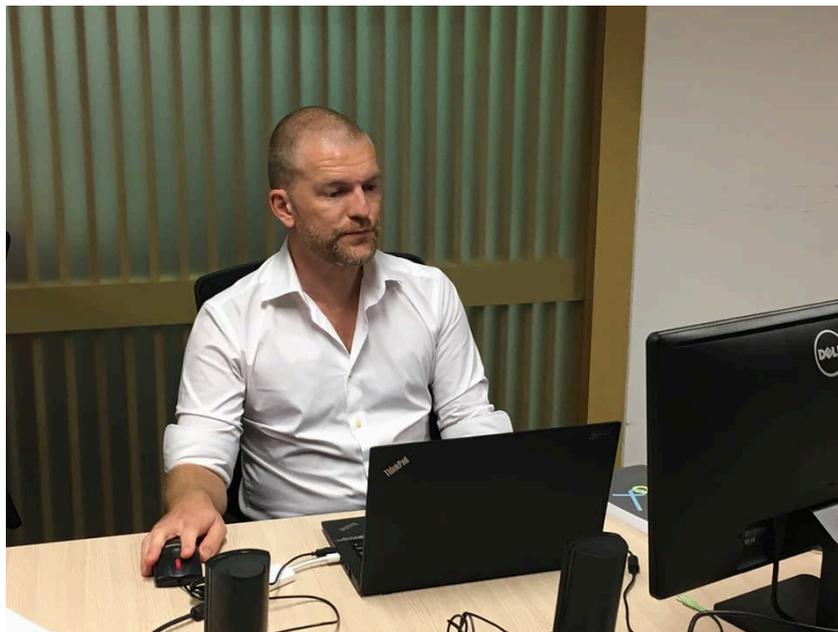


LKYSPP Professor explains what it takes to be a successful 21st century public manager

(by Saipriya Salla and Nguyen Phan Dai Trang)

Brexit and Trump victory over the US Presidential Election are some of the most defining events of the year 2016, marking a new era full of unexpectedness. To many policymakers across the globe, this characteristic presents them profound challenges as they navigate the VUCA world in the 21st century. Standing for “Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity”, this term triggers both anxiety and yet excitement, which in turns poses the critical question about what it takes for public managers to succeed in that environment.



In response to this vital concern, Associate Professor Zeger van der Wal at Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) hosted a short, interactive webinar in the first week of November specifically for the school’s alumni. This also inaugurated a webinar series that the Alumni Relations team of the LKYSPP hopes to conduct frequently in the future. During this 45-minute talk and with the attendance of around 30 participants, Professor van der Wal outlined the demands public managers have to meet in the VUCA world, as well as the needed skills for them to thrive. First, after briefly introducing himself and his new book “The 21st Century Public Manager” (Palgrave Macmillan, March 2017), Professor van der Wal illustrated how things were simpler when he was born about 40 years ago in Amsterdam (Netherlands): citizens were less informed, authorities had more power monopoly, and stakeholders’ relationships were less

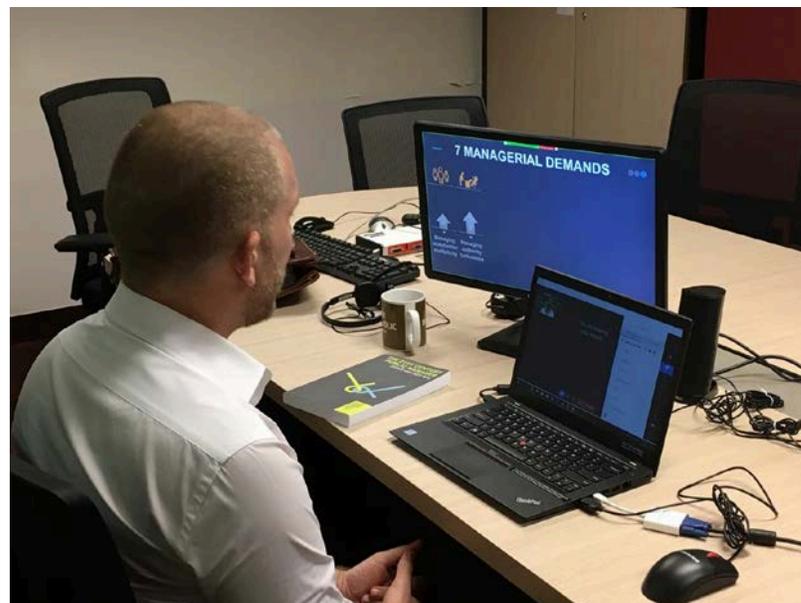
complicated. He then continued with pictures showing an un-motivated provincial administrative nowadays in India, the mortal worry about bureaucracy, the Internet minute and its future of speedy information sharing, and the innovative, start-up style of new public offices. All of these exhibits led to the million-dollar question: What does it mean for public managers worldwide?

Obviously, life as a public manager was never meant to be easy, and it was not getting any easier now. In brief, Professor van der Wal referred from his book the 7 key managerial demands as below:

- Demand 1: Managing stakeholder multiplicity
- Demand 2: Managing authority turbulence
- Demand 3: Managing the new workforce
- Demand 4: Managing innovation forces
- Demand 5: Managing ethical complexities
- Demand 6: Managing short vs. long time horizons
- Demand 7: Managing cross-sector collaboration

To illustrate the example of offices in the 21st century having a diverse workforce, a short clip from the movie “The Intern” was played to the participants.

Professor van der Wal spoke about the importance of distinguishing between trainable skills and competencies and innate values. There also will be the need to develop new skills and values as an organization, while holding some traditional ones that are still applicable in today scenarios.



The participants had a wide range of questions, as the webinar drew closer to a finish. One of them asked about the concept of reverse mentoring, or how the younger employees could help mentor their seniors in an organization. Professor van der Wal elaborated that generations are getting increasingly inter-dependent and no organization would benefit from a “generational warfare”. There must exist a collaborative, open learning culture in the workplace, to enhance productivity.

When asked about which societies are most receptive to innovative practices in the public sector, Professor van der Wal went on to speak about agencies in Singapore, Hong Kong, Rwanda, Australia and New Zealand and the like. Public agencies in these countries were leveraging technology to streamline their operations and provide better services to the public.

The participants then questioned about the frequency of progress reviews for any organization. They wondered if continually revising goals and plans would affect credibility. The professor illustrated that at the rate the world is changing, it is mandatory that all organizations employ a more “anticipatory stance”. Moving forward, strategic planning is going to be a key feature, in governmental vision setting or goal setting for public agencies. If governments are able to strategize well, they will be in a position to set the message and establish the frame of the discussion.

Professor van der Wal afterwards spoke about the need to be “better collaborators” in the future. Bureaucracy needs to shift away from the command and control approach that they are used to, and adopt an approach that encourages cross-learning and partnerships.



The book “21st Century Public Manager’ focuses on the individual manager/agency. Professor van der Wal acknowledged how there should also be amendments to existing reforms that govern the actions of these said managers. Public service needs to shift from a more unionized style, making itself less rigid. Governments are bringing in more private sector agencies, in the form of public private partnerships, at the higher levels. It shall be pivotal for the employees and managers to change their mindsets, while functioning in increasingly diverse workspaces. Professor van der Wal finally concluded that organizations should be more open to learning and collaborating on various aspects.

Professor van der Wal’s book “The 21st Century Public Manager” is available for purchase at the NUS Co-op Bookstore as well as online on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).