



# Changes in Personnel Administration in the Thai Public Sector: the Resource-Based View and the Sustainable Perspective\*

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper was to explore whether the changes in Thai public personnel administration since 1997 have met the criteria of sustainability; that is, building trust and accountability, transparency, and organizational learning. Data were mainly collected from official documents and surveys. Survey data were collected through four point Likert-scale questionnaires from 4 groups. The first two groups were 400 undergraduate students and 400 master degree students. The last two groups were 400 subjects in Bangkok and 500 working people, of which 250 were employed in the public sector and 250 in the private sector. The findings indicate a gap in the public personnel administration that needs to be filled, especially regarding the image of public organizations and the expected behavior of public officers. The crucial proposition tied to the resource-based view and related research issues is to make the public sector an employer of choice and to sustain the expected behavior of the public personnel.*

**Keywords:** *Personnel Administration, Thai Public Sector, Resource-Based View, Sustainability*

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## การเปลี่ยนแปลงในการบริหารงานบุคคลภาครัฐ: มุมมองฐานทรัพยากรและการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืน\*

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาว่า การเปลี่ยนแปลงในการบริหารงานบุคคลของภาครัฐในประเทศไทย ตั้งแต่ปี พ.ศ. 2540 นั้น นำไปสู่ความยั่งยืนของภาครัฐหรือไม่ โดยพิจารณาจากเกณฑ์ 3 ประการ ได้แก่ ประการแรก การสร้างความเชื่อมั่นจากประชาชนและความพร้อมรับผิด ประการที่สอง ความโปร่งใส และประการที่สาม การเรียนรู้ขององค์กร ในบทความนี้ ผู้เขียนได้ทำการทบทวนเอกสารที่เกี่ยวข้องและทำการสำรวจด้วยข้อคำถามแบบลิเคิร์ตสเกล โดยใช้มาตราส่วน 4 ระดับ และทำการเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลจากกลุ่มตัวอย่าง 4 กลุ่ม ได้แก่ กลุ่มนักศึกษาในระดับปริญญาตรีและปริญญาโท จำนวนกลุ่มละ 400 คน กลุ่มประชาชนทั่วไป จำนวน 400 คน และกลุ่มคนทำงาน จำแนกเป็นบุคลากรที่ทำงานในภาครัฐจำนวน 250 คนและบุคลากรที่ทำงานในภาคเอกชนจำนวน 250 คน ทั้งนี้ จากผลการศึกษาสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงช่องว่างในการบริหารงานบุคคลของภาครัฐ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในประเด็นที่เกี่ยวกับภาพลักษณ์ขององค์กรและพฤติกรรมของบุคลากร จากผลการวิจัยดังกล่าวนำมาสู่ข้อเสนอแนะที่ยึดโยงจากมุมมองในเชิงฐานทรัพยากรขององค์กรว่า การบริหารงานบุคคลที่นำไปสู่ความยั่งยืนนั้น จะต้องทำให้องค์การภาครัฐเป็นองค์กรแห่งทางเลือกและต้องส่งเสริมให้ข้าราชการมีพฤติกรรมที่พึงประสงค์

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## Introduction

Sustainability is a concept that has become increasingly significant for both the public and private sectors. The concept of sustainable development has survived a decade since the United Nation's Commission on Environment and Development first promulgated it (Lütteken and Hagedorn, 1999). Sustainability is about actions which are ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially just and humane (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In the past, the public sector took on the role of a near-monopoly provider of utilities, such as power and water, of services such as healthcare, social welfare and education, and of transport infrastructure and services. From the early 1980s onwards, reinventing government concepts had made inroads in the public sector. People are increasingly concerned about the quality of the services they receive and the choices available to them. In response to these challenges, public sector agencies must find ways to increase their internal capability, and to improve their performance while remaining within tight expenditure limits (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005).

## Framework and Methods

The aim of this paper is therefore to explore whether the changes in the public personnel administration since 1997 have led to a path toward the final goal of sustainability. This paper is structured by first describing the criteria for sustainability by applying the resource-based view theory. The changes in the Thai public personnel administrative system, that is, recruitment and selection, development, and retention systems, are then discussed.

### Resource-based View

The resource-based view suggests that human resource systems can contribute to a sustained competitive advantage through facilitating the development of competencies that are firm specific, produce complex social relationships, are embedded in a firm's history and culture, and generate tacit organizational knowledge (Barney, 1992; Reed and DeFillippi, 1990; Wright and McMahan, 1992). Much research has been conducted that addresses the link

between human resource management practices and competitive advantage (e.g., Schuler, R.S. and MacMillan, 1984; Schuler and Jackson, 1987). The key insights of the resources are the only factors capable of creating sustained performance differences among competing firms, and these resources should figure prominently in strategy making (Kraatz and Zajac, 2001: 632). A firm's resources encompass all input factors, both tangible and intangible (Amit and Schoemaker, 1993). The firm's capacity to generate, exchange, and utilize the information is needed in order to achieve desired organizational outcomes through their human resources. Organizational culture is one of the capabilities that create a sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1986). Resources and capabilities have been labeled distinctive competence (Fiol, 1991; Reed and DeFillippi, 1990), core competence (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990), and organizational competence (Stalk, Evans, and Shuman, 1992).

Organizational competence describes the firm-specific resources and capabilities that enable the organization to develop, choose, and implement value-enhancing strategies. Organizational competencies include all of the firm-specific assets, knowledge, skills, and capabilities embedded in the organization's structure, technology, processes, and interpersonal relationships. It is important to note that organizational competency is crucial for goal achievement because of its linkages with organizational goals and because it is difficult to imitate. Thus, for public sector agencies to deliver services for the benefit of the populace, they must articulate a strategic vision and communicate this vision throughout the organization and empower public servants to realize that vision (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989); they also must create a beneficial firm-environment relationship (Hambrick and Mason, 1984). The civil service system plays a very important role in acquiring, developing, and retaining the best people in order to fulfill the strategic goals of the public sector. Some research (Osman, Ho, and Galang, 2011; Kay, 1995) shows that achieving sustainability depends upon the ability of an organization to utilize their human resources and the ability to accumulate new resource stocks more efficiently and effectively.

### Sustainability and Sustainable-based Human Resource Management

Sustainability and sustainable development are two terms that are commonly used interchangeably. There are some differences between the two, however. Sustainable development describes the process leading to the final goal outcome, sustainability. Another difference is that sustainable development can be seen as a dynamic concept, while sustainability is a rather static concept. However, sustainability is a multidimensional concept, reflecting social, economic, cultural, and environmental values. Also, it is defined differently by each culture (Roe, 1998). Sustainability in general can be defined as “the long-term maintenance of systems according to environmental, economic and social considerations” (Crane and Matten, 2007).

For discussion purposes, sustainability in the public sector can be grouped into three criteria: building trust and accountability with external stakeholders in order to meet their needs, transparency, and organizational learning. Each of these categories encompasses several of the elements described in the four frameworks; that is, Common Assessment Framework (CAF, 2006), International Workshop Agreement (IWA, 2009), International Sustainability Guideline: ISO/DIS26000 (ISO, 2009), and Global Reporting Initiative (GRI, 2010). Based on these three criteria of sustainability, human resource management should be pursued as follows (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Framework for Sustainable-based Human Resource Management**

Criteria for Sustainability	Framework for Sustainable-based Human Resource Management
Building trust and accountability	Human resource strategy that aims to address sustainability needs to include guidelines for recruiting, selecting, and developing and retaining employees that support the organizational sustainability efforts.
Transparency	Public servants should be guided by the principles of incorruptibility, meritocracy, and impartiality.
Organizational learning	The behavior of public employees should focus on outcomes and impacts rather than output (concern more about long-term interests than short-term benefits).

### **Building Trust and Accountability**

In order to build trust, public agencies should become mission-driven organizations. Their civil servants should become a role model for the private sector. They should have the knowledge, skills and capabilities that enable the public sector to create and deliver products and services that are valued by their citizens. A significant element of building trust is to improve the quality and moral standards of civil servants, improve the recruitment and selection system, attract highly-capable and outstanding people for the right positions, provide greater career advancement opportunities for highly-skilled professional officials, and improve the pay and incentive system according to the type and nature of the job.

### **Transparency**

Governments have made major changes in the way in which they manage the public sector in the past two decades. They have cut red tape and have made government more transparent in response to citizens. However, some reforms have not produced the changes in behavior and culture needed to sustain them over the longer term. To become transparent is not just an issue of the willingness to reveal information; it also means ensuring that government services are accessible to the public, and making government more responsive by enabling citizens to participate in decision making. Moreover, the civil service system as a backbone and vital machinery of the government has to place more emphasis on merit-based and competency-based personnel systems. More important, public servants should be prevented from getting into situations that cause conflicts between their private interests and their public duties. Civil servants should uphold justice and equality: they should be guided by the principles of incorruptibility, meritocracy and impartiality.

### **Organizational Learning**

There is a strong linkage between sustainability and organizational learning (Nattrass and Altomare, 1999). The research conducted by a number of scholars reveals that the higher the degree of organizational learning, the higher the degree of adaptability of firms in meeting the challenges of globalization will be (Senge

and Carstedt, 2001). The commonly-defined characteristics of a learning organization are challenging mental models, fostering fundamental change, engaging extensive collaborative activity, relying on scientific methods, and insisting on data rather than assumptions as the background to decision-making. Moreover, organizational culture plays a critical role in organizations that aim to become more sustainable. Sustainability-centered cultures will guide the behavior of employees to focus on outcomes and impacts rather than outputs.

### **Methods**

This paper used data from a variety of sources: official documents, interviews, and surveys. Survey data were collected through four point Likert-scale questionnaires from 4 groups of samples. The first two groups were 400 undergraduate students and 400 master degree students that were studying in Bangkok. The attitude of these two groups was asked in order to reflect the Thai people's perspective on the employer of choice and the image of public organizations. Moreover, an attitudinal survey was created in order to collect data from 400 subjects in Bangkok and nearby provinces. The last group consisted of working people, of which 250 were employed in the public sector and 250 in the private sector. This group provided supportive information for explaining the similarities and the differences in human resource management between the public and private sector. The percentage of the questionnaires returned from each group was 387 from the undergraduate students (96.75 percent), 292 from the graduate students (73 percent), 380 from people in general (95 percent), and 243 from the working people in the public sector and 224 working people in the private sector (93.4 percent).

### **Changes in the Public Personnel Administrative System**

During 1997-2010, Thailand had to face two economic crises: the *Tom Yum Kung* crisis in 1997 and the Hamburger crisis in 2009. The most severe case was the Tom Yum Kung crisis. During that time, economic problems were solved by seeking assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). According to the letter of intent with the IMF, it was necessary for the Thai government to reform government

work, which led to the reform of the Thai bureaucratic and public personnel administration. A committee was set up to carry out this reform, but the focus seemed to be on the sub-problems in the system, or on some parts rather than the overall system (Chadarasorn, 1997; Vesarat, 1996).

### **Recruitment and Selection**

It was found that the recruitment and selection systems were still the same as in earlier periods. However, new ingredients were added to public personnel administration when the office of Civil Service Commission introduced the High Performance and Potential System (HIPPS). This system was applied to only regularly-employed government officials in the operational line in the bureaucratic system.

Regarding new channels to attract people to work for the government, it was found that the Internet was used for job applications. In the past, applicants had to apply in person to take the tests or by mail. This study found that only a few of the sampled individuals, 12.9 percent of bachelor-degree students and 32.5 percent of master-degree students, had visited the website of the Office of Civil Service Commission. Additionally, it was found that the sample of people in Bangkok and nearby provinces had a negative attitude toward government officials' behavior ( $\bar{x} = 3.36$ ).

### **Development**

With regard to development and refinement of government officials, it was found that importance was given to investment in personnel development. For example, the Office of Civil Service Commission introduced e-learning, as it has been able to quickly develop government officials across the board (Yavaprapas, 2003) by learning and training through the use of information and communication technologies. Work manuals were prepared, and development of knowledge in the work line and more training became available. The policy on civil servant development in 1992-1996 was set to determine and promote the measures for developing civil servants. This policy of civil servant development was continued from 1997 to 2001, and required personnel to be developed before and while

working for the government. The latter was divided into two parts (Yavaprapas, 2003). The first part was the development of government officials by the organization's staff. Training methods depended on the courses that were put into the plan every year. These courses included an orientation course for new officials, a course for low-level administrators, a course for middle-level administrators, and a course for high-level administrators. Apart from these major courses, there were courses to upgrade knowledge in the work line, a special training course to upgrade skills or to gain specialization in their profession. The second part focused on government officials that were developed by other organizations as necessary. For example, when a ministry had a new project that needed specialized knowledge from other organizations, it could send its personnel to be trained by an educational institution and the expenses could be reimbursed. Although there were more new dimensions in personnel development at that time, many weaknesses still existed. This study found the following.

First, for personnel development to be successful it was the head of the work unit that had to play an important role. However, the findings revealed that the head of the work unit played his or her role in this matter less well than his or her counterpart in private enterprise. This finding was in line with the data from interviews conducted with executives of private companies. Another person that was very important in personnel development was the government official himself/herself. It was found that 62.6 percent of the sampled individuals working in the public sector stated that they were not given an opportunity to participate in determining any training course.

Second, personnel development would be successful and cost-effective only when the contents could close the competency gap between the required skills of the workplace and the existing skills of government officials. However, it was found that government agencies did not have any evaluation before the training. After the training, those working in the private sector for the past five years were evaluated regarding the cost-effectiveness of the training more than those working in the public sector. It was also found that the public sector provided a great amount of funds for human resource development. About 70.4 percent of the sample working in the public sector responded that their organization

provided funds for taking a site visit abroad and 56.0 percent responded that their organization provided scholarships for study abroad. This was different from the responses of the private sector sample, with only 47.3 percent of them reporting that their company provided funds for visits abroad and only 21.4 percent responding that their organization provided scholarship for study abroad. This reflected the high investment by the public sector during the past 10 years. It was noted that going abroad was part of the training, but taking observation tours was not considered to be cost-effective, as could be seen from the fact that there was no report of putting the knowledge into practice. Taking observation tours was just for the purpose of widening one's horizon. To be cost-effective, the content of the observation tour and the results had to be more clearly specified.

Third, there was a problem of linking personnel development with other administrative systems. In other words, the development was, up to that point, not integrated into the administrative system. For example, when a government official returned from training, he/she should be assigned a more challenging job. However, most of them still worked in the same position, performing the same duties. As a result, the government officials could not see the necessity of self-development.

### **Retention**

With regard to the process of retaining quality personnel, there seemed to have been a lot of changes in the pay scale that could be summed up as follows.

(1) Broad banding had been introduced, with the hope that this system would give an opportunity for the superior to reward those with outstanding performance without worrying about promotion because broad banding also widens the salary range.

(2) The High Performance and Potential System (HIPPS) was put to use to accommodate the career advancement of government officials that had high competence. This system was used to retain and attract quality people to work for the government.

(3) There was a tendency to use payment in accordance with performance or skills and competence. This system reflected an individual's performance. In Thailand, the quota to obtain special pay was not more than 15 percent of the total number of government officials.

(4) The introduction of the new personnel classification system enabled government officials to progress in their work because of their knowledge, ability and performance.

(5) The concept of achievement-oriented administration was put to use as a tool to measure and evaluate individuals' performance based on specific criteria. There were reliable indicators which could be used to motivate people to work.

All of the aforementioned systems have their potential benefits. Nonetheless, these tools and concepts have not been productively implemented. The process of change in personnel retention was quantitatively changed, but was not qualitatively changed. The process that the public sector used was mainly welfare and salary, as well as job security. The adjustment of the pay scale in the public sector could not compete with that of the private sector. As for expected salary, 54.8 percent of the sample that were undergraduates expected to earn 10,000-20,000 baht and 18.3 percent of those that were graduate students expected a salary of 20,000 baht or higher. The salaries of those with a bachelor's degree in the private sector were 40-50 percent higher than those in the public sector.

Furthermore, it was found that 58.8 percent of those working in the public sector said that the organizations provided facilities as requested, while nearly 80 percent in the private sector stated that their organizations provided them with adequate facilities. Again, this shows that the private sector gives more support to employees than the public sector does. In addition to unattractive remuneration in the public sector, job security, which used to be a strength that attracted people to work for the government, no longer existed, because the employment system had been reformed. There are now many kinds of people that sign a contract with employing organizations. As for welfare, welfare is still a strength of the public sector. This research also found that the welfare of the public sector was better

than that of the private sector. The examples were health benefits, housing, and tuition fees for children. However, these types of welfare have been declining. In the past, welfare was given to three generations—government officials themselves and their parents and children. At present, the economic conditions have caused welfare to decline. As a whole, the public sector does not have much with which to attract or retain personnel when compared to the private sector.

## **Does the Change in the Thai Public Personnel Administration satisfy the Framework of Sustainable-based Human Resource Management?**

### **Does the Thai Public Sector build Trust and Accountability?**

The public sector should become customer-oriented and it should be responsible for its impacts on society and the environment. From the 1980s onwards, the public administration in the OECD countries has changed significantly, followed by other countries. The restructuring of government functions, and privatization and cuts in personnel spending, have led to decreasing numbers of public employees. A special challenge will be how to attract well-educated personnel. In response to people's needs, the government should develop strategic management which uses the resource-based view to support competitiveness. Human resource strategy should be implemented throughout the public organization or agency. This implies a strategic organizational change, with a focus on the customer, flexible in design and in the service process, and fast in changing to meet new demands or conditions. To do this, the government has to increase the Ministries' autonomy over their own staff matters. Since 1997, there have been economic, social, and political changes in and outside the country. Globalization and the concept of democracy have forced the private sector in Thailand to adjust itself a great deal. The national economic and social development plan focused on developing the industrial sector and expanding investment. This resulted in Thailand's economy, particularly the industrial sector, expanding strongly compared to the past 25 years. This expanded economy gave rise to competition for labor, while the public personnel administration system remained the same (Wedchayanon, 2010). Indeed, until that time the personnel administration still contained elements of so-called

“traditional” personnel management, and could not adjust itself to the changing situation (Siengthai and Bechter, 2005).

Considering the three main processes of personnel administration, that is, recruitment and selection, development and refinement, and retention of quality human resources, it was found that the recruitment and selection process remained the same—focusing on a reactive rather than a proactive approach. That is, for recruitment, the private sector used more than one interview, and administered English language and personality tests. It also used the method of observing behavior. On the other hand, the public sector used an overall written test, Test B, that measured knowledge and skills suitable for a specific position. Additionally, the private sector used minimum qualifications, such as minimum grades, as a first screening. Although the Office of Civil Service Commission introduced the HIPPS into the system, this was applied to regularly-employed government officials on the operational line in the bureaucratic system only, not to new applicants. Also, the concept of selecting people to fit the corporate culture was not used. As a result, some government officials had a negative attitude toward their organizations and behaved inappropriately.

### **Does the Thai Public Sector create Organizational Learning?**

Learning takes place on many levels. The basic level starts with the individual being open to learning from experience and from others in and outside the organization. At the organizational level, learning becomes a complex process when principles are identified in a range of practices or actions and when tasks need to be integrated. The most complex form of learning takes place when training is concerned with the values and attitudes of people and groups. This is not only the most complex area, but also the most difficult and dangerous. The reason is that if the organization focuses on the exploitation of new ideas without paying equal attention to the more time-intensive process of creative exploration, the result is a quick fixed habit rather than the development for sustainability. Since 1997, the master plan for the Thai bureaucratic reform was set by General Chawalit Yongchaiyut’s government (Wedchayanon, 2010). This was the first historic plan of Thailand that focused on solving the basic problems of Thai

bureaucracy, which had been centralized for 100 years (Office of the Public Sector Development Commission, 2001). The personnel administration process was improved as follows: development of the form of employment in the public sector; revision of the personnel classification system; development of indicators for measurement and evaluation; development of high-ranking administrators to build leaders in the public sector; reduction of manpower; development of government officials to become professionals; improvement of discipline, petition and complaint systems; improvement of the retirement system; and revision of the role of the central administration in personnel administration. Moreover, a number of new tools and techniques were introduced to the public sectors, such as a performance management system, a talent management system, the balanced scorecard, the human resource scorecard, and the key performance index and competency model.

As for development and refinement of government officials, the government agencies did not have an opportunity to participate in determining and evaluating any training course. Moreover, the bureaucracy has the idea of offering pay on the basis of ability or skills, but the idea has not been put into practice. It could be seen that the notion of the learning organization was not really introduced; however, an integrated perspective of the concept is still a problem. Therefore, problem solving in the public sector still favors the “quick fix” over thoughtful consideration of the key components of an issue or problem. The majority of public agencies also value hierarchy, power, expediency in decisions, and are hierarchical in their structures.

### **Does the Thai Public Sector have an Image of Transparency?**

Most of the bureaucracy reforms in the past could be clearly seen in the structure and process, while changes in government officials’ behavior could not be obviously seen. This was attributed to the fact that the three personnel administrative processes were not adjusted rapidly enough to keep pace with the environmental changes. Moreover, the spoil and patronage systems still remain big ingredients in the Thai society. The research revealed that people expected government officials to be honest and transparent. In addition, when asking for

the reasons why the samples did not want to be government officials, the answer was the widespread notion of corruption in the bureaucracy ( $\bar{x} = 3.94$ ). Moreover, as for career advancement, 51.9 percent of the sampled individuals working in the public sector said that Thai organizations did not give them an equal chance to move up the career ladder. On the other hand, 70.1 percent of the sampled individuals working in the private sector stated that their organizations gave them an equal chance for career advancement. This suggests that although a person is competent, the patronage system is still a serious problem in the bureaucracy.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Based on empirical evidence concerning the attitudes of all stakeholders, the findings indicate that the image of the public personnel administrative system was unattractive. Therefore, the bureaucracy must review its work structure, and attempt to make it interesting and meaningful. It must carry out public relations to inform the people that will enter the labor market about this matter. The most serious problem was low salary and little chance to prove themselves in their work. To fill the gap in public personnel administration, it is necessary for the government to survey the pay scale that the private sector offers in order to set a salary close to it. For example, if it offers a lower salary it should compensate by providing a better chance for career advancement and job security. The image of public organizations must be adjusted to become an employer of choice because a good organizational image makes the personnel feel proud and this can compensate for a lower salary in comparison with the private sector. Building an image of public organizations does not mean just doing external marketing, but refers to the expected internal behavior of the public officer, which leads to the sustainable impact of public personnel administration. That means that the public personnel administration has to obtain the trust and accountability of people, have a good, transparent image, and take account for organizational learning.

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