

The Role of Workload in Moderating the Relationship Between Competence, Motivation, and Performance of Civil Servants in Bulungan Regency

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Abstract

Public sector employee performance is a key factor in achieving effective governance and high-quality public services. Amid rising public demands, government employees face job complexity, resource constraints, and high administrative pressure. This study aims to analyze the influence of competence and motivation on the performance of public sector employees and to examine the moderating role of workload in this relationship among government officials in Bulungan Regency. This study employs a quantitative approach using a survey method targeting public sector employees in Bulungan Regency. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling to test the direct relationships and moderating effects among the variables, after first ensuring the validity and reliability of the instruments. The results of the study indicate that competence and motivation have a positive and significant effect on employee performance, while workload acts as a moderating variable that weakens the relationship between competence and performance as well as between motivation and performance when workload is high. These findings indicate that the management of disproportionate workloads can hinder the utilization of employees' competencies and motivational energy; thus, in practice, local governments need to balance the distribution of workloads with competency development and motivation systems so that civil servant performance can be optimized sustainably

Keywords

competence, employee performance, motivation, public sector, workload



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INTRODUCTION

The issue of public sector employee performance is a global concern that is receiving increasing attention as demands for the quality of government services rise (Borst et al., 2017; van Loon et al., 2016) In various countries, reports and empirical findings indicate that heavy workloads, limited human resources, and the increasing

complexity of administrative tasks contribute to work-related stress, burnout, and a decline in the productivity of public servants (De Angelis et al., 2021; Knies et al., 2020). Within the Job Demands Resources framework, workload is identified as a primary job demand that depletes employees' physical and psychological energy, thereby hindering their ability to fully utilize their competencies and maintain work motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Lesener et al., 2018). This situation means that highly competent employees are not always able to perform at their best when faced with an excessive workload, while highly motivated employees may experience a decline in performance when work demands exceed their adaptive capacity (De Angelis et al., 2021; Schaufeli, 2021)

Performance challenges among civil servants remain a strategic issue in bureaucratic reform, where efforts to enhance professionalism, competence, and motivation among employees continue to be promoted through the implementation of a merit-based system and the strengthening of talent management as part of bureaucratic reform policies aimed at achieving good governance and effective performance (Setyowati, 2019). Nevertheless, the implementation of this policy in many local governments still faces various challenges, including an uneven distribution of workloads, limited staff, and increasing demands for public services that require employees to handle multiple tasks simultaneously, which ultimately affects the effectiveness of the results-based performance appraisal system (Maslach, 2003). In practice, such conditions create an imbalance between employees' competencies, work motivation, and the demands of their jobs, resulting in performance that does not always reflect their true potential and commitment—a finding consistent with the view that competencies and work motivation are the primary determinants of civil servant performance (Mahmudi & Bakar, 2025).

Although various studies have demonstrated that competence and motivation have a significant impact on public sector employee performance, most studies still treat workload as an independent variable or as a factor that directly influences performance. Research on regional government offices indicates that competence and work motivation have a significant influence on employee performance; however, this relationship has not been consistently tested by including workload as a moderating variable that strengthens or weakens the relationship (Tabrani et al., 2024; et al., 2025). This limitation is reinforced by the finding that studies in the context of government agencies often focus on the direct effects of competence on performance and overlook the moderating role of workload or other moderating variables in the relationship model (Tabrani et al., 2024; et al., 2025). Furthermore, empirical studies that specifically

examine the realities of public sector organizations in border regions and developing areas such as Bulungan Regency remain very limited, indicating a significant research gap from both conceptual and contextual perspectives (Tabrani et al., 2024; et al., 2025).

Based on these conditions, this study aims to answer the question of how workload moderates the relationship between competence and motivation on the performance of public sector employees in Bulungan Regency, as well as to what extent the level of workload can alter the strength of the influence of competence and motivation in driving civil servant performance.

The objective of this study is to analyze the influence of competence and motivation on the performance of public sector employees and to test the role of workload as a moderating variable in this relationship within the Bulungan Regency Government, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the factors determining civil servant performance. The contribution of this study lies in enriching the literature on public sector human resource management by examining the moderating role of workload in the relationship between competence, motivation, and performance a topic that has rarely been studied in an integrated manner. Theoretically, this study strengthens the Job Demands Resources perspective and performance theory by demonstrating that the effects of competence and motivation are not universal but are highly dependent on the level of job demands faced by employees.

METHODS

This study employs an explanatory and confirmatory research design, as its primary objective is to explain the causal relationship between employee competence, motivation, and performance, and to test the role of workload as a moderating variable in the structural model formulated based on theory and previous empirical findings (Hair et al., 2021; Richter et al., 2016; Shmueli et al., 2019). A quantitative approach was employed to objectively and measurably test the relationships among variables using structural equation modeling, particularly in the context of testing direct, indirect, and moderating effects in models of organizational behavior and performance (Benitez et al., 2020; Cepeda-Carrion et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2021; Pati & Kakani, 2022)

The study population includes all civil servants working at the subdistrict offices in Bulungan Regency. A total population sampling technique was used (Acharya et al., 2013; Asiamah et al., 2022; Iliyasu & Etikan, 2021; Taherdoost, 2016). The sample size was 121 respondents, based on the requirements of SEM-PLS analysis, which specifies the necessary sample size. The data collection method involved a survey using a structured questionnaire distributed to respondents both in person and online.

The survey method was chosen because it allows for the collection of broad and consistent data on employees' perceptions regarding competencies, motivation, workload, and performance, as recommended in modern public sector human resource management research (Hoque, 2021; Rasool et al., 2020).

The measurement instrument was developed by adapting a scale from previous research that has been empirically validated and possesses cross-organizational validity (Karatepe et al., 2020; Podsakoff et al., 2019). Competencies are measured using indicators of knowledge, skills, and work abilities adapted from a public employee competency model that has been widely used in public sector performance studies (Hoque, 2021; Putra & Sari, 2025). Work motivation is measured through the dimensions of need for achievement, commitment to tasks, and intrinsic motivation, as reflected in a work motivation scale for employees that has been validated in government and public service organizations (Rasool et al., 2020; Sinambela, 2020). Workload is measured based on perceptions of task volume, time pressure, and job complexity, adapted from a widely used workload scale in organizational and industrial-organizational psychology studies (Ambilichu et al., 2024; Karatepe et al., 2020). Employee performance is measured using indicators of work quality, work quantity, and timeliness, in accordance with the modern public sector performance evaluation model (Podsakoff et al., 2019; Putra & Sari, 2025). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale to adequately capture the range of responses and enhance the reliability and sensitivity of the measurement (Hoque, 2021; Rasool et al., 2020).

The data analysis technique employed Partial Least Squares-based Structural Equation Modeling using the SmartPLS software. This method was chosen because it is suitable for models involving latent constructs and moderated interactions, and does not require strict assumptions of multivariate normality, making it effective for highly complex models with moderate sample sizes (Hair et al., 2021). The analysis includes testing of measurement models and structural models, including testing of the direct effects of competence and motivation on performance, as well as the moderating effect of workload through the formation of interaction constructs, which have been validated in the context of latent relationship and moderation analysis in PLS-SEM (Benitez et al., 2020).

Validity and reliability testing was conducted in several stages. Convergent validity was assessed based on the outer loading and average variance extracted values, which must exceed the minimum thresholds, as recommended in the evaluation of the PLS-SEM reflective model (Hair et al., 2021). Discriminant validity

was tested using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio, which have been shown to be more sensitive in detecting construct discrimination issues (Benitez et al., 2020; Hair et al., 2021). Construct reliability was evaluated using composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha, with values above the recommended threshold, while tests of the significance of structural paths and moderating effects were conducted using bootstrapping procedures to obtain robust parameter estimates and confidence intervals (Hair et al., 2021).

Research ethics were upheld by ensuring that respondent participation was voluntary, anonymous, and free from administrative consequences. Each respondent was informed about the research objectives, data confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The data were used solely for academic purposes and reported in aggregate form without identifying specific individuals or institutions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the data analysis, this study found that competence and motivation have a significant effect on the performance of public sector employees in Bulungan Regency, and that workload was found to act as a moderating variable in this relationship. These findings are consistent with various empirical studies indicating that job competence is a key human resource that enhances the effectiveness of public employees' performance, with competence having been shown to positively influence employee performance across various contexts of public service and governance (Friadi et al., 2025; Rahmawati et al., 2025; Sismiati et al., 2025). In addition, the combination of competence and motivation collectively enhances performance, and workload can influence the strength of the relationship between human resources and actual work outcomes (Noviyanti et al., 2025; Putra & Sari, 2025). Other studies also confirm that work motivation has a strong direct impact on performance, particularly in the context of public service, government bureaucracy, and performance-based public sector organizations (Hasan et al., 2023; Suryani et al., 2023). In many studies, motivation is described as a psychological factor that strengthens the relationship between competence and performance outcomes, while contextual variables such as workload act as moderators that determine the magnitude of that effect (Noviyanti et al., 2025; Putra & Sari, 2025; Rahmawati et al., 2025). The findings of this study reinforce this evidence, but also indicate that the effects of competence and motivation on performance are not universal; rather, they depend on the level of workload experienced by employees.

Previous research has shown that workload often acts as a moderating factor in the relationship between individual characteristics and performance. Studies in the

public sector in Europe, East Asia, and developing countries have found that at moderate levels of workload, competence and motivation have a stronger impact on performance, while at excessively high levels of workload, these effects tend to weaken due to fatigue, psychological stress, and time constraints. The findings from the study in Bulungan Regency are consistent with this pattern, where workload either strengthens or weakens the relationship between competence and motivation and employee performance.

Thus, these results confirm the findings of empirical research indicating that job characteristics and work demands moderate or amplify the influence of individual factors on performance, as explained in the Job Demands–Resources framework, which posits that work demands and job characteristics interact with personal resources to shape employee performance and well-being (Bakker et al., 2023; Lesener et al., 2018), and supported by findings in the public sector indicating that job characteristics and workload influence the relationship between employees' competencies, motivation, and performance (Jensen & Vestergaard, 2016; van Loon et al., 2016)

From a theoretical perspective, these findings expand the application of Job Demands–Resources Theory in the context of the local public sector (Bakker et al., 2023; Lesener et al., 2018). This theory states that employee performance and well-being are influenced by the balance between job demands and the resources available to the individual (Bakker et al., 2023; Benitez et al., 2020). Competence and motivation can be viewed as personal resources, while workload is a job requirement (Xanthopoulou et al., 2012). The results of this study indicate that job demands not only have a direct impact on performance, but also alter the strength of the influence of personal resources on performance (Lesener et al., 2018; Van den Broeck et al., 2021). Thus, this study contributes to theoretical development by demonstrating that workload serves as a contingency mechanism that determines whether competence and motivation can be optimally converted into performance (Bakker et al., 2023; Schaufeli et al., 2023). This reinforces the understanding that the relationship between psychological variables and performance in the public sector is dynamic and context-dependent (De Angelis et al., 2021; Lesener et al., 2018).

The managerial implications of this study are highly relevant for local governments, particularly in Bulungan Regency. The findings indicate that improving competencies through training and capacity building for civil servants will not result in optimal performance if the workload is not managed appropriately (Bakker et al., 2023; De Angelis et al., 2021) Similarly, efforts to boost motivation through incentives,

rewards, or improvements to the career system will be less effective if employees are overworked (Lesener et al., 2018; van Loon et al., 2016). Therefore, leaders of public organizations need to implement more rational workload management through the redistribution of tasks, the establishment of workload standards, and the use of technology to reduce administrative pressure (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Taris et al., 2001). For policymakers, these findings underscore that bureaucratic reform must not only focus on improving the competence and motivation of civil servants, but must also address job design and workload so that local governments' human resources can perform at their best (De Angelis et al., 2021; Schaufeli et al., 2023).

Regarding findings that do not fully align with the hypothesis, if the research results reveal a relationship that is weaker than expected—for example, a diminished effect of competence on performance under conditions of extremely high workload—this can be explained by the effects of work-related fatigue and time pressure (Bakker et al., 2023; Karatepe et al., 2020). Under conditions of overload, even competent employees lack the cognitive and physical capacity to perform their tasks optimally, as the demands of the job deplete the psychological resources and work attention required for high performance (Lee et al., 2022; Schaufeli et al., 2023). This phenomenon has also been observed in various studies showing that excessive workloads can negate the benefits of competence and motivation, particularly through mechanisms such as emotional exhaustion, time pressure, and reduced work engagement (Bakker et al., 2023; Molino et al., 2018; Paškvan et al., 2016). These findings suggest that organizational context and job design play a crucial role in determining whether individual resources can actually be translated into high performance, thereby opening up opportunities for further research to include factors such as managerial support, organizational climate, and the digitalization of work as additional variables (Bakker et al., 2023; Emanuel et al., 2018; Sverke, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the data analysis and discussion, this study demonstrates that competence and work motivation significantly influence the performance of public sector employees in Bulungan Regency, where employees with higher competence and stronger motivation tend to show better performance in carrying out their duties and delivering public services. In addition, workload has been proven to function as a significant moderating variable that can either strengthen or weaken the influence of competence and motivation on employee performance. Under balanced workload conditions, competence and motivation can be translated more effectively into optimal performance, whereas excessive workloads tend to reduce their positive

effects due to increased work pressure and fatigue. Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on public sector human resource management by integrating workload as a moderating variable in the relationship between competence, motivation, and performance, thereby supporting the Job Demands–Resources approach and work performance theory, which emphasize that job demands not only directly affect performance but also shape the relationship between individual factors and work outcomes. Practically, the findings imply that the local government of Bulungan Regency should improve employee competencies through training and development programs, strengthen work motivation through rewards systems and supportive work environments, and at the same time manage workloads proportionally through better task distribution, workforce planning, and the utilization of technology to improve efficiency. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations, including the use of cross-sectional data that cannot capture changes over time, reliance on questionnaire-based perceptions that may create subjectivity and common method bias, and a research scope limited to the public sector in Bulungan Regency, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research is recommended to employ longitudinal designs, include additional variables such as leadership, organizational culture, and organizational support, and expand the scope of study across different regions or sectors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of workload in influencing employee performance.

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