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Abstract

Innovation is critical to organisational success and is a process steered, and potentially thwarted, by individuals. However, despite the importance of public sector innovation given the complexity of policy issues faced and the sector's specific contextual features, our understanding of innovation processes in government requires expansion. This study, using in-depth case analyses of three Australian Public Service agencies, focuses on understanding the 'human component' of the innovation process by drawing on both innovation champion and promotor theories to explore, through the lens of organisational power, how multiple human agents progress public sector innovations. The results highlight the key, and often tandem, roles of individuals at multiple organisational levels who work to inspire and motivate others to progress an innovation (champions) and those with specific power bases who help overcome organisational barriers to innovation (promoters).

Keywords: innovation champions; innovation promoters; Australian Public Service; public sector innovation; organisational power.

Introduction

Innovation in the public sector ‘involves creating, developing and implementing practical ideas that achieve a public benefit’ (Mulgan, 2014, p.5). Historically, analyses of public sector innovation has moved from awareness of its importance, to identifying barriers impeding it, to active attempts to embed innovative practices (Bason, 2010). Although innovation is critical to government given its diverse policy challenges (Marsh & Edwards, 2009), ‘the current understanding of the sources of public innovation is inadequate’ (Sørensen & Torfing, 2011, p.844). Further, despite recognition that innovations must be steered by individuals (Frost & Egri, 1991) few studies focus on the range of critical human agents who do this, particularly in a public sector context, such as the types of roles played and how barriers are overcome to progress innovations. Drawing on innovation champion and promotor theories, we undertake an in-depth exploration of these critical human agents within an Australian Public Service (APS) context.

Both innovation champions and promoters (termed ‘innovation agents’) are active and enthusiastic drivers of organisational innovation (Rost, Hölzle & Gemünden, 2007). Innovation champions are generally viewed as one or two key agents who extend ‘above and beyond’ their formal role to engage in multiple, particularly transformational leadership-style, behaviours to push an innovation forward (Howell, Shea & Higgins, 2005). Promotor theory focuses on specific organisational barriers to innovation and the individuals who assume specialist promotor roles to overcome them (van Laere & Aggastam, 2015). These frameworks are predominantly investigated separately, despite recent work recognising that both types of agents are important for innovation processes (Rost et al., 2007) that are often non-linear and complex. This means relatively little is

known about how both champion and promotor roles operate together and may be embodied within and across multiple individuals (van Laere & Aggastam, 2015). The characteristics of government, such as its hierarchical structures, bureaucracy and formalised distributions of organisational power (Matheson, 1996), will also impact upon how, and how many, innovation agents operate and navigate this context. Overall, there is much scope to strengthen the sector's culture of innovation through greater insight into the critical individuals who help to drive it.

We develop these insights through an in-depth qualitative approach using three case studies of medium and large APS agencies. Drawing on Kanter's (1988) power bases as a linking mechanism between champion and promotor theory, we argue that the hierarchical and power-dependent nature of the public sector drives the need for multiple innovation agents, both champions and promoters at multiple organisational levels, to navigate the complexity and barriers to innovation that characterise this organisational context (Torugsa & Arundel, 2016). The study contributes to the public sector innovation literature through unravelling the critical roles adopted by individuals to 'drive, navigate and protect' a project and identifying the unique contributions of both champions and promoters at various organisational levels.

Theory and Research Questions

Human agency is a critical driver of innovation (Frost & Egri, 1991). Two different perspectives are dominant in theorising on human agents in innovation – champion and promotor theories. While the champion concept is prevalent in Anglo-American research (Rost et al., 2007), German studies have largely focused on Witte's (1977) promotor model (Hauschildt, 2010).

Innovation champions: Going 'above and beyond'

Broadly, champions are ‘the individuals who emerge to take creative ideas ... and bring them to life’ (Howell & Higgins, 1990a, p.40). Champions arise informally in organisations (Howell et al., 2005), extend beyond their formal roles (Howell & Higgins, 1990b), display ‘persistence and courage of heroic quality’ (Schon, 1963, p.85), have high levels of intrinsic motivation (Mansfeld, Hölzle & Gemünden, 2010), demonstrate energy (Maidique, 1980) and optimism (Howell & Higgins, 1990b) and assume a potentially high degree of personal risk to overcome the change resistance often associated with innovation (Kriz, Molloy & Denness, 2013). Champions’ abilities to communicate ‘a clear vision of what the innovation could be or do, displaying enthusiasm about innovation, demonstrating commitment to it, and involving others in supporting it’ distinguishes them from non-champions (Howell et al., 2005, p.646). While the concept has been criticised as a ‘Great-Man theory’ (Rost et al., 2007, p.344) that focuses on only one individual or ‘all-around star’ (Goduscheit, 2014, p.526), the literature does identify that multiple people can undertake the role. For example, Frost and Egri (1991) suggest that product or process champions (at lower organisational levels) and management or executive champions (at higher organisational levels) are important, particularly when an innovation is complex, critical or costly (Day, 1994). Van Laere & Aggestam (2015, p.15) have also shown that ‘multiple heroes’, rather than a single champion, do exist. This also reflects broader discussions in the field of a shift from more traditional ‘push’ to more contemporary ‘pull’ models of innovation (Hagel, Brown & Davison, 2010).

Kriz et al.’s (2013) two-level framework describes ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ championing by distinguishing innovation champions (ICs) from champions of innovation (CoIs). The more commonly cited ICs identified above generally operate at

lower and middle management levels and ‘push’ the innovation upward. CoIs are a top-management level individual (not necessarily the CEO) (Frost & Egri, 1991) who exhibits similar motivational qualities to the IC and is enthusiastic towards the innovation, but also has hierarchical power (Day, 1994) and can channel resources to the innovation (Maidique, 1980). Through their positional authority, CoIs operate from the top-down to ‘pull’ innovation through the system. They do this by absorbing risk (Maidique, 1980), enhancing idea legitimacy (Deschamps, 2005), utilising strong power bases to acquire needed resources (Tushman & Nadler, 1986) and exerting influence and control over innovation-based decisions (Deschamps, 2005). The distinction recognises that compared to ICs, CoIs will likely have increased formal responsibility for driving strategic innovative activities and greater control and influence over resource allocation and decision-making regarding innovation. The notion of multiple individuals assuming roles in the innovation process has led to the development of promotor theory.

Promotor theory: Innovation as a division of labour

While similar to champion literature in suggesting that promoters ‘actively and intensively promote an innovation’ (Witte, 1977, p.53), promotor theory is premised upon the use of power bases (Hauschildt, 2010) and focuses on a number of specialist individuals (Goduscheit, 2014) who overcome specific organisational barriers to innovation (Rost et al., 2007).

Witte (1977) initially conceived of two promotor roles: a *power promotor* who utilises hierarchical power to marshal resources and remove obstacles (Goduscheit, 2014) or barriers of ‘will’ (Witte, 1977, p.47); and an *expert promotor* who holds specific technical knowledge and has a close connection to the innovation (Rost et al., 2007) to overcome barriers of ‘capability’ (Witte, 1977, p.47). This conceptualisation

has now expanded to include two other roles. *Process promoters* overcome administrative or bureaucratic barriers (Klerkx & Aarts, 2013) by exercising their organisational knowledge, networks and ‘diplomatic talents’ to connect and communicate with relevant stakeholders (Chakrabarti & Hauschildt, 1989, p.166) by ‘interfacing within the organisational structure’ (Rost et al., 2007, p.344). *Relationship promoters* overcome barriers of cooperation ((Klerkx & Aarts, 2013), largely between extra-organisational partners, by leveraging their networks and ability to connect disparate parties and foster knowledge sharing for the benefit of the innovation (Rost et al., 2007). Each type of promotor must draw on a specific power base (e.g. hierarchical potential for a power promotor) in order to overcome their specific barrier (Hauschildt, 2010).

Distinguishing the champion and promotor frameworks

While the terms champion and promotor have been used interchangeably (e.g. Klerkx & Aarts, 2013), the concepts represent different theoretical lenses for the study of innovation agents (e.g. Mansfeld et al., 2010; Rost et al., 2007). The existence of both champions and promoters has been empirically identified (Rost et al., 2007), including the different personal characteristics of each such as their motivation, commitment and need for autonomy (Mansfeld et al., 2010). Another posited distinction is that champion theory focuses on the activities of *one* individual (the champion), whereas promotor theory focuses on *multiple* individuals in the innovation process (through various promotor roles) (van Laere & Aggestam, 2015). However, as identified earlier, this distinction overlooks how champion literature theorises and empirically demonstrates that more than one champion may be needed (e.g. Frost & Egri, 1991). Building on Mansfeld et al. (2010), and the work of Howell and colleagues, we focus on the

transformational nature of champions and the behaviours they exhibit (identified earlier) as a key differentiator between the two concepts.

Howell et al. (2005, p.657) label champions as ‘informal transformational leaders’ and the literature explicitly theorises the ‘heroic’ qualities of these individuals (Schon, 1963, p.85), including: inspiring and enthusing others (Howell & Higgins, 1990c); motivating others in support of the innovation (Howell et al., 2005); passion for the innovation (Howell et al., 2005); and heightened persistence (Howell & Higgins, 1990c) and acceptance of personal risk (Chakrabarti & Hauschildt, 1989). While promoters are recognised as active and intensive supporters of an innovation (Witte, 1977), the transformational-type behaviours and specific qualities identified in champions are generally not reflected in promotor studies. Instead, promotor theorising focuses on specific barriers to innovation progression and the specialist roles assumed to overcome those (Rost et al., 2007). Due to these differences studies have generally analysed either champions or promoters (for exceptions see Rost et al., 2007; Mansfeld et al., 2010). However, as both agents ‘must be an integral part of innovation processes’ (Rost et al., 2007, p.345), and we suggest this is particularly so in a public sector context, we aim to study their co-existence.

Integrating the frameworks: Exploring the roles of champions and promoters in the Australian Public Service context

To integrate the frameworks for a public sector context we draw on an underlying mechanism that we argue drives the need for multiple champions (both at lower and higher organisational levels) and promoters, what Kanter (1985, p.216) terms ‘the search for power’. Different sources of power are often needed to successfully drive an innovation through organisations that are complex, hierarchical, resistant to change,

politically sensitive (Kanter, 1988) and bureaucratic, all of which constitute barriers to be navigated in public sector innovation (Torugsa & Arundel, 2016). However, clearly not all innovation agents, either champions or promoters, will have access to each of these ‘power tools’ (Kanter, 1988, p.186) or bases. Particularly when power is distributed according to organisational hierarchy individuals must rely upon ‘additional supplies’ from other agents to successfully facilitate an innovation (Kanter, 1985, p.216).

The use of power is particularly critical in the public sector as governments continue to ‘operate through systems of delegated authorities’ (Bourgon, 2008, p.395). Due to the need for accountability and political control the APS remains dominated by mechanistic structures with ‘narrow spans of control, tall hierarchies, fixed duties, centralised decision-making and vertical communications’ (Matheson, 1996, p.44). Limits on delegation and the discretion available at lower hierarchical levels (Matheson, 1996) suggests that power will be concentrated at the higher echelons of the organisation. This type of power structure will likely amplify the need for championing efforts at lower and higher organisational levels as well as specialised promotor roles (such as process promoters) to navigate innovations through the hierarchy, as agents find the limits of their power are reached thus requiring the ‘supplies’ of another. This also reflects Sørensen’s (2012) assertion that public sector innovation requires both top-down and bottom-up management.

By identifying the underlying mechanism of power and adopting Kriz et al.’s (2013) IC-CoI distinction and the four promotor roles (expert, power, process and relationship), we aim to address a key gap in the literature by exploring the roles that both champions and promoters play in fostering public sector innovation and what they

individually, and collectively, ‘bring to the innovation table’. The research questions guiding our study are:

RQ1. What roles do ICs and CoIs play in the public sector innovation process?

RQ2. What roles do promoters play in the public sector innovation process?

RQ3. Can champion and promotor roles be conducted simultaneously within and across individuals and what impact does this have on the innovation process?

Methods

A qualitative case study approach, with semi-structured interviews, was utilised. Size was an important criterion for case selection as a range of innovation agents are more likely in complex and sizable organisations (Chakrabarti & Hauschildt, 1989). As per Australian Public Service Commission (2012) definitions, cases consisted of one medium (251-1000 employees) and two large (more than 1000 employees) APS agencies. Three to four innovation agents within each case were selected (Yin, 2003).

Accessing champions is not easy (Howell, et al. 2005), but peer nomination has become ‘a highly reliable and valid technique’ (Howell & Higgins, 1990b, p.326) for identification (e.g. Rost, et al., 2007). Within this study, identification occurred in two stages. First (as per Kumar, Stern & Anderson (1993, p.1634)), within each agency a ‘key informant’ provided background information on the organisation, supported the research and anonymously identified and then facilitated access to champions (with nominated ICs and CoIs unaware of their identifier). A ‘key informant’ typically has close proximity to a champion, offers an independent perspective on their behaviour and is ‘knowledgeable about the issues being researched and ... willing to communicate about them’ (Kumar et al., 1993, p.1634). Champion identification began by meeting

the key informant to discuss the types of individuals sought for interviews. Role descriptors derived from the champion literature were developed and each key informant nominated individuals closely matching these criteria. Solely using the IC-CoI two-level framework here was more parsimonious for informants to identify others, rather than utilising the four promotor roles or both in tandem.

The second stage of champion identification followed the interviews. Three champions were identified and interviewed within each case (generally two in lower- to middle-level roles and one at the higher-level), as well as key informants. Two to three researchers generally participated in the interviews to help determine ‘true’ champions. Not all nominees were confirmed in these roles (please see Table 1) as, in conjunction with key informants’ comments, ICs and CoIs were verified by the researchers using Kriz et al.’s (2013) definitions (including assessing hierarchical level and degree of control and influence) and whether individuals exhibited champion qualities identified in the literature. Whether confirmed champions also undertook promotor roles was determined between the researchers from the interview data (key informant and identified champion data) and guidance from the literature. Triangulating these multiple perspectives enables deliberation and reconciliation of diverse construct views (Eisenhardt, 1989) to more accurately identify focal individuals. The interview data were analysed through NVivo software and a finer-grained process of researcher data immersion through manual content analysis.

Overall fourteen face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 45 minutes to one hour (all were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim). The interview protocol focused on champion behaviours, motivations and the APS context. Interviewees varied in gender, age and job and APS tenure.

Table 1. Identified innovation champions and promotor in case organisations

<i>Case</i>	<i>Final label for the innovation agent</i>	<i>Organisational level (broadly)</i>	<i>Self-identified as what type of champion?</i>	<i>Confirmed as a champion by the researchers?</i>	<i>Confirmed as a promotor by the researchers?</i>	<i>IC/CoI characteristics</i>	<i>Promotor characteristics</i>
APS1	IC1 (Expert Promotor)	Middle	Innovation champion	Yes	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intrinsically motivated by innovation • Went beyond role requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boundary spanning, quantification of ideas (<i>Expert Promotor</i>)
	n/a	Middle	Innovation champion	No - played a supporting role in the innovation but largely directed by CoI1.	No – no clear promotor role undertaken	n/a	n/a
	IC2 (Expert and Process Promotor)	Upper	Champion of innovation	Yes – as an IC, not CoI due to limited positional power and ability to initiate innovative projects and influence budgetary allocations	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calculated risk taker • Motivated by innovation • Highly persistent despite challenges, empowered staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holds relevant technical skills (<i>Expert Promotor</i>) • Politically savvy, key influencer (<i>Process Promotor</i>)
	CoI1 (Process and Power Promotor)	Upper	Champion of innovation	Yes	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passionate and intrinsically motivated by innovation • Persistent despite challenges • Stimulated innovation culture • Calculated risk taker, ‘protected’ new innovations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses networks to gain cross-agency support (<i>Process Promotor</i>) • ‘Pilots’ ideas – ‘I say to people ‘just do it’’ and accepts accountability (<i>Power Promotor</i>)
APS2	P1 (Process Promotor)	Middle	Innovation champion	No - passionate about the job, not necessarily the innovation.	Yes	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influences different audiences and ‘smooths over’ organisational

<i>Case</i>	<i>Final label for the innovation agent</i>	<i>Organisational level (broadly)</i>	<i>Self-identified as what type of champion?</i>	<i>Confirmed as a champion by the researchers?</i>	<i>Confirmed as a promotor by the researchers?</i>	<i>IC/CoI characteristics</i>	<i>Promotor characteristics</i>
							‘politics’ (<i>Process Promotor</i>)
	IC3 (Expert, Process and Relationship Promotor)	Middle	Innovation champion	Yes	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very passionate about the innovation, highly motivated • Goes beyond formal role to support the innovation; perseverance, determination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject matter expert on project (<i>Expert Promotor</i>) • Can ‘navigate’ the politics, savvy (<i>Process Promotor</i>) • Forged and maintained productive relationships with external partners (<i>Relationship Promotor</i>)
	P2 (Process Promotor)	Upper	Champion of innovation	No - motivated by other factors (e.g. doing the job well), not the innovation. Wasn’t identified as a motivating force for others.	Yes	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of organisational hierarchy, politically savvy, extensive networks to justify and ‘protect’ the project (<i>Process Promotor</i>)
APS3	IC4 (Expert and Process Promotor)	Middle	Innovation champion	Yes	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intrinsically motivated by the innovation, motivated staff members • Extended beyond role responsibilities to take a leading role; persistence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boundary spanner (literature searches, external consultation) (<i>Expert Promotor</i>) • Political nous, extensive networks and uses influence tactics (<i>Process Promotor</i>)
	P3 (Process Promotor)	Middle	Innovation champion	No - general desire and enthusiasm to improve the workplace; not a motivating force.	Yes	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political skills, influence, high-level relationships (<i>Process Promotor</i>)
	CoI2	Executive	Champion of innovation	Yes	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong personal commitment and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used positional power to ‘set up’ the innovation,

<i>Case</i>	<i>Final label for the innovation agent</i>	<i>Organisational level (broadly)</i>	<i>Self-identified as what type of champion?</i>	<i>Confirmed as a champion by the researchers?</i>	<i>Confirmed as a promotor by the researchers?</i>	<i>IC/CoI characteristics</i>	<i>Promotor characteristics</i>
	(Power Promotor)					passion for the innovation • Willing to risk personal reputation and the reputation of APS3 for the innovation	recruit supporters and generally drive it internally and externally <i>(Power Promotor)</i>

Results

Case findings are discussed separately to analyse the innovation process within its context.

As the innovations discussed were incremental or ongoing, and this research focuses on innovation through its ‘people’ and ‘power’ dimensions (Frost & Egri, 1991), project outcomes are not canvassed. As findings are presented interviewees are confirmed and labelled as either ICs or CoIs (e.g. IC1, CoI1 and with any promotor role/s identified) or confirmed and labelled as promotors (e.g. P1, P2 and the specific role/s identified). Table 1 presents the results.

Case Organisation APS1

APS1 is a large decentralised federal public sector agency with interviewees located in a regional office. Innovation was identified as critical to achieving the agency’s strategic vision and interviewees predominantly discussed a range of incremental work process innovations within the organisation. APS1 had relatively structured processes to generate innovative ideas from staff, termed an ‘innovation system’, where individuals could submit an idea, have it vetted and potentially progressed. Current, and previous, agency heads were viewed as innovation-focused, encouraging of risk-taking and seeking faster generation and implementation of ideas. However, the broader organisation generally remained risk- and change-averse. Of the two self-identified ICs, one was confirmed as an IC (termed IC1), and of the two self-identified CoIs, one was confirmed as a CoI (termed CoI1) and the other was confirmed as an IC (IC2) (please see Table 1 for reasoning). This highlights the subjectivity in identifying champions and the value of including multiple participant and researcher perspectives.

The confirmed ICs held middle and upper middle management roles. IC1 (middle level) was motivated and passionate about innovation. While generally not an idea generator, IC1 facilitated the innovation process by ‘sifting through’ ideas generated through the system

and progressing those with potential for wider implementation by quantifying (as far as possible) the benefits of the idea before seeking further approval. Combined with boundary spanning, scanning and sharing new ideas with relevant business areas, this suggests IC1 also engaged in an expert promotor capacity through knowledge gathering on specific innovations. When IC1 identified ideas with wider organisational potential, he or she would consult with IC2 (at a more senior level) who, if supportive, would ‘go and bat for (it)’ at higher levels to push for implementation.

IC2 (upper middle level) was at a more senior level to IC1, but expressed similar motivation and passion for pursuing innovation and a ‘drive to make things happen’. IC2 also empowered his or her staff to take risks and identify new ideas. IC2 also embodies a process promotor role, describing the need to be politically savvy and to influence peers and more senior managers to support and implement an innovation:

‘... there are other agendas going on all the time and ... my idea may not be a priority for someone else in their job and that’s just the reality of life. So I’ve got to be very persuasive as to what the benefits are for them ... going forward ... You build up trust with your colleagues so you can get some things done quicker than normal’.

IC1 confirmed this process promotor role, citing a small innovation pilot and IC2’s use of network relationships:

‘So (IC2) would go ‘here’s the sites, who do I know there? I’ll ring this person’, (tell them) what we’re doing, because there’s that working relationship, (and) they say ‘yeah ok, I’ll do it for (you)’.

IC2 also exhibited some expert promotor characteristics due to specialist knowledge, explaining that ‘it helps having that (technical) understanding’ when promoting innovation within the agency.

CoI1 was at the same hierarchical level as IC2 (upper middle). CoI1 demonstrated similar passion and motivation to initiate innovation, but this was tempered by the reality of operating within a large bureaucracy ('we are rule bound to the 'nth' degree). Like IC2, CoI1 empowered lower level staff to take risks and seek out new ideas. However, CoI1 differed in his or her ability to leverage positional power to initiate, endorse and protect the trialling of innovations through a 'piloting' process at the regional office location and assume personal risk in doing this:

'It's easier for us to pilot new things because we are out of their eyes and I say to people here 'just do it'. Like what's the consequence? Unless it's illegal or immoral, just do it. Oh I go, 'look, if you need someone to be accountable it's me'.

Given CoI1's seniority, wider idea implementation generally involved 'handing it over to someone else or empowering someone else to take it forward'. From a promotor perspective, CoI1 leveraged his or her seniority, and the regional office context, to create a microcosm to foster innovation. By providing staff with the permission and resources to pilot innovations at the site-level and essentially protecting them from external interference, CoI1 demonstrated power promotor characteristics. A process promotor role was also apparent, with CoI1's hierarchical level providing extensive networks to facilitate the wider implementation of successfully piloted innovations: 'oh absolutely, absolutely. Being at the level I'm at and in the different networks I'm in, yeah absolutely'.

Case Organisation APS2

APS2 is a large, decentralised federal public sector agency and interviewees were located in the head office. The focal innovation involved combining several existing systems to change the delivery of a front-end service. Interviewees identified that the department 'did not lack ideas or was necessarily non-innovative' but that innovative outcomes were lacking partly due to a culture of 'risk aversion' and that 'the public service is really good at innovating but

we're not good at finishing'. To help address this, APS2 now have 'a more clearly articulated innovation process' through an organisational-wide system for capturing innovative ideas and a specific functional area focused on developing policies to foster and support innovation and 'formalise the end-to-end (innovation) process'. For the focal innovation there was a clear hierarchy of individuals charged with driving the project forward, a: business sponsor ('they're ultimately responsible for the change ... to make sure the funding is there and for removing any obstacle'); working-level representative of the business sponsor ('doing what is required to get the change implemented'); and a change manager ('a supporting role to help achieve implementation'). The three individuals now discussed were appointed to these three roles. Of the two self-identified ICs, one was confirmed as an IC (termed IC3), while the other exhibited only process promotor attributes (termed P1). The self-identified CoI was not confirmed, but did undertake a process promotor role (termed P2) (please see Table 1 for reasoning). All interviewees were working on the same project, with P1 being a project team member (at a lower level than IC3) and IC3 reporting to P2.

P1 was situated at a lower hierarchical level, but was crucial for facilitating project implementation and had specialist change management knowledge. P1 exhibited clear process promotor attributes: 'my role has been influencing the key audiences to adopt the change' and 'part of my role is to smooth that (politics) over and make that work for the change'. This included identifying key stakeholders and the 'informal ways that you can influence those people as quickly as you can' and developing and utilising networks at various hierarchical levels, from 'the most senior level' to a 'mid- to team leader-level' and general staff to promote the innovation and its benefits and get 'those people onboard'.

IC3 was at the middle level of the organisational hierarchy. Other interviewees detailed the inspirational force that IC3 brought to the project, including the energy, drive and passion used to move the project forward, motivate others in the team and make a 'massive,

massive difference' through personal commitment. IC3 was described as an 'incredibly dynamic champion' and:

'... a force to be reckoned with. I've never met anyone who has so much passion about getting a change implemented than (IC3) has, (IC3) is incredible. Which also means that (IC3) has (a) team who is very inspired and willing to go the extra mile'.

However, P1 identified limits to IC3's influence given his or her hierarchical position, suggesting that IC3 would have experienced 'frustration' at 'road blocks' because 'a lot of it was politics above (his or her) level'. IC3 also exhibited expert promotor attributes, as he or she co-initiated the project:

'(IC3) is also the subject matter expert, the beating heart of the project from the point of view of why are we doing this, what do we want out of it, what do we need to do?'

As the project involved close external partner collaboration, IC3 had been instrumental in forging this partnership and 'built really good relationships with some of the (external partner) staff' (a relationship promotor role). Another interviewee praised IC3's ability to work through 'road blocks' that occurred with the external partner, by 'just (keeping) going with one approach after another until something worked out'. IC3 also undertook a process promotor role, with his or her championing attributes appearing to assist:

'Also (IC3's) ability to navigate the organisation and ... awareness of the political environment is very good so that's a major driving force ... there are a lot of people at that same (hierarchical level) ... who don't nearly manage upwards so well. People are prepared to work for (IC3) and do things for (him or her) that they might not do for somebody else ... (IC3's) ability to influence is very good because of that.'

P2 was a critical process promotor at a senior level, demonstrating detailed knowledge of the organisational hierarchy, political savvy and extensive networks:

‘A lot of what I do is just trying to make sure we keep on track ... that I’m talking to the other (senior executives) to make sure that either (a) they understand the importance of what we’re doing or (b) they don’t do anything to derail it ... we’re in a world of competing priorities’.

At the upper level of the hierarchy P2 was ‘dealing with much higher Boards and (executive management)’, influencing to ‘consistently and constantly justify why (x amount of money) was going to (the focal innovation project) and not going (to something else)’ and generally ‘protecting it (the innovation project)’.

Case Organisation APS3

APS3 is a medium-sized, centralised federal public sector agency. The focal innovation was a radical administrative, cultural change innovation. As in the other cases, interviewees identified a generally ‘risk averse’ and largely ‘analytic’ and data-driven organisation; however, unlike the other cases there was no structured or formalised innovation process. Of the two self-identified ICs one was confirmed as an IC (termed IC4), while the other embodied process promotor attributes (termed P3) (please see Table 1 for reasoning). The self-identified CoI was confirmed (termed CoI2). IC4 reported to P3 who ultimately reported to CoI2.

IC4 was at the middle level of the organisational hierarchy and was ‘persistent’, bringing ‘drive (and) determination’, ‘helping to foster a team’ and motivating and leading project staff even if ‘setbacks’ were experienced:

‘Definitely (IC4) was an excellent motivator for the team and (he or she) took a really good leadership role on a day-to-day level ... (IC4) used a lot of (his or her) personal strengths to motivate the team and help us all contribute’.

IC4 demonstrated expert promotor characteristics, through scanning via literature searches and external consultation and ‘putting all (of) that material together’ for the team. IC4 was also particularly adept at internal and external networking and influencing upwards by using

his or her political nous and knowing the limits of influence given his or her hierarchical level (process promotor attributes), a theme evident across all case organisations:

'In (APS3) it can be quite hierarchical, (IC4) was influential despite knowing those constraints. There's only so far you can go. (IC4) wouldn't overstep so as to get people offside. (He or she) was still very influential as far as (he or she) could be'.

P3 was at a senior level in the agency, with political and influencing skills and extensive intra-organisational networks reinforcing his or her critical process promotor role. P3's hierarchical position also provided direct access to the organisation's Board and executive leaders. As a key informant stated:

'The other person that was really important was (P3) because (he or she) was (in a position close to executive management) and (he or she) had an enormous trust relationship with (CoI2) ... (he or she) just knew the Board'.

P3's influencing abilities ('it's about how you present ... how you filter information ... it's about timing') helped navigate the innovation through the hierarchical system and influence critical parties to ensure its ongoing support:

'... I wouldn't use the word 'power' in relation to my role, maybe that's just me. The way I try to do things is I try to influence'.

CoI2 was at the executive level in APS3 and had largely unhindered decision-making authority, describing his or her personal characteristics helping to drive the innovation as: honesty, integrity, enthusiasm, persuasion, persistence, passion for the innovation and being a clear communicator. CoI2 created and drove this innovation and continued to be '100% behind this'. As a power promotor, CoI2 could set in place the 'infrastructure' to promote and drive the innovation. This included: choosing formal champions for the innovation; vesting departmental bodies with decision-making power to oversee and drive the project and creating 'a broader team of people who are leading on this'; and securing Board support for

the innovation. CoI2 utilised both positional and personal authority to direct and persuade others to adopt the change:

‘Very early on I used my positional authority to say this is now a business priority for the department to address this and you don’t have to like it, but you have to accept it. And I used my personal authority to try and convince people to come onboard’.

Over time, CoI2 moved away from saying ‘this is important, we’ve got to do it, we’ve got to really drive this forward’ to ‘in a sense, steering the ship’ and empowering others to ‘own this and ... (drive) it forward’.

Discussion

This research contributes to the literature in a number of ways. The findings show that both champions and promoters play critical roles in public sector innovation processes. Few studies explore how these types of roles may be embodied in one person, across many people or how they may operate in tandem. Rather than focusing on a champion or a promotor we follow more recent research (e.g. van Leare & Aggestam, 2015) in seeking to unravel how multiple innovation agents operate. By maintaining the champion (focused on their ‘transformational’ and motivational qualities) and promotor (focused on specific barriers to overcome) roles as distinct, our study adds to emerging work by demonstrating within a public sector context how each role makes important contributions to innovation progression.

All cases involved champions (ICs) at, particularly, middle and upper middle levels, with most simultaneously undertaking expert and/or process promotor roles. This supports Bason’s (2010) work showing the critical role of, and power wielded by, middle managers in the innovation processes of bureaucracies. Focusing solely on their championing qualities, these individuals were characterised by others as motivating, inspiring and embodying the types of transformational leader and charismatic championing qualities identified by Howell and Higgins (1990b). These individuals provided the energy, stamina and ‘spark’ which

motivated others to progress the innovation even when facing setbacks. Potts and Kastelle's (2010, p.125) suggestion that public sector innovation is 'instrumentally disjointed' as idea generators can be disconnected from incentives to progress ideas to implementation, resulting in 'none of the excitement and prospect' of a more 'traditional' innovation process, supports our finding that the motivating qualities of champions are particularly important 'energisers' of public sector innovation processes. Champions (CoIs) located at more senior and executive levels were far less predominant, but did also use these qualities to empower others to take risks and foster an innovative culture. Due to the CoI power bases required to allocate resources and make strategic decisions regarding projects, these individuals also assumed power promotor roles. However, given that this power appeared to be concentrated at very senior levels in the case organisations, this type of promotor role was beyond the scope of most interviewees.

Confirming the multiplicity of individuals' innovation roles, and linked to public sector power structures, both champions and non-champions assumed (often multiple) promotor roles. While champions motivated and inspired others, promotors instead navigated the organisation's power structures. Because leveraging power bases is critical to innovation progression (Kanter, 1988), and as promotor theory is 'based on the specific use of power bases' (Hauschildt, 2010, p.171), our findings help identify those key power sources (and the barriers they overcome) in a public sector context. Expert ('knowledge specialty' power base) and process ('organisational know-how' power base) promotors were predominant (Hauschildt, 2010, p.170). Expert promotors were particularly important at the middle levels of the hierarchy as the idea generators were generally not deeply involved in further idea development, meaning the individuals undertaking day-to-day project work (usually at the mid-level) needed to possess the content knowledge to develop the innovation and promote it to senior staff.

More critically, however, was that almost all interviewees at varying levels undertook process promotor roles to navigate bureaucratic and power structures and influence internal stakeholders. Interviewees recognised the hierarchy in which they operated and the level of power they possessed, with some acknowledging there was ‘only so far they could go’ in progressing an innovation before requiring senior colleagues to exercise influence at a higher level. Even interviewees with greater seniority acknowledged limits to their power as it was usually at the highest executive levels where critical decisions regarding resource allocation and strategic priorities were made. This reflects the seniority of the few power promotors identified, whose roles involved using their authority to ‘protect’ innovations from interference and maintain resource allocations. These findings reflect Frost and Egri’s (1991, p.236) surface (day-to-day actions to navigate the ‘rules of the situation’) and deep (historically developed rules and frames of reference) organisational power structures. As the public sector’s hierarchical levels are clearly set out and understood by interviewees (‘the way things are’ within the deep structure (Frost and Egri, 1991, p.236)), this drives the need for multiple (particularly process) promotors across the hierarchy to navigate them (actions relating to the surface structure). While this finding is contra Witte’s (1977) promotor theorising that it is preferable for one individual specialist, rather than multiple individuals, to undertake each promotor role, it supports Kanter’s (1985) view that individuals need to rely on others and their power sources in the innovation process. The delegated decision-making power within the public sector heightens this need and indeed drives the necessity for multiple, particularly process, promotors at different hierarchical levels as one individual’s power base is generally insufficient to progress an innovation upward.

Taken together, these findings suggest that innovation across our cases broadly follows a ‘drive-navigate-protect’ model. At the mid-hierarchical levels individuals usually undertook the day-to-day project work, boundary spanning and scanning to accrue the expert

knowledge needed to ‘drive’ the project, generally undertaking both expert and process promotor roles and, in two cases, also embodying IC qualities. This passion and advocacy for the innovation helped to drive it from the ‘bottom up’. Expert promotors at this level also provided more senior staff with the knowledge and rational arguments required to continually justify the innovation through the ‘navigate’ and ‘protect’ stages. Individuals at upper middle and senior levels then generally took on stronger process promotor roles to ‘navigate’ the innovation through the bureaucracy by utilising their networks to influence key stakeholders to support and adopt the innovation and justifying its progression. These individuals often embodied champion qualities too, assuming personal risk and extending well beyond their formal role requirements to help inspire, motivate, energise and empower their teams and more senior individuals to progress the innovation in the face of setbacks. This ‘navigate’ element was particularly important given the power-dependent organisational context identified earlier, hence the number of process promotors detected at various hierarchical levels. There was then usually a third individual at a more senior level again who undertook at least a process, and potentially a power, promotor role to continue advocating the innovation, ‘protecting’ its resource allocations from interference or diversion and strongly justifying its importance.

For practitioners, we build on the work of Mansfeld et al. (2010) by identifying the skill sets required by key innovation agents. While champions and promotors are generally recognised as emerging informally and spontaneously within organisations (e.g. Mansfeld et al., 2010; Witte, 1977) our findings suggest the roles and individual attributes to be targeted when identifying innovation agents in the public sector. The skills and power bases of process promotors, their organisational knowledge and intra-organisational networks (Goduscheit, 2014) and ability to identify and overcome organisational and administrative barriers (Rost et al., 2007), are critical in an APS context. Case study process promotors

needed to be politically savvy and aware and able to navigate the organisation's deep (embedded hierarchy) and surface (persuade others throughout the hierarchy within their remit of influence) power structures (Frost & Egri, 1991). Expert promoters deriving power from specialist knowledge were also important, particularly at middle levels, to provide the justification to drive innovations forward. Here, boundary spanning (sourcing ideas and information within and outside the organisation) was a critical skill. Innovation agents with specific champion qualities also provided the 'stamina' for others involved in the project to persist in the face of challenges. These attributes included: inspiring others; energy and passion for innovation; high intrinsic motivation for progressing innovations; willingness to engage in calculated risk-taking and accepting accountability where necessary; and persistence, determination and commitment to persevere to implementation. Because innovation involves risk and change, it was apparent that the involvement of champions and their ability to motivate had a positive effect on others.

Future Research Directions

An underlying premise of this paper, and arguably much of the work on innovation agents, is that champions and promoters exist to help overcome organisational cultures that often thwart innovation through risk- and change-averseness (Shane, 1995). While national culture can influence championing strategies (e.g. Shane, 1995), to our knowledge virtually no research explores how champions and promoters and their activities and behaviours influence organisational culture. For example, over time, do these agents (particularly the more senior CoIs) help foster an improved innovation culture and 'chip away' at the change-averseness that necessitates their interventions? Or are they (and their successors) destined to toil against the same barriers and inertia to innovation time and again? In the public sector these questions are pertinent, as the earlier discussion of deep and surface power structures (Frost & Egri, 1991) highlighted that the sector is characterised by entrenched hierarchy and

bureaucracy which is ‘better designed for killing ideas than nurturing them’ (Mulgan, 2014, p.7). Given this, and the importance of a culture of innovation within the public sector (Casebourne, 2014), future research could investigate whether champions and promoters positively influence an organisation’s innovative culture and, if so, how government could leverage these individuals as cultural change agents to identify and help overcome the deeper causes of innovation resistance. Another area for further inquiry is how champions and promoters are positioned within the organisation. For example, CoI1 in case APS1 identified how the regional office location facilitated greater risk-taking by being relatively ‘out of view’ of the head office, which contrasted with this individual also being centrally positioned within organisational networks as a successful process promotor. Exploring how innovation agents navigate the potential necessity, and tension, of being positioned at both the ‘centre’ and ‘edge’ of the organisation could shed further light on their behaviours and effectiveness.

Limitations and Conclusions

Notwithstanding the study’s strengths limitations exist. Although in-depth cases were utilised a greater number could enhance future findings. Solely focusing on the APS also restricts generalisation of the results, so extending research to other contexts with different levels of government and national cultures (see Shane, 1995) with different power structures would be helpful. This study is cross-sectional and is largely dependent on participant recall of events, meaning our ability to identify patterns and relationships over time is limited. Also, given the either ongoing or incremental nature of the innovations discussed, it generally wasn’t possible to identify how champion and promotor roles contributed to their success. However, future research could develop this work to replicate the findings and improve generalisability.

Overall, this study offers a deeper understanding of the critical innovation agent roles, and how they are enacted, in an APS context. By drawing on the mechanism of power, the delegation of which forms an important characteristic of the public sector, we have

demonstrated how this context drives the need for multiple innovation agents, champions and promoters at various organisational levels, in order to drive, navigate and protect an innovation through the sector's hierarchal power structures. Both champions and promoters were shown to offer important, but unique, contributions to the innovation process with the roles able to be undertaken both within one person and across many people. Understanding these innovation agents also has merit for managers tasked with identifying employees for involvement in innovation projects.

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