

The Raffles Review

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Back office blues in the bureaucracy



SOURCE

The article "Alone in the back office: the isolation of those who care to support public services", published in *Work, employment and society* 2015, Vol. 29(4) 624-640.

The authors examined the notion of a public service identity for public servants who have little or no direct contact with citizens in their daily work. They interviewed 'back office' public servants, who provided administrative, financial, policy or performance-related support to the delivery of public services, in the United Kingdom.

BIG IDEAS

- Back office workers interviewed positively affirmed their public service identity through the carrying out of routine, bureaucratic tasks.
- Back office workers also affirmed their identity through perceiving themselves to be more public service-oriented than their colleagues.
- These workers were also found to be highly motivated to make a difference, but admitted that they felt isolated from their co-workers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

- While frustration with bureaucracy by public servants has been noted in other research, back office workers in this study were actually motivated by bureaucratic work processes. Through administrative work such as responding to Freedom of Information Act requests, the production of policy documents or the provision of performance information, these workers felt that they were demonstrating public service values of fairness, accountability, transparency and due process. It contributed to their self-identification as guardians of good governance.
- This suggests that there is less need to offer back office public servants vicarious links between front line service delivery outcomes and back office work in order to affirm their public service identity and motivate them (as earlier research has promoted). This value can also be found in undertaking administrative support functions.
- Public sector managers should be aware that highly motivated back office workers may see the themselves as more caring and committed to public service than their co-workers, leading to the potential downsides of feeling isolated and detached from their teams – and be prepared to respond to this.
 - The article noted a paucity of research on what motivates back office public servants. GCPSE is commissioning a study into the motivation of such public officials in Pakistan and Kazakhstan, with a view to expanding the research into other developing countries in future.

The Raffles Review
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This weekly offering summarises insights on public service matters to challenge assumptions and question the status quo.