

# PROTECTING AND SERVING

The Australian Customs and Border Protection Service is utilising advancements in technology and operational efficiency to ensure it delivers a seamless and streamlined service.

Images courtesy of Australian Customs and Border Protection Service

**P**rotecting and policing Australia's border is a duty that the employees of the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service take very seriously. As CEO, Michael Pezzullo has focused on optimising the operational efficiency of the business and leading the industry in technological advancements.

Michael started his career in 1987 with the Department of Defence, moving to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in 1992 where he worked in the International Division. Through a myriad of public sector roles, both in government and in the Department of Defence, Michael has used his expertise and leadership skills to engage and motivate diverse groups of workers.

*The CEO Magazine* recently discussed with Michael the unique culture at the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service and how he's created a cohesive team out of a vast assortment of highly skilled individuals.

***The CEO Magazine:* How does the culture of Australian Customs differ from some of the other departments you have worked in?**

**Michael:** It's similar and it's different. It's similar in the enforcement area. It's a very similar mindset, culture, and orientation to what you find in the police services and the military services. We have a strong sense of vocation and a strong sense of duty. It's sometimes hazardous and dangerous work. Indeed, we have a lot of people who have come to us from police, emergency services, fire brigades, army, navy, and the air force, and similarly some of our people end up joining those services.

Yes, it's a public service, but it's a unique brand of public service which, for more than 60 per cent of our staff, involves uniform work, and they are in a disciplined service where they have to follow commissioners' directions. However, it's different in that we have quite extensive regulatory responsibilities, and that's more akin to other sorts of public

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agencies that actually regulate a market or a space, in our case the border space.

We are a bit of a hybrid, and that's why you get a unique culture here in the sense that you've got some people who have an extensive background—either here or they've come to us from immigration—with a very deep expertise in the regulatory side of government, for instance, setting laws and writing regulations. And then you've got more of the enforcement side. Part of the magic of both leadership and management here is to ensure that everyone is focused on one mission, that it's one service and one culture, while recognising the unique strengths and differences of our employees.

**What's your secret potion for marrying those two sides, the regulatory and the enforcement sides, in a cultural sense?**

Whether this is done successfully or not is for others to judge, but in a cultural sense it's really about emphasising the fact that while you might have quite different skills and you bring very different >



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vocational backgrounds, you all follow one mission. That mission is to protect the border, and the best way you can protect the border is to run an efficient border where the vast majority of your transactions with customers, be they traders or travellers, are efficient and easy to navigate.

As long as they are focused on the one mission, then at one level it doesn't really matter what different life experience or competencies you bring to it because you're all bringing different skills to the one mission. It's really about constantly driving through that message of one mission, and doing that through the leadership team and then cascading it down through our middle managers and staff.

**What's your viewpoint and philosophy around Australia's border issues?**

The border is a national asset. Most of our stakeholders in the border environment, even before travellers get on planes or goods are packed into containers, want an efficient and effective experience at the border because in this globalised world, fast, efficient travel, whether you are in business, travelling for a family holiday, or shipping goods, is vital. If the border is an impediment, it costs you time and money.

In business, that's real dollars. If you're travelling for pleasure, that's still an impediment because you want to get on to your destination. Even though we're a monopoly provider of border services, we're sort of a happy monopoly. We've got the same interest as most of our customers, which is fast and efficient flow. It doesn't matter whether it's a cruise ship coming in, passenger flights, air cargo flights, or sea containers; we have all got the same interest in fast, efficient movement through the border.

The problem is that those very same networks of efficiency—air travel, sea container travel, or others—if they're not regulated

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properly, are also mechanisms by which illicit goods or even persons can be trafficked in a way that either gets around the laws that prohibit those goods or gets around the screen we have in place to ensure that the goods are properly classified and that appropriate duty is collected.

Our philosophy at the border is that it's not right to paint it as a dichotomy between 'open' and 'closed'. And it's not even right to say that there is a choice between either facilitating movement—and therefore accepting the higher level of a risk in terms of enforcement or enforcing the border, closing it further—and simply accepting poorer facilitation outcomes.

We have to be able to do both seamlessly and simultaneously. We have to facilitate trade and travel quickly, efficiently, and with overwhelmingly positive customer experiences while at the same time applying our intelligence systems and analytics systems and capturing and assessing risk through big data and intelligence tip-offs from other agencies and the like to really reach into that flow and identify issues.

**How far is Australia ahead of the world in terms of this new approach?**

I think in some respects we are either world leaders or perhaps even potentially ahead of the pack with things like SmartGate, our

automated entry and exit gates. When we established this technology in the mid 2000s, we were probably world leaders. A lot of other jurisdictions are now looking at things like automated border entry systems. We are going to reach for even higher performance standards and higher levels of excellence.

**What's your blueprint for reform? What's your vision for the organisation?**

The blueprint itself, which was launched in July 2013, has now gone through a further evolution since the change of government. The blueprint for reform was presented to the Abbott government upon its election. They asked us to change a few things, and we're just working through some cabinet processes.

In terms of the vision, it's a three-part vision that all comes to the same end point, which is a modernised twenty-first-century customs and border protection service. The three critical subcomponents are our culture and our workforce; our operating model, including how do we improve our customer-facing processes; trusted trader and trusted traveller; and how do we innovate and bring technology in to help that operating model redesign. At the end of it, in 2018, my vision is to have the most advanced, twenty-first-century customs and border protection service in the world. •