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The Emerging of Future-Ready Conceptual Skills among Public Servants and the Effectiveness of Good Governance Practices

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Abstract

According to several studies, upcoming employment will require a certain set of skills. As a result of this evaluation, future organizations, including the public sector, may determine the public servants' skills to commit to the best governance principles and practices. The effectiveness of good governance practices demonstrates the quality of public servants' service delivery and administration in the public sector. In this article, the researcher implies that public servants in leadership and management positions deal with high-complexity challenges. The purpose of this article is to discover the relationship between future-ready conceptual skills and the effectiveness of good governance practices. Following a literature review of the underlying theory to describe Katz's Three-Skill Approach (i.e., human, technical and conceptual), relevant papers were obtained and analyzed for relevancy that primarily relates to the effectiveness of good governance practices. From one of the three different skills for successful management under Katz's model, conceptual skills were acknowledged, and the relationships with the effectiveness of good governance practices were discussed. Complex Problem-Solving, Critical Thinking, and Creativity were reviewed in this article which is considered as the impact of a shift to developing future-ready conceptual skills that enable public servants to play an active role in the organization. As the expected findings, this study will help public servants, especially leaders, to enhance their performance, and this study also aims to develop a preliminary evaluation of future-ready skills from a public service viewpoint. Moreover, it is possible that future-ready conceptual skills are necessary for the achievement of the effectiveness of good governance practices.

Keywords: Complex Problem-Solving, Critical Thinking, Creativity, Future-ready Conceptual Skill, Katz's Three-Skill Approach.

Introduction

Public servants are crucial professions and the backbone of a nations' delivery of public services. They have been taught to provide services to society that go beyond their own personal interests. Understanding and addressing the issues that affect public servants is vital to discover any impacts on delivering services to the public. Among the critical topic confronting governments worldwide now is the skills that public servants will need and relevant in the future. As a result, public servants should be prepared for changes by

continually acquiring skills that allow them to be more efficient, inventive, and prepared to satisfy citizens' requirements (Vivona et al., 2020).

As a public policy and administration grow more complicated and disputed, public servants are increasingly challenged with new expectations. According to Mangan (2017), the government must identify public servants' skills in order to keep up with all transformations in emerging 21st-century public service. Simultaneously, citizens' faith in government and perceptions of the public sector's responsiveness, efficiency and integrity have not completely recovered from crises such as rapid technological change, which hamper governments' capacity to undertake required shifts (OECD, 2019). In the public sector, governments must maintain effectiveness and stability that enable public servants to be prepared, spot indications of crisis, such as pandemics, find solutions rapidly, and react accordingly to prevent severe consequences with early warning, readiness, and rapid response (Kauzya & Niland, 2020). Thus, investment in the skill sets of 21st-century public servants is necessary for governments' functions and models to become more adaptable, agile, and flexible (Baimenov & Liverakos, 2019).

Given the present complicated environment in which governments operate, role-players such as leadership may assist employees in functioning more successfully in changing work contexts to implement principles and functions properly. In Katz (1955) foundational work on leadership skills, he proposed a three-skill approach of leadership skills that he believed were necessary to be managerial effectiveness; human, technical, and conceptual skills (Muthuveloo et al., 2017). Katz stated that the triple skills are important at every level of different management (top, middle, and low or supervisory) (Katz, 1974). Conceptual skills are more significant at the upper management level compared to human skills (middle management levels) and technical skills (lower management level) (Katz, 1974; Matteson et al., 2016; Seyedinejat et al., 2014).

According to Katz's model, human skill is the ability to understand, create motivation and work with employees, while technical skill denotes an understanding and expertise in a particular type of activity, most notably methods, processes, procedures, or techniques. The third managerial skill suggested by Katz is the conceptual skill that is based on broad understanding, cognitive, and theoretical skills. A person in management with conceptual skills has the ability to see the organization as a whole and must realize how various functions of an organization interrelate (Seyedinejat et al., 2014).

Public servants, especially leaders, must possess conceptual skills since the skill is important in managerial carrying out decisions to expand the overall goals and deal with the organizations' complexities. As employees are promoted to higher rank through the levels of the organizations, they are more accountable for giving strategic direction; hence conceptual skills becomes more vital (Matteson et al., 2016). Typically, leaders strive to propose a set of new strategic ideas or important new goals that necessitate behavioral changes across the organization (Hambrick & Lovelace, 2017).

The leader carries out the responsibility of establishing good governance and good organizational practices with integrity (Yusuf et al., 2020). The public sector is expected to be free of corruption and adhere to good governance practices (Ibrahim et al., 2020). Furthermore, Hendrik et al (2018) found a relationship that indicates a positive influence on leadership toward good governance. The employee, especially the leaders, could direct the organization in the direction of good governance and optimum practices performance (Yusuf et al., 2017).

Public servants will act within the legal parameters and recognize the laws and regulations. Hence, conceptual skills are among the crucial skills when dealing with dilemmas, good decisions, and conflicts of interest, which enable them to anticipate the implications of every action, especially in achieving the effectiveness of good governance practices. Thus, this conceptual paper aims to discover the relationship between future-ready conceptual skills and the effectiveness of good governance practices.

Literature Review

Good Governance Practices

The public's confidence in government can only be strengthened if the public sector has good governance (Khalid et al., 2016). In order to improve public sector performance and combat corruption, a strong sense of accountability and transparency are the essential components of good governance (IFAC & CIPFA, 2014). The ministry or department should also develop its ethics and accountability actions to guarantee that the public sector has a culture of good governance (Said et al., 2018). The advantages of good governance followed by strong governance principles would achieve economic growth and continuous development (Bincof, 2020). With the ultimate goal of enhancing the execution of efficiency in order to improve public service performance, the idea of good governance was introduced to the public sector (Ibrahim et al., 2020).

It is essential to reduce corruption and strengthen public administration to ensure the integrity of the government's operations. Effective management, leadership, and monitoring may all benefit from good governance, which can lead to more effective involvement and, ultimately, better results (IFAC & CIPFA, 2014). Bincof (2020) stated that the critical goal of public sector reform is to improve governance. Strengthening and recognizing public servants as better-skilled serves as the core element to improve public sector performance (Luu, 2020). Thus, in support of good governance practices, skills development as one of the reforms will contribute to public servants' quality that ensures enforcement and compliance.

Future-Ready Conceptual Skills

As public policy and governance grow more complicated and disputed, public servants are increasingly faced with a new set of skills. This paper explores conceptual skills suggested by Katz as one of the skills which are helpful to empower employees based on broad understanding, cognitive, and theoretical skills (Seyedinejat et al., 2014). Having the ability to think through and work with complicated ideas requires strong conceptual skills from those at the top of the organization (Jasim, 2019). In other words, top-level managers' conceptual skills reveal how well they understand their organization's setting.

Katz (1974) explained that understanding the big picture and how one part of it affects the whole is a key component of conceptual skill, which also includes the ability to see how an organization's various functions are interconnected and how those changes impact the whole. Dealing with ideas and concepts is a part of conceptual skills (Holsinger, 2018; Rahman, 2019; Trivedi, 2019). An employee with a high level of conceptual skills can think through the concepts on behalf of the organization and convey them, making them wise thinkers. They have a thorough grasp of fundamentals and a clear vision for the future that will help them run the organization more effectively (Trivedi, 2019).

With regard to top management characteristics, employees who have conceptual skills understand how to handle and manage change, thus requiring a leader's influence on the organization (Jasim, 2019). Based on the conceptual skills criteria, this article referred to some

literature involving 21st-century skills that mentioned problem-solving, creativity, critical thinking, cognitive flexibility, planning, innovation skill, strategic thinking, risk management, and visualizing, listed as conceptual skills. The Future of Jobs Report from the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum, 2020) emphasized the skills needed for the year 2025 and is in line with the literature; thus, Complex Problem-Solving, Critical Thinking, and Creativity has been selected as the top future-ready conceptual skills for this study.

Complex Problem-solving

Problem-solving with vigorous, obscure, or interconnected characteristics is referred to as complex problem-solving (Nicolay et al., 2020). Complex problem-solving is also defined as an ad hoc process and a subset of problem-solving in which a system is converted from its existing state to the desired goal (Weise et al., 2020). Rahmat et al (2019) indicate that complex problem-solving skills, including sub-skills like breaking down issues into more manageable and merging solutions from complex circumstances, will be required in all future professions. It is aligned with Gupta, Chopra and Kakani (2017), mentioning that there must be an ability to examine enormous amounts of data, break down complicated difficulties into more minor problems and uncover important aspects of decision-making in order for a public administrator to be effective in their job.

Iterative learning and operation and a framework that supports flexible planning and reaction are required for complex problem-solving (Satterwhite et al., 2020). In order to achieve certain predetermined objectives, complex problem-solving represents the process by which knowledge in a complicated context is transformed into practice and directed to efficient performance (Nicolay et al., 2020). Some tasks have a high degree of unpredictability, connectedness, and difficulty; thus, complex problem-solving performance might have important outcomes for practice. Situations with minimal structure, significant levels of stress (time pressure), and catastrophic consequences are particularly common in these tasks (Grezo & Sarmány, 2021). Hence, public servants need to have complex problem-solving skills to adjust based on demands and pressures when confronted with severe events and uncertainty, such as pandemics and natural catastrophes.

Critical Thinking

World Economic Forum (2020) defined critical thinking as using logic and reasoning to assess the advantages and disadvantages of various solutions, conclusions, or approaches to issues. The capacity to conceptualize, logically reason, use strategy, analytical thinking, decision making, and synthesize to solve any situation is also referred to as critical thinking (Rahman, 2019). Eggers et al (2017) describe critical thinking as the ability to examine stakeholders, implications, and consequences while analyzing and evaluating circumstances and recommending courses of action. In other words, critical thinking skills are essential for evaluating and sifting through the daily deluge of information that people must deal with (Qadir et al., 2020).

Critical thinking is regarded as a key ability in practically all professional fields and academic subjects. Critical thinkers can carefully assess information to reach well-justified conclusions or find alternate solutions to issues (Shaw et al., 2019). Furthermore, Butler et al. (2017) found that critical thinking skills had a stronger relationship with real-world decisions and were more predictive of what people really do. As a result, critical thinking skills are becoming increasingly vital for today's workforce as they develop for increasingly complex work conditions in the 21st-century.

Creativity

Creative individuals are ‘ideas people,’ capable of regenerating the work process in any work context (Rahmat et al., 2019). Pérez-peñalver et al (2018) indicated that creativity also entails developing or adopting meaningful alternatives, processes, services, goods, or ideas, regardless of their potential use or future added value. The development of creativity among public servants is also a response to wicked and complex issues that are the source of useful and novel ideas (Sherief, 2019). In fact, Houtgraaf et al (2021) even defined public sector creativity as “public servants coming up with novel and useful ideas through various practices.” Pedersen (2019) felt that because the pandemic has created a thoroughly unpredictable environment, there is a need to increase creativity and employee autonomy to assist the organization in being innovative and responsive in forceful circumstances.

An organization’s innovation begins with an initial stage of creativity (Houtgraaf et al., 2021; Pérez-peñalver et al., 2018). It is crucial to understand that innovation entails more than just creativity or coming up with fresh ideas (Kimanivong, 2015). Moreover, an interaction with a stakeholder who needs assistance in addressing an issue or when they realize that a service may be enhanced to better align with the organizational goal can initiate the creative process among public servants (Houtgraaf, 2022). It is important to know that a gap may develop between the degree of creativity when employees perceive a work climate that does not foster individual creativity (Wipulanusat et al., 2018). Therefore, creativity is crucial in evolving novel ideas and implementing them into practice among public servants to keep pace with society’s continual requirements and desires (Houtgraaf, 2022).

Proposed Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature discussed above, this paper proposed a conceptual framework (refer to Figure 1 to discover the relationship between future-ready conceptual skills (i.e., Complex Problem-Solving, Critical Thinking, and Creativity) and the effectiveness of good governance practices.

FUTURE-READY CONCEPTUAL SKILLS

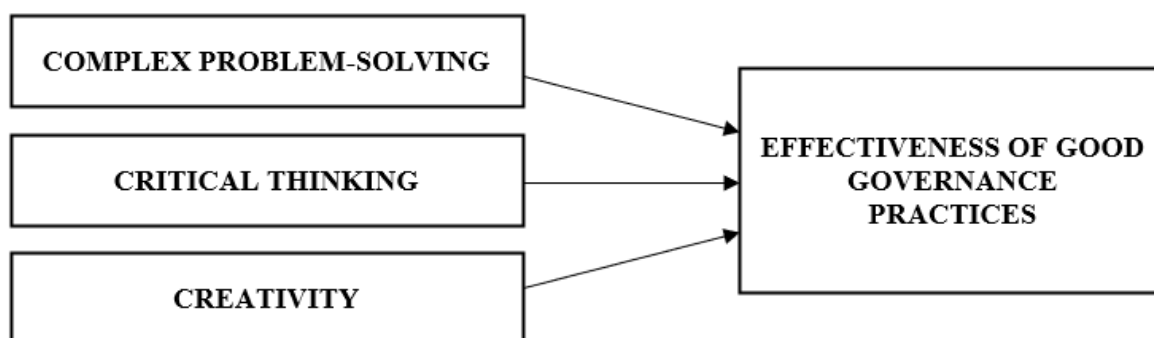


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

The methodological views of the researcher have been examined, leading to the selection of a quantitative research strategy and content analysis as the data-gathering technique. The method is relevant in this kind of research to explore the relationship between future-ready conceptual skills (i.e., Complex Problem-Solving, Critical Thinking, and Creativity) and the effectiveness of good governance practices. The data collection methods involved a targeted survey of public servants, specifically Administrative and Diplomatic Officers or PTD (Pegawai

Tadbir Diplomati) at the Managerial and Professional level (Grade M41 to M54) with selected ministries in Malaysia. A questionnaire will be sent to respondents through e-mail using the Google Docs application, ensuring that the information will not be shared with another party.

Recommendations

Public servants in Malaysia are the focus of this study, aiming to get insight into the future-ready conceptual skills that they are expected to possess. Respondents may have widespread uncertainty concerning their grades, job position, and task variety. However, future-ready conceptual skills can help as a motivation for their behavior since the purpose of this research can influence a desire and ability to grow professionally towards achieving the effectiveness of good governance practices. In order to remain relevant in citizen-centered public service, this study can recommend that the stakeholders in the public sector, including public servants, 'invest' in upskilling into more advanced skills with well-taught, practiced, and well-assessed. The future findings in this research will allow them to better integrate their capabilities in management positions and fulfill the increased need for a higher degree of skill set. This article will also help public servants, especially leaders, better understand how future-ready conceptual skills may improve organizational performance and good governance practices.

Area of Further Research

More study is needed to look into the various elements that impact the adoption of future-ready human, technical and conceptual skills that may be used in the public sector. Due to this, it is necessary to investigate how well and how difficult it is for the public servants to absorb those skills, combined with an act in accordance with laws, rules, and standards regulations. Since more research is needed on future-ready human, technical and conceptual skills, it is crucial to emphasize the effectiveness of good governance practices by numerous public administration researchers. A lack of research on public servant skills can void the understanding of how future-ready skills can better serve organizational goals.

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