

TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT END OF YEAR EVENT

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KIERAN BUTLER:

It's wonderful to be here with you all. My name's Kieran Butler, I'm the Chief of Staff to the Secretary of the Attorney General's Department, and I'll be your chair for this evening for the EA Series, End of Year event. Of course, the most important event of the year and a very fitting end to the year. I'd first like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal People, the traditional custodians of the land on which we're meeting and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging, I'd like to acknowledge and welcome any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who might be attending today's event.

So now I'd like to turn to introduce our speakers for tonight, Bev Sims PSM, Jack Dolan, and Danielle Casanova. I'm sure you know them all very well, but I will introduce them properly. Bev is the EA to Phil Gaetjens, secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Her prior experience includes being EA to the department's previous Secretary, Martin Parkinson, Secretaries to The Treasury, as well as the former Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency. And outside of her very busy work as an EA, Bev has also managed a number of projects, worked in recruiting and training roles and worked for three years at the International Monetary Fund in Washington, DC.

Jack Dolan is the EA to Professor Brendan Murphy, secretary of the Department of Health. Jack moved with Professor Murphy following on from his previous role as the Australian Government's Chief Medical Officer. He has over 10 years of experience in the Australian Public Service, including administrative positions in the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, the Tax Office and the Department of Health. Jack loves working in high pressure environments, he ended up in the right place, brings a calm, common sense approach to his work, which has been invaluable to Professor Murphy in responding to the pandemic.

And finally, Danielle Casanova, who is EA to the national coordinator of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency, Andrew Colvin, a position she was appointed to in early 2019. Danielle began her public service career at the Department of Environment in 2013 before transferring to the Australian Federal Police in 2015. And since then, her EA experience includes supporting the Chief of Staff, Deputy Commissioner of Capability and the Commissioner of the AFP. Danielle's ability to deliver high levels of executive support across a range of work environments has helped her build a reputation as an expert of her craft. So please welcome Bev, Jack and Danielle.

I think it's really important to start by acknowledging that we're all very fortunate we can be here, an event like this. I think we all watch the news, look at the situation in Australia and around the world, and the fact that we can have a forum like this at the end of the year, all get together and sit together and be in a room, I think is an incredible achievement by the Australian government. And I think an important thing to do is acknowledge upfront it's a testament to the work of you all. We've all played various parts in this unprecedented year, I'm going to use that term once now and hopefully not use it again, but that's impossible. I think we all recognise, and we'll talk in some detail about particular roles of our panellists, but we've all played an important part in the different aspects of the government's response this year.

I think it's interesting as well and clearly purposeful that our panel reflects some of the top priorities and almost the trajectory of this year. We started with bush fires which caused incredible devastation to our people, our landscape, our wildlife, and led to the creation of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency in January this year to lead the national response and empower our communities to respond and to build a more resilient future. Then, of course, we had to turn to responding to one of the greatest health and economic challenges the world has ever seen in the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to measures we've never seen before in this country, including international and domestic border closures, lockdowns and a mass move to remote work. I think it's safe to say Professor Murphy is probably the most famous public servant in Australia, the most recognisable in his former role as the Chief Medical Officer, even though he's now moved on to an equally busy job as Secretary of the Department of Health, and I would doubt there's been a more challenging year for our colleagues in that department.

And as always, leading the public service through all of this has been the Secretary Gaetjens and his department and Bev Sims. As the Prime Minister and Secretary Gaetjens had both noted, the public service really does excel in a crisis, and this year we've really shown that we can deliver. We've done an amazing job suppressing the virus achieving nearly no community transmission, which around the world is quite an amazing feat, and we have amongst the lowest death rate per capita in the world. Our economy has also fared better than most, and we're already seeing significant improvements, including to our unemployment rate. And through all of this, we haven't been doing our jobs in a regular way, it's been remote work, Zoom meetings, kids and dogs involved in our meetings, constant hours of work and relentless pressure. We've seen huge redeployment of APS staff to agencies where they've been most needed such as Services Australia to deal with the huge spike in people suddenly needing government assistance.

And I think it's safe to say, in a first for many of us, we've seen a real public awareness of the work that we do and a real public gratitude. There was a picture being circulated tonight as part of the interview message from Secretary Gaetjens and the APSC Commissioner, and it's a message scrawled on the sidewalk in Inner Melbourne, which says, "Thanks Centrelink staff." That's the sort of thing that we haven't and don't tend to see, so I think it's an incredible acknowledgement and awareness of the hard work that people in the government are doing.

And you've all been absolutely at the centre of this. I think it's safe to say you've been playing a key role in keeping your staff connected, supporting our leaders, and I'm sure from what I've seen, playing roles like counsellor, IT support person, motivational speaker, coordinator, and many, many more roles. So with that as our unusual and pretty significant backdrop, I think it's a really good time for us to come together to talk about how we're going, what we've learned and I hope start to wind down. So with that, I'm going to hand over to my panel, and I might ask, Bev, to make a few opening remarks to start us off. Thanks, Bev.

BEV SIMS:

Thanks, Kieran. I just wanted to thank everyone for inviting me, giving me the opportunity to be part of the panel. 2020 has been described as many things, the most common has been unprecedented, as Kieran has noted. I would like to use the words difficult, challenging, and heartbreaking, but also like to use the terms self-reflective, supportive and heartwarming.

My year commenced with an early return from leave to support the bushfire effort, and it's been nonstop ever since. January saw the first of many coordinated responses with the States in dealing with the natural disaster. It saw the establishment of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency headed by AJ Colvin and supported by Danielle, who's one of our panel members today. If anyone has been involved in the establishment of a department or an agency, you know how challenging that can be, and that was heightened by the fact that we needed to respond quickly to the many Australians who were affected by the bush fires.

Then we moved into February and March and we started to understand the gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic and what it meant for Australia and the rest of the world. The national cabinet was created replacing a rather bureaucratic forum known as COAG. The group created to deliver and coordinate the response to the pandemic met over 20 times this year. The new national cabinet comprising of the prime minister and premiers and chief ministers from the States and Territories, engaged directly and regularly on the crisis. The immediate priority was dealing with the health crisis and then the economic response. Then the second wave in Victoria hit and the priority again became the health crisis. There were daily briefings on health and regular economic briefings with the prime minister and other ministers. These briefings were being informed by health and economic data being provided by the States on a daily basis. And while the States managed their situations differently, and there were challenges, there was a level of cooperation between the States and the Commonwealth not previously seen.

To deal with the complexities of the crisis, in March, Secretary Gaetjens appointed an Associate Secretary, Stephanie Foster, so he could focus on supporting the government and the States with their pandemic response, these arrangements remained in place for five months. As I look back on those challenging times, the most challenging part for me was the fact that we were dealing with real people in desperate need of our help. Having worked most of my career in a central agency focusing on policy development, I have a new and well-founded respect for the work of our line agencies who deliver services to Australians. Whether it was supporting our health workers or those in real financial need, our line agencies have been in the forefront of our effort.

So 2020 has certainly broadened my horizons. It has shown me firsthand how effective we can be when governments and our public services come together. It has been difficult personally, being isolated from my friends, family, and work colleagues, not being involved in the work I love most, stakeholder engagement and supporting our EA network. In the height of the pandemic, I felt like I was managing a chess board, the pieces were always moving and moving quickly but there were no new pieces. Seeing my fellow Australians suffer and hearing their stories was heartbreaking, seeing the world as we know, potentially change forever. But I've seen the very best in people, it's been a privilege in 2020 to have witnessed our best and brightest come together to manage and continue to manage the dual crisis of the bushfires and COVID-19. Thanks.

KIERAN BUTLER:

Thanks very much, Bev. Jack, I'd like you to start us off and talk a bit about how your job has been, the critical support you provide and what that looked like this year and how that your role has changed, and particularly what's been the biggest challenge that you faced.

JACK DOLAN: Yeah, sure. Hello everyone. This is my first IPAA event, and to be speaking in front of you all is really great and I'm very happy that we can convene, as Kieran said in the opening remarks. My year started off... So I've been supporting Brendan since May of 2019, prior to that I was in an Executive Officer role and working in aged care policy. So I had to make a transition back into the EA space, which I very much enjoy and much prefer. So I was settling back into that, and then towards the end of the year, we started to hear rumblings of news out of China of a virus that was believed to be passed similar to like a bird flu type virus. But once late January and then February hit in Australia, the virus spread, it was human to human transmission, we very quickly had to adapt into a new space.

The biggest challenge for me throughout the pandemic was not knowing what was next. It was such a highly unpredictable time and I think as, I'll speak personally, but I think as EAs, we generally like to have a bit of sense of control of what's going on. So learning to having to go with the flow a bit, took a bit of adapting to. Coupled with that, we then also had two changes of secretaries in the department. We had an outgoing secretary who had been there for a few years, we then had Caroline Edwards come into the department as an interim or acting secretary so that Brendan could continue his work with the pandemic. So the balance or the challenge really was how do we balance this massive influx of work of the pandemic whilst also remaining to take over the BAU work? So it was very much a challenge for us.

And I had a bit of a think about it, how did we as an executive team manage or persevere with that ordeal? And we're very lucky in our department, I've found I could easily rely on my executive EA colleagues. I had to lean on them and they had to lean on me, it was very much an all in effort, so I'm very proud of how we worked as a collective. So I think that was one of the biggest challenges. I'm very much glad to say that we're coming out of that space now and moving more into a BAU type space, but just the unexpected and unforeseen impact that, that had on the agency was definitely a challenge.

KIERAN BUTLER: Thanks Jack. I have to say though, I'm not sure I'd describe your job for the next year as BAU, I think it's not.

JACK DOLAN: No.

KIERAN BUTLER: Clearly you're coloured by how busy [crosstalk]. The year ahead with the vaccine looks like a BAU.

JACK DOLAN: Yeah, very much. And we're probably a bit tainted by the past-

KIERAN BUTLER: Indeed.

JACK DOLAN: ... and how we were working.

KIERAN BUTLER: Bev or Danielle, do you want to reflect on what's been the biggest challenge for you this year?

DANIELLE CASANOVA: Yeah, I'd probably comment on that too. I'd come off maternity leave with my second daughter who was 12 months at the time and it's still in the AFP. So I'd stepped out of the AFP role and I thought, "Oh, this would be awesome. I'll be coming to the job four days a week, I'm really going to just slide back into work." And I think it was the fifth of Jan, and I got a WhatsApp message from, Andrew Colvin, and I thought, "Oh, I know what this is going to be." And sure enough, I read it, and he said, "I didn't want to call you, I'm just going to send you a message just in case you say no. So call me back if you can come do the job." I didn't even know what he meant.

The next day on the sixth, the Prime Minister announced it and I thought, "Yeah, that makes a lot of sense." So I sat down with my husband and I said, "Look, you know that plan of me coming back to work four days a week and leaving at four? That's not going to happen." But I did talk about it with him and I said, "I need your full support because it's going to be really hard and it's going to be long and it's going to be really tough." COVID was not in the eyesight yet, we still had bushfires ravaging everywhere. So I ended up saying to my husband, "I've got to do this because it's not only a good opportunity for me, but I feel like I have to do it for my fellow Australians." So a huge challenge.

BEV SIMS: Well done.

KIERAN BUTLER: Bev, what do you think in terms of the role of the EA and whether it's been redefined through this sort of multiple crisis, ongoing crisis mode we've been in?

BEV SIMS: So I think the role of an EA is ever changing. This year it's heightened importance because our executives are responding to crises and more than ever, we need to plan and anticipate their immediate and future needs. And to be best placed to do that, we need to develop an environment of mutual respect between you and your executive, I think that's critical. For you to be making decisions on their behalf, they have to value you and your judgement, and likewise, you need to understand them and understand the business. So, I think the critical things are working on that relationship.

So, hopefully we are in relationships that are working, if they're not, we have to work at it. And sometimes relationships can be difficult, but we need to understand that we all operate differently. And as much as we need to understand our executives, I'd like to think that our executives make an effort to understand us as well and I think that brings out the best in a partnership and therefore enables us both to perform at our best. And I think it's important that we value each other, but also as EAs, we value ourselves, we value what we do and we project that value to others. So that's sort of ongoing.

And as a contemporary EA, I always describe myself as a facilitator, it's a key part of my role to connect people at the right place and the right time. And so to enable that to happen, I really need to understand the business and to understand the priorities of my executive. And in a crisis that's particularly challenging because as, Jack, mentioned, you don't know what's around the corner. So to anticipate needs and to anticipate how you can add value is heightened when it's in a crisis.

So we need to think strategically and to join the dots, identify who needs to prepare information or briefing, who needs to be consulted and involved, and I think the consultation is really important because if we're setting up a meeting, you might be asked to invite five people, but as a good EA, you realise, well, actually there's two other people that it's incredibly important that they're there as well. So, don't wait to act on what you're asked, think about who else needs to be involved and also who needs to access information. So when you're circulating information on behalf of people, is this getting to all the people that need to know, and is it getting to them in the time that they need it to enable them to act?

And importantly, we need to allow our time for our executives to think, to work, and during a crisis time is the most precious, so that even becomes even more difficult. And so we need to be even more proactive in a crisis. It's an all hands on deck this year, and so it's provided us with an opportunity to think beyond our traditional EA roles. To remain relevant in the future, we need to do that constantly. So if I can encourage you, don't wait to be asked, look for opportunities and take measured risks. So, obviously, when you're taking a measured risk, you need to weigh up the benefits and the potential pitfalls. But without taking those risks, we're not going to grow, we're not going to learn and certainly we're not going to challenge ourselves. So if you've had the opportunity to extend yourself this year, as I've done, I would encourage you continue to look for those opportunities into the new year. If you haven't had those opportunities, then I would encourage you to seek them out in whatever you're doing into the future.

KIERAN BUTLER:

That's interesting, your reflection on the importance of who needs to know, because at the speed at which things are moving, people are in different locations around Australia, work remote, and I think that's been critically important. Making sure people who need to know, do know, and then as you say, building in time for the executive to think, because that's also very difficult to achieve. Jack, as someone who's come in and out, as you say, of this role and then supported the few different people over this period of time, do you have any reflections on how that the role has shifted from when you had previously done it all through different secretaries?

JACK DOLAN:

So I think I very much found that I much preferred being in the EA space. I've found that doing the logistical day-to-day gave me more of a sense of satisfaction, like it gave you more of the tangible evidence, sorry, the tangible aspects of the job that you could see. For example, in my case, Brendan, up on TV, all right, what went through that day to allow me to get him there. So it kind of gave me that bit of self sort of satisfaction in a way.

I'd like to very much back up Bev's point about the anticipation. Just at the pace of how quickly things were moving this year, I very much found that I was suggesting things a lot more to Brendan than probably I would have in the past. So for instance, just making sure that, particularly in the second wave of Victoria, do we have the right people on the ground from our Victorian State Office? Have we looped in our State counterparts because they're moving at such a quick pace? I found that I was doing a lot more of that, which I hadn't encountered previously. So I think there is a lot of space for us to back ourselves, I know that sometimes EAs think, I'm just the EA, I just do diary, just do scheduling, but I really do think we've got space to really add value in our roles and I think this year has taught myself, anyways, definitely taught me that.

KIERAN BUTLER: Thanks, Jack. Danielle, you've already kind of alluded to this, but in terms of your experience of, let's say working outside your comfort zone and things you've taken away from that for your professional or indeed personal life, do you want to offer any reflections from what has been an interesting period?

DANIELLE CASANOVA: Yeah. I think I've worked a lot outside my comfort zone this year. As I was saying, coming straight in off maternity leave, I think I was probably a bit dusty and I was self doubting myself a little bit and I didn't really have time to. And amongst that, in the second week of the job or the third week, Andrew said to me, "We've got to go travelling, you're coming with me." And I thought, "Oh God, lucky..." I haven't ever travelled before as an EA no matter what EA role I was doing, so I thought, "Here we go." And I just remember being in the car with him on the first time we were driving and he said to me, "This is what I want you to do. I just need you to listen and I need you to listen and I need you to listen. We just need to listen to these people, they've lost everything. Let's listen and let's see what we can do."

And it was so confronting to sit with these people who had literally lost everything. And I remember thinking, "I don't know what I can offer them." But it's not necessarily... They don't want you to do anything and they don't necessarily want your money or just to know what the government is doing, they just want to know that you're listening. So I think that chucked me huge out of my comfort zone. But as the months went on and I started to travel a lot more, it became more and more apparent that, just go out there and listen and make conversation and let's see what we can do. But it was also knowing what funding is there available? Because a lot of the time they don't care whether your Commonwealth, State, Local, they just want to know what can you do for me?

So I think that was probably one of the best lessons that I've learnt this year, and I think... I come back to my office and I think, "Well, what would they think? How can I do my job better? What am I doing? Is that making a difference to these people? Yes, I have Andrew to look after, but what's the big picture here. And I think whilst in my travels, it wasn't just being there for the communities, I also had my full-time day job of looking after Andrew and BAU back in Canberra, so that was a huge effort. We'd get back to our motel at seven o'clock, and I'd log on and I'd pretty much start my day from there because as everyone can appreciate people still contact you, people still call you, they still want to know, "Can I get a meeting with Andrew tomorrow?"

So, that pushed me a little bit out of my comfort zone, definitely, but what a lesson it's been. Because now I've learnt a lot and I think going forward, the lessons I've taken out of that is that there are people out there that need help and just the tiny things that you can do really goes a really long way. And I think being away from my family too a lot, which I wasn't really used to, to be honest, just having two really young children. But the support and the connections around you... I'm fortunate to have a really great EA team around me. We're an agency of a hundred people and I think we've got five or six EAs. So, just having a really close network and knowing, yep, I can flip this on to this person at and it'll get done.

So, just building those relationships and on that, my relationship with the EO, I think is really, really important. We worked together in the AFP, so we brought with us a good knowledge of Andrew and we brought with us just being able to bounce ideas and just being able to step into each other's roles a lot of the time too. And I know that brings Andrew a lot of comfort because if Karen's away or I'm away, he just knows it's going to get done. And I think having that relationship really, really tight, has benefited us greatly. Yeah.

JACK DOLAN: Yeah, I completely agree with that. I'm very lucky to have a very strong and proactive relationship with my exec officer, and there's a very mutual level of trust between the two of us. And I think that's pivotal in a role or in a situation if you have two exec support staff supporting the SES. Yeah, I reckon that's such a good point and I'd really encourage anyone to really build and focus on that relationship because in our roles, as ever-changing as they are, we're expected to take on so much more work. We can't do everything, we're not superhuman, so to have that mutual trust and respect, it's certainly helped me this year.

BEV SIMS: And interesting, Jack, I've actually had situations where people have asked me where the relationship hasn't been as good, so clearly you're both very fortunate in that you've had good relationships and I've got in that situation now where I've got a good relationship. But I have witnessed and been in relationships where the EA, EO role hasn't been as effective, and it's really challenging. So people have asked me, "Well, how do I make that a productive relationship?" The way I look at it, obviously communication is key. The other thing is to think about why are you both there? You're both there to support your executive, and so you have to find common ground. So if you both agree that you're both there for the right motivations, then that helps the situation.

So you don't necessarily need to personally like each other even, but you need to respect each other and you need to respect your motivations for being in the role. So that's why that communication is so key in making even a difficult relationship work because if you're both there to support your executive to the best of your abilities, then that makes it work in a different way, but it still can work.

KIERAN BUTLER: Before we turn to audience Q&A, I'm just going to drop in a big question which we could probably spend a whole night talking about. And that's the question of work-life balance, which whenever we say this, people tend to laugh because this isn't the year where people ask about it, but then putting that into practise has been a bit more challenging. Do any of you have tips or strategies, even if they're ones in theory that you haven't managed to put into practise? That could be a starting point, I'd welcome any thoughts and I'm sure the audience might have some thoughts on this as well.

DANIELLE CASANOVA: I'm happy to quickly talk work-life balance. I think at the beginning I knew that there would be a time where I wasn't going to be home for dinner, wouldn't be able to tuck the kids into bed, so I really had to have an open and honest conversation with Andrew in the beginning. And I said, "Look, I'm happy to do this until the fires are out, and then I've got to tuck my kids into bed and then I'm happy to log on." And I think having that open and honest conversation in the beginning really helped me because there were nights in the beginning where I thought, "Oh my God, I don't know how long I can do this for." I was actually still breastfeeding when I started in the agency and that was huge because I knew this journey isn't going to go forever, and I really had to, again, step outside my comfort zone and really work out what I was going to do.

Now, it's really good, I think COVID changed it for all of us. I don't know what the bushfire situation would have been like had we not have had COVID, I think it's quite hard for the bushfire victims in that sense. But I think being at home with my children during that six weeks or at least that we were at home was very challenging. But we got through it and I think it's just super important to have that conversation and say, "I love work. I'm going to do everything that you need me to do whether that means I get in the office at seven and leave at five and then have to log on for two hours at night, then that's what I'm going to do just to be at home for my children."

JACK DOLAN:

Yeah, I think that's a really good point. I actually had an experience just after Brendan moved into the secretary role, I was fortunate enough to have two weeks leave. But I came back for about a week or so, I think, and I actually got quite unwell unexpectedly, and it wasn't coronavirus which thank goodness for that, it wouldn't have looked good on the front page. But I did contract a virus which affected the balancing function in my inner ear. I just woke up one morning and I had extreme vertigo, couldn't walk and I had to have two weeks unexpectedly off work. And I just thought, "Well, it's a real reminder that we really do need to look after ourselves. We're there to support our AO and SES, but who's going to support us." So it's a really good point, we really do need to take that time, and as Danielle said, having that conversation with your boss, I'm willing to do all of what you're expecting for me, but just trying to figure out what that balance is.

And because I was doing a lot of the same, working whatever hours, seven to sometimes late at night, but you really do need to build that in. And I think with remote working and we've got the technology now to be able to kind of... I think it'll help us build that balance into our work lives, which I think is really handy. So I'm very much, I'll go home, I'll log on for an hour or so and clear the emails and then you're in better stead for the next day. But I think it's an ongoing, oncoming battle for us all in executive support roles.

BEV SIMS:

And I think I come from a different perspective because my family has grown up, so I have more time on my hands, I like work. But what I like to do is to finish my day in the office. So if I stay till later in the evening, that's my choice because then when I go home, I put on my track suit, I put on my slippers and I don't do work after that. Whereas for other people with family, they might leave the office earlier, but when the children are in bed, they log on and do more work then. So I think it's a situation where depending where you are in your life, depending on what your work preferences are, you need to work with you, your team and your executive to make the messaging clear around where your boundaries are. So whatever your boundary is, talk it through and make sure everyone is on the same understanding that, I'm here, I work really hard, but I really need this time or I need this activity or I need something else to balance my work and my other life.

KIERAN BUTLER:

Well, thank you all for sharing those thoughts, you all really need a break, by the way, isn't that what you're talking about and other things? But let's turn to the audience questions, so feel free to ask questions on any topics we've talked about or share your experiences of this year or any insights you have. We've got about 20 minutes for Q&A, so who's going to be the first person to ask a question?

KERRY COLLINS:

Oh, hello. I'm Kerry Collins, I work for David Gruen, the Australian Statistician and I wanted to know other than you would obviously all need a break, what personal qualities have you brought to the role to allow you to work to such a high standard for the whole year?

BEV SIMS: Do you want to go, Danielle?

JACK DOLAN: Yeah. I've found I have a very calm approach to my work style, sometimes it may come across that I'm a bit too calm. But I think that's really helped me this year, I've never been one to really panic when stuff has gone crazy. So I really have relied on that this year because it has helped me, I guess, feel more grounded, especially during those periods of the unknown because we didn't know what this pandemic was going to look like, so I really did have to draw upon on that.

DANIELLE CASANOVA: Yeah, I'll probably touch on that. I'm a bit the same, I am a bit calm, but I think you have to be in these sorts of situations. But I think the other side to that is I bring a bit of humour to the office because I think if you're not laughing and you're not joking, you're not having fun whilst doing your work, then I think that it can be quite dull and it can actually create quite a bad culture. So I know in where I am at the moment, just positivity. And I think if you're not happy and you're not positive and you're not smiling and you're not willing to work things out with everyone, then I think that becomes hard. So that's something... I walk into the office everyday, I don't carry with me what I've just had to endure at childcare drop-off, I leave that there, get in the car, drive my 20 metres, and walk in the door and I start my day, then I think just try and do it on a really happy and positive note.

BEV SIMS: And I think what I've recognised about myself in the more recent times is that I need to be needed. So this year has presented multiple opportunities for me to be needed and so in some ways, as difficult as has been, I've found myself thriving in this type of environment because I enjoy the challenge, I feel like I'm contributing and making a difference to other people.

SARAH KALLESKE: Hi, I'm Sarah Kalleske. I work in the ACT Public Service for the Head of Service, Kathy Leigh. Not only have we in the ACT had all of that, but we've had the hail storm earlier in the year and we've also had an election on top of that, so it's been pretty frantic where we are. Probably my question is to you Bev, I know in the ACT we've worked more at home probably than what the Commonwealth has, so keeping us connected has been slightly more challenging and most of us are still working quite a lot from home. I get myself into trouble because I'm working all the time and Kathy will say to me, "Stop, you need to stop." How do you do that? Because I think sometimes our executives don't always understand what it is that we do and I probably get double the emails that she gets. And not only are we getting them from eight till five, but because people are working differently, they're all through the night as well, so I find myself online all the time. So does Phil say to you to stop?

BEV SIMS: He does, but I don't think he needs to because I've realised my own boundaries. So to be effective, we all have to stop at some point. I try not to respond to emails overnight because I think that just encourages people to send them at night. So we've got this culture where we send a response at nine o'clock at night and expect a response back, and I don't think that's healthy for anyone, and nine times out of 10, there is no need for the response to be coming back at nine o'clock at night. So sometimes, because I do look at my phone before I go to bed, but I purposely don't respond because I don't want to perpetuate this culture where it's okay to be sending and expecting a response way outside business hours when there's no need to.

Clearly, if there's a need, I will respond, but I don't. And the Secretary doesn't expect it either because he recognises his boundaries. He's got to the end of the year and I said to him this morning, "We're going to limp you over the line, you've got two more slips to go, we'll get there." And so it's not just us, it's our executives, and so we all need to be thinking about one another's welfare. And sometimes that person that sent the email, they're doing it because they think they need to, but if you don't respond, then they might the next time think about, "Well actually, do I need to send this now or can I send it another time?" There's also a facility where you can delay sending, so if there is something you want to send at night but it doesn't need to, put it on delay to send the next morning so it's not looking like you're working through the night and expecting people to respond likewise.

KIERAN BUTLER: Actually, I think Jack and Danielle, it might be interesting for you to talk to it a bit as well because the current flexible, remote work, which I think we all appreciate, the future of work is more flexible and more remote, which is fantastic for all of us, but it also presents challenges, particularly in your roles. How have you dealt with that and do you have any sort of lessons that you're going to take forward on managing that, noting that, as you've reflected yourself, you're also doing your own flexible work, albeit it seems just more hours outside of work, but it's a challenge?

JACK DOLAN: Yeah, it's definitely is. I found that during the height of the pandemic, I was not working from home, we had to be in the office to support Brendan, so I was largely unaffected by working from home. I have done a day or two here or there where I can, but completely agree with Bev's points. I very much check my phone before going to bed, and then I just flag stuff that I need to follow up in the morning because I very much don't want people to have that expectation that they can contact me 24/7, round the clock. Again, it's like just reinforcing those boundaries. Yeah, I very much like that point, and that's what I've been trying to do as well.

DANIELLE CASANOVA: Yeah. I did use that. In the height of the pandemic, we did a few weeks at home and I'd find myself like it'd be five o'clock in the afternoon, I'm cooking the kids dinner, but you don't know when to switch off. I think working from home is really hard because you'd always feel like you have to be online, and I found that really hard. So, quite often, as an overnight timer, once the kids were in bed, I'd draft my emails and I'd just send them in the morning because it was the same, I didn't want to create that expectation that we should be working all the time because we have our own lives and it just goes on and creates those expectations. But I found something really useful is when I went to bed, I'd reply and I'd just save it as a draft, so in the morning I'd send it. But I did find it really hard for a while just to learn when to switch off, I think I will hang two loads of washing out today, so I've got to make that time up.

So I found that really difficult, but I think as it went on, you just start to teach yourself some good traits and just that welfare is really important.

KIERAN BUTLER: I actually got an email from someone in your department, Bev, the other day, and it said, "I'm sending this email at this time because it suits me and I don't expect you to respond." And it was in their signature block. And I think I said to the Secretary, I said, "That's a really good idea, actually, because sometimes it might suit me to do that because then I can relax and it's off my plate, but I don't want to create that expectation." So I thought that's a nice little tip, which I might actually adopt myself.

JODIE WORLEY: Hi, my name is Jodie, and I work for Kate Wilson, she's an assistant Commissioner at the ATO. I can imagine that your executives are under immense amount of pressure so much of the time, and I wanted to understand how you support that stress besides scheduling correctly and ensuring that you have that happy, bubbly smell, oh, self, sorry. How did you manage their stress to help them at work?

BEV SIMS: So I think it's about our emotional intelligence. So I think EAs have or need a higher level of emotional intelligence. So it's when you've got something, knowing whether that's the right time to get the best outcome, so holding back if you need to, obviously, there's times where you just have to go ahead and interrupt. But I think the way to support people is to give them space when they can have it, it's understanding them and the way they prefer to work, so it's all about having a conversation early in your relationship about the best ways they operate and their preferences around working styles so you can fit in with that, whether it's just save everything up until the end of the day, unless it's really urgent or if it's coming to me whenever you need to, I've got an open door, how do they prefer to deal with their staff? All those sorts of things. And so I think that is really important, particularly when they're super busy.

And also to know it is difficult to build a close relationship and with some executives, you never get that close relationship and you can work within that. But if you do, are fortunate to have that close relationship, being there if they need to talk. Because for my secretary as head of the public service, he recognises that he doesn't have any peers he can talk to. So I'm someone who's non-threatening, he can speak to me and it's in confidence, and just sometimes it might just be a throwaway line or it might be something else. So I think in that way, if you do have that capacity or do have that type of relationship, and as Danielle's said, when she went out and listened to the bushfire victims, in our roles, it's as important to listen to our executives because it's difficult for them to talk to people about what's going on for them.

So yeah, just a nice bit of banter or just something to start that personal relationship is good, and obviously developing trust over time, and that takes a long time. I've worked for people for 12 months before I would say that we've started to develop that trust element. So it's not something that's going to happen overnight, don't be disappointed if it doesn't happen immediately because it will take time. And I think as public servants we're innately conservative, so we don't open up quickly to people. And so once you develop that trust, that's when you can have a really important emotional intelligence role with your executive which supports their very intense times.

DANIELLE CASANOVA: I think that's a good point. Previously, when Andrew was Federal Police Commissioner, I would know when he would walk into the office, of a morning. Because he'd walk in and if he had his head down, it wasn't going to be a great morning, but if he's head was up and he was smiling and he said hello and all the rest, you knew that, yep, today's a good day. But I think it's about knowing that relationship, knowing their stress factors, knowing what sort of signs to look out for. But for me, yeah, it's that walking in the morning, you just get a sense straightaway nine times out of 10, it's a good morning. But that one out of 10 when it's not a great morning, it might mean, okay, I'm going to shift a couple of meetings because it's not urgent, I'm just going to shut your door and you can do what you have to do. So it's just sort of picking up those signs, I think.

JACK DOLAN: Yeah. And definitely the judgement that we had to apply was really a big thing. Totally agree with you, Danielle, about observing Brendan as he walked in, what's today going to be like. I kind of learned to tell just by even non visual clues, but yeah, just having that judgement. And at the heart of the pandemic, we still had people wanting to invite Brendan to speak at all these speaking engagements for the end of the year and they keep pestering, pestering. So you did have to really just say, "Look, sorry." And build that buffer and just have that common sense judgement to say, "Look, this isn't a priority, your conference in December when we're in February, kind of dealing with a once in a hundred year pandemic." So I really felt like applying judgement was critical this year.

BEV SIMS: And if I could just add one thing, don't take things personally. So if your executive is busy and they're distracted, and they aren't engaging with you, it's not you. I relate it to my family, so you feel most comfortable with your family just putting their hand up and going, "Not now." And so for me, if you have a good relationship with your executive, that's what will happen. So sometimes they feel more comfortable pushing back on you than they do anyone else, and that's because you have a good relationship and you feel comfortable with that. So my key is I don't take it personally, it's not about me, it's about what they're dealing with, it's about the pressures they're under, it's what they've got to deal with on that given day and I'm there to support them. But sometimes I can't, sometimes I just have to let them be and let it ride out and then be there when we're ready to move on.

KIERAN BUTLER: I think that's a important lesson, Bev, is that they don't need to put the happy face on for you because they trust you and you have an understanding and then they go out and put the happy face on. So you have to deal with what it is on the day and support them. I think we have time for one more question before we have to wrap up.

ALEX STINZIANI: Hi, I'm Alex Stinziani from the Bureau of Statistics. I think we talk a lot about relationships with our executives, but I think it's equally as important to talk about the relationships that we need to build with each other because ultimately we're the ones that are talking to each other, especially at the moment when we're doing so much cross department collaboration. So this is my first IPAA event and I can already tell that it's a fantastic forum. So I guess my question is, do you have any networks that you draw on, how do you get out there and talk to each other?

JACK DOLAN: Moving with Brendan into the secretary role, I very much found out quite quickly what a tight secretary EA cohort that we have. Networking played a very big part for dealing with this year, and even if it was not necessarily meeting face-to-face. Like I found that there was particular EAs that I had to build relationships with very quickly because with how quickly things were moving, we'd have to be in constant contact and try and negotiate diary times and everything like that. So definitely I'm very much keen to continue being part of the IPAA events because like yourself, this is my first event as well. But I think this year has really shone a light on how valuable networking is for us in just the day-to-day.

DANIELLE CASANOVA: Yeah, I'll add onto that. I think coming into PM&C at the start of the year from the AFP, I came from a really heavily focused law enforcement job that I have been in for five years, and coming across PM&C really opened my eyes into the public service. I sort of broke that law enforcement bubble and I just went, "Oh my gosh, there is so much more to the public service than what I ever knew." And I remember on my first day, Em, here at the front, came and got me from reception and she just said, "Come upstairs, I'll take you to see your boss." And I just remember thinking, "I have no idea what I'm doing." But I think those really good networks in the beginning really, really helped me, and Bev and the rest of the PM&C exec EAs up there just really showed me the ins and outs. And I remember scheduling my first IDC and I had no idea what an IDC was, we don't have those in the AFP so I remember just getting that support from EA networks in PM&C was really, really valuable, so thank you.

BEV SIMS: And I think the EA role can be quite isolating, so I think our networks are even more important in the roles that we have. So at PM&C we have an EA network, it was difficult during the pandemic when we couldn't meet face to face, we had our first face-to-face Christmas lunch couple of weeks ago, and so those connections are really important. So I would encourage all departments and the senior EA leaders within your departments to start, if you haven't already, really developing a formal EA network process. So we have an EA new starters kit that we have on our intranet, we do a newsletter, there's multiple things you can do. You can do a little bit or you can do a lot, but I think the key with any successful network is the people within the network feeling comfortable to reach out to the other members. So whether it's a coffee rule that you set up, so that's one of our things for new EAs, we just throw our names in and you have a coffee roulette and you just match up and go and have a coffee.

So it's just having someone to talk to outside your area to test ideas, if you're not feeling comfortable, if you're not sure what terminology you use or just need someone to run things by, our inward looking EA networks are just as important as our across the APS network. So please senior EA leaders out there, be proactive in this space, our junior EAs we need to build on them, we need to show them what great career opportunities can be created from our networks, but they won't see that if we're not there to support them.

DANIELLE CASANOVA: And I think, just quickly, don't be afraid to seek out and get yourself a mentor. It doesn't have to be an EA, it can be anyone you like. And on that too, if someone seeks for you to mentor, I think take that on because you learn so much about yourself and about other people, and I think that's really strong for EAs because as Bev said, it is quite isolating. And a lot of the time I think we go unrecognised a bit, so I think doing those little things can really, really help.

KIERAN BUTLER: That was a great question to finish off, thanks, Alex. Really perfect kind of reflection upon the importance of this network and these relationships. And I think I've reflected on a few times this year, how much we've all relied upon those existing networks especially when you've all of a sudden transitioned to remote work or hit a crisis, the fact that you've met your counterpart in another agency or that you know you're all EAs in your own agency, and even if it's... Because often we couldn't meet in person, the fact you could pick up the phone, even if it was, "I don't even know where to start with this, but I know you, so can you give me a hand and point me in the right direction." I think that's been this year more important than ever.

And we've also reflected on the fact, and, Bev, mentioned it, how challenging it would be if you were a new EA or a new junior staff member and you don't have those relationships, and the importance of supporting someone in that new role, especially when they've come into a new role and perhaps half their branch or department isn't even in the office. And so introducing them to this network, to your internal network and sort of guiding them through it and developing those relationships. Because I think we've all seen that we don't do anything that we do in government without the relationships that we have. We often talk about it, but this year really has shown us, it's a massive whole of government effort to the extent that we've been sharing staff across agencies in huge numbers that we never had before. And I understand that's going to be the way of the future, that we just have to be flexible and respond and your roles and your relationships are going to be critical in supporting us through allowing that to happen.

So what I'd like to do is just briefly turn to the panellists to offer some closing reflections because I think we've talked about some challenges and lessons learned, but we're looking towards 2021; some leave, borders opening, our colleagues in health are working on the vaccine distribution, so no pressure, there's good things ahead. So let's ask our panellists to sort of look forward to what they're thinking about and looking forward to in 2021.

BEV SIMS: So I actually became quite emotional when I thought about 2021 because I thought 2020 has been quite the year. And in my very extended life, I haven't experienced a year like this where there's been hardship everywhere I've looked. So I actually wrote down what I was looking forward to in 2021 so I wouldn't get a bit teary. I'm looking forward to learning and adapting to our new normal, so whatever the normal is, I think we need to embrace it and accept that this is what our new life might be. Looking for ways to support my colleagues and others still doing it tough. To continuing to learn more about myself and others and to being a better me.

KIERAN BUTLER: That's good.

DANIELLE CASANOVA: How do I [inaudible] from that? Something for me into next year, I hope to have a break. But on from that, I hope that we don't lose sight of our victims. I think COVID really threw a spanner in the works, so they're still out there and they're still really suffering. So for me personally, that's something that I've sort of really taken on throughout the year, is that there are so many people out there. So I think next year will be bigger and better. I hope that it's not any type of a repeat, like it was this year, and if it is, then we'll handle that. But for me personally, just really focusing on my family, taking some leave and ready for next year.

JACK DOLAN: Yeah. I think family's a big one, I'm sure there'd be nearly everyone in this room who's gone a large amount of this year without seeing certain family members and relatives, but I'm very much looking forward to a time, now that travel is becoming more of a thing, to just having some good quality time with family. Having some time to further reflect on the year that has been, I'm very much looking forward to, as Bev said, the new normal, whatever that's going to be in this post COVID world, we've got to get through the vaccine component first. But yeah, I think family is a big one because it really does ground you.

KIERAN BUTLER: Well, thanks very much, Jack. I think we've had a lot of sort of interesting reflections and actually I was just thinking, I liked Danielle's comment from Andrew Colvin about the importance of listening. I think that applies to us and also to everyone and to our executives and others, is just stop and take the time to think and actually listen, listen to each other and listen to the people in the community. I think that's something we don't often take enough time to do, and listen to each other.

So I'd like to thank our panellists for joining us today and sharing their experiences. Some pretty interesting experiences, and no doubt, lots to come, 2021 is going to be a big year. But I think lots of things for us to deliver, but I'm confident we can all do it and using this network as a linchpin to doing that. So I understand I have some chocolates from our Jasper and Myrtle local chocolate here to give to our panellists.

JACK DOLAN: Oh, thank you.

DANIELLE CASANOVA: Thank you.

JACK DOLAN: Very nice.

BEV SIMS: Thank you very much.

KIERAN BUTLER: I think chocolate is a very important.

DANIELLE CASANOVA: Oh, absolutely.

KIERAN BUTLER: I'd like to thank you all for attending today. I hope you've had a good night and encourage you to stay around and enjoy each other's company, and thanks again for coming.