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General service staff take the floor

'Professionals often have no idea what we do'

The relationship between general service and professional staff has come under the microscope – at a groundbreaking session to increase understanding between the categories.

General service staff were invited for the first time to take the floor in front of over 100 colleagues from across FAO divisions to explain what their jobs entailed.

The session happened at an [event](#) in Rome run by the investment centre, which with 37 general service staff working in a wide variety of roles has one of the largest general service presences in FAO.



Role play: Professional and general service staff switch jobs

"This is an important session because general service staff are such a crucial part of what we do in terms of making sure all of our missions can happen," said Charles Riemenschneider, director of the investment centre, introducing the session. "What the rest of us have to do in the field wouldn't be possible without them."

Run by office clerk Liza Traniello and programme clerk Egle De Angelis, the session kicked off with a sketch in which professional and general service staff reversed roles, playing out a typical scene in the office.

A harassed general service staff member, played by senior environment officer David Colbert, dealt with a stream of professional staff all needing to go to far-flung locations 'tomorrow' – none of whom had requested mission or budget codes, made flight reservations, or got security clearance or terms of reference. "Can you sort it out?" they asked Colbert, who Mamma Mia-ed his way through countless rushed phone calls to save the day.

"The aim was to explain our work and try to reduce the divider between general service and professional staff," said Traniello. "It was about raising awareness of what we do so that we can function better as a team, improve how we work and make life easier for professionals and general service."

"Professionals often have no idea what general service staff do. I sometimes think they believe we spend our time having coffee and going to the commissary."

To support investment centre professionals, most of whom spend large amounts of time travelling, general service staff last year created 771 mission codes and 846 Oracle codes, sent 314 field disbursement requests and 708 purchase orders, raised 1 027 travel authorizations and dealt with nearly 2 000 time sheets.

"A request from your side that takes two minutes often depends not just on us but a whole series of other people and divisions, and can take half a day to implement," she added.

The session went on to involve professional staff in a brainstorming exercise on how to improve working relationships between the categories and explore career development possibilities for general service staff, such as increasing mobility within the division and occasionally accompanying professional staff on missions.

"The session was extremely well received," Traniello said after the event. "I think initially some people were dubious



about it and were a bit scared of what we were going to say. But we've had a lot of positive feedback, and a lot of willingness to make it a starting point for change.

Liza Traniello (right): 'We've had positive feedback'

A consultant is meanwhile due to come into the division to find out more about what general service staff do and work on improving career development opportunities, she said.

Traniello praised schemes in other divisions that encourage general service and professional staff to work closely together, such as the small teams in the statistics and plant production and protection divisions.

But she said general service staff across the Organization should be encouraged to communicate more openly with professional staff.

"Don't be scared to talk to them. Lack of communication is one of the reasons why this divider exists, and in a way general service staff are themselves putting up that barrier.

"Don't be scared to approach supervisors and don't underestimate yourself. If you think you have an idea to improve work in the division, propose it. The worst they can say is no."

As of December 28 2010, there were 2 011 general service staff working at FAO, 1 019 of whom were based at headquarters and 992 at offices elsewhere.

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