communal benefit (Brunie, 2009). The generalized approach explains how societies benefit from altruistic actions generated by individual based social capital (Uslaner, 2008; Uslaner, 2000; Brehm and Rahn, 1997). While all three conceptions add value to our understanding, this research study will focus on the resources paradigm because career advancement is, at its core, an individual based outcome.

Shin's and Gordon's (2024) portfolio theory is a valuable alternative to explore. They identify four factors that explain talent management fundamentals. Firstly, brain train refers to the activities that nurture existing talent. The "Develop" pillar of the OPS People Plan (Government of Ontario, 2024) applies this concept to human capital strategy. Secondly, brain gain explains how organizations supplement existing resources with outside talent by convincing them to join and enticing them to stay. The OPS applies these principles by recruiting external candidates at all levels, including senior executives (Government of Ontario, 2024). The third and fourth factors, brain circulation and brain linkage, discuss how people leave organizations but return later via employment and/or professional partnerships. These concepts manifest themselves in intra-OPS career progression, where employees build and leverage transferable skills in progressively senior roles.

This study will examine how senior executives' career trajectories align with the principles behind social capital and portfolio theory. The results will help governments build leadership pipelines and aspiring executives to maximize their career prospects.

## Methodology

This study's methodology leverages the strengths and lessons learned from Spicer's and Chatha's (2024) directory and LinkedIn focused research on Ontario's political staff cadre.

InfoGo – the publicly available OPS directory – was used to manually create a database of all 227 deputy ministers, associate deputy ministers and assistant deputy ministers as of February 2025. Every senior executive's LinkedIn profile was searched for their academic and professional histories. 88 individuals were excluded from the cohort because they met at least one of the following exclusion criteria:

- The most recently listed role on LinkedIn did not match the current position, as listed on InfoGo.
- The subject and/or highest level of completed education could not be identified.
- They had more than one LinkedIn profile.

This career trajectory study explores nine potential social markers across three categories of variables – academic, tenure, and professional diversity. Academic variables outline the highest level of education a senior executive achieved and associated subject area(s). Tenure variables describe how much experience senior public servants have, especially within the senior executive ranks. Professional diversity variables explore depth and breadth of experiences across functional areas and ministry clusters. The full list of variables, organized by category, is listed below, with possible values in parentheses.

- Academic
  - Completion of highest level of education (graduate [including professional programs], undergraduate, college, entrepreneurship, apprenticeship, high school)

- Subject of highest level of completed education (political science/public policy, social sciences/humanities/history/geography, law, STEM, business, trades, high school)
- Tenure
  - Number of years of experience as a deputy minister/associate deputy minister/assistant deputy minister (up to 2, more than 2 but less than 5, more than five but less than 10, more than 10)
  - Number of previous roles as a senior executive – deputy minister/associate deputy minister/assistant deputy minister (count)
  - Number of years of experience outside government (up to 1, more than 1 but less than 10, more than 10 but less than 15, more than 15)
- Professional Diversity
  - Number of ministries in which someone worked (1, 2 or 3, 4-6, at least 7)
  - OPS and/or federal and/or municipal government experience in (yes, no):
    - Central agencies (Cabinet Office, Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs, Ministry of Finance, Treasury Board Secretariat, Ministry of Red Tape Reduction and their federal and municipal equivalents)
    - Economy, justice, natural resource and transportation ministries (Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, Ministry of the Attorney General, Ministry of the Solicitor General, Ministry of Energy and Mines, Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks, Ministry of Transportation, Ministry of Infrastructure etc., including their federal and municipal equivalents)

- Health, education and social policy ministries (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Long-Term Care, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security, Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services etc., including their federal and municipal equivalents)
- OPS and/or federal and/or municipal government experience in (based on the names of their divisions):
  - Strategic policy (yes, no)
  - Operations (yes, no)
  - Communications (yes, no)
  - Executive offices at the assistant deputy minister or above level (yes, no)
  - Corporate services (yes, no)
  - Legal services (yes, no)

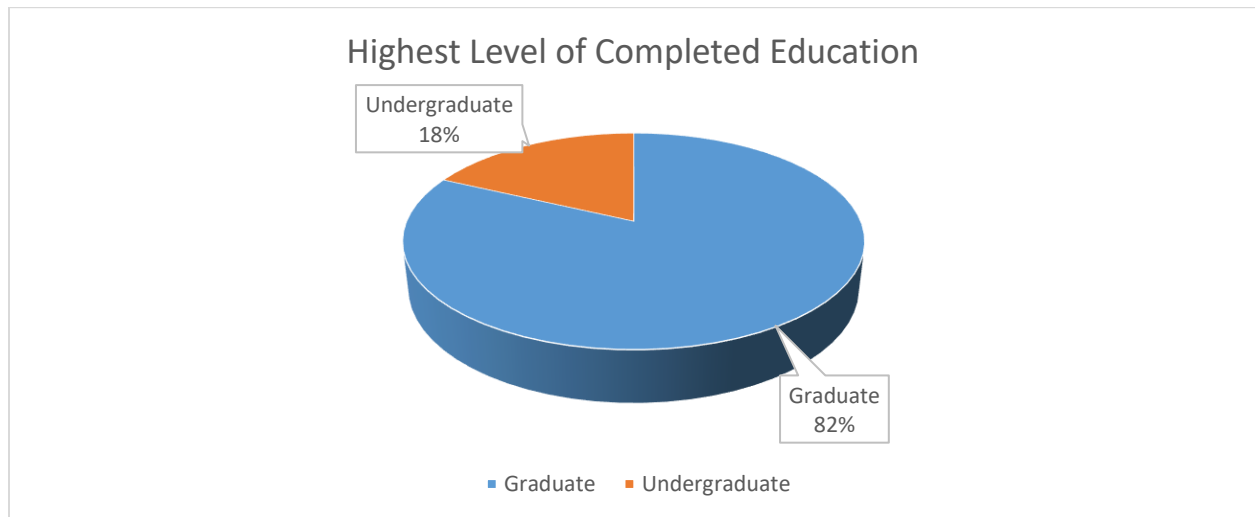
## **Findings & Discussion**

Social markers exist across all three categories of variables that may contribute to explain the current OPS senior executives' career trajectories.

### Education

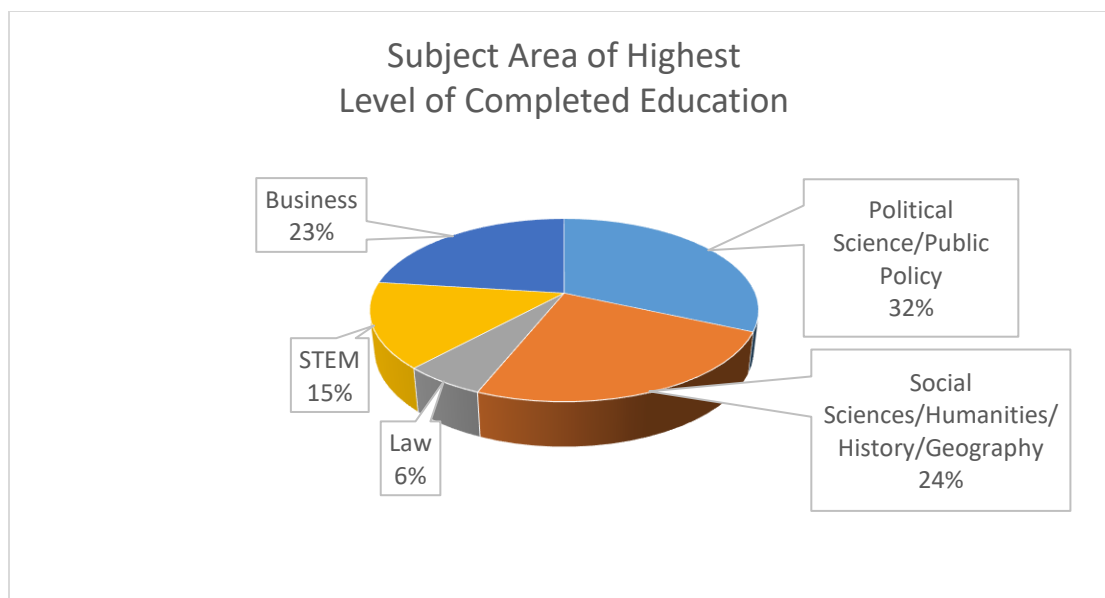
Completion of postsecondary education, especially graduate level studies, seems to be an unwritten prerequisite to becoming an OPS senior executive. As shown in Figure 1, more than 82% of deputy ministers, associate deputy ministers, and assistant deputy ministers completed graduate and/or professional degrees, with the remaining almost 18% completing undergraduate

studies. There is a complete absence of individuals who pursued entrepreneurship, the skilled trades, or other colloquially non-traditional education journeys.



**Figure 1:** Highest Level of Completed Education

Unlike the Australian public service's apparent bias in favour of leaders who possess graduate business credentials (Evans et al., 2007), one's subject area of study is not a relevant factor when considering career trajectory in the OPS. While the top three subject area clusters – political science/public policy (32%), social sciences/humanities/history/geography (24%), and business (23%) – represent almost 80% of current senior executives, it is important to note they also represent the vast majority of subjects being studied. The results also suggest the OPS recruits educational generalists to join its senior leadership team, even in technical areas – transportation, healthcare, and finance, to name a few examples – where it could be forgiven for seeking individuals with industry specific backgrounds.



**Figure 2:** Subject Area of Completed Education

Education is a clear social marker that seems to correlate with advancing into senior leadership at the OPS. For aspiring provincial public service executives, the two-part message is clear. Firstly, pursue graduate and/or professional programs to maximize your chances of success. Secondly, ensure you have university credentials to your name because if you do not, career stagnation is the almost certain outcome. Notably, this outcome appears to hold even in cases where an advanced degree is not explicitly required in the job posting.

This phenomenon can be explained through both the social capital and portfolio theory lenses. Applying Lin's (2008) findings that we try to maximize status, power, and wealth as characteristics of social capital, it follows education level – specifically, completing graduate studies in the ideal world or university education at worst – is a marker of status that translates into power at the OPS. While speculative in nature, generational cohort effects are also possible – university trained senior executives are more likely to promote aspiring leaders with equivalent academic credentials because they are seen as a symbol of status and a predictor of future performance. Education level bifurcates the attainment of all four factors in Shin's and Gordon's

(2024) portfolio theory model. Individuals can enjoy the cumulative benefits of brain train, gain, circulation, and linkage, but only if they can demonstrate academic achievement in the form of completing postsecondary studies.

These results highlight how the OPS is not achieving the ideals of representative bureaucracy. Contrary to Kingsley's (1944) and Van Riper's (1976) scholarship on representation as a key element of public service effectiveness in Western democracies, education has become an unfortunately convenient metric to screen for viability of future OPS senior executives. The 2021 census showed only "36.8% of people aged 25 to 64 in Ontario had a bachelor's degree or higher" (Statistics Canada, 2022). It therefore follows the OPS is subconsciously and effectively closing the door to senior executive tables for over 60% of the Ontarians it helps to govern.

### Tenure

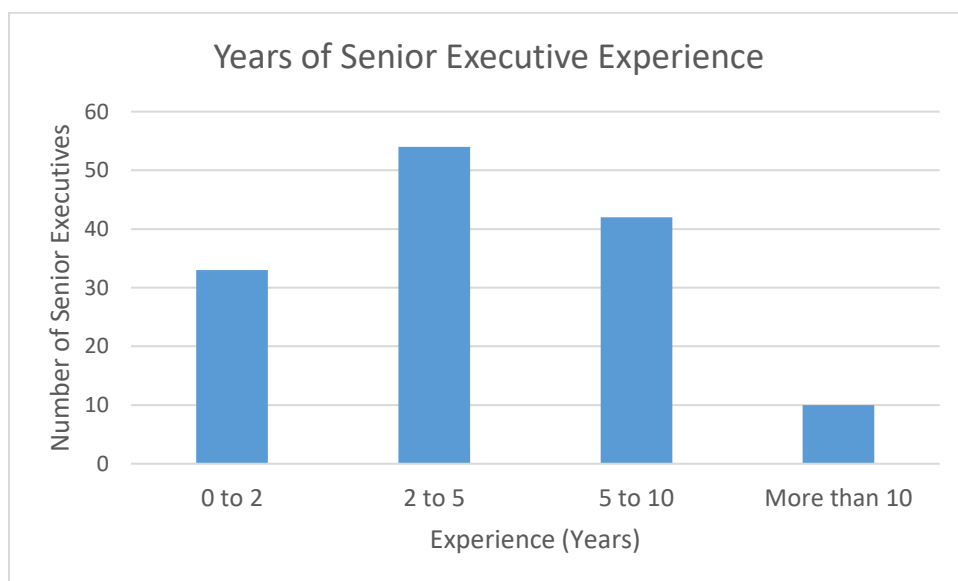
Current OPS senior executives are relatively seasoned leaders, with some notable caveats.

The intra-interval slopes in Figure 3 show most individuals have between two and 10 years of experience at the assistant deputy minister or above level. Combined with the first quartile, third quartile, and interquartile range of previous senior executive roles noted in Figure 4, it follows these people most likely served in one or two lateral or promotional assignments between their first senior executive appointment and their current role.

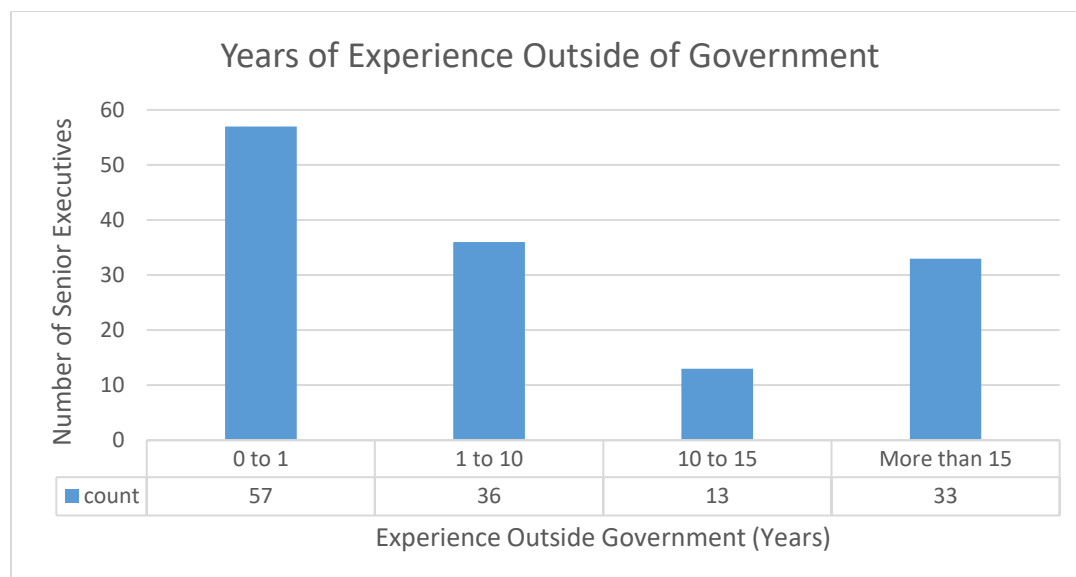
At the same time, the OPS seems to be a relatively friendly environment for less experienced and aspiring senior executives. Figure 3 outlines 24% of provincial senior public servants have less than two years of OPS senior leadership experience. In addition, Figure 4 highlights how  $\frac{3}{4}$  of assistant deputy ministers and above have had no more than two previous

senior executive appointments, with a median of one such assignment. In totality, the data show there are plenty of opportunities to break into the deputy, associate, and/or assistant deputy minister ranks. The OPS has a healthy culture of bringing fresh perspectives to senior executive tables.

On the other end of the spectrum, only 7% of current executives have over 10 years of senior leadership experience. This suggests a certain shelf life for people once they become a senior executive. Reasons for this phenomenon were not explored in the study, though they could include leaving to pursue other opportunities or retiring from the workforce altogether.



**Figure 3:** Years of Experience as a Senior Executive



**Figure 4:** Number of Past Senior Executive Appointments

The OPS senior executive cohort is made up of people with either non-existent, limited, or very significant professional experiences outside of government entities. A visual inspection of the counts in Figure 4 shows a plurality of current OPS senior leaders have less than one year of non-public sector experience. On the other hand, there is a significant number of people with more than 15 years of external experience. The OPS is therefore a friendly environment for both career bureaucrats who rise through the ranks and individuals with deep industry experience, while those in the middle face a somewhat less forgiving path to the senior executive cadre.

These results provide another case study in support of the portfolio theory of talent management. Career bureaucrats experience and benefit from the brain train, circulation, and linkage phenomena.

- Brain train – In alignment with the OPS People Plan (Government of Ontario, 2024), future leaders are most likely given opportunities to build the skills and experiences needed to become the assistant deputy ministers that make up part of the nearly ¼ of senior public servants with less than two years of equivalent level experience.

- Brain circulation and linkage – As will be discussed in the next subsection, individuals cycle through jobs across different functions and ministries before and throughout their tenure in the current senior executive cohort.

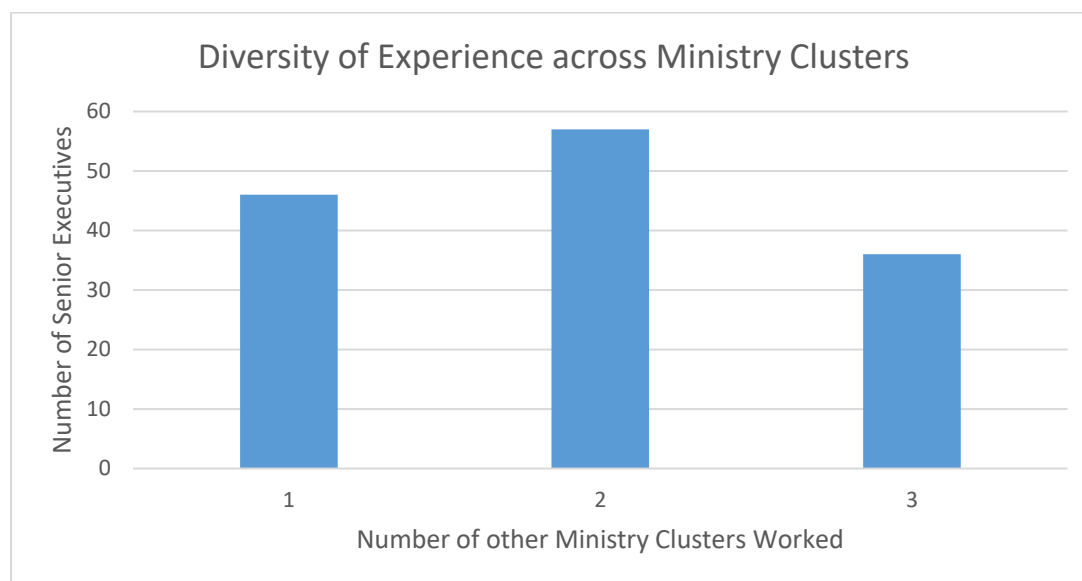
Senior public servants with outside-of-government professional experiences highlight the importance of recruiting and retaining external talent to optimize an organization's senior leadership roster. By leveraging the principle of brain gain, the OPS complements lifelong public servants with industry hires who are better positioned to inject fresh ideas into important conversations.

### Professional Diversity

The data clearly show current OPS senior executives come into their roles with significant diversity of professional experiences, although with very distinct patterns to note.

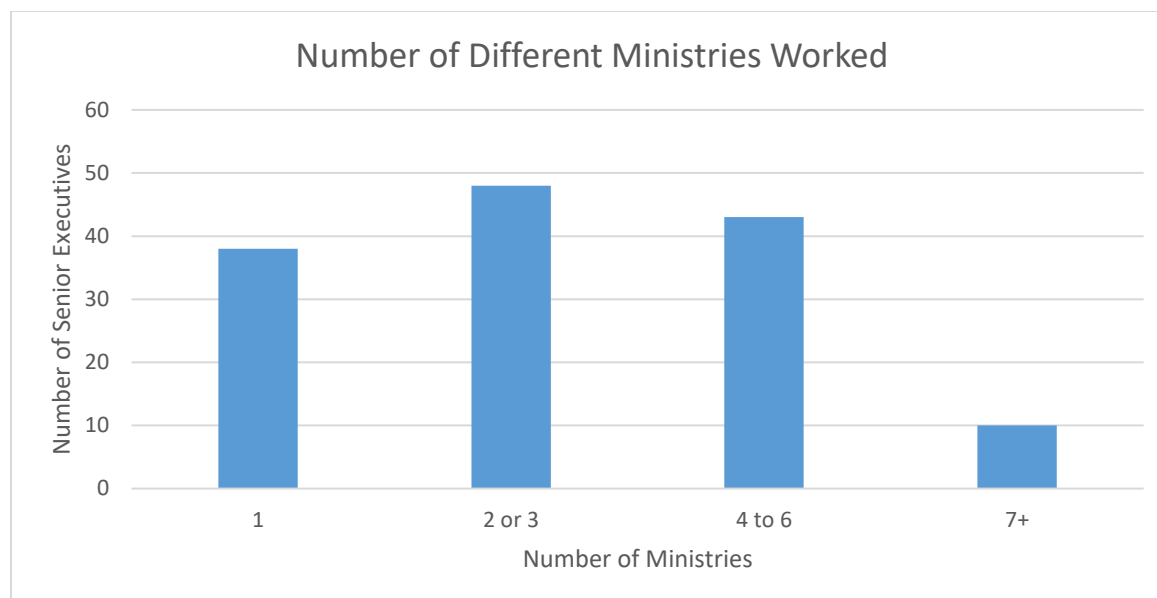
Findings on experiences across 1) functions; and 2) ministry clusters were converted into two corresponding sets of binary data. All “yes” responses were reclassified as “1” and “no” responses were reclassified as “0”. The breadth of professional diversity was measured by taking the sum of the (now binary) responses for each of the function and ministry cluster variables.

Figure 5 shows the number of clusters senior executives worked in a ministry cluster different from their current one. There was no ministry cluster especially overrepresented or underrepresented in senior leaders' resumes. The existence of interministerial diversity is more instructive than a specific combination of ministry experiences. To translate the abstract into the concrete using a hypothetical example, the average assistant deputy minister at the Ministry of Education has previously served, though not necessarily at a senior executive level, in either a central agency or within the economy, justice, natural resources, and transportation cluster. They are not more likely to work in one compared to the other.



**Figure 5: Professional Diversity Across Ministry Clusters**

Senior leaders are disproportionately likely to have strategic policy experience (90% of individuals) and especially unlikely to have legal services (5%) or communications (13%) experience. The majority (59%) currently work or have worked in corporate capacities, while a minority bring operations (40%) and executive office (24%) experience to the table. Figure 6 shows the number of Ministries in which senior executives have experience (at any level). Together with the average number of Ministries for this sample of executives at a little more than two functional areas and the detailed breakdown by areas of experience (reported above, not shown), meaning strategic policy experience is necessary but not sufficient for a career in senior leadership at the OPS.



**Figure 6:** Professional Diversity Across Functional Areas

Professional diversity variables shine another light on which career experiences are most powerful from a social capital perspective. Breadth in ministry cluster and functional area experiences, in addition to working in strategic policy and corporate services (the latter albeit relatively less significant), seem to convey status in OPS senior leadership and executive recruitment circles.

Reflections on the nature of work at the OPS informally support these conclusions. Governmental decisions are holistic and complex, an environment in which senior executives would benefit from drawing upon a wide body of diverse professional experiences. Since strategic policy and implementation form the core of public facing and/or high-profile government activities, it makes sense that individuals in these roles have done analogous work in the past.

### **Limitations**

The exclusively digital, LinkedIn and InfoGo based, data collection strategy employed for this research maximizes efficiency, but at the expense of accuracy and depth of analysis. This

section will discuss three key limitations and how they can be mitigated in future iterations of this study.

Firstly, the cohort of senior leaders that did not meet any exclusion criteria represents only 61% of the current OPS senior executive universe. There is a not insignificant risk of self-selection bias, where deputy, associate and assistant deputy ministers with fully up-to-date LinkedIn profiles are fundamentally different from those who have relatively stale accounts or no professional online presence as well.

Secondly, self-reported LinkedIn data points may be purposefully or mistakenly inaccurate. Consider the following examples based on anonymized composites, the core of all of which applied to at least one individual whose profile was excluded from the study:

- Marcus has been a deputy minister for five years across three assignments. He decides to omit all career (but not academic) history details prior to his appointment as a deputy. Due to these omissions, the values of his tenure and professional diversity variables are definitely and possibly understated, respectively.
- Julia, an assistant deputy minister in the strategic policy space, includes the universities she attended but not the subjects she studied. Her LinkedIn profile seems to show her complete professional history. As a result of omitting some academic background details, Julia's career journey was not considered in the study.
- Adam very recently started a new assignment as an assistant deputy minister and chief administrative officer. He did not yet update his online presence to reflect this new role. Although Adam's profile is otherwise fully populated, he was excluded from the study because his LinkedIn information was inconsistent with the InfoGo listing. This development shrinks the size of the cohort.

Thirdly, InfoGo and LinkedIn provide only surface level information, making it difficult to conduct deep analysis on all social markers that may contribute to senior executives' career progression. Consider the following questions that remain unanswered because of this reality:

- What demographic, psychographic, and/or socioeconomic factors have an impact on one's social capital in the context of optimizing career trajectory in the OPS? What are those impacts?
- How exactly does a high level of professional diversity enhance one's career prospects? Broader networks? Exposure to different ministry cultures and subcultures? Something else entirely?

Colleagues who wish to build on this work can consider applying research methods that collect deeper, more meaningful data – sending out detailed surveys like Evans et al. (2007) or conducting case study interviews with a representative sample of senior executives, to name a couple possibilities. These strategies would mitigate the current study's limitations, though new challenges will arise. Individuals may choose not to participate in surveys nor interviews. This risk would be compounded by the tight timelines experienced in the Topics paper context. The trade-off when comparing these alternatives and the digital exclusive methods employed here will always be between efficiency of data collection and accuracy of such collected data.

Researchers need to balance these risks and decide which ones they are most willing to tolerate.

### **Opportunities for Future Research**

This paper only begins to fill the knowledge gap on social markers of career advancement in the OPS. Future studies can build on this progress in three ways.

Firstly, it would be valuable to conduct a more comprehensive analysis of a wider range of potential social markers. This work could examine demographic, socioeconomic and

psychographic variables, including the intersections between them, to paint a fuller picture of why some people find it easier to advance in their careers at the OPS. As discussed in the previous section, data collection and analysis strategies would be more survey, interview and/or case study driven in this scenario.

Secondly, future research could examine whether and/or how the social markers identified here apply to OPS leaders who are not senior executives – directors and managers (and equivalents). The purpose of this hypothetical study would be to explore the extent to which career progression into senior leadership is fundamentally similar to and/or different than advancement into middle management. The methodology could be refined to address the limitations discussed earlier, though the current, digital focused strategy is still applicable to this idea.

Thirdly, colleagues could compare and contrast social markers of career advancement into senior leadership at the OPS with those in its federal, provincial and municipal public service counterparts. This would shine a light on how findings at the OPS are generalizable to the public sector as a whole, increasing the academic and real-world value of this work. To optimize for comparability, it is suggested to use similar data collection and analysis methods across public services.

## **Conclusion**

This study identified several social markers of career advancement for current OPS senior executives across academic, tenure, and professional diversity domains. Aspiring senior leaders can consider the following advice:

- University credentials are a prerequisite to becoming a senior public servant.
  - Graduate degrees are highly desirable, but not essential.

- There will be a significant number of opportunities to ‘break into’ the senior executive ranks.
- Individuals looking to join from the private or not-for-profit sectors would be wise to build up significant (15+ years) experience in their industries.
- People who want to become a senior executive should broaden their experiences across ministry clusters and functional areas.
  - Strategic policy experience is effectively non-negotiable.
  - Corporate services experience is valuable, but not non-negotiable.
- Leaders who want to maximize impact should do so early. Only 7% of current senior executives have been in those roles for longer than 10 years.

These findings reflect and reinforce key ideas from social capital theory. Lin’s (2008) model suggests individuals accumulate and deploy relationship resources in pursuit of professional achievements. In the OPS context, a graduate degree, experience across ministries and functions, and tenure in the senior executive cadre are some examples of social capital that signal readiness for progressively responsible roles. Access to the leadership table is not randomly distributed. It reflects the unequal distribution of social capital across the public service.

Portfolio theory offers an equally valuable lens to inform this analysis. Shin and Gordon (2024) describe talent systems in terms of brain train, brain gain, brain circulation, and brain linkage. The OPS leverages all four to build its senior executive team – developing rising stars through diverse assignments, recruiting externally to add complementary skillsets, and fostering career progression and mobility at all levels to maintain a healthy talent pipeline. Participation in

this talent ecosystem is conditional – education is a gatekeeping mechanism that shapes who rises to the top and who is left out.

The study's digital first research methods tolerate data accuracy to maximize efficiency. It is important to note LinkedIn and InfoGo have limited utility and do not provide the desired texture for a comprehensive analysis. Future research can address these limitations and build on current progress by leveraging more surveys and/or interviews, exploring social markers at the director and manager levels, and/or comparing and contrasting the state of the OPS with its federal, provincial, and municipal partners.

These findings point to the presence of unwritten rules that influence advancement in the OPS. Merit is inferred through proxies – academic credentials, tenure, and mobility across ministries and functions. Unfortunately, social markers run the risk of reinforcing systemic biases by favouring those who know or learn how the system works at the expense of those who do not or cannot.

Senior executives' values, priorities, and decisions shape what governments do, how public institutions operate, and whose interests they serve. If advancement into the OPS' most powerful corner offices is heavily influenced by fulfilling a narrow set of social markers, the public service may inadvertently exclude capable leaders whose backgrounds fall outside the dominant mold. The organization therefore risks missing out on the full range of perspectives, experiences, and competencies needed to govern an increasingly diverse and complex province.

This study starts the conversation by making visible what some may suspect. By identifying informal pathways to senior leadership, it provides a foundation for future research and consideration of pragmatic solutions. Building more inclusive and transparent talent management practices is not just the right thing to do. It is the smart thing to do. In today's

dynamic and turbulent world, it is essential to ensure the OPS continues to “attract, develop, and retain” (Government of Ontario, 2024) top talent as it continues its journey as an effective, representative, and trusted institution. As the saying goes, personnel is policy.

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