

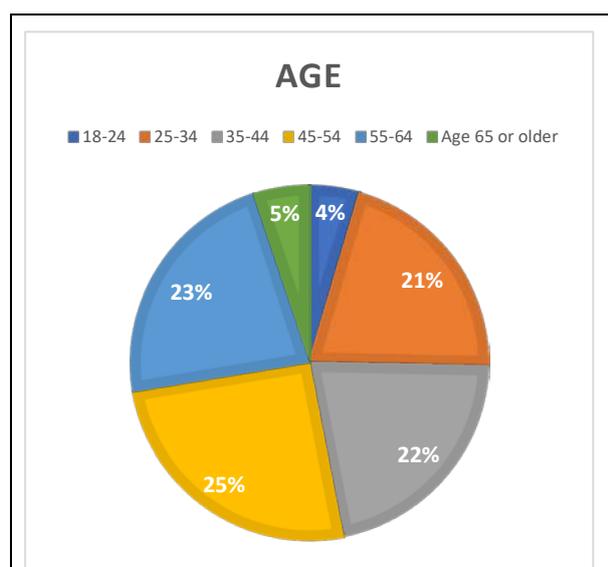
Public servants and motivation –results of the 2019 IPANZ survey

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According to a survey conducted by a group of Victoria University Wellington researchers, public servants are motivated to do their jobs and serve the public, but they face various barriers in their work. Many experience high work demands, many lack confidence in their ability, and some could be better supported by their managers. The survey of 893 Institute of Public Administration New Zealand (IPANZ) members carried out in February 2019, sought information on the challenges public sector organisations and their employees face and what organisations can do to help employees grow and develop in their jobs.

Survey respondents

Eighty-seven percent of the survey respondents were permanent employees, and more females (65%) than males (33%) took part in the survey. Most respondents had worked (for their current employer for more than 5 years and most (67%) were between the ages of 25 and 54. This sample reflects the ageing public sector workforce, with 28 percent of respondents over 55 and the characteristics are reasonably reflective of New Zealand’s broader public service.

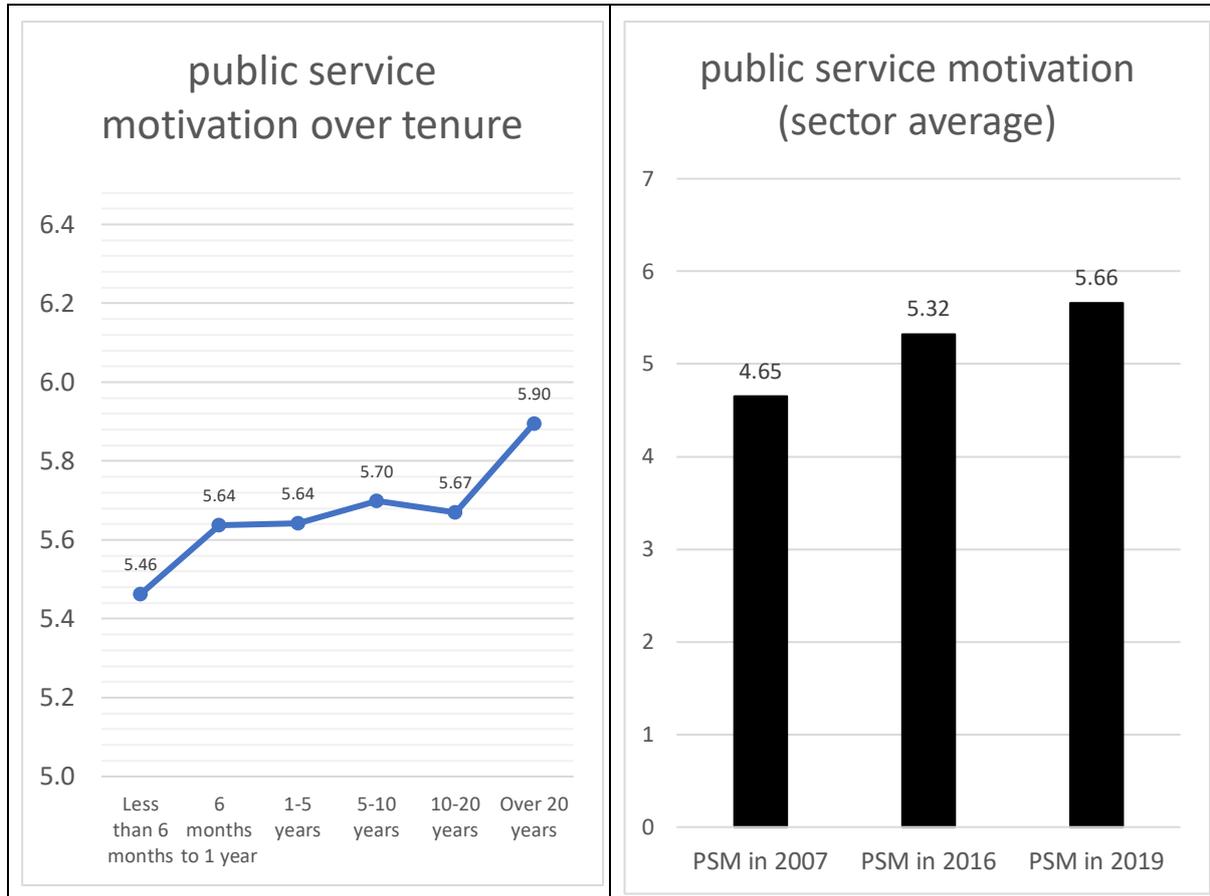


Public service motivation: Spirit of service?

Respondents reported high public service motivation - the individuals' desire to serve the public with a purpose to do good for others and society. Providing meaningful (and effective) public

services was important to over 90 percent of respondents. This indicates that the public sector workforce is highly motivated in terms of their intention to serve the public effectively, but not surprisingly, fewer (30%) are motivated to make ‘enormous sacrifices for the good of society’.

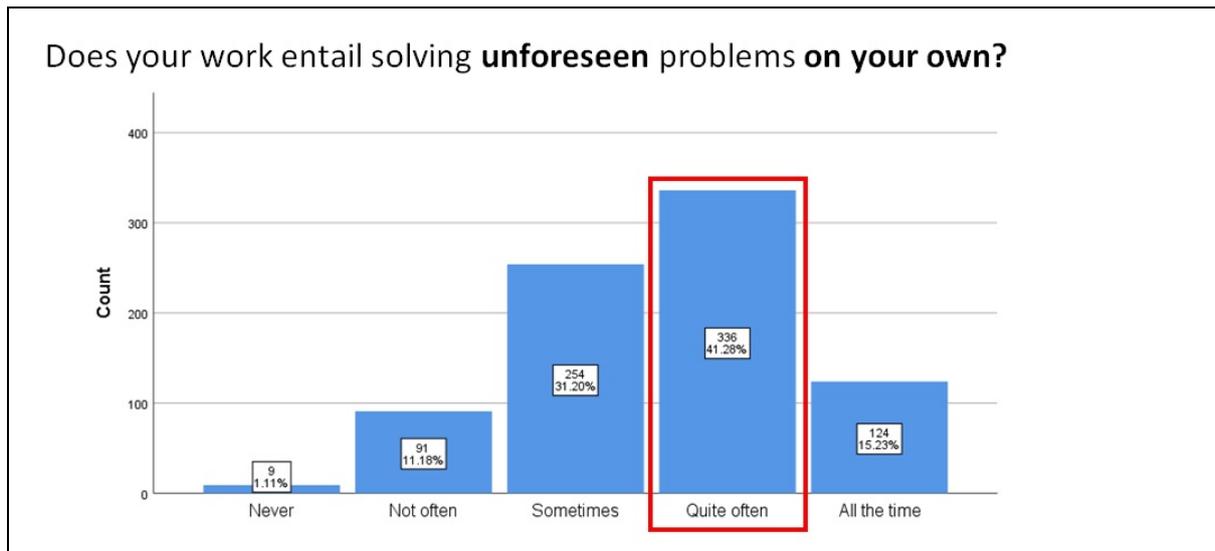
Overall, though, individuals are highly motivated to serve the public, and this motivation gets higher with increased tenure in the public sector. This may be a result of socialisation effects over time and the effect of internalising public values over time. It could also be due to generational differences. The findings on employee motivation are largely consistent with the literature.



The literature shows that high motivation, to a moderate extent, predicts higher performance. But what about public servants’ work demands and stressors and what kind of support do they get from their managers? These factors also matter in the effective delivery of public services.

How demanding is public work?

The survey results indicate that work is perceived to be demanding for most public employees with 62 percent facing tight or short deadlines ‘quite often’ or ‘all of the time’, and 56 percent often or always needing to deal with unforeseen problems on their own.

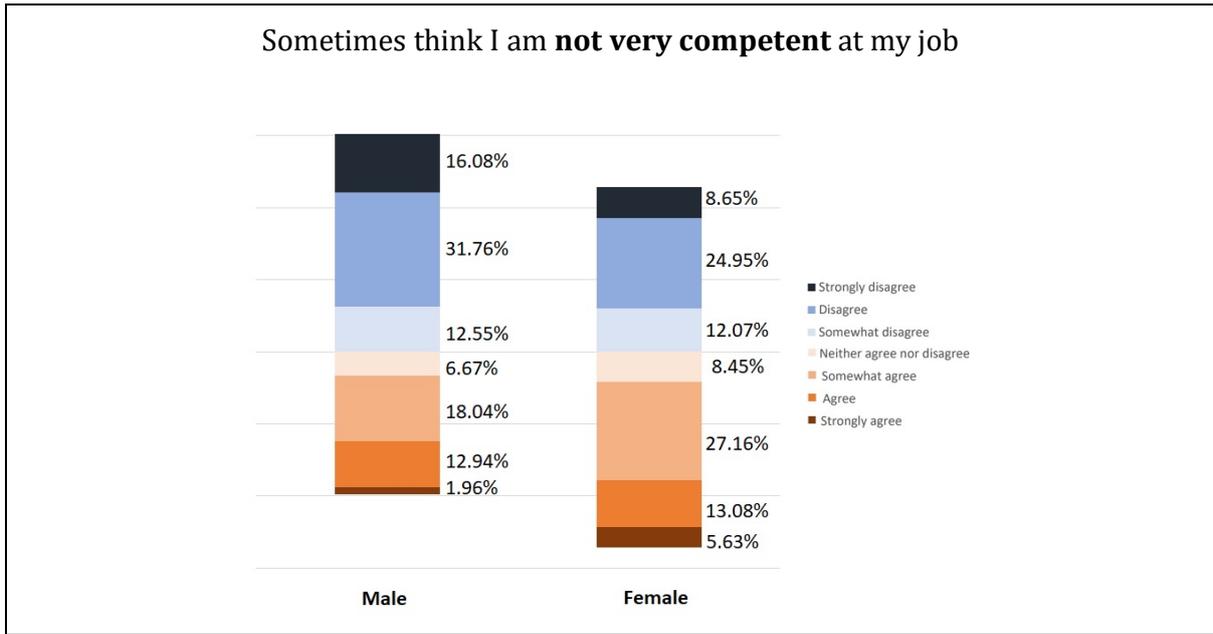


Nearly 50 percent of respondents strongly agree that they deal with competing demands from stakeholders and politicians, and over 90 percent face these demands to some degree in their work. These results align with the increasingly dispersed and networked nature of public services, which is part of a global trend.

These high (and often competing) demands place employees at risk of stress or burnout, particularly if they're experiencing poor management, which some are (see later). Work pressures and poor management are also associated with higher risk of perceived bullying (Plimmer et al., 2017a).

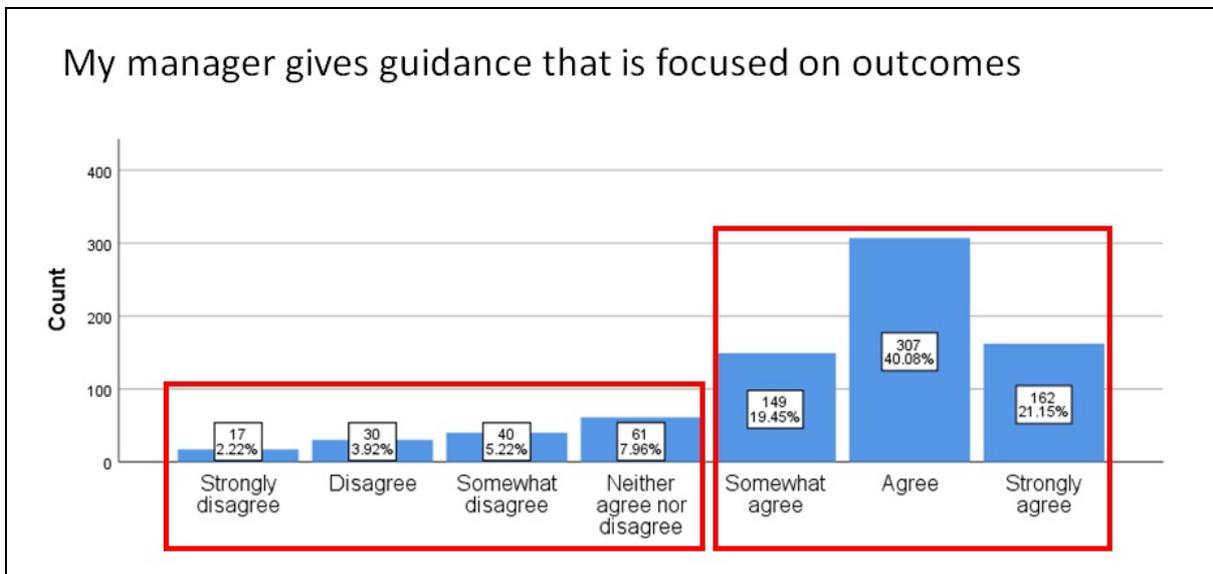
Perceptions of competence

Many respondents (41%) lacked perceived competence in their job, while just over half (51%) believed they were competent. Many factors could play a role here. Self-esteem, support from peers and managers, and role clarity are just a few potential contributors. Also, women and men responded differently to this question. Men are more likely to rate their competence highly. This may indicate that women underestimate their abilities in comparison with men, a finding in many international studies.



Where do managers come in?

Good managers can make a difference, and the research indicates that globally, and in New Zealand, public sector managers are not always 'good' (Plimmer et al., 2017). In this study, however, respondents reported that in general, they felt well supported by their managers. For example, most respondents agree that exchanges with their manager are fair and positive.



We trialled a new measure of how effective managers are seen to be in developing their staff. Overall, managers were rated highly in encouraging teamwork, building trust, and supporting staff growth and development. However, while most public servants experience reasonable management, around one in five respondents reported low or mediocre management support. Many of these staff had been with their managers a long time, suggesting some managers can stay in their jobs despite being poor at managing people, or at least that bad working relationships can persist for a long time.

Satisfaction and employee wellbeing

The survey results showed that although most people are satisfied in their jobs overall, but that more than one fifth are not satisfied (or are dissatisfied) with their jobs. Desire to serve the public was weakly related to job satisfaction, and wellbeing. Often quite motivated people reported low satisfaction and wellbeing. In terms of wellbeing, most public servants reported it to be good or very good, but 20 percent reported poor wellbeing. Public organisations should consider how to better support and develop improved satisfaction and wellbeing.

What to do?

Managers play a key role in either accentuating or helping to manage the demands on employees, as well as supporting employee competence. The study found that supportive managers can increase employee wellbeing and job satisfaction, even in workplaces under high stress and with high job demands. New Zealand public servants experience high workloads and complex demands from clients and stakeholders, but managers can make sure this does not have a detrimental effect on employees' wellbeing.

This research points to some interesting implications. As well as holding managers accountable, public organisations need to work at developing managers so they know how to effectively support their staff, particularly when managers are already busy and perhaps do not feel they have time for 'people management stuff'. More demands on already busy managers may lead to managers burning out. Therefore, organisations need to develop and support managers so that both employees and managers can more easily tackle their various demands. These are not easy problems to solve. But as we move into an increasingly complex and unpredictable future, better designed jobs, and better support and development are likely to matter more. Ideally, managers and employees trust each other and grow together so that they have the confidence, and the competence, to thrive in uncertain environments. Other research in the New Zealand public service has found that good people management makes a difference to organisational capability (Plimmer et al., 2017b), and that promoting shared leadership can help, as can managers who actively manage the paradoxes and competing demands of public service work (Zeier et al., 2018). Of course, there are many options to consider in deciding what approach to take.

Going forward

The 2019 IPANZ survey has provided a useful overview of the current characteristics and experiences of public servants. Public servants face increasing demands in their work. Jobs are changing and becoming more dynamic, and the role of managers remains critical. This survey is hopefully the beginning of a larger, broader, ongoing study focused on developing public sector employees, managers, and organisations. Further research will help us to develop more robust conclusions on the current state of the public sector workforce and what this means for employees, employers, and organisations.

These survey results were presented by Wonhyuk Cho at the New Zealand Public Sector Conference on 15 August 2019.

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