

Intelligent careers and human resource management practices: qualitative insights from the public sector in a clientelistic culture

Intelligent careers in the public sector

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to empirically test the intelligent career framework in a public sector setting in a country with a clientelistic culture to inform human resource management strategies.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on a qualitative methodology and an interpretivist paradigm, 33 in-depth interviews were conducted with Greek civil servants before the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview recordings were subsequently transcribed and coded via a blend of inductive and deductive approaches.

Findings – Outcomes of the study indicate that in a public sector setting in a country with a clientelistic culture, the three dimensions of knowing-whom, knowing-how and knowing-why are less balanced than those reported by findings from private sector settings in countries with an individualistic culture. Instead, knowing-whom is a critical dimension and a necessary condition for career development that affects knowing-how and knowing-why.

Originality/value – The theoretical contribution comes from providing evidence of the dark side of careers and how imbalances between the three dimensions of the intelligent career framework reduce work satisfaction, hinder career success and affect organisational performance. The practical contribution offers recommendations for human resource management practices in the public sector, including training, mentoring, transparency in performance evaluations and fostering trust.

Keywords Career success, Civil servants, Clientelistic culture, Greece, Human resource management, Intelligent career, Organisational performance, Public sector, Work satisfaction, Social capital

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The intelligent career framework describes a set of essential competencies drawn from the competency-based view of the firm, including culture, know-how and networks (Arthur *et al.*, 1995). According to Parker *et al.* (2009), the theory posits that an individual invests in their careers through relationships and reputation (*knowing whom*), skills and expertise (*knowing*



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how), and motivation and identity (*knowing why*). Examples include family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues (*knowing-whom*), training opportunities, access to information, feedback and appraisals, promotions (*knowing-how*), safety, money, family and personality (*knowing-why*). The intelligent career framework also acknowledges links between the three competencies (Parker *et al.*, 2009). These include the dyadic relationships between (1) knowing-whom and knowing-how, (2) knowing-whom and knowing-why, and (3) knowing-how and knowing-why.

According to Amundson *et al.* (2002), each of the three competencies must be equally developed for satisfactory career development. However, the intelligent career framework has predominantly been designed and empirically tested in the private sector, which is problematic since the idiosyncrasies of the public sector have yet to be fully explored (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, integrating the fields of career studies and public personnel administration that conventionally have been studied separately addresses calls for career research in the public sector (Hart and Baruch, 2022).

Additionally, context and culture in management research can influence findings (Baruch and Vardi, 2016). While studies exploring the intelligent career framework are often carried out in individualistic societies (e.g., Australia, Canada, United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (USA)), there still needs to be more emphasis on empirical testing in countries with more clientelistic practices (e.g., Brazil, Greece, Namibia, Türkiye) (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010; Kyriacou, 2023). Clientelism is characterised by an environment in which contingent exchange plays out on a quid-pro-quo basis (Hicken, 2011). Greece offers an excellent case to explore of the significant reliance on social networks of power where clientelism has become “an organic part of the Greek polity” (Marangudakis, 2019, p. 81).

Consequently, our study aims to empirically test the intelligent career framework in a public sector setting in a country with a clientelistic culture to inform human resource management practices.

Context: civil servants in Greece

Greece is characterised by a large public sector, accounting for 21.3% of the labour market (International Labour Organization, 2019). During the 1980s, working in the public sector became the “Greek dream” (Saiti and Papadopoulos, 2015). The Greek civil service is a bureaucratic, highly centralised and inflexible system that has operated under monopolist conditions for several decades (Michalopoulos and Psychogios, 2003). The clientelistic culture means that the careers of public sector workers in Greece are heavily influenced by political considerations and nepotism (Bozionelos, 2014).

Following the 2007–2008 Global Financial Crisis, Greece adopted austerity reforms that led to the largest-scale privatisation in the country’s history (Brewer and Kellough, 2016). Efforts were made to improve the Greek public sector and develop a workforce capable of delivering cost-effective and efficient services to the public. The key goals of the program were (1) to maintain low levels of recruitment in the public sector, (2) to cut spending (a minimum 30% cut was applied to public servants’ salaries) and (3) to adopt a unified remuneration system that would cover basic wages and allowances of all public sector employees (Ladi, 2014). To ensure cost savings, the public sector introduced forced distribution performance appraisals, wage reduction and merit-based rather than seniority-based promotions (Papadopoulou and Dimitriadis, 2019). In reality, wage and promotion freezes often took place instead of merit-based promotions to control salary-related costs during austerity (Ladi, 2014). More than anything, the new changes required the civil servants to re-evaluate their career competencies, as the expected stability and security were no longer guaranteed.

Yet, Katsikas (2022) observed that by the end of 2018, “the most important objectives according to their own evaluation -the incorporation of the remuneration system in an integrated human resources management system and its link with employee tasks,

responsibilities, and productivity, were the least realized” (p. 18). Consequently, we adopt the case of civil servants in Greece, per the approach recently adopted by [Mouratidou and Grabarski \(2021\)](#), who tested the kaleidoscope career model in such a setting.

Research question and overview of the contribution

Based on interviews with 33 Greek civil servants, we address the following research question:

What are the relationships between the three intelligent career framework competencies of knowing-whom, knowing-how, and knowing-why within the public sector in countries with more clientelistic cultures?

The theoretical contribution comes from understanding how emphasis across each of the three competencies of the intelligent career framework can influence work satisfaction, career success and organisational performance. The practical contribution offers recommendations for human resource management practices in the public sector, including training, mentoring, performance evaluations and fostering trust.

Method

Paradigm and research stance

Our study employed an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative methodology, whereby the data generation method involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interpretive approach enabled us to explore individuals’ perceptions, interpretations, and experiences ([Merriam, 2009](#)). Consequently, the perceptions, interpretations and experiences of individuals working for the Greek civil service enabled us to empirically test the intelligent career framework in a public sector setting in a country with a clientelistic culture to inform human resource management practices. Moreover, as the study touches on personnel management reforms in specific organisations, it is vital to understand how these reforms are perceived by employees ([Rubin and Baker, 2019](#)). By understanding the perceptions, interpretations and experiences of individuals working for the Greek civil service, we could address our research aim of empirically testing the intelligent career framework in a public sector setting in a country with a clientelistic culture to inform human resource management practices.

Sample

The lead author conducted 33 in-person interviews with employees in two of Greece’s most prominent social insurance organisations before the COVID-19 pandemic. Ethical approval was obtained via the Institutional Review Board, and all participants provided informed consent. Our recruitment approach initially entailed approaching employees via email or social media and subsequently adopting a purposive and subsequent snowballing sampling until no new unique insights emerged and suggestions for new informants became repetitive, thus reaching saturation ([Morse, 2000](#)). The sample consisted of 23 women and 10 men, with an average age of 44. The average years of work experience was 17. [Table 1](#) provides demographic details about the participants (names have been replaced with pseudonyms).

The sample was reflective of the population under study. The homogeneity of the sample of civil servants had limited within-group differences in demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, length of service, education level), which was ideal to avoid the effects of respondents’ different socioeconomic status that a heterogeneous sample might bring ([Qu and Zhao, 2012](#); [Wong and Lin, 2007](#)).

Data collection procedure

Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to describe in their own words their career development since graduation from high school and their career experiences ([Elliott, 2005](#)).

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Highest qualification	Years of service	Job title
Iliana	Female	33	Bachelor	8	Front line
Athanasia	Female	46	High school	23	Front line
Sofia	Female	38	MA	10	Front line
Urania	Female	49	Technological	26	Middle manager
Hermione	Female	50	Bachelor	28	Senior manager
Eva	Female	43	High school	9	Front line
Stella	Female	37	MA	10	Front line
Theodor	Male	45	High school	15	Front line
Toula	Female	48	Technological	9	Front line
Vaso	Female	41	MA	15	Middle manager
Giannis	Male	38	Technological	10	Front line
Eleftheria	Female	42	MBA	13	Front line
Christina	Female	39	MA	11	Front line
Irene	Female	42	MA	13	Front line
Gianna	Female	48	High school	26	Front line
Magda	Female	38	BA	10	Front line
Maria	Female	37	Technological	15	Front line
Mihalis	Male	57	Compulsory	33	Front line
Litsa	Female	49	BA	22	Middle manager
Konstantina	Female	36	BA	7	Front line
Nikos	Male	40	Technological	17	Front line
Petros	Male	41	BA	8	Front line
Antonis	Male	35	High school	8	Front line
Chrysa	Female	45	Technological	14	Front line
Liza	Female	55	BA	26	Middle manager
Zaharias	Male	41	MA	12	Front line
Eleni	Female	48	Technological	23	Middle manager
Stefania	Female	32	Technological	8	Front line
Koula	Female	63	BA	31	Senior manager
Alexis	Male	51	High school	24	Front line
Apostolos	Male	39	High school	18	Front line
Makis	Male	41	High school	18	Front line
Parthena	Female	51	Technological	29	Middle manager

Table 1.
Participant
demographics

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Throughout telling their career story, participants were asked to expand on issues such as (1) motivation for specific work-related decisions and activities (e.g. initial vocational choice, entering or leaving jobs), (2) their values (e.g., the meaning of work), (3) the satisfaction of work-related needs, (4) the career support received from their employer, (5) relationships and (6) meaning of important career events. The interviews were conducted in Greek across two distinct organisations, lasted an average of 46 min and were subsequently transcribed and translated into English by the first author. The risk of intragroup contamination was minimised by asking each interviewee to discuss the interview with their co-workers only after the data collection phase had concluded.

Analytical procedure

In qualitative research, the degree of confidence in data, interpretation and techniques adopted is demonstrated by trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To ensure trustworthiness, we took the following steps: Authors one and two held frequent meetings to discuss the data analysis and maintained an audit trail of process logs, including the analysis process, which added to the study's rigour. After the interviews were transcribed,

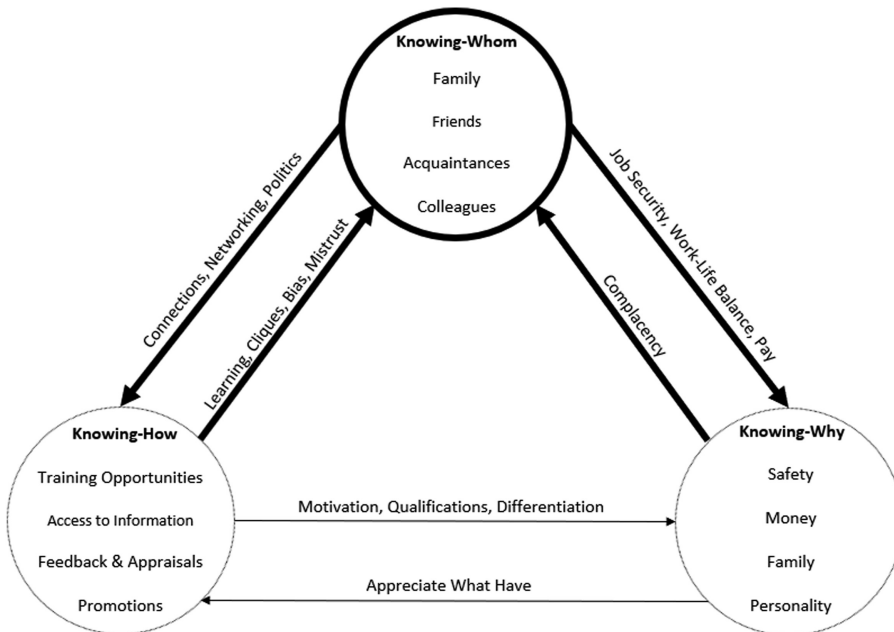
the participants checked the transcripts to confirm the credibility of the information; this step allowed them to examine their interview, comment on their data and discuss potential ideas that may have been missed (Choi and Roulston, 2015). Moreover, after each interview, the lead author recorded their ideas, thoughts and observations in a diary (Krefting, 1991).

Once the interviews had been transcribed and approved by the participants for accuracy, the researchers analysed the data set separately and systematically, treating each interview as a separate analytical unit (Elliott, 2005). Our analytical process combined deductive and inductive approaches. First-level coding was done freely after familiarising ourselves with the data. Examples of first-level codes included *connections*, *family*, *balance*, *safety* and *money*. Then, the analysis was theory-driven, and codes were classified using a template analysis procedure following King’s (2012) protocol. For various reasons, template analysis is appropriate for a qualitative interpretive study; it allows the researchers to analyse large quantities of data, encourages priori coding and is systematic (Davis and Van der Heijden, 2018).

A coding template was developed based on the three intelligent career dimensions: knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom, and decisions were made regarding connections between themes (e.g., *why-whom* or *whom-how*) based on a similar approach by Parker *et al.* (2009). Individual data extracts were coded into as many different themes as they fitted and as often as deemed relevant by the researchers. Frequent online meetings were held to discuss classification decisions until a consensus was reached (Saldaña, 2015).

Findings

Figure 1 offers a “Public Sector and Clientelistic Culture-Intelligent Career Framework” (PSCC-ICF). The circles represent the three competencies (Arthur *et al.*, 1995) from the original



Source(s): Authors’ own creation

Figure 1. Figure 1 offers a “Public Sector and Clientelistic Culture-Intelligent Career Framework” (PSCC-ICF) based on findings from Greek civil servants

intelligent career framework, while the connecting lines capture the interconnectedness of the three competencies (Parker *et al.*, 2009). Our findings support the existence of these three competencies and the connections between them.

However, our findings also indicated that in a public sector setting in a country with a clientelistic culture, the three dimensions of knowing-whom, knowing-how and knowing-why are less balanced than those reported in studies based on the private sector or in individualistic cultures. Instead, *knowing-whom* is the dominant competency and a necessary condition for career development, whereby the *knowing-whom to knowing-how* and the *knowing-whom to knowing-why* dyadic relationships are the most influential. The words along the interconnecting lines in our model evidence the dominant themes from the interviews.

We now examine the *knowing-whom to knowing-how* and the *knowing-whom to knowing-why* dyadic relationships and provide participant quotes for each theme. The themes are presented in italics for clarity.

The knowing-whom to knowing-how dyadic relationship

From the knowing-whom to the knowing-how direction, participants in our study spoke of the significant *influence of connections* and *networking*, including the role of *politics*. As Sofia explained

I applied for a new position, but my uncle suggested that I went to see a powerful man within X political party. So, I went to his office to see him and talk to him about my application. He told me that the specific position is very competitive and that he could not help me. Obviously, I did not get the job. Most posts advertised are like that. They have someone already in mind when they advertise them. So, it doesn't matter if you have the knowledge and qualifications. What matters is whom you know and what the person can do for you. We have a state which is based on connections, not a meritocracy. The big bosses are placed by the political parties, this signals what is happening . . .

Additionally, *politics* continues to play an influential role throughout one's career in the civil service, as captured by Urania, who reflected

I have not reached top management yet because of the connections, and in the appraisal, I did not get the score I deserved and was passed down for promotion . . . because I did not have any support from anyone important. I wasn't involved in any political party.

Makis further captured the influential role of *politics*:

. . . to climb, you need connections, not qualifications. No matter how many degrees you have, such as a master's or PhD and no matter how good you are, if you don't have connections in Greece, you cannot climb the ladder. Now with the crisis, no one climbs. So, we can forget the career anyway . . . Everything is connections . . . When the manager is openly politicised and supports a party and has connections in the whole city, even if you deserve a promotion, you will not get it. He/she will promote the individual who shares her/his opinion. The manager is biased and looks at things through a political prism.

From the knowing-how to knowing-whom direction, Eva also raised concerns about access to *learning opportunities* due to *cliques*:

Over the last few years, there have been no seminars due to the crisis. There are some employees that go to seminars, usually, the clique goes, the ones that are close to the manager. The public sector is full of cliques. This is how things happen in Greece.

Parthena spoke about issues with *bias within the performance appraisal*:

. . . the appraisal was without targets; it was about how good friends you were with your boss. He/she would rank you from 1–10 on behaviour towards clients/colleagues, how well you know your work/

subject, and up until now everyone got 10, now the new appraisal demands some get merit, others ok and some fail, without giving the criteria on how to judge the individual. This is wrong, too.

Subsequently, there were issues of *mistrust*, as reported by Nikos:

A lot are complaining constantly about their work . . . there are backstabblings, miscommunication, no logic.

Taken together, these findings also show the dark side of careers (Baruch and Vardi, 2016). We see how performance appraisal outcomes, access to training and development, promotion and information are linked to political connections with decision-makers, whereby knowing-who determines access to knowing-how elements. This, in turn, results in negative career experiences for employees who lack the necessary social capital whilst also stimulating feelings of mistrust. Consequently, lower motivation levels in these employees impact the organisation's performance.

The knowing-whom to knowing-why dyadic relationship

From the knowing-whom to knowing-why direction, participants in our study regularly mentioned *job security* and *work-life balance* as the key drivers of working in the civil service. As Liza explained

For me, this was not the dream [job]. . . I was 22 years old, and maybe I chose it because of the way we were brought up. I mean, it was safety, it gave stability, a wage, it was 'The Job' . . . My father suggested this (appointment) for me, you knew it was a stable path, and you took it.

Irene also shared how:

In the private sector, you can be called to work last minute, but here you know if you need to work [outside contracted hours], which rarely happens, and you get paid . . . I appreciate my permanency, especially now . . . I am grateful to have this because it's very hard out there.

While Nikos explained

I am very pleased with my work, and I think that the civil servants that are not pleased are just ungrateful. I entered the public sector for safety, for the good working hours, for the good things that we don't want to admit. But I don't know why they don't admit it. . .

However, the aftermath of the 2007–2008 Global Financial Crisis continues to *limit pay increases*, as captured by Eleni:

Because of the crisis, there is no money left . . . everything stopped. Imagine, even the desk utensils are limited. The government argues about budgets and pay cuts, and raising taxes. The last thing on their mind is to give us a raise.

Additionally, from the knowing-why to knowing-whom direction, Ilianna raised concerns about *complacency*:

Unfortunately, my work is shaped by a general mentality in the public sector, which I always hated, and which emphasises not to work, rather be relaxed. So, you get frustrated when some [people] are relaxed and safe and consequently overload others with their work. I try to keep a distance from the public sector mentality of relaxing and not doing much work, you know, pretending to work and spreading papers around the desk to look busy.

Taken together, these findings further develop the dark side of careers (Baruch and Vardi, 2016). We see how knowing-why can provide a counterbalance to an individual who is politically blocked in their careers by being denied access to skills development (knowing-how), promotion (due to knowing-whom) and the complacency some participants witness in their colleagues.

Discussion

Having set out the findings, our attention now shifts to addressing the research question, identifying the theoretical and managerial implications, and stating limitations and opportunities for future work.

Addressing the research question

Our original research question asked, What are the relationships between the three intelligent career framework competencies of knowing-whom, knowing-how and knowing-why within the public sector in countries with more clientelistic cultures?

Outcomes of the study indicate that the three dimensions of knowing-whom, knowing-how and knowing-why are less balanced than those reported by findings from private sector settings in countries with an individualistic culture. Instead, knowing-whom is a critical dimension and a necessary condition for career development that affects knowing-how and knowing-why. Consequently, a “Public Sector and Clientelistic Culture-Intelligent Career Framework” (PSCC-ICF) is presented in [Figure 1](#).

Interestingly, in the context of our study, social capital (knowing-whom) was highly influential in securing employment in the public sector and securing promotion during one’s career. While social capital also plays a role in individualistic cultures [e.g. as a form of employability capital ([Donald et al., 2023](#)) or enhancing managerial proficiency by developing informal networks ([Ekonen and Heilmann, 2021](#))], it is less influential (at least in overt terms). Additionally, the influence of social capital to facilitate opportunities and identify threats has also been observed in employees in Uganda ([Najjinda et al., 2023](#)). However, this comes more from the opportunities to interact at work and develop networks whilst in employment rather than the need for such networks to secure employment or access promotion opportunities.

In Greece, we observed how acquiring knowledge depended on relational social capital ([Gubbins and Dooley, 2021](#)). People with strong personal networks had access to many benefits such as information, training, promotions, improved job opportunities and quality of work-life (placements in elite departments). On the other hand, people who are not part of a network (often based on politics) have limited chances to progress or be rewarded. The austerity measures significantly exacerbated the situation, as managerial layers were cut and funds were frozen. Thus, there were reduced incentives for individuals to invest in improving their performance since rewards, if available, were saved for well-connected individuals. As [Beigi et al. \(2018\)](#) demonstrated these connections included people outside the professional network. Subsequently, performance evaluations, which were supposed to provide valuable feedback for performance improvement, were perceived as uninformative; or were not conducted at all and were replaced by forced ranking distributions. In general, there was mistrust in the performance management system, resulting in demotivation and weakening workplace morale.

Previous studies in the private sector often portrayed the knowing-why as a career insight linked with being proactive, open to experience and seeking challenges ([Beigi et al., 2018](#)). Our study, therefore, addresses national human resource development in the context of Greece and advances the career development cluster of human resource development research by focussing on underrepresented actors of public civil servants ([Shirmohammadi et al., 2021](#)). Our findings extend the notion of knowing-why beyond the job content to include elements associated with employment in the public sector. These include permanency (job security), stable pay and reasonable working hours for spending time with loved ones ([Perry, 1990](#)). These findings also support the claim that despite the public sector’s movement toward private sector practices, there are still notable differences between the two ([Soares et al., 2021](#)). For example, job security was not guaranteed due to the financial crisis and its aftermath. However, the Greek public sector could still provide some assurances compared to the

domestic private sector. Consequently, our findings align with studies in other countries and cultures that emphasise the desirability of public sector roles for people who value work-life balance and job security (Choi and Chung, 2017; Ng and Gossett, 2013).

Theoretical contribution

Our study addresses calls to explore the idiosyncrasies of the public sector (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2020) and conduct career research in the public sector (Hart and Baruch, 2022). The focus on civil servants in Greece as a case for a public sector setting in a clientelistic culture is appropriate since clientelism has become “an organic part of the Greek polity” (Marangudakis, 2019, p. 81). The theoretical contribution comes from providing evidence of the dark side of careers and how imbalances between the three dimensions of the intelligent career framework reduce work satisfaction, hinder career success and affect organisational performance.

Whilst balancing the three competencies can lead to satisfying careers, this is only sometimes the case, mainly because career perceptions are socially constructed and context-dependent (Andresen *et al.*, 2020). In our study, knowing-whom became the dominant competency, and its dyadic interactions with knowing-how and knowing-why determined the chance of initially securing employment and subsequent career success. For those lacking the knowing-whom competency, the emphasis on social capital becomes a source of stress and insecurity, creating a rift and a sense of mistrust among and between employees and the system (Peeters *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the links between the competencies can have negative consequences if one competency becomes a necessary condition, especially if acquiring that competency sits beyond an individual’s agency.

Collectivism in Greece often means that individuals of a particular group cooperate while remaining competitive and suspicious towards people outside their group (Papalexandris, 2008). Thus, even those who have strong competencies of knowing-why and knowing-how might not be able to have a satisfying and successful career if they do not belong to a strong in-group (e.g., family, friends, people with similar political views) (Benson *et al.*, 2020; Bozionelos, 2014; Dello Russo *et al.*, 2017). Thus, our findings support the view of Peeters *et al.* (2019) that personal resources can form from two distinct sources (1) employability (e.g. job-related, career-related and development-related capital); and (2) social capital.

The findings also illustrate the dark side of careers. While idealistic images of successful careers characterised by competencies are highly sought after, major-scale events like the financial crisis emphasise pre-existing challenges, including job insecurity (Creed *et al.*, 2021). Looking at the dark side allows us to provide a more balanced view of careers and address understudied issues (Baruch and Vardi, 2016). By identifying factors that shape individual perceptions, we may see that some factors are determined at an organisational or systemic level via personnel selection practices. Despite the tendency to view the individual agency as a central element of career development, many issues are caused by the system, indicating a shared responsibility between individuals and systems to address challenges (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). This emphasises the need for practical human resource development policies to support employees, particularly given the increased focus on the significance of employee well-being (Nimmi and Donald, 2023; Nimmi *et al.*, 2021, 2022, 2023).

Furthermore, person-organisation fit can evolve over time either from the employee perspective, the employer perspective, or both (Donald, 2023). This was evidenced in the interviews where participants spoke of the evolving nature of the civil service in Greece, predominantly driven by the impacts of the 2007–2008 Global Financial Crisis and the close links to political parties. Again, this interaction of individual and contextual factors can influence the success or failure of specific initiatives. This likely explains the Greek civil service’s failure to incorporate “the remuneration system in an integrated human resources management system and its link with employee tasks, responsibilities, and productivity” (Katsikas, 2022, p. 18).

Managerial implications

The practical contribution offers recommendations for human resource management practices in the public sector, including access for all employees to training and mentoring opportunities, transparent criteria for performance evaluations and fostering trust.

The absence of access to training opportunities impeded the participants' career development, with potential consequences to themselves and the organisations. Previous findings show that failure to provide training results in reduced performance, decreased job satisfaction and increased withdrawal from the organisation (e.g., [Garavan et al., 2021](#); [Sitzmann and Weinhardt, 2018](#)). If budget constraints are challenging, learning opportunities can come through work-based or work-applied learning to enhance intellectual capital ([Garnett et al., 2016](#)). Internal organisational resources (e.g. supervision, mentoring, peer support and coaching) can also contribute to relationship building, fostering social mobility and career success ([Donald and Ford, 2023](#); [Martin, 2010](#); [Singh et al., 2009](#)). However, these approaches need to consider contextual factors since, according to [Wang et al. \(2022\)](#),

Effective coaching activities should integrate cognitive coping (e.g. combining cognitive behavioral and solution-focused technique), positive individual traits (i.e. strength-based approach) and contextual factors for an integrative approach to address the full range of coachees' values, motivators and organizational resources for yielding positive outcomes (p. 77).

Additionally, we recommend transparent criteria for performance evaluations to ensure they are used effectively and fairly. The performance appraisal is a vital human resource development tool which, if implemented correctly, leads to improved individual and organisational performance ([Amygdalos et al., 2014](#); [Brewer and Kellough, 2016](#)). On the other hand, unfair procedures can lead to mistrust towards the manager and disappointment in the organisation ([Cho and Sai, 2013](#); [Dello Russo et al., 2017](#)). Thus, fairness in salary, performance appraisals, reward allocation and availability of career paths is crucial as it can also impact the satisfaction levels of employees ([Boswell and Boudreau, 2000](#); [Mariani et al., 2021](#)).

Furthermore, while civil servants who are cynical about their organisation are inclined to mistrust it, receiving specific, consistent and high-quality feedback enhances trust in the leader ([Audenaert et al., 2021](#)). Building trust benefits the employees' motivation and engagement and contributes to their mental health, alleviating their fear of the unknown and reducing stress. Investing in a fair and effective performance appraisal process will also help employees develop their knowing-how competence, weakening dependence on the knowing-whom and benefiting all the employees equally ([Mylona and Mihail, 2019](#)).

Finally, [Wall et al. \(2017\)](#) also provide evidence of how appreciative enquiry through the role of positive emotions using work-based projects can enhance organisations facing austerity measures. However, they also note that organisational culture and climate can limit long-term benefits. For the managerial implications to be practical, support will likely be required from political institutions and national governments, which might prove tricky in a clientelistic culture. Nevertheless, as we have done in this manuscript, it is important to make a case for the benefits of a more balanced intelligent career framework by highlighting the dark side of careers ([Baruch and Vardi, 2016](#)) and offering pragmatic strategies for real-world implementation. This is particularly true given the influential role that employee perceptions play in life well-being and the sustainability of their careers and the organisations that employ them ([Nimmi et al., 2022](#)).

Limitations and future research

Our study was conducted in the context of public sector employees operating within a clientelistic culture. Therefore, our findings cannot be generalised to private sector

employees, self-employed individuals or public sector employees operating within an individualist culture. Additionally, our findings were generated from civil servants in Greece. Therefore, future research may benefit from comparing our findings with those of different public sector employees in Greece and/or conducting cross-national comparisons between countries with and/or without more clientelistic cultures. Furthermore, our data were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, repeating the study to see what changes (if any) have occurred due to this global-level chance event may be of interest. However, since Greece continues to face the aftermath of the 2007–2008 Global Financial Crisis, our findings are representative of the legacy of a previous global-level chance event. Finally, future research may consider using different approaches to generate data, acquire data from various sources and deploy a longitudinal study designs to observe the impacts of human resource management interventions over time across various political, economic and social contexts.

Conclusion

Our study aimed to empirically test the intelligent career framework in a public sector setting in a country with a clientelistic culture to inform human resource management strategies. Based on findings from 33 in-depth interviews with Greek civil servants, we observed that knowing-whom is the critical dimension of the intelligent career framework and a necessary condition for career development that affects knowing-how and knowing-why. The theoretical contribution comes from evidencing the dark side of careers and how imbalances between the three dimensions of the intelligent career framework reduce work satisfaction, hinder career success and affect organisational performance. The practical contribution offers recommendations for human resource management practices in the public sector, including training, mentoring, performance evaluations and fostering trust.

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