Employee Engagement in the Public Sector: Evidence from Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT:

Employee engagement is increasingly recognized as a key factor in the effectiveness and sustainability of public sector organizations. This paper explores the level and determinants of employee engagement in the Bulgarian public administration, using empirical evidence from surveys and institutional reports. The study also reviews theoretical frameworks such as Kahn's psychological conditions model and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, emphasizing how factors like meaningfulness, psychological safety and ability which are related to the professional development, leadership style and learning influence engagement levels among public employees. The analysis highlights specific challenges in the Bulgarian context, including limited incentives, bureaucratic structures, and restricted career development opportunities. Findings suggest that engagement is strongly correlated with leadership support, communication transparency, and opportunities for personal growth. The paper concludes that fostering employee engagement can significantly enhance the performance and accountability for both – employee and public institutions in Bulgaria.

Keywords: *employee engagement, public sector, Bulgaria, motivation, leadership, empirical evidence*

Introduction

Employee engagement has become a central concept in organizational behavior even in public sector due to the importance of achieving special public values as well as, reflecting the extent to which employees are physically, cognitively, and emotionally invested in their work roles. It is widely associated with positive outcomes such as higher performance, reduced turnover, and improved well-being. Public sector employees often operate in environments characterized by high job demands, limited resources, bureaucratic constraints, and strong normative expectations related to serving the public interest. These conditions make engagement both more challenging to sustain and more crucial for organizational effectiveness and service quality. That is why exploring its engagements gives an opportunity to better understanding the civil servants behavior. On a national level the Engagement Barometer is an annual national survey conducted by the Institute of Public Administration in

Bulgaria to assess the attitudes, motivation, and engagement of employees across the Bulgarian public administration. Also, there are at least two wildly concepts regarding to better understanding public behavior in this context – those are the Kahn's Model of Personal Engagement as well as the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model. Kahn's model conceptualizes engagement as the expression of the self in work roles, shaped by the psychological conditions of meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability. In the public sector context, these conditions are strongly influenced by organizational practices. In particular, leadership contributes to psychological safety and meaningfulness, while training and professional development enhance employees' sense of competence and availability. The JD-R model complements this perspective by identifying leadership, training, and development as key job resources that foster employee engagement.

Engagement in the Bulgarian Public Administration: Insights from the IPA Engagement Barometer

Employee engagement is generally defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). The "Engagement Barometer" is a traditional anonymous survey of employee motivation and satisfaction in the Bulgarian public administration, which has been conducted once a year since 2019. It reflects the thoughts and feelings regarding the work of employees in the public administration. The survey is anonymous. All administrations receive an invitation to participate and each civil servant has the opportunity to express his or her opinion. The Institute of Public Administration (IPA) summarizes the responses and publishes the summarized results.

The questionnaire contains 41 statements. They are closed-ended questions with 5 fixed answer options. The respondent can select only one answer by clicking on it with the mouse (radio button). When changing the answer, the choice automatically changes. In this way, the technology allows only one answer to be given to each question - the last answer chosen by the participant remains as final. The statements measure engagement and the factors that determine it - leadership, remuneration, team, organizational goals, direct supervisor, etc. The content of the questionnaire has not changed over the years and is identical to the initial version of the questionnaire from 2019. This ensures comparability of the results, both with previous years and with the results of the British administration, where the content of the questionnaire has also not been changed since 2009.

In 2025 the engagement survey was conducted from April 22 to May 9, 2025 via IPA report. A total of 6,254 respondents participated, which is 29% less than in 2023, but almost as many as in 2019, 2020, and 2021. The data show that the motivation of civil servants in 2025 is broadly similar to that in 2024. The only difference is that the share of highly engaged employees has decreased by 1%, while the share of engaged employees has increased by 1%. These differences are within the statistical error and it can be concluded that the level of engagement of civil servants remains. Although there are no statistically significant differences compared to last year, if we look at the data in a longer-term perspective, some worrying trends will be noticed: The overall level of engagement of employees in the administration has been falling for the fourth consecutive year - by a small amount, but steadily. The share of highly engaged employees in the administration is decreasing every year. Again, the trend is weak, but stable, and against this background, if we look at the results of 2022, it will be found that in 2025 it remained almost half. Detailed data also shows that a significant part of the engagement of employees in the state administration is due to their identification with the institution in which they work, as well as to the belief that the state administration is an attractive place to work, due to the security it provides. To the statement "I would recommend my administration as a very good place to work," 38% of respondents answered that they would do so, and even more that they would rather do so. However, a lower score is observed year after year for the statement: "My administration motivates me to do my best." The overwhelming majority of civil servants are satisfied, but the share of those who are motivated to give their best in the civil service decreases by 1% every year.

Engagement can also be defined as a specific attitude of employees towards their work and its results. The following groups of employees are distinguished according to the methodology of engagement via Bulgarian annual research:

▸ Highly engaged employees work "with heart". They strive for exceptional performance and high results because they enjoy their work and feel attached to what they do and to their organization. For them, work is a source of meaning and personal satisfaction.

▸ Moderately engaged employees are motivated, disciplined and responsible. For them, work is important, but it is not the most significant part of their lives. All over the world, in the public and private sectors, moderately engaged, conscientious and conscientious employees prevail.

▸ Disengaged employees are extrinsically motivated. They are not attached to their work, but do it because they need income and security.

▸ The negative pole of engagement is formed by actively disengaged employees. They do not like or even hate their job, but believe that they cannot risk leaving it and changing it.

However, people are not born engaged or disengaged they develop these attitudes as a result of several driving factors. That is why 8 main factors have been identified via Bulgarian research:

1. Leadership and change management – the subjective perceptions of employees related to the top management of the administration – perceptions of the correctness of his judgments and decisions, of his skills to manage change and to set meaningful and inspiring goals.
2. My work – the subjective perceptions of respondents related to their own work and daily work life – to what extent employees like their work and are motivated to achieve high results in it.
3. Organizational goals – to what extent the goals of the administration and the structural unit are clear and to what extent employees see a connection between their own work (role) and the implementation of these goals.
4. My manager – employees' subjective perception of their direct manager as motivating, supportive, concerned about their development and providing timely feedback.
5. Team – employees' subjective perceptions of the quality of interpersonal and working relationships in the team, as well as the extent to which colleagues are perceived as helpful, supportive and cooperative.
6. Learning and development – the subjective perceptions of the respondents about the availability of opportunities for career and professional development at work, as well as perceptions of their administration as stimulating learning and supporting the development of professional competencies.
7. Resources and workload – the subjective perceptions of the employees about the workload and stress at work, the provision of the necessary resources and information for the performance of work tasks, and the possibility of achieving a balance between work and personal life.
8. Remuneration – the subjective perceptions of the employees about the fairness of remuneration and satisfaction with the remuneration received.

The most important of these is leadership in organizations. Leaders are those who set challenging and inspiring goals, manage change. Leadership is a key factor for motivation in

Bulgarian public administration. Effective leadership fosters conditions that enhance engagement, such as clear communication, trust, and support for professional development. When employees perceive their work as meaningful and feel supported by their leaders, their level of engagement increases, leading to higher motivation and stronger involvement in organizational goals. According to the conducted research a relatively weaker aspect of leaders in the Bulgarian state administration remains that they do not sufficiently stimulate critical thinking and innovative thinking. These results are almost identical to the results from last year.

My work, the second most important factor on which engagement depends is the content or the very nature of the work performed. It is associated with the feeling of professionalism and professional fulfillment. Compared to last year, the assessment of the Bulgarian administration has remained at the same level regarding this indicator.

My team, the next factor shows that managers in the Bulgarian administration still do not sufficiently encourage employees towards innovative thinking and opportunities for improvement. This statement is made in comparison with the British study. Resource availability and workload are linked to job stress. This is another factor on which Bulgarian civil servants are consistently rated lower than their British counterparts.

Learning and development - Since the survey was conducted in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian public administration's scores on this factor have been consistently better than those of the British public sector. Employees in the Bulgarian public administration attend more and more diverse training. Moreover, in all previous years except this one, IPA found a way to offer a large number of training courses financed under European programmes, which were free of charge for Bulgarian administrations. This further increased the opportunities for training and the accessibility of the training itself. The combination of free training and the growing popularity of distance learning are the main reasons for the relatively high score of the Bulgarian administration on this indicator.

Despite this, however, once again and for another year, satisfaction with remuneration in the Bulgarian public sector is significantly higher than that in the British administration.

Clear goals and good organization of work are a sustainable strength of the Bulgarian administration. This is consistently the factor that receives the highest rating in all surveys so far. Positive assessments prevail in all aspects, with satisfaction varying between 65% and 80%. Areas for improvement include recognizing the contribution of employees to achieving work goals/results.

The Well-being Index was introduced into the British Civil Servant Engagement Survey in 2012 at the insistence of the Office for National Statistics, which measures the subjective well-being of Britons. The idea is that when people feel engaged in their work, they feel happier and more satisfied with their lives overall. In 2022, the PERMA Index was also introduced into the Bulgarian Engagement Barometer. The results show that almost 75% of Bulgarian civil servants believe that the things they do in their lives are meaningful and worth the effort, 67% are satisfied with their lives as a whole. The questionnaire also includes several additional questions related to subjective well-being, but which are not included in the PERMA index. 69% of Bulgarian civil servants surveyed said they felt happy or rather happy, compared to only 63% of their British colleagues who gave such answers. Approximately 30% of Bulgarian civil servants feel anxious compared to 34% of British civil servants, also point the Bulgarian survey. Regarding the subjective perception of mental and emotional health – over 75% of civil servants in Bulgaria define their mental health as good or very good, while the reference value for British civil servants is 73%.

All of those factors related to the higher performance of the Bulgarian civil servants and has significant role for its commitment.

The evidence from survey also shows that although there are no statistically significant differences compared to the previous year, some worrying trends will be noticed: "The overall level of engagement of employees in the administration has been falling for the fourth consecutive year - by a small amount, but steadily. The share of highly engaged employees in the administration is decreasing every year. Again, the trend is weak, but stable, and against this background, if we look at the results of 2022, it will be found that in 2025 it remained almost half" (Engagement Barometer, p. 20). Also, we can notice that the observed differences in the level of engagement depending on the position held are substantial and statistically significant. As expected, the most engaged are senior civil servants and employees in managerial positions. Similar results are found in all previous surveys. Senior civil servants and managers are more engaged compared to experts, as they are more actively involved in the decision-making processes and in the management of the administrations themselves. Statistically significant differences are also observed by age. The results also show that that the youngest and oldest employees are defined as more engaged compared to middle-aged employees. The youngest employees are motivated because they are still in the stage of establishing themselves in their jobs. They strive to perform at their best in any task assigned to them and to show that they can be relied upon.

However, the general conclusions made in the report are that compared to last year, the changes in the survey results are small. The overall engagement score decreased slightly by 1 index point, which is entirely due to lower satisfaction with wages. Looking more broadly at the dynamics of the survey ratings over the years, it is clear that one indicator remains relatively constant over time and that it is the cornerstone of the engagement of the state administration. This is the intrinsic motivation of employees, or the motivation coming from the nature of the work itself. Another stable factor that supports employee engagement is clear organizational goals. This is again true for both Bulgaria and the UK. Civil servants know their job very well, are aware of the expectations for themselves and the standards for the quality of their work. Professional roles and work processes are clear and well-established, and areas of personal responsibility are clearly and distinctly formulated. The third strong point on which the motivation of civil servants is based is training and development opportunities. In no other factor of engagement are such large and consistent differences observed between the Bulgarian and British civil services as in training opportunities. Barometer data show that training in public administration in Bulgaria is both more accessible and timely. The most worrying negative trend in the Barometer data in 2025 is the continuing downward trend in the share of highly engaged civil servants. Compared to 2021, it has decreased from 28 to 15 percent. Highly engaged employees are the "engine" of any organization. They are the agents of change and the internal reason for maintaining high standards of quality and efficiency of work. If they continue to decrease, the productivity of administrations will also decrease due to the lack of internal incentives generated by comparisons between individual employee results. Therefore, the recommendations of Bulgarian survey address this specific topic:

▸ "A special study of the image of the state administration as an employer is needed, focused on identifying the reasons for the decrease in highly motivated employees. This can be done by studying what kind of people and what career expectations they enter the administration and what kind of employees and for what reasons they leave the public sector.

▸ The public administration should expand and open up career development opportunities for ambitious, intelligent and competent civil servants by reviewing the current performance appraisal system and identifying the factors that lead to its formal implementation.

▸ It is appropriate to review the rules for career development in the public administration. In many cases, they stimulate the accumulation of experience instead of the active and purposeful expansion and deepening of professional competence.

▸ It is necessary to diversify and enrich the arsenal of leadership styles of managers in the public administration. In many administrations, employees are accustomed to transferring all complex issues "upwards", and managers often make all important decisions themselves, without consulting their team. Such a management model is good for passive and not particularly committed employees, but in no way stimulates the professional development and enrichment of the professional competence of their highly motivated and ambitious colleagues.

▸ The capacity of the administration to implement modern forms of learning in the workplace must be developed. The learning process is changing, and the boundary between learning and work is increasingly blurred. More and more work tasks require the acquisition of information and learning in order to be successfully solved. Knowledge must be available immediately when needed, and not after months or years. The wide opportunities for the use of artificial intelligence, online training or information exchange between administrations should be fully utilized to increase the productivity and efficiency of state administration, and civil servants should be encouraged to learn and implement them" (IPA, p. 43). All of this recommendation has significant value also in theory.

Kahn's Model of Personal Engagement in the Public Sector

The conceptualization of engagement proposed by William A. Kahn (1990) is particularly relevant for understanding engagement in public organizations. Kahn defined engagement as the extent to which individuals bring their physical, cognitive, and emotional selves into their work roles.

In the public sector, the three psychological conditions identified by Kahn - meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability - are strongly influenced by institutional and organizational characteristics:

Meaningfulness is often a key driver of engagement in public service. Many public employees are motivated by a sense of mission, contributing to societal welfare, and serving citizens. However, excessive bureaucracy or unclear organizational goals can undermine this sense of purpose. In the public sector context, these conditions are strongly influenced by organizational practices. In particular, leadership contributes to psychological safety and meaningfulness, while training and professional development enhance employees' sense of competence and availability.

Psychological safety can be challenged in hierarchical and bureaucratic public organizations, where strict rules and formal procedures may limit open communication and risk-taking. Leadership styles that encourage participation and voice are essential to foster safety.

Psychological availability may be constrained by high workloads, emotional demands (e.g., working with vulnerable populations), and limited resources, which are common in public sector settings.

Thus, the public sector context can both enhance (through public service motivation) and hinder (through structural constraints) the psychological conditions necessary for engagement.

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model in Public Organizations

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, developed by Arnold B. Bakker and Evangelia Demerouti (2007), provides a useful framework for analyzing engagement in the public sector due to its flexibility and applicability across different occupational contexts. In public organizations Job demands often include high workloads, administrative burden, emotional demands (e.g., dealing with citizens in distress), and role conflict arising from political and organizational pressures. Job resources may include autonomy, social support from colleagues and supervisors, opportunities for professional development, and alignment with public service values.

The JD-R model posits two key processes relevant to public sector engagement. Those are: Health impairment process: Persistent high job demands, which are common in public sector jobs due to budget constraints and increasing service expectations, can lead to burnout and reduced engagement and also,

Motivational process: Job resources are particularly important in the public sector as they help sustain motivation despite structural constraints. For example, supportive leadership and participative decision-making can enhance engagement by reinforcing employees' sense of purpose and control. Importantly, in the public sector, job resources may compensate for limited financial rewards by enhancing intrinsic motivation and reinforcing public service values. Overall, the integration of Kahn's model and the JD-R framework highlights that employee engagement in the public sector is not only an individual psychological state but also a function of organizational factors, particularly leadership practices and opportunities for learning and development. Additional understanding brings the concept of Perry and Wise for public motivation.

Public Service Motivation as an Additional Perspective

An important concept closely related to engagement in the public sector is public service motivation (PSM), which refers to an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations (Perry & Wise, 1990). PSM complements the JD-R model by explaining why individuals are motivated to engage in public sector work despite relatively lower extrinsic rewards.

Employees with high PSM are more likely to perceive their work as meaningful, which aligns with Kahn's (1990) concept of psychological meaningfulness. Thus, PSM can be seen as an antecedent of engagement, particularly in public organizations. Integrating Kahn's model, the JD-R framework, and public service motivation provides a comprehensive understanding of employee engagement in the public sector. Job resources (JD-R model) enhance meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability (Kahn's model). Public service motivation strengthens the internal drive to engage, particularly in meaningful and socially impactful work. Organizational factors such as leadership style, workload management, and organizational culture determine the balance between job demands and resources. In the public sector, fostering employee engagement requires not only managing job demands but also strategically enhancing job resources and aligning organizational practices with the intrinsic motivations of public employees. By integrating these perspectives, researchers and practitioners can better understand how organizational design and leadership practices contribute to employee engagement through both environmental and psychological mechanisms.

Conclusions

Workplace engagement is a comprehensive approach that integrates emotional, cognitive and behavioural dimensions. It plays an essential role in achieving sustainable organizational development and employee well-being, both in the public and private sectors. Organizational engagement, especially in public administration, contributes to higher quality of services, lower turnover and stronger legitimacy of the state in the eyes of citizens. The results from the Engagement Barometer indicate that engagement levels are relatively stable, but there are signs of gradual change that reflect the influence by several factors. Improving organizational conditions, particularly leadership and development opportunities remains important for maintaining and strengthening employee engagement in public sector work. The IPA Engagement Barometer provides rich empirical data that can be interpreted through established engagement theories. For example, according to William A. Kahn's model of personal engagement, three psychological conditions - meaningfulness, psychological safety,

and psychological availability - determine the extent to which employees bring their full selves into their work roles. Measuring it through established models and implementing policies to strengthen it are strategically necessary for modern public administration. Developing practices to promote engagement is a strategic necessity for modern administrations.

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