



Aboriginal Affairs and  
Northern Development Canada

Affaires autochtones et  
Développement du Nord Canada

## **Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada**

### **Internal Audit Report**

#### **Management Practices Audit of the Communications Branch**

**Prepared by:**

**Audit and Assurance Services Branch**

**Project # 14-15**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACRONYMS .....	ii
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	1
1. BACKGROUND .....	4
2. Audit Objective and Scope.....	7
3. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY .....	8
4. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	8
4.1 Operational Plans and Objectives .....	8
4.2 Human Resource Planning.....	9
4.3 Client-centered Service and Service Standards.....	10
4.4 Internal Communications.....	11
5. CONCLUSION.....	12
6. MANAGEMENT ACTION PLAN .....	13
Appendix A: Audit Criteria.....	15
Appendix B: Relevant Policies/Directives .....	16

## ACRONYMS

AANDC	Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada
CSA	Control Self-Assessment
DG	Director General
HQ	Headquarters
HR	Human Resources
IHRP	Integrated Human Resources Plan
MPA	Management Practices Audit
MPR	Management Practices Review

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## ***Background***

The Communications Branch (or ‘the Branch’) of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC or ‘the Department’) supports departmental programs and corporate functions in their communications efforts, provides communications advice and information, plans and coordinates activities, and develops products to ensure that AANDC employees and the general public have a better understanding of Aboriginal and Northern issues, and of the department’s priorities and results.

On February 6, 2014, the Deputy Minister approved AANDC's 2014-15 to 2016-17 Risk-Based Audit Plan, which included a Management Practices Audit of the Communications Branch. This audit was initiated by the Audit and Evaluation Sector in March 2014.

The Communications Branch’s mandate is to promote the government’s Aboriginal and Northern agenda.

A significant restructuring of the Communications Branch occurred in December 2013. While substantially complete, some areas in the Branch are still in transition. Under the new organizational structure, Communications services are delivered by the following four Headquarters-based directorates and are supported by regional Communications units that have a functional reporting relationship to the Director General, Communications.

- Strategic Communications
- Issues Management
- Digital Communications
- Corporate Communications and Planning

## ***Audit Objective and Scope***

The objective of the audit was to provide senior management with assurance over the adequacy and effectiveness of a selection of management controls and activities in place to support the achievement of the Communications Branch’s objectives.

The scope of the audit covered four management practice areas assessed as being key to mitigating areas of highest risk, as determined through the CSA workshop, preliminary interviews, documentation review, an understanding of departmental plans and priorities and input from the Director General, Communications Branch. The four areas included in scope were as follows:

- Operational Planning and Objective Setting;
- Human Resources Planning;
- Client-centered Service and Use of Service Standards; and
- Internal Communications.

Audit fieldwork was conducted at AANDC Headquarters (HQ) during April and May 2014. The audit covered the period 2013-2014. For the Operational Plans and Objectives and Human Resources Planning areas, plans for 2014-2015 were included in the scope.

## **Statement of Conformance**

This management practices audit conforms with the *Internal Auditing Standards for the Government of Canada*, as supported by the results of the quality assurance and improvement program.

## **Observed Strengths**

The following strengths were observed in the Communications Branch:

- **Business Planning** – Branch-level business planning is generally adequate within the Communications Branch; and the Branch has clear objectives and priorities which align to departmental priorities.
- **Human Resource Planning** – The Branch undertook a Talent Management Review Process with Branch managers to better understand the make-up of the skill sets and career aspirations of its employees and assist in identifying future development opportunities for staff and management.
- **Internal Communications** – Management has implemented ongoing monthly all-staff meetings, and bi-weekly and weekly meetings for Branch management to foster ongoing discussion about Branch priorities and to address key issues.

## **Conclusion**

The Branch's business planning and objective setting, human resources planning and internal communications were found to be generally effective, with opportunities for improvement in all areas. In the area of client centered-service and service standards, the Branch's controls were found to be inadequate with significant opportunities for improvement.

## **Recommendations**

The audit team identified areas where management practices and processes could be improved, resulting in four recommendations, as follows:

1. The Director General, Communications Branch should strengthen directorate-level work planning processes to better forecast and manage client requirements, prioritize tasks, and manage operational requirements.
2. The Director General, Communications Branch should enhance succession planning and move toward a needs- and competency-based learning and development model to better position the Branch to respond to emerging needs and conflicting priorities.

3. The Director General, Communications Branch should develop and implement client service standards for the Branch's primary communications services.
4. The Director General, Communications Branch should improve internal communications by setting clear consistent expectations for internal communications within all directorates and communicating with staff on the results of the reorganization.

### ***Management Response***

Management is in agreement with the findings, has accepted the recommendations included in the report, and has developed a management action plan to address them. The management action plan has been integrated into this report.

# 1. BACKGROUND

## 1.1 *Management Practices Initiative*

The Audit and Evaluation Sector conducted twenty (20) Management Practices Reviews (MPRs) between 2007 and 2010 as part of a Department-wide initiative to assess the relative strength of regional and sector management practices. Following the completion of the first round of MPRs, the Deputy Minister and the Audit Committee recommended that a summary report be prepared to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the MPR process and to make a recommendation on whether the management practices review initiative should be continued. Stemming from this analysis, a second round of management practices engagements, using a revised approach, was recommended by the Audit Committee and later approved by the Deputy Minister.

Under a revised approach designed to provide departmental management with an audit-level of assurance, management practices engagements were to be conducted in two phases: a control self-assessment (CSA) workshop and a limited-scope audit. Based on the input gathered through the CSA workshop, the results of previous audits and management practices reviews and an understanding of departmental plans and priorities, a selection of the most important management practices are selected for inclusion within the scope of each Management Practices Audit (MPA).

To date, the Audit and Assurance Services Branch has completed MPAs for all ten regions and seven of the sectors. Two MPAs are scheduled for completion in 2014-15, including an MPA of Communications Branch, as set out in AANDC's 2014-15 to 2016-17 Risk-Based Audit Plan, approved by the Deputy Minister on February 6, 2014.

## 1.2 *Control Self-Assessment*

The CSA workshop is a venue through which Audit and Assurance Services Branch gathers management's perspectives and comments on the importance, efficiency, and effectiveness of a wide range of key management practices. Specifically, the workshop includes a facilitated discussion and sharing of individual perspectives on how well key management practices are functioning in support of the achievement of Branch objectives. The CSA workshop was facilitated by an independent third-party and held on March 14, 2014. The workshop was designed to allow for maximum discussion, using anonymous voting technology to encourage the sharing of perspectives.

Eighteen (18) management practices areas were discussed during the half-day CSA workshop. While there was consistency in how participants viewed the importance, efficiency and effectiveness of some management practices areas, the session also revealed that a range of perspectives exists across the Branch. The analysis of workshop feedback, along with other considerations described in section 2.2 of this report was considered in selecting the management practice areas for inclusion within the scope of the audit.

### **1.3 Communications Branch**

Communications Branch's mandate is to promote the government's Aboriginal and Northern agenda, including<sup>1</sup>:

- Informing Canadians about the Department's work, in an accessible and accountable manner;
- Maintaining an open flow of information with First Nations, Inuit, Métis and Northerners;
- Promoting positive public perceptions of Aboriginal people and issues; and,
- Ensuring coherence and consistency in messaging aligned with government priorities.

The Communications Branch assists and supports program areas in their communications efforts, provides communications advice and information, plans and coordinates activities, and develops products to ensure that Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) employees and the general public have a better understanding of Aboriginal and Northern issues, and of the department's priorities and results. The Branch supports the Department in communicating how it is achieving policy and program objectives. There is a functional reporting relationship with regions, which includes the responsibility for ensuring compliance with a range of government communications policies.

The Communications Branch is headed by the Director General (DG), Communications Branch, who reports directly to the Deputy Minister, and is supported by an Associate Director General.

The Branch's clients are both internal and external to the Department and include the Minister of AANDC, the Deputy Minister, the Media and AANDC sectors and regions.

The Communications Branch leads in the areas of, but not limited to:

- media relations and analysis;
- management and maintenance of the internet and intranet sites;
- maintenance of social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.);
- maintenance of internal online collaborative workspaces (GCpedia, GCForums, GCconnex);
- speech writing for the Minister and Deputy Minister, as well as legislative speeches;
- issues and crisis communications management;
- application of the Government of Canada's Communications Policy;
- provision of strategic communications advice and support to AANDC sectors and regions; government advertising;
- facilitation of public outreach;
- management of departmental publications; and,

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<sup>1</sup> Communications Branch 2014-15 Business Plan

- development of various other communication products, including videos, publicity;
- coordination and support of all Ministerial public events and related products.

The Branch' environment is characterized by fluidity in operational demands and evolving expectations, including:

- Frequent escalations in media attention to government and Departmental initiatives and emerging issues;
- Rapidly evolving communications landscape (e.g., a web 2.0 initiative, increased use of social media, and move to web-first approach);
- Budget reductions, and uncertainty around the renewal of supplemental funding; and
- Highly mobile personnel and changing skills requirements.

### ***Recent Organizational Changes***

To better support client needs, the government-wide effort to develop a web-first communications approach and to implement Open Government requirements<sup>2</sup>, the Communications Branch was reorganized in December 2013. While the reorganization is substantially complete, some areas in the Branch were still in transition during the audit. Under the new organizational structure, communications services are delivered by four Headquarters-based directorates and supported by regional communications units which report functionally to Communications Branch and administratively to Regional Directors General. The four directorates and their responsibilities include:

*Strategic Communications* – accountable for developing and implementing the departmental Strategic Communications Plans and implementing coherent communications policy, management and evaluation frameworks as well as a regime for AANDC resources that are engaged in communications activities and associated communications products; and for providing strategic communications advice, support and services to the Minister and Deputy Minister and to senior officials in other government departments and central agencies and senior departmental officials. The division handles all communications aspects associated with treaties and aboriginal governments concerning northern and Aboriginal affairs; and develops implements and evaluates media and social media relations strategies with internal and external partners.

*Issues Management* – develops and implements a proactive issues management program that ensures that the Minister and departmental spokespersons are as prepared as possible

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<sup>2</sup> "Canada's Action Plan on Open Government" is part of the federal government's efforts to foster greater openness and accountability, to provide Canadians with more opportunities to learn about and participate in government, to drive innovation and economic opportunities for all Canadians and, at the same time, create a more cost effective, efficient and responsive government. <http://data.gc.ca/eng/canadas-action-plan-open-government>

for media enquiries, and provides communications support to some of the Department's other corporate functions;

*Digital Communications* – accountable for leading the Department toward a more focused digital presence; for maintaining and modernizing the AANDC website; for overseeing the migration to the Government of Canada Website; for providing communication services to support clients' communications requirements; and for providing functional direction, advice and expertise to both regional offices and senior Headquarters (HQ) officials. The HQ management team provides input into the business planning cycle; and quick social media and web 2.0 response capabilities in situations requiring incident management and ad hoc policy development.

*Corporate Communications and Planning Directorate* – accountable for developing, managing and implementing corporate communications activities and horizon-scanning approaches and mechanisms at the departmental level; for providing centralized services to the Deputy Minister and the Minister's office including speech writing and for functional guidance and direction to the regions; and for managing the departmental advertising plan, publishing strategy, branding program, public affairs and Internal communications. The division develops and implements the AANDC Crisis and Emergency Communications Plan; and leads the media monitoring program.

## **2. AUDIT OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE**

### **2.1 Audit Objective**

The objective of the audit was to provide senior management with assurance over the adequacy and effectiveness of a selection of management controls and activities in place to support the achievement of the Communications Branch's objectives.

The audit objective is supported by detailed audit criteria developed and aligned with Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat's Audit Criteria Related to the Management Accountability Framework. The audit criteria are included in Appendix B.

### **2.2 Audit Scope**

The scope of the audit covered four management practice areas assessed as being key to mitigating areas of highest risk, as determined through the CSA workshop, preliminary interviews, documentation review, an understanding of departmental plans and priorities and input from the DG, Communications Branch. The four areas included in scope were as follows:

- Operational Planning and Objective Setting;
- Human Resources Planning;
- Client-centered Service and Use of Service Standards; and
- Internal Communications.

Audit fieldwork was conducted at AANDC HQ during April and May 2014. The audit covered the period 2013-2014. For the Operational Plans and Objectives and Human Resources Planning areas, plans for 2014-2015 were included in the scope.

### **3. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

The MPA of Communications Branch was conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Treasury Board Secretariat *Policy on Internal Audit* and followed the *Internal Auditing Standards for the Government of Canada*. The audit team examined sufficient, relevant evidence and obtained sufficient information to provide a reasonable level of assurance in support of the audit conclusion.

The probability of significant errors, fraud, non-compliance, and other exposures was assessed during the planning phase of the audit.

The principal audit techniques used included:

- Interviews with Branch management and staff;
- Examination of documentation related to operational plans and objectives, human resources planning, client-centered service and service standards and internal communications, including business plans, human resources plans, quarterly reports, organizational charts, meeting agendas, records of decisions, etc.; and
- Qualitative and quantitative analysis of the information gathered.

### **4. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

On the basis of evidence gathered, observations and conclusions were drawn for each of the audit criteria included in Appendix B. Where a significant difference between the audit criterion and the observed practice was found, the risk of the gap was evaluated and a recommendation proposed.

#### ***4.1 Operational Plans and Objectives***

As a component of effective governance, organizational units develop operational objectives and plans aimed at delivering on their mandate and broader organizational priorities. To this end, operational objectives and plans of organizational units must reinforce and align to broader organizational objectives and priorities.

The audit found that Communications Branch has clear operational objectives and plans that support and align to AANDC's corporate priorities.

The Branch developed a Corporate Communications Strategy in 2011 which covered the fiscal years 2011-2012 to 2013-2014. A new Corporate Communications Plan is being prepared by the Branch to replace this out-of-date strategy but it was not assessed during the audit as it was at an early stage of development.

On an annual basis, the Branch prepares and communicates a Business Plan as per departmental requirements. The Communications Branch Business Plan includes Branch-level priorities and planned activities, with these activities aligned to AANDC Report on Plans and Priorities. For each planned activity, performance indicators and performance targets are in place and being measured through a quarterly performance reporting processing. The Branch's DG reinforces the Branch's vision and priorities regularly through staff meetings, e-mails and other means.

While Branch-level business planning is in place, the Directorates within the Branch lack forward work planning processes and tools to forecast and manage client demands. The Branch's work is characterized by frequent changes to client requirements with sudden spikes in demand, making forward planning and workload reallocation processes important. Communications Managers and Advisors are responsible for engaging with their clients across the department to understand their upcoming communications needs but their approaches are varied and informal, with limited advanced identification of client requirements. This makes it difficult to proactively establish priorities and develop work plans, impeding coordination amongst directorates and placing undue pressure on managers and staff.

***Recommendation:***

1. The Director General, Communications Branch should strengthen directorate-level work planning processes to better forecast and manage client requirements, prioritize tasks, and manage operational requirements.

## ***4.2 Human Resource Planning***

To ensure that the Branch optimizes use of its human capital in delivering on its mandate, it is important that recruitment, hiring, learning and succession planning activities support the current and future needs of the organization. This can be accomplished by closely integrating business planning and human resource planning processes and through proactive identification and management of human resources (HR) related risks.

The audit found that the Branch recently developed an Integrated Human Resources Plan (IHRP or "the Plan") and that the IHRP is communicated and linked to the Communications Branch Business Plan 2014-15. The document includes a workforce analysis and environmental scan to describe the internal and external factors that could impede the achievement of HR objectives. As part of the IHRP, the Branch created an HR Action Plan which includes key activities to be undertaken in response to the specific challenges detailed in the IHRP, as well as milestones, performance indicators and accountabilities. The IHRP is further supported by a branch-level Strategic Staffing Plan.

The Branch faces a number of challenges in implementing its staffing and learning plans, including high rates of planned and unplanned leave, shortage of qualified staff, high mobility rates between federal departments, workforce with highly transferable skills and ongoing budgetary pressures. Recognizing the importance of developing and retaining staff, the Branch launched its own talent management initiative. This initiative involved seeking to understand

individual strengths, interests and career aspirations and designing development opportunities to support employees in furthering their careers.

Two areas where the Branch IHRP requires improvement are succession planning for anticipated vacancies and vulnerable positions and competency-based learning and development for all staff. While the IHRP outlines the need to develop staff competencies and skills as key HR risks, few tangible strategies are in place to address them. In respect of learning and development, a Branch-wide identification of skills and competency requirements could inform the development of a competency-based learning and development model aimed at strengthening Branch capacity in emerging communications fields and media, better positioning the Branch for the future.

***Recommendation:***

2. The Director General, Communications Branch should enhance succession planning and move toward a needs- and competency-based learning and development model to better position the Branch to respond to emerging needs and conflicting priorities.

### ***4.3 Client-centered Service and Service Standards***

Service standards are an important element of service management excellence; they foster reasonable client expectations, allow for proactive management of employee workloads, support performance measurement and promote client satisfaction<sup>3</sup>. To be effective, service standards must be consistently understood, achievable, aligned to clearly defined business processes, in accordance with client's expectations, and supported by a performance measurement and reporting regime.

We expected to find that the Branch had clear service standards in place to govern and manage the services being provided to its internal clients. The audit found that the Branch does not have service standards or performance targets in place for the services provided to internal clients. Rather, services are typically delivered according to deadlines agreed upon with each client and no processes or tools are in place to demonstrate that the Branch is delivering on its commitments. Our audit did not include discussions or surveys with clients of the Branch and, accordingly, we make no observations or conclusions about the quality or timeliness of services provided by the Branch.

We also expected to find that the Branch had formal mechanisms in place to solicit client feedback. The audit found that informal mechanisms to solicit client feedback exist, including open dialogue with client managers and some participation in client management meetings.

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<sup>3</sup> Treasury Board, Guideline on Service Standards, 2012-07-04, <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=25750&section=text>

Additionally, the DG sits on many departmental committees and working groups where informal feedback can be obtained. However, the audit found no regular formal processes for soliciting feedback from internal clients and assessing whether the Branch is satisfying its clients' needs.

The Branch is currently clarifying and documenting its business processes and procedures and publishing them on its intranet site. Once completed, these could pave the way for development of service standards and performance targets.

***Recommendation:***

3. The Director General, Communications Branch should develop and implement client service standards for the Branch's primary communications services.

#### ***4.4 Internal Communications***

Open and effective channels for internal communications and employee feedback are important to ensuring that timely and relevant information is provided to staff, plans are consistently implemented and open and honest feedback is received.

The audit found that many formal and informal internal communication channels are in place within the Branch. The DG's monthly all staff meeting is used to engage and update all staff on Branch priorities, changes in the communications landscape and upcoming initiatives. Anyone can contribute to the agenda by submitting agenda items ahead of time. A bi-weekly Management Committee meeting is held with the DG, directors, and HR and finance professionals to discuss resource management and operational issues, including business and human resources planning and emerging operational issues and challenges. A Branch Operations meeting is held weekly for the DG, directors and selected managers to discuss operational requirements and emerging issues and to set operational priorities. While minutes for these meetings are not prepared, our review of meeting agendas and interviews with staff indicate that these communications channels are effective.

The audit noted that the effectiveness of internal communications within each directorate varied and was influenced by different management approaches and communications styles. All directorates had effective channels for disseminating information to staff with some also having strong feedback mechanisms with staff. The audit found that while feedback mechanisms exist within the Branch, not all staff are comfortable using them for suggestions and complaints. Interviews indicated that due to the stressful environment and work demands, some staff do not use formal or informal mechanisms to air complaints or make suggestions.

Our audit found that the Branch would benefit from additional communications related to the recent Branch reorganization and cut-backs. When the reorganization was first announced, the Branch undertook a number of coordinated communications to present the reorganization and this was well received by staff. As employees continue to adjust to changing reporting relationships and responsibilities, additional communications could allow the Branch to collectively reflect on the challenges they have overcome together and promote a forward-looking outlook.

***Recommendation:***

4. The Director General, Communications Branch should improve internal communications by setting clear consistent expectations for internal communications within all directorates and communicating with staff on the results of the recent Branch reorganization.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The Branch's business planning and objective setting, human resources planning and internal communications processes were found to be generally effective, with opportunities for improvement in all areas. In the area of client centered-service and service standards, the Branch's controls were found to be inadequate with significant opportunities for improvement.

## 6. MANAGEMENT ACTION PLAN

Recommendations	Management Response / Actions	Responsible Manager (Title)	Planned Implementation Date
<p>1. The Director General, Communications Branch should strengthen directorate-level work planning processes to better forecast and manage client requirements, prioritize tasks, and manage operational requirements.</p>	<p>The Branch will draft a 2-year Corporate Strategic Communications Plan designed as a planning document to assist all departmental communicators (regional and headquarters), as well as sector clients and regional clients to be engaged in issue-based, key priority and regional operational planning that will take into account an adaptive approach to shifting workloads and technologies.</p> <p>This plan will be informed by quarterly meetings between Communications Managers and their respective clients to collaboratively identify communications activities, deliverables, and time frames of specific immediate, medium- and long-term key action items.</p>	<p>Director General, Communications Branch</p>	<p>Draft of Corporate Strategic Comms Plan by Fall 2014</p> <p>Implementation: April 2016</p> <p>Flexibility in the planned implementation date will take into consideration operational demands, evolving expectations and ongoing Departmental priorities.</p> <p>October 2014</p>
<p>2. The Director General, Communications Branch should enhance succession planning and move toward a needs- and competency-based learning and development model to better position the Branch to respond to emerging needs and conflicting priorities.</p>	<p>As part of its succession plan, the Branch will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Create a Branch-wide learning road map for all levels (IS-02 to IS-06) to support the current and future needs of the organization.</li> <li>2) Build on the existing learning opportunities and activities in place to develop and enhance employee knowledge and skills using the PSES results as a benchmark and incorporating where feasible, language training.</li> </ol>	<p>Director General, Communications Branch</p>	<p>October 2014</p>

	<p>3) Continue to perform a talent management review on an annual basis</p> <p>4) Recruit and initiate Aboriginal employee development at all levels</p>		
<p>3. The Director General, Communications Branch should develop and implement client service standards for the Branches primary communications services.</p>	<p>Using the GCSuite of tools, the Branch has recently updated its business products, practices and procedures which will pave the way for the development of service standards and a performance measurement framework.</p> <p>An evaluation group will be established to draft and implement this framework.</p> <p>Tools will be developed to solicit and evaluate overall Client/Program/Branch level of satisfaction with communications advice and products.</p>	<p>Director General, Communications Branch</p>	<p>October 2014</p> <p>December 2014</p>
<p>4. The Director General, Communications Branch should improve internal communications by setting clear and consistent expectations for internal communications within all directorates and communicating with staff on the results of the recent Branch reorganization.</p>	<p>Open and effective channels for internal communications will be improved by expanding collaboration via GC Suite of tools and the Branch's new Intranet.</p> <p>The Branch will also undertake a workplace well-being assessment to help prepare for ongoing generational technological changes. This will include a workload assessment to determine how tasks and responsibilities can be accomplished, guided by the principles of Destination 2020.</p>	<p>Director General, Communications Branch</p>	<p>Fall 2014</p>

## Appendix A: Audit Criteria

The audit objective is supported by audit criteria developed in alignment with Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat's *Audit Criteria Related to the Management Accountability Framework: A Tool for Internal Auditors (March 2011)*. Additional audit criteria were developed to address specific risks identified in the planning phase.

<b>Audit Criteria</b>	
<b>Operational Objective-Setting and Planning</b>	
1.1	The organization has clearly defined and communicated strategic directions and strategic objectives, aligned with its mandate.
1.2	The organization has in place operational plans and objectives aimed at achieving its strategic objectives.
<b>Human Resource Planning</b>	
2.1	Human resource planning is aligned with business planning.
2.2	Recruitment, Hiring and Promotion consider the current and future needs of the organization.
<b>Client-centered Service (Service Standards)</b>	
3.1	Service standards are established and communicated.
<b>Internal Communication (Internal to the Branch)</b>	
4.1	Open and effective channels exist for internal communications and feedback.
4.2	There is effective communication concerning the Branch Reorganization.

## Appendix B: Relevant Policies/Directives

The following authoritative sources (i.e. guidance documents/policies) were examined and used as a basis for this audit:

- Treasury Board's *Audit Criteria related to the Management Accountability Framework: A Tool for Internal Auditors (March 2011)*.
- Treasury Board of Canada Communications Policy of the Government of Canada
- Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat Human Resources Planning
- Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat Guideline on Service Standards
- Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat Policy on Management, Resources and Results Structures