

Motivation of Public Service Officials: Insights for Practitioners

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Studies have shown that reduced salaries, insufficient equipment to perform work duties, dysfunctional government budgets and the pressure to remain effective while cutting resources and costs have affected service motivation in many countries. Years of such decline make the prospect of a public service workforce being able to deliver an increasingly complex agenda on reduced budgets unlikely.

Yet, the public sector is critical to international development and key public services, such as healthcare, sanitation, electricity and water supply can be harmed by the lack of a motivated workforce. It is thus important to restore motivation in the public service to achieve the UNDP's post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

WHY DOES IT MATTER IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of frontline public officials is crucial for public service sector effectiveness. And because the public service sector is such a key pillar for international development, motivation also becomes critical to achieving international development goals. To produce effective and lasting reforms, there must be an internal desire to change and motivated public officials are best placed to lead this charge.

While public services are constrained in their ability to compete for top talent, it may not actually be in their best strategic, long-term interests to compete. Resources will always be a limiting factor, and the vagaries of human nature make the management, let alone motivation of public service officials challenging in the best of conditions. The discussion in this summary seeks to offer inspiration, insight and instruction as a starting point on the crucial journey to improve motivation in the public service.



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Public Service Motivation (PSM) is “an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions or organizations”.¹ It is an inclination to provide services for the good of society.²

One study has identified four factors that draw individuals to the public service: attraction to public policy making; commitment to public interest and civic duty; self-sacrifice; and compassion.³ Another study classified motives for public service into different ‘helping orientations’: Samaritans (defined by service to individuals in need), Communitarians (community activists), Patriots (who value service to one's country) and Humanitarians (who work for the broader interests of humanity).⁴

Private and public sector workers differ in their intrinsic motivation to serve. The amount of effort that workers exert depends on factors such as personality and the type of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards that they respond to. Workers in the public service sector are typically regarded as more altruistic than their private sector counterparts.

An individual's PSM values influences their job choice and work performance; those with greater PSM values are often drawn to the government service. In a British study of longitudinal data, it was found that employees working in the public sector are attracted because of the intrinsic rewards and so, are more likely to be committed to their organization.⁵ The authors also observed that larger numbers of people who are not intrinsically motivated accept jobs in the public sector when the extrinsic rewards are high.

- 1 James L. Perry and Lois R. Wise (1990). “The motivational bases of public service,” *Public Administration Review* 50, no. 3 (May/June): 367-373.
- 2 James L. Perry and Annie Hondeghem, eds. (2008). *Motivation in Public Management: The Call of Public Service* (New York: Oxford University Press); and Sangmook Kim, et al., (2010) “The Development of an International Instrument to Measure Public Service Motivation: A Research Note,” paper prepared for presentation at the 11th National Public Management Research Conference at Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, June 2-4, 2011.
- 3 James L. Perry (1996). “Measuring public service motivation: An assessment of construct reliability and validity,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 6, no. 1: 5-22
- 4 G. A. Brewer, S. C. Selden and R.L. Facer II (2000). “Individual Conceptions of Public Service Motivation,” *Public Administration Review* 60, no. 3: 254-264.
- 5 Y. Georgellis, E. Iossa and V. Tabvuma (2011). “Crowding out intrinsic motivation in the public sector,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 23, no. 3: 473-493.



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In reality, motivation among frontline public sector officials varies across space and time. Assuming that all public service officials possess sufficient intrinsic motivation to serve the public good may be naïve. Unfortunate incidents across the world, such as a strike in South Africa where staff in public hospitals turned away paramedics when they brought in accident victims, challenge this view. However, intrinsically motivated public service workers do exist. In 2008, the International Civil Service Commission surveyed 15,000 UN Common System Staff and found that most employees joined the UN because of opportunities to use their skills to serve a good cause.

While the overall impression gives hope that the majority of public service employees generally possess intrinsic motivation to fulfill the missions of their organizations, it also points to the pressing need to improve their motivation. We have already drawn attention to the combination of decreasing resources and increasing complexity that further indicates there is indeed a problem that requires attention.

It has been suggested that to improve the motivation of employees, public service institutions could seek to select candidates with public service values, design meaningful jobs, create conducive work environments, encourage leaders with values and promote a civic-minded society.

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WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

Organisations, including public sector agencies, move from “a vicious circle of capacity erosion to a virtuous cycle of economic growth and bureaucratic efficiency”⁶ when they link incentives and motivation to the organizations’ objectives; poor incentives such as low salaries and unfair recruitment and promotional criteria can lead to capacity erosion. Furthermore, many public services compete for staff with the private, non-profit and voluntary sectors; public services do not hold a monopoly of opportunities for staff with ‘pro-social’ values looking for a career dedicated to the public good. Having proper incentives is therefore a basic prerequisite for public service motivation. Without these, there might not even be enough employees to carry out required tasks, let alone aspire to enhance public service effectiveness.

Having said that, incentives and extrinsic motivators are insufficient - best-selling author Daniel Pink argues that the current carrot-and-stick operating model does not work and often does more harm than good. He says that rewards “can extinguish intrinsic motivation, diminish performance, crush creativity, and crowd out good behaviour”.⁷

In a discussion at a workshop on public service motivation, it was observed that developed countries that engage in New Public Management (NPM) reforms tend to place an excessive reliance on extrinsic forms of motivation. In addition, while it was agreed that pay was important in a public service setting, practitioners and thinkers around the table felt that this could even be a potential demotivator. Participants felt that it was important to create an environment with autonomy, mastery and purpose to motivate those on the ground. A study found that performance bonuses often backfire when it comes to cognitively challenging work, ignoring “the complexity of human drive, particularly the role of intrinsic motivation—the desire to perform an activity for its own inherent rewards”.⁸

These observations are further supported by a recent study focused on Indonesian public sector entrants, which found that public sector workers were more intrinsically-motivated for public service (“pro-social”) than their private sector counterparts; public sector workers also exerted higher efforts in pro-social tasks; the study also found that more motivated individuals would join the public sector even though pay was low.⁹

Based in these findings, we plan to investigate and conduct further research on specific areas of public service motivation. These are: (1) the differences and similarities in the motivation levels of female and male public service workers, (2) the motivation levels of workers in post-conflict countries, in those undergoing political transitions and in conflict zones, (3) the level of intrinsic motivation in recent graduates and those nearing retirement, (4) a discussion of how Public Service Motivation fits into Public Administration Reform, and (5) the outcomes of incentives given to workers from various public service professions and in parts of the world not covered in this paper.



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For a more detailed coverage of Public Service Motivation – please refer to the full paper: www.bit.ly/GCPSE-evidence

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- 6 Inger Ulleberg (2009) *Incentive structures as a capacity development strategy in public service delivery* (Paris, France: International Institute for Educational Planning).
 - 7 Daniel H. Pink (2009), *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverside Books), p.218.
 - 8 S. Woolhandler, D. Ariely and D. Himmelstein (2012). “Will pay for performance backfire? Insights from behavioral economics,” Health Affairs Blog, 11 October
 - 9 S. Banuri and P. Keefer (2013). “Intrinsic Motivation, Effort and the Call to Public Service,” The World Bank, Development Research Group, Policy Research Working Paper, 6729.

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