The Impact of Motivation and Public Service Competency on Employee Performance at Provincial Professional Agencies: A Survey in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT:

This study investigates the influence of employee motivation and public service competency on employee performance within provincial professional agencies in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. This study investigates the impact of public service motivation and public service competency on employee performance, with professionalism examined as a mediating variable. The research adopts an explanatory quantitative approach, aimed at understanding the causal relationships among these core constructs within the context of provincial professional agencies in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam an urban governance hub where performance expectations are high and public accountability is increasingly emphasized. The research population consisted of employees across selected provincial agencies responsible for policy implementation, administrative management, and citizenfacing services. A census sampling method was applied in cases where the unit size allowed for total population analysis. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), implemented through WarpPLS software, enabling the assessment of both direct and indirect effects within the proposed model.

Keywwords: Public Service Motivation; Employee Performance; Public Service Competency; Professionalism; Ho Chi Minh city; Vietnam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the launch of bureaucratic reform in Vietnam in 2008, significant efforts have been made to modernize public administration. However, these reforms are widely considered to have fallen short of producing meaningful change, particularly at the operational level both centrally and provincially. Reform, by definition, demands structural, procedural, and cultural shifts. Thus, civil servants are not only expected to adapt to new administrative systems, but also to actively participate in reform implementation through behavioral change, learning, and professional judgment [1].

In this context, the role of public sector human resource management becomes a pivotal element in achieving reform objectives. The success of any government organization is deeply intertwined with the effectiveness and efficiency of its human capital. The State Civil Apparatus (SCA) in Vietnam, as in many developing nations, is seen as the backbone of public governance. Hence, the quality of public servants defined by their competence,

professionalism, and motivation is critical to organizational success [2].

However, the limited availability of highly capable human resources continues to hinder the performance of public sector organizations. In a dynamic administrative environment, the need for continuous development of employee skills and mindset becomes an institutional necessity. Employees must be both willing and able to align with changing expectations, new service standards, and evolving performance metrics [3].

The performance of government organizations is an enduring focus within public administration literature. It is often used as a benchmark for assessing reform effectiveness and service delivery capacity. Performance, in this sense, is measured by the degree to which individuals successfully achieve predetermined targets, meet work standards, and contribute to broader institutional objectives [4].

According to [5], two dominant factors shape individual performance: ability and motivation. Building on this framework, this research integrates a third factor professionalism as an essential dimension that connects motivation and competency to actual performance outcomes in public service agencies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Achieving good governance, a core aim of bureaucratic reform, requires not only competent and motivated civil servants but also professionalism in the execution of public duties. Professionalism is characterized by an individual's technical expertise, ethical responsibility, and commitment to service quality. It reflects a government official's ability to provide transparent, responsive, and accountable public services, which in turn depend on adequate training, relevant experience, and educational background [6].

As [7] notes, professionalism is not merely a technical skill set, but a mental attitude and ethical commitment to maintaining and continually improving standards of public service. It is this ethos that enables government institutions to gain public trust and legitimacy, especially in a reform-driven context like that of Ho Chi Minh City

A central challenge in modern public management is determining how public sector organizations can effectively motivate civil servants (ASN) to perform at high levels in service of the public interest. This is especially critical in a transitional administrative context like Vietnam, where building an efficient and accountable civil service is essential for delivering public value. Encouraging public employees to serve the community and uphold collective interests is key to nurturing a strong, ethical, and compassionate state apparatus. One concept that has garnered significant attention in this regard is Public Service Motivation (PSM) a theoretical construct that offers deep insights into the unique motivational drivers of public employees [8].

Public Service Motivation can be broadly understood as an individual's predisposition

to respond to motives grounded in public institutions and the desire to serve society for the common good [9]. Employees who are intrinsically motivated by the belief that their work contributes to societal welfare are more likely to perform well, even when operating under constraints such as limited resources or bureaucratic inefficiencies. This intrinsic orientation toward social impact makes PSM a critical lever for enhancing public service effectiveness, and a valuable tool for public sector leaders seeking to improve recruitment, retention, and long-term organizational performance.

Alongside motivation, competence plays a fundamental role in determining an employee's capacity to perform. Competence encompasses the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences individuals acquire through their interaction with the environment and is essential for problem-solving in complex public service settings. As noted by [10], competence represents a form of "mental wealth", enabling individuals to navigate challenges and improve both personal and organizational outcomes. According to [6], competence is defined as the ability and willingness to complete tasks efficiently and effectively in pursuit of organizational goals.

This research builds on the intersection of motivation, competence, and performance, identifying a persistent research gap in the literature. While many empirical studies have examined these relationships, their findings often diverge, particularly in how professionalism acts as a bridge between motivation or competence and performance outcomes. The need to clarify and validate these linkages, especially in provincial government settings, provides the basis for this study.

Prior research has consistently demonstrated that professionalism is a significant factor in enhancing public employee performance, with studies exploring the professionalism-performance relationship in various public contexts [11]–[20]. Similarly, a growing body of literature supports the notion that PSM positively correlates with job performance and organizational outcomes [21]-[32]. Meanwhile, research into the combined effects of competence, professionalism, and performance also confirms their relevance in the public sector [33]–[42].

In the context of Ho Chi Minh City, where citizen expectations for efficient and transparent service delivery are rising, addressing employee performance problems among the State Civil Apparatus (ASN) has become a policy imperative. The persistent challenges in public service ranging from bureaucratic delays to citizen dissatisfaction—highlight performance gaps that undermine public trust. Complaints reported through the media or direct citizen channels often reveal inefficiencies and unprofessional conduct that tarnish the public image of government officials.

Given this reality, the present study aims to examine the influence of Public Service Motivation and Public Service Competency on Employee Performance, while explicitly testing the mediating role of Professionalism. This framework offers a more comprehensive understanding of how motivation and competency translate into tangible improvements in the

quality of public service delivery.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study is classified as explanatory research, aiming to clarify causal relationships among key variables and test specific hypotheses through empirical analysis [43]. The focus is on understanding how public service motivation and competency influence employee performance, with professionalism serving as a mediating variable, within the setting of provincial professional agencies in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

The research population consisted of employees from selected agencies at the provincial level institutions tasked with executing public policies and delivering administrative services. The sampling technique used was saturated sampling, where the entire population is included as the sample. As stated by [44], saturated sampling is appropriate when the population size is relatively small and all members are accessible and relevant to the research objectives.

This study incorporates three main variables: Exogenous Variables: Public Service Motivation and Public Service Competency; Intervening Variable: Professionalism; Endogenous Variable: Employee Performance; Each of these variables is measured using validated instruments adapted for the Vietnamese public sector context. A detailed overview of the operational definitions and measurement items for each construct is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Identification and measurement of research variables.

No	Variables	Indicators
		Attraction to public policy making
1	Public Service Motivation (X1)	Commitment to the public interest
		Compassion
		d. Self-sacrifice [31]
	Competence (X2)	Knowledge
		Understanding
		Skill
		Value
		Attitude
		Interest [10]
	Professionalism (Z)	proficiency in using equipment
		staff readiness in public service
3		responsibility (accountability)
		discipline (obedience to applicable regulations)
		attitude of government officials [45]

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4	Staff Performance (Y)	Quantity of Work Quality of Work Job Knowledge Creativeness Cooperative Dependent ability Initiative Personal Qualities [46]
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The data analysis stage as a form of research hypothesis testing uses Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the WARPPLS statistical tool. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is an integrated approach between factor analysis, structural models and path analysis [47].

4. **RESULTS**

Respondent Descriptive Statistics

The respondents in this study were 80 staff members from various provincial professional agencies in Ho Chi Minh City, selected to represent administrative personnel directly involved in the delivery and management of public services.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of respondent demographics.

	Criteria	Frequency (peoples)	Percentage (%)
Age	a. < 30 years old	29	36,3
	b. $30 - 50$ years old	38	47,5
	c. > 50 years old	13	16,2
	Total	80	100,0
Gender	a. Male	66	82,5
	b. Female	14	17,5
	Total	80	100,0
Marital	a. Marry	72	90,0
status	b. Not Married Yet	8	10,0
	Total	80	100,0
Education	a. Elementary Scholl	3	3,7
Level	b. Junior High Scholl	9	11,2
	c. Senior High Scholl	36	45,0
	d. Diploma	11	13,7
	e. Bachelor	15	18,7
	f. Postgraduate	6	7,7

	Total	80	100,0
Position	a. Echelons	13	16,2
	b. Staf	67	83.8
	Total	80	100,0
Experience	< 5 years	18	22,5
	5 - 10 years	38	47,5
	> 10 years	24	30,0
	Total	80	100,0

Source: Data processed

Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) Analysis Results

Test results with the WARPLS 7.0 program provide SEM-PLS model results as shown in the following Figure 1.

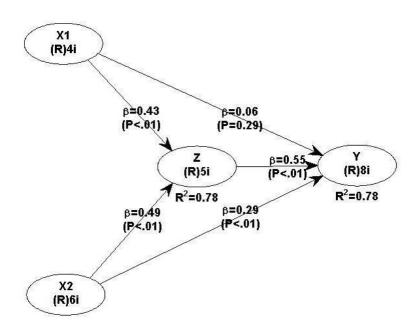


Figure 1. SEM-PLS model test result.

Direct Effect Test Results

Test results with the WARPLS 7.0 program provide SEM-PLS model results as shown in the following Table 3.

Table 3. Direct effect test result.

	Effect		Estimate	S.E.	P	Result
Public Service		Professionalism	0,430	0,098	<0,001	H1 accepted
Motivation						
Competence		Professionalism	0,487	0,096	<0,001	H2 accepted
Public Service		Staff	0,062	0,110	0,288	H3 rejected
Motivation		Performance				
Competence		Staff	0,294	0,102	0,003	H4 accepted
		Performance				
Professionalism		Staff Performance				
			0,550	0,095	< 0,001	H5 accepted

Source: Data processed

The results of direct effect test show that public service motivation and competence have a significant effect on professionalism. Competence has a significant effect on employee performance, while public service motivation have insignificant effect on employee performance. And, professionalism has a significant effect on employee performance.

Indirect Effect Test Results

An indirect relationship occurs between the exogenous latent variables public service motivation (X1) and competence (X2) on the endogenous latent variable tied to employee performance (Y) and the intervening endogenous variable professionalism (Z). A summary of the indirect influence of these variables can be seen in the following table 4.

Table 4. Indirect effect test result.

Effect	Estimate	S.E.	P	Result
Public Service Motivation	0,237	0,074	<0,001	H6 accepted
Professionalism□ Staff Performance				
Competence ☐ Professionalism☐ Staff Performance	0,4268	0,073	<0,001	H7 accepted

Source: Data processed

The results of the influence test do not directly show that professionalism plays a role as an intervening variable in the relationship between public service motivation and employee performance. Thus, the hypothesis states that public service motivation has a significant effect on employee performance mediated by professionalism. Furthermore, professionalism acts as an intervention variable in the relationship between employee competence and

performance. So the hypothesis states that competence has a significant effect on employee performance mediated by professionalism.

Analysis of the Coefficient of Determination (R2)

The R-square value describes the variation in changes in exogenous variables that can be explained by endogenous variables. Test results related to the R-square value can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. R-Square value.

Variables	Variables Name	R-square
\overline{Z}	Professionalism	0,781
Y	Staff Performance	0,785

Source: Data processed

Based on Table 5, the R-square value of the professionalism construct is 0.781 and the R-square value of the employee performance construct is 0.785. An R-square of 0.781 can be interpreted as meaning that 78.2% of the variability in changes in professionalism can be explained by the public service motivation and competency variables. An R-square of 0.785 can be interpreted as meaning that 78.5% of the variability in changes in employee performance can be explained by the variables public service motivation, competence and professionalism.

Summary of Research Hypothesis Testing Results

After analyzing the data using SEM-PLS, the following is a summary of the results of research hypothesis testing.

Table 6. Summary of hypothesis testing results.

No	Research Hypothesis	Conclusions
1	Public service motivation has a significant effect on professionalism	H1 accepted
2	Competence has a significant effect on professionalism	H2 accepted
3	Public service motivation has a significant effect on staff performance	H ₃ rejected
4	Public service motivation has a significant effect on staff	H4 accepted
5	Profesionalism has a significant effect on staff	H ₅ accepted
6	Public service motivation has a significant effect on employee performance mediated by professionalism	H6 accepted

7 Competence has a significant effect on employee performance mediated by professionalism

H7 accepted

Source: Data processed

5. DISCUSSION

The Effect of Public Service Motivation on Professionalism

The research results show that public service motivation has a significant effect on professionalism. Public service motivation is closely related to awareness of the positive impact resulting from the services provided to the community, this can build public trust in the government and public organizations [48]. Government officials associate public service with dedication to serving the state, thereby giving them a special status to work for the government [8].

The role of motivation in an organization has a huge influence on employees because it can trigger employees to carry out work professionally so that organizational goals can also be achieved. According to [7], professionalism is a term that refers to a mental attitude in the form of commitment from members of a profession to always realize and improve their professional quality. Professionalism is the commitment of members of a profession to improve their professional abilities and continually develop the strategies they use in carrying out work in accordance with their profession. The most important aspect in providing services is that motivated human resources can certainly show a professional attitude towards carrying out their service tasks. An obstacle is faced by public organizations in being able to demonstrate employees who are motivated and professional, because the focus and expectations of public organizations are centered on their employees who are tasked with controlling the functions of government. The findings of this research are in accordance with the empirical findings from [49]–[53] which state that motivation has a significant influence on work professionalism.

The Effect of Competency on Professionalism

The research results show that competence has a significant effect on professionalism. Competency is the most demanded thing for someone who has worked in a government institution. Competency is often linked to the performance results achieved by the employee himself. This can be seen from the employee's ability to achieve work output, complete work on time, commitment to work, competence in accordance with institutional expectations, and having initiative in solving problems faced in each job [45]. According to [31] a person who has a high level of competence automatically produces good quality performance or output.

An employee with a work attitude that always produces good quality performance or output is defined as a professional employee. According to [2] professionalism is a

responsibility that is based on the duties and regulations that apply where the individual works. Professionalism in a job or profession has long received attention from researchers. Professionalism, seen from the meaning of the language, can have several meanings. First, professionalism means expertise, having certain qualifications, experience in accordance with the field of expertise within the company. Second, the definition of professionalism refers to a work standard, namely the moral and ethical principles of the profession [45]. The research results support empirical findings which show the influence of competence on professionalism, including [35], [37]–[39], [54].

The Effect of Public Service Motivation on Employee Performance

The research results show that public service motivation does not have a significant effect on employee performance. This means that public service motivation is not directly assessed as a determining factor in employee performance. PSM theory represents an alternative to rational choice theory which states that people's behavior is based solely on their personal interests [48]. In contrast, PSM theory argues that human behavior is not only driven by concern for oneself but also by altruistic motives and motives related to other people with the aim of doing good for society [8].

The nature of performance in the public sector is very complex because it can refer to the efficiency and effectiveness of the private sector or more specific public sector goals such as public access, transparency, or freedom from corruption [2]. [27] studied a model of public service motivation that is linked to performance and achievement. The research results are inconsistent with research findings [28], [29], [32], [55], [56] which found that high motivation for public services provided will increase employee performance.

The Effect of Competency on Employee Performance

The research results show that competency has a significant effect on employee performance. Competency is the ability to carry out or carry out a job or task that is based on skills and knowledge and supported by the work attitudes required by the job. Boyatzis in [57] said that competence describes characteristics that are related to superior and/or effective performance at work. A similar opinion was expressed [2] that competence is what people bring to a job in the form of different types and levels of behavior. Competencies determine aspects of the job performance process.

A person's performance can be improved if there is a match between work and abilities [5]. Individual ability refers to an individual's capacity to perform various tasks in a job. Competency influences employee performance. An employee who has high competence such as knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes appropriate to the position he holds is always encouraged to work effectively, efficiently and productively. This happens because the competence possessed by the employee concerned is increasingly able to carry out the tasks assigned to him. The research results are in accordance with and support the findings of [31], [38], [54], [58], [59] which state that competence has a

significant effect on employee performance.

The Effect of Professionalism on Employee Performance

The research results show that professionalism has a significant effect on employee performance. Professionalism is the commitment of members of a profession to improve their professional abilities and continually develop the strategies they use in carrying out work in accordance with their profession. According to [57], work professionalism is a benchmark in assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of the performance of government agencies in implementing their work programs. Efforts to realize good governance require professionalism from government officials.

Organizational performance is a description of the results of an organization's work in achieving its goals which of course will be influenced by the resources owned by the organization [57]. The resources in question can be physical such as human resources or non-physical such as regulations, information and policies, to better understand the factors that can influence an organization's performance. Each organization can have its performance assessed using existing performance indicators to see whether the organization has carried out its duties well and to find out whether its objectives have been achieved or not [5]. Research that shows the significant effect of professionalism on employee performance includes [11], [12], [38], [54], [60].

The Effect of Public Service Motivation on Employee Performance Mediated by Professionalism

The research results show that public service motivation has a significant effect on employee performance mediated by professionalism. This means that professionalism acts as an intervening variable in the relationship between public service motivation and employee performance. Public service motivation is closely related to awareness of the positive impact resulting from the services provided to the community [48]. Professionalism is the commitment of members of a profession to improve their professional abilities and continually develop the strategies they use in carrying out work in accordance with their profession. According to [57], work professionalism is a benchmark in assessing effectiveness and efficiency of the performance of government agencies in implementing their work programs. Efforts to realize good governance require professionalism from government officials.

Organizational performance is a description of the results of an organization's work in achieving its goals which of course will be influenced by the resources owned by the organization [57]. The resources in question can be physical such as human resources or non-physical such as regulations, information and policies, so that we can better understand the factors that can influence an organization's performance. Employees of government institutions with high public service motivation will always be professional in carry out their service to the community, and ultimately will show good performance.

The Effect of Competency on Employee Performance Mediated by Professionalism

The research results show that competence has a significant effect on employee performance mediated by professionalism. Competency is the most demanded thing for someone who has worked in a government institution. Competency is often linked to the performance results achieved by the employees themselves [45].

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CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: Based on the results of the data analysis, it can be concluded that both public service motivation and public service competency have a significant positive influence on professionalism among employees in provincial professional agencies. However, when examining direct effects on performance, the results reveal a notable distinction: competency has a direct and significant impact on employee performance, while public service motivation does not show a statistically significant direct effect on performance.

Professionalism, on the other hand, exhibits a strong and significant effect on employee performance, confirming its critical role in translating motivational and competency factors into tangible performance outcomes. In terms of indirect effects, the study finds that professionalism acts as a mediating variable in both the relationship between public service motivation and employee performance, and between competency and performance. Thus, the hypothesis that public service motivation and competency positively influence employee performance through the mediation of professionalism is supported by the empirical evidence.

Implication: The findings underscore the importance for provincial public sector agencies in Ho Chi Minh City to effectively manage and integrate three key elements public service motivation, competency, and professionalism within their human resource strategies. These components serve as strategic assets for enhancing employee performance, particularly in agencies tasked with delivering high-quality public services in a demanding urban environment [x].

Agency leaders and HR managers should prioritize professional development programs that not only enhance technical skills but also reinforce a culture of professional accountability and public service ethics. By doing so, they can bridge the gap between intention (motivation) and outcome (performance)

Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on organizational behavior in the public sector, particularly within developing country contexts. It reinforces the role of professionalism as a dynamic mechanism that connects internal dispositions (motivation) and capacities (competency) to actual performance behaviors. It also opens up avenues for conceptual development, especially in modeling public employee behavior in performance-driven governance systems.

Future Research: This study is limited in its generalizability, as the sample is restricted to provincial professional agencies in Ho Chi Minh City. While these findings provide meaningful insights for Vietnam's most urbanized and administratively advanced region, future research should consider expanding the geographic and institutional scope, including regional and national-level public agencies, to verify the robustness of these relationships across diverse governance contexts.

Another limitation concerns the quantitative nature of the questionnaire used. While statistical analysis provides clarity on relationships, future studies should incorporate qualitative approaches—such as interviews or focus groups to gain deeper insights into how motivation and competence are internalized and expressed as professionalism in day-to-day public service work..

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