



Australian Government  
Australian Public Service  
Commission

AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE  
EMPLOYEE CENSUS

# EXPLANATORY GUIDE 2019



HAVE YOUR SAY

## Contents

Overview .....	2	Work-life balance.....	12
Management and administration of the APS employee census.....	2	Flexible working and other arrangements	12
Timing.....	2	Sources of stress at work.....	13
Questionnaire .....	3	Wellbeing.....	13
Data collection .....	3	Recruitment and retention.....	13
Participating agencies in 2019 .....	4	Individual performance .....	13
Development.....	7	Organisational performance.....	13
Employee engagement index.....	8	Risk culture .....	13
Innovation index .....	9	Innovation.....	14
Wellbeing index .....	10	Organisational change .....	14
Calculating and interpreting index scores.	10	Collaboration .....	14
Other topics addressed in the APS employee census.....	11	APS Values and unacceptable behaviours	14
Work-related demographics .....	11	Corruption.....	14
Diversity details.....	11	Free-text questions.....	14
Job family .....	11	Reporting rules .....	15
General impressions: Current job .....	11	Using the results .....	16
General impressions: Immediate workgroup.....	12	Interpreting survey results .....	16
General impressions: Immediate supervisor.....	12	Differences between employee perception survey results and data from human resources information systems	16
General impressions: Senior Executive Service .....	12	Comparisons and internal benchmarks ....	17
General impressions: Agency.....	12	Time series comparisons .....	17
Developing capability.....	12	Internal APS benchmarks.....	17
		Differences in function and size .....	17
		Rounding.....	18
		Further information .....	18



## Overview

The Australian Public Service (APS) employee census is an annual employee perception survey of the APS workforce. All eligible personnel employed under the *Public Service Act 1999* are invited to participate.

In 2019, 136,527 employees from 102 APS agencies were invited to participate in the employee census. A total of 104,471 responded, yielding a response rate of 77 per cent. This response rate is encouraging given the size of the APS workforce, the number of participating agencies and that the employee census has been administered annually for some time. This response rate is also strong when compared with similar surveys in other jurisdictions:

- NSW People Matter Employee Survey (2019) – 53%
- QLD Working for Queensland Survey (2017) – 49%
- VIC People Matter Survey (2018) – 47%
- NT People Matter Survey (2018) – 46%
- WA Employee Perception Survey (2018) – 43%
- TAS State Service Employee Survey (2018) – 30%
- SA Your Voice Survey (2018) – 22%
- UK Civil Service People Survey (2018) – 66%
- Canada Public Service Employee Survey (2018) – 58%
- USA Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (2018) – 41%

## Management and administration of the APS employee census

The APS employee census is managed and coordinated by the Strategic Policy and Research Group within the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC). The APSC contracts an external service provider to support survey administration and reporting activities. Engine (previously ORC International) was this service provider in 2019.

## Timing

Each year, the APS employee census is administered in the five week period beginning the second week of May. The reasons for the timing of the survey are two-fold. Firstly, the survey is administered at the same time each year to enable long-term trends and comparability of data across years and secondly, to meet our timeframe commitments for the annual State of the Service Report. Results from the APS employee census are a key input to the State of the Service Report and its production is carefully timed and managed to meet legislative requirements.



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## Questionnaire

All respondents to the APS employee census are asked a standard set of questions. This approach is taken to generate APS level results and benchmarks for comparison purposes.

## Data collection

The APS employee census is primarily an online survey. Respondents are invited to participate by email and are provided with a unique link to access the survey. A limited number of agencies distribute a paper version of the employee census to personnel who do not have regular access to a work email account.

Although participation is encouraged, the APS employee census is a voluntary activity. If a respondent chooses to participate, only a limited number of demographic-type questions must be answered. The remaining questions do not require a response if the respondent chooses not to answer.

Information about how privacy is maintained can be found on the APSC website:

- [Privacy policy](#)
- APS employee census [collection notice](#)

## Participating agencies in 2019

Administrative Appeals Tribunal  
 Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency  
 Attorney General's Department  
 Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission  
 Australian Building and Construction Commission  
 Australian Bureau of Statistics  
 Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research  
 Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission  
 Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity  
 Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care  
 Australian Communications and Media Authority  
 Australian Competition and Consumer Commission  
 Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission  
 Australian Digital Health Agency  
 Australian Electoral Commission  
 Australian Financial Security Authority  
 Australian Fisheries Management Authority  
 Australian Human Rights Commission  
 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies  
 Australian Institute of Family Studies  
 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare  
 Australian Law Reform Commission  
 Australian National Audit Office  
 Australian National Maritime Museum  
 Australian Office of Financial Management  
 Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority  
 Australian Public Service Commission  
 Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency  
 Australian Research Council  
 Australian Securities and Investments Commission  
 Australian Skills Quality Authority  
 Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority  
 Australian Taxation Office  
 Australian Trade and Investment Commission  
 Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre  
 Australian Transport Safety Bureau  
 Australian War Memorial  
 Bureau of Meteorology  
 Cancer Australia  
 Clean Energy Regulator  
 Climate Change Authority  
 Comcare  
 Commonwealth Grants Commission  
 Defence Housing Australia  
 Department of Agriculture and Water Resources  
 Department of Communications and the Arts  
 Department of Defence  
 Department of Education and Training  
 Department of Finance  
 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade  
 Department of Health  
 Department of Home Affairs  
 Department of Human Services  
 Department of Industry, Innovation and Science  
 Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development  
 Department of Jobs and Small Business  
 Department of Social Services  
 Department of the Environment and Energy  
 Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet  
 Department of the Treasury  
 Department of Veterans' Affairs  
 Digital Transformation Agency  
 Fair Work Commission  
 Federal Court of Australia  
 Food Standards Australia New Zealand  
 Future Fund Management Agency  
 Geoscience Australia  
 Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority  
 Independent Parliamentary Expenses Authority  
 Infrastructure and Project Financing Authority  
 IP Australia

Murray-Darling Basin Authority  
 Museum of Australian Democracy at Old  
 Parliament House  
 National Archives of Australia  
 National Blood Authority  
 National Capital Authority  
 National Disability Insurance Agency  
 National Disability Insurance Scheme Quality  
 and Safeguards Commission  
 National Film and Sound Archive of Australia  
 National Health and Medical Research Council  
 National Health Funding Body  
 National Library of Australia  
 National Mental Health Commission  
 National Museum of Australia  
 National Offshore Petroleum Safety and  
 Environmental Management Authority  
 National Portrait Gallery of Australia  
 Office of National Intelligence  
 Office of Parliamentary Counsel  
 Office of the Australian Information  
 Commissioner  
 Office of the Commonwealth Director of  
 Public Prosecutions  
 Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman  
 Office of the Fair Work Ombudsman  
 Office of the Inspector-General of Intelligence  
 and Security  
 Office of the Inspector-General of Taxation  
 Organ and Tissue Authority  
 Productivity Commission  
 Professional Services Review  
 Royal Australian Mint  
 Safe Work Australia  
 Screen Australia

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards  
 Agency  
 Torres Strait Regional Authority  
 Workplace Gender Equality Agency  
 Note:

Two non-APS agencies participated in the APS employee census in 2019 –The Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS) and Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA).

Agencies can opt to invite non-APS employees to participate in the employee census. Any responses from respondents who identify as not being an APS employee are excluded when calculating APS overall results. This includes responses from non-APS agencies such as DPS and CASA.

The number of APS employees invited to participate in the employee census differs from the size of the APS workforce officially reported in the APS Employment Data releases. These differences are for several reasons. It is up to agencies to set their own eligibility criteria, however typically:

- employees on leave for the entire period of the employee census administration period are typically excluded from the survey population as it is assumed that they are not at work to complete a work activity
- employees who are very new to an agency prior to or during the administration period are typically excluded from the survey population as it is assumed they have not had sufficient exposure to the new agency to develop opinions. This means that APS staff who have moved between APS agencies during this period may be excluded.

Additionally, some agencies specifically choose not to invite their non-APS, intermittent or irregular APS employees to participate in the employee census.



# The questionnaire



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## Development

The 2019 APS employee census questionnaire includes 267 individual questions grouped into 17 sections. Each section addresses a key aspect of working for an APS agency.

Each year the content of the APS employee census questionnaire is reviewed to ensure that each question has value and meets a specific purpose. The APSC researches and consults broadly to develop and select questions for inclusion in the questionnaire. In 2019, the APSC:

- Considered strategic-level priorities coming from the Independent Review of the APS, as well as the Secretaries Board and other senior-level committees to ensure that the employee census would capture appropriate information to inform and benchmark against these initiatives.
- Consulted with subject matter experts from within the APSC and other APS agencies to seek their input to question design and information requirements for supporting APS-level policies and programs.
- Researched contemporary understanding of issues and options for questionnaire content.
- Provided participating agencies with an opportunity to provide feedback and input to questionnaire design.

The resultant questionnaire covers numerous themes and measures. Central to these are three indices addressing employee engagement, innovation and wellbeing.



## Employee engagement index

Employee engagement has been thoroughly researched over a number of decades. High levels of employee engagement is strongly associated with positive benefits such as increased performance and productivity.

Employee engagement is more than simply job satisfaction or commitment to an organisation. It is the extent to which employees are motivated, inspired and enabled to improve an organisation's outcomes. It is a two-way relationship that exists between an employee and their organisation.

The APSC employs a model of employee engagement developed by Engine. This model addresses three attributes associated with employee engagement and measures the emotional connection and commitment employees have to working for their organisation. In this model, an engaged employee will "say", "stay" and "strive":

- Say – the employee is a positive advocate of the organisation.
- Stay – the employee is committed to the organisation and wants to stay as an employee.
- Strive – the employee is willing to put in discretionary effort to excel in their job and help their organisation succeed.

The Say, Stay, Strive model of employee engagement is flexible and the APSC has tailored the questions for the APS context. The questions that address each attribute and contribute to the index score for employee engagement are presented to the below.

 <p><b>SAY</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am proud to work in my agency</li> <li>• I would recommend my agency as a good place to work</li> <li>• Considering everything, I am satisfied with my job</li> <li>• I believe strongly in the purpose and objectives of my agency</li> </ul>
 <p><b>STAY</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I feel a strong personal attachment to my agency</li> <li>• I feel committed to my agency's goals</li> </ul>
 <p><b>STRIVE</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I suggest ideas to improve our way of doing things</li> <li>• I am happy to go the 'extra mile' at work when required</li> <li>• I work beyond what is required in my job to help my agency achieve its objectives</li> <li>• My agency really inspires me to do my best work every day</li> </ul>

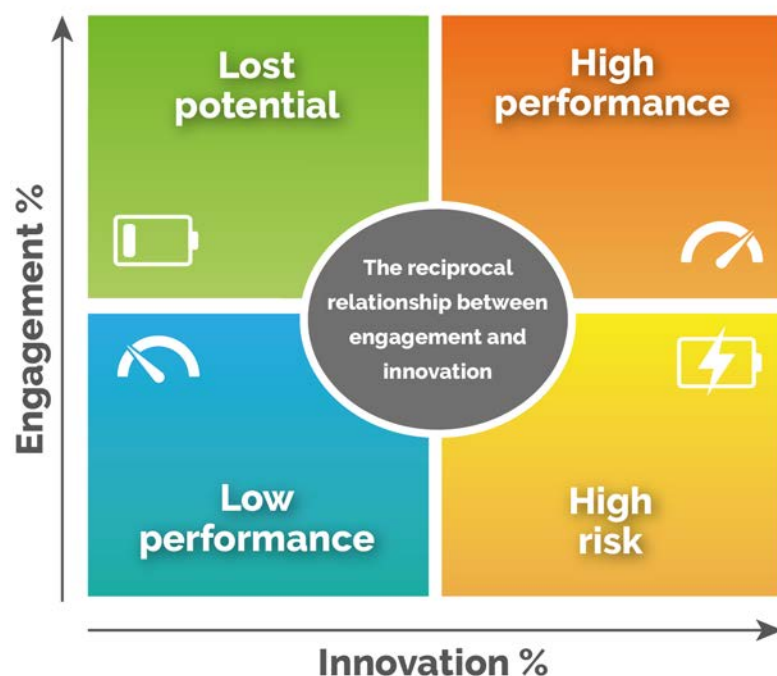
## Innovation index

Innovation is a particular focus for the APS because it can drive improved performance, productivity and work outcomes. Innovation and employee engagement are also linked such that innovation can drive engagement, and innovation can flourish where employee engagement is high. Engine summarises the reciprocal relationship between employee engagement and innovation with the graphic to the below.

In part, the 2019 APS employee census addresses innovation through a set of dedicated questions that contribute to an index score. This innovation index score assesses both whether employees feel willing and able to be innovative, and whether their agency has a culture which enables them to be so.

The questions that form the innovation index are:

- I believe that one of my responsibilities is to continually look for new ways to improve the way we work.
- My immediate supervisor encourages me to come up with new or better ways of doing things.
- People are recognised for coming up with new and innovative ways of working.
- My agency inspires me to come up with new or better ways of doing things.
- My agency recognises and supports the notion that failure is a part of innovation.





## Wellbeing index

The APS has long been focused on the wellbeing of its employees. As employers, APS agencies have obligations under Work Health and Safety legislation. Together with these obligations is an acknowledgement that high performance of employees and organisations cannot be sustained without adequate levels of employee wellbeing.

The wellbeing index included in the APS employee census measures both the practical and cultural elements that allow for a sustainable and healthy working environment.

The questions that form the wellbeing index are:

- I am satisfied with the policies/practices in place to help me manage my health and wellbeing.
- My agency does a good job of communicating what it can offer me in terms of health and wellbeing.
- My agency does a good job of promoting health and wellbeing.
- I think my agency cares about my health and wellbeing.
- I believe my immediate supervisor cares about my health and wellbeing.

## Calculating and interpreting index scores

The questions that comprise each index are asked on a five-point agreement scale. To calculate the index score, each respondent's answers to the set of questions are recoded to fall on a scale between 0 and 100 per cent. The recoded responses are then averaged across the five or more index questions to provide the index score for that respondent. An individual only receives an index score if they have responded to all questions which comprise that index.

Index scores for groups of respondents are calculated by averaging the respondent scores that comprise that group.

An index score on its own can provide information about the group to which it relates. Index scores, however, have the most utility when they are compared with scores over time or between work units, organisations and demographic groups.



## Other topics addressed in the APS employee census

The APS employee census addresses a broad range of topic areas. These topic areas and the questions that relate to them can change between years depending on priorities and areas of focus for the APS.

Each of the major topic areas addressed in the 2019 APS employee census is listed below with a brief summary of where each set of questions originated.

### Work-related demographics

As in previous years, the 2019 APS employee census included several questions about demographics such as length of service, type of work and level of education. These facilitate a greater understanding of workforce attitudes.

### Diversity details

The APS employee census captured a range of information to address the diversity and inclusion priorities of the APS. A question has been added in 2019 to assess the extent to which those who identify as LGBTI+ are 'out' in the workplace. ACON<sup>1</sup> approached the APSC about the importance of measuring this in order to provide a richer understanding of the experience of LGBTI+ people at work. This aligned the APS employee census with the Australian Workplace Equality Index (AWEI) for benchmarking purposes, and was supported by LGBTI+ networks across the APS.

### Job family

The 2019 APS employee census included a question asking respondents to choose an option that best describes the type of work they do. The response options presented at this question corresponded with the job families within the [APS job family model](#). A "digital" job type was added to inform APS work on [Building Digital Capability](#).

### General impressions: Current job

Respondents were asked their attitudes towards their current job and working conditions. Some questions within this section contribute to measures of employee engagement. Most questions within this section have been included within the APS employee census for a number of years and provide useful data for time series comparisons.

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<sup>1</sup> ACON is a New South Wales based health promotion organisation specialising in HIV prevention, HIV support and LGBTI+ health.



## **General impressions: Immediate workgroup**

Respondents were asked a number of questions about the people they work with on a daily basis. Most of the questions within this section have been included within the APS employee census for a number of years.

## **General impressions: Immediate supervisor**

Respondents were asked for their views of their immediate supervisor. Some questions within this section have been included in the APS employee census for a number of years. Others are relatively new and reflect contemporary skills and attributes of APS managers.

## **General impressions: Senior Executive Service**

Respondents were asked for their views of their immediate Senior Executive Service (SES) manager as well as their thoughts on the SES cohort within their agency. For the purposes of the APS employee census, an immediate SES manager is a Line/Branch/Group manager or equivalent. The majority of questions within this section reflected the set of leadership behaviours and competencies endorsed by the APS Secretaries Board.

## **General impressions: Agency**

Respondents were asked for their attitudes towards their current agency. Several questions within this set contribute to measures of employee engagement, while others evaluate APS workforce strategies or provide time series comparisons.

## **Developing capability**

Questions assessing the ways that supervisors and individuals develop employee capability were created in 2018 in consultation with subject matter experts within the APSC. These have been extended in 2019 to include items that assess skills or capability gaps within the immediate workgroup.

## **Work-life balance**

The question asking respondents to indicate their satisfaction with the work-life balance of their current job has been included within the APS employee census since 2012.

## **Flexible working and other arrangements**

The questions addressing flexible working and other arrangements were revised in 2019 to ensure options presented to respondents were current. As flexible working and other arrangements were often informal and not documented, these questions provided each agency with additional information about the uptake of these arrangements. This information also supported the evaluation of specific APS diversity strategies.



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## Sources of stress at work

The United Kingdom's Health and Safety Executive (UK HSE) identified six [Management Standards](#) that represent the primary sources of stress at work. The HSE Management Standards Indicator tool contains 35 questions to assess work stress, and as in previous years, the 2019 APS employee census uses seven of these questions.

## Wellbeing

Respondents were asked a series of questions that assessed organisational support for employees' health and wellbeing. Responses to most of these questions were used to calculate the wellbeing index score. The remaining questions were provided by Comcare.

## Recruitment and retention

The 2019 APS employee census asked respondents about their future career intentions. These questions have been included within the APS employee census for a number of years.

One of the priorities for the APS is investment in capability and talent management. Part of this includes strategic recruitment, development and mobility. Questions about mobility were developed for the 2017 APS employee census and have been expanded upon in 2019.

## Individual performance

A revised set of questions addressing perceptions and experiences of performance management were included within the 2018 APS employee census and have been continued in 2019.

Accompanying the updated set of questions addressing performance management were revised questions focused on the management of underperformance. These questions were developed by the APSC to better understand respondents' views and experiences relating to how underperformance was managed in their agency.

## Organisational performance

As in previous years, respondents were asked about their workgroup and agency's success. In 2019, respondents were also asked about possible barriers to performing at their best.

## Risk culture

The 2019 APS employee census extends the assessment of agencies' risk culture. These were developed in consultation with the Department of Finance and align with their approach to assessing risk culture across the Commonwealth.



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## **Innovation**

Questions addressing respondents' experiences with and attitudes towards innovation have been expanded following revision in 2018. Questions regarding experience of innovation were asked only of Executive Level (EL) and SES staff in 2019 – a change intended to only ask those staff with most visibility of innovation. A block of five attitudinal questions from this section, asked of all employees, was used to calculate the innovation index score.

## **Organisational change**

The 2019 APS employee census included a revised section assessing the impacts of organisational change. This section assesses the type of change experienced in the past 12 months, and the impact of this change, as well as asking how respondents perceive organisational change more generally.

## **Collaboration**

This new section in the 2019 APS employee census was asked only of EL and SES staff. It assesses the experience of collaboration within and between agencies and external stakeholders.

## **APS Values and unacceptable behaviours**

Questions addressing perceived adherence to the APS Values have been included in the APS employee census for a number of years. This section also includes questions regarding perceived experiences of discrimination, harassment or bullying in the previous 12 months.

## **Corruption**

Consistent with previous years, respondents were asked to indicate whether they had witnessed corruption in their workplace and to describe the behaviour they had seen. A series of attitudinal questions towards corruption were also developed in collaboration with agencies and relevant APSC policy areas.

## **Free-text questions**

At the very end of the 2019 APS employee census, respondents were asked to provide comments to two questions: what the agency was doing well and the most important issue that the agency needed to address.

## Reporting rules

The APSC employs specific rules around how results are reported. Such rules protect the privacy of respondents and individual agencies' results.

De-identification of data is undertaken in accordance with guidance provided by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner.

The APSC may provide agencies and external parties with de-identified census datasets. As outlined in the APSC Privacy Policy, responses within these datasets will not be reasonably attributable to any specific individual.

Agencies may publicly release reports of their APS employee census results. These reports will be at the whole-of-agency level.

De-identified datasets are uploaded to [data.gov.au](https://data.gov.au) in accordance with the Australian Government Public Data Policy.





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## Using the results

### Interpreting survey results

Most items in the employee census ask respondents to rate the level of agreement regarding, or satisfaction with, workplace issues on a five-point, ordinal scale. The scales are generally balanced, allowing respondents to express one of two extremes in view (for example, satisfaction and dissatisfaction) and with a midpoint that allows respondents to enter a 'neutral' response. When reporting, the five points can be collapsed into three: agree/satisfied, neutral, and disagree/dissatisfied. Therefore the neutral category refers to responses that reflect a 'neither agree nor disagree' sentiment.

When interpreting item responses, it is important to realise there is an ordinal relationship between points in a scale. The strength of opinion to shift a respondent from 'neutral' to 'satisfied' may be much smaller (or larger) than the strength required to shift a respondent from 'satisfied' to 'very satisfied'.

Although it can be a valuable resource and evidence base, it should be remembered that the APS employee census is an employee perception survey. Respondents are asked to provide their opinions and perceived experiences.

As with any survey, the APS employee census can involve error, both predictable and unpredictable. For example, respondents may provide a socially acceptable answer rather than their true attitudes.

Additionally, although all APS employees are invited to participate, not everyone chooses to do so. Even with a strong response rate at the APS-overall level, there is a chance that non-respondents are different from those who completed the census. At the APS-level, five demographics are checked to ensure respondents are representative of the broader APS workforce. These demographics are age, gender, state/territory, and substantive and current classification. There were no considerable differences in demographics among those who did and did not respond to the survey. However, some caution may be required when interpreting results from groups with lower response rates.

### Differences between employee perception survey results and data from human resources information systems

Responses to the APS employee census as an employee perception survey may differ to data held within human resources information systems. This is particularly true for demographic and diversity-related information.

There are numerous reasons for these differences. Some characteristics are not always permanent and impact an employee for a certain period of time (e.g., disability). Some employees also may not want to officially disclose and record some information on their agency's human resources systems or find the process onerous.



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## Comparisons and internal benchmarks

### Time series comparisons

Results for the APS employee census are compared with those from previous years wherever possible. This provides a source for trend comparisons and a benchmark for assessing whether results have changed.

The questions included within the APS employee census can change between years. While most questions are retained without change, new questions are added, others removed and some are reworded. Results are typically only compared between years if the same question wording was used in each year. Changes in wording can alter the meaning of a question and change how it would be answered by respondents.

### Internal APS benchmarks

Reporting of agencies' APS employee census results primarily focus on comparisons with internal APS benchmarks.

Results for the APS overall provide the most common comparator for individual agencies' results. Agencies are further grouped by size and function to provide other benchmark scores for comparisons.

### Differences in function and size

There may be variability in results across the size of agencies, as well as the functions that agencies perform (e.g., regulatory, specialist, operational). Therefore any comparison across agencies should also take into consideration other factors, such as size and functional cluster. More information about functional cluster and size can be found on the [APSC's website](#).

When comparing results to external benchmark scores, it is important to consider how well the APS employee census and benchmarked questions match. While it is usually preferred that questions being compared have identical wording, it is sometimes reasonable to compare questions that are worded differently.

When comparing the results for questions with different wording, it is important to consider whether the questions measure the same thing in the same context. Differences can certainly be accommodated, but likely weaken any direct comparisons between the results.

For instance, these two questions are similar, but are not directly comparable:

- Considering everything, I am satisfied with my job.
- I like the work I do in my current position.

While both questions appear to address how much a respondent likes their job, the first addresses general job satisfaction, while the second focuses more on how much the person likes the work they



are asked to do in their job. Both concepts are similar, but not the same. Depending on the reasons why external benchmarks are required, it may still be appropriate to compare the results for these questions.

Engine collect and make available a range of external benchmarks drawn from their activities in numerous sectors around the world. These benchmarks can be viewed via the online portal and interactive tools that agencies can access to analyse their APS employee census results.

## Rounding

Results for the APS employee census are typically reported as whole numbers for ease of reading. Values from x.00 to x.49 are rounded down, while values from x.50 to x.99 are rounded up. Any rounding is performed at the last stage of calculation to maximise accuracy of the reported results.

In some instances, results may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Rounding may also mean that reported figures may not be identical to those calculated manually. Any differences, however, would not be more than one percentage point.

## Further information

To access further information regarding the APS employee census and reported results, please go to the [APSC website](#).

State of the Service Reports can be found on the [APSC website](#).

To access APS employee census de-identified datasets, please go to [data.gov.au](#).

To request further information about the APS employee census please contact the APS employee census team from the APSC at [stateoftheservice@apsc.gov.au](mailto:stateoftheservice@apsc.gov.au) or on 1800 464 926.