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The quality of local civil servants in Vietnam

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Abstract

Civil servants are the workforce to exercise state power to manage social development, so their quality is frequently clearly defined by national laws with general requirements following the characteristics of the civil service in every branch and at every central or local level. The Law on Cadres and Civil Servants in 2008 and Decree No. 90/2020/ND-CP of Vietnam in 2020 stipulate the evaluation of the quality based on the following standards: Politics, ethics; professional qualifications; working abilities; and work performance results. In this paper, the author conducts research on the quality of local civil servants at the commune level in Vietnam based on the issued legal regulations. By combining the qualitative method of collecting secondary data with the quantitative one of conducting a direct survey of 400 commune-level government leaders in five provinces representing three regions of Vietnam, including Sơn La Province, Hòa Bình Province (Northern), Nghệ An Province (Central), Bắc Liêu Province, and Cà Mau Province (Southern). According to research findings, they have underestimated the practical working capacity of commune-level civil servants. Based on the research findings, the author makes some recommendations for local leaders to conduct research and make appropriate policy changes to improve the quality of civil servants and enable them to serve the people better.

Keywords: Civil servants, quality of civil servants, local civil servants, Vietnam

Introduction

Vietnamese civil servants are divided into two categories: central-level and local-level officials. At the local level, they continue to be classified according to three levels of government: provincial (63), district (705), and commune ones (10,599), which are divided into three regions: Northern, Central, and Southern (GSO, 2023). The commune level is the lowest in that government system, directly implementing State laws and policies and dealing with people's requirements.

According to the overall assessment, the quality of local civil servants in Vietnam will improve in terms of professional qualifications and realistic task performance results from 2016 to 2021. However, despite accelerating reform and international integration, local civil servants, particularly those at the commune level, have not yet met the requirements of their duties (VG, 2021). The question of how to ensure the quality of civil servants to fulfill the criteria and tasks in the current

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circumstances has been a concern for local authorities in light of the reality: of administrative reform, international integration, and the fourth industrial revolution (revolution 4.0).

To assist local leaders in answering the above question, it is necessary to promote research on the quality of civil servants in the current context. For that reason, the author conducted a survey of leaders of commune authorities in five provinces representing three regions of Vietnam with a scale of 400 people. The survey results provided the author with objective data to draw research conclusions and propose policies appropriate to Vietnam's conditions to improve the quality of local civil servants.

Literature review

The quality of civil servants (QCV)

The term "quality" is used in research and management with the common understanding of what makes the subject valuable. It is described as "what produces the quality and value of a person, object, or event in the field of research" (Phe, H., 2011). This concept is widely applied to research, production, and management, particularly when it comes to the quality of human resources; and goods and services. It is defined as "the entirety of an entity's features that give it the ability to satisfy stated and intended needs" in the field of management (MOSTE, 1999). This regulation can be applied in a variety of activities, but it is probably more suitable for state management activities and strictly applied by agencies and organizations when participating in the state management process in a given industry or field.

It can be seen that the views and concepts presented above all refer to the value of people and things expressed through inherent characteristics and attributes when placed in specific conditions. This human resource value is confirmed when they demonstrate their qualities and capabilities to meet government agencies' work requirements. Many Vietnamese researchers have mentioned and analyzed the quality of civil servants, including their quality, capacity, and service (Trung, N.S. et al., 2022) inherited in this study, which is: Qualities, capacity to meet current job position requirements (QCS1); Qualities and capabilities to meet future job position requirements (QCS2); Dedication to serving the state and the people (QCS3).

Criteria for the quality of civil servants

In management, civil servants are identified as the workforce exercising state power to manage social development in every country. Therefore, the issue of civil servant quality criteria is frequently clearly defined with general requirements suitable to the characteristics of the civil service and specific requirements appropriate to every industry and level. This issue is delineated in Vietnam by the Law on Cadres and Civil Servants 2008 and Decree No. 90/2020/ND-CP 2020. The criteria for civil servant quality are almost well-defined according to job characteristics (professional work, management, and leadership work) and according to each rank (employees, officials, specialists, principal experts, senior experts) and encompass the following fundamental

contents: Politics, ethics; professional qualifications; working ability; work performance results.

The term "criteria" refers to the subject's distinguishing features in research. The criteria for civil servant quality are often cited by researchers, and they include both general standards based on legal requirements (politics, ethics; qualifications; professional skills; work capacity; work performance results) and separate standards linked to specific professional characteristics and each level of government (Khanh, C.X. et al., 2010; Tam, N.T., 2011). As a result, there is interference between managers and researchers in the context of civil servant quality criteria. Therefore, the author of this paper concentrates on analyzing the general criteria for the quality of civil servants based on modified inheritance, developed from the legal regulations and previous research findings, as a foundation for designing research and survey samples when assessing it at the commune level in Vietnam. Politics, ethics, professional qualifications, operating ability, and job performance outcomes are among the criteria for civil servants.

a) Politics and Ethics (PE)

Politics and ethics are the most fundamental standards for all civil servants as defined by law (VNA, 2008) and confirmed by numerous researchers (Thai, P.H., 2016; HUHA, 2020), including:

PE1: Having excellent political ideology. Public servants strictly abide by the law, have sturdy political courage, take a steadfast stance, are free from corruption, have a spirit of solidarity, and seek to establish a transparent and powerful agency and unit.

PE2: Having good ethics and a healthy lifestyle. Civil servants live an honest, humble, and simple life, do not allow relatives or acquaintances to use their positions and powers for personal gain and respect their colleagues and the people.

PE3: Possessing a good working style. Public servants work independently and collaboratively to complete their assigned tasks, have the right attitude, and perform their work in a democratic and principled manner.

PE4: Having a strong sense of discipline. Civil servants strictly adhere to task assignments and the regime of honest and objective work reporting; they strictly follow the rules and regulations of the working agency.

b) Professional qualifications and skills (QS)

A civil servant's professional qualifications and skills are the knowledge and skills that they are trained and fostered to meet the requirements of the duties of government agencies at each stage of development before being recruited as a civil servant. Many researchers agree that professional qualifications and skills are the fundamental criteria for assessing the quality of civil servants (Khanh, C.X. et al., 2010; Hai, N.H., 2014). Vietnamese law (VNA, 2008) establishes criteria for civil servants' professional qualifications and skills, including:

QS1: Possessing qualified professional credentials. Civil servants have professional qualifications

that meet the requirements of civil servant ranks and employment positions, as evidenced by diplomas issued by accredited educational institutions.

QS2: Having a standard state management qualification. Civil servants have state management qualifications equivalent to civil servant ranks, as evidenced by diplomas awarded by competent educational institutions.

QS3: Getting specialized skills to meet the job's requirements. Civil servants have specific skills (knowledge, abilities) related to their job roles and are responsible for effectively demonstrating this knowledge and skill through assigned task fulfillment.

c) Working competency (WC)

The quite commonly understood concept of competency includes the "characteristic of an individual that demonstrates a degree of proficiency, i.e. being able to competently and reliably perform a certain activity or type of activity" (EPH, 2020) and "the ability to do good work due to ethical qualities and professional qualifications" (Lan, N., 2006). Vietnamese law (VNA, 2008; VG, 2020) stipulates civil servants' working capacity by the assigned work norms associated with the working position and the requirements of the job position, including:

WC1: Having strong consulting abilities. Civil servants can advise on policy formulation and professional activities in fields related to employment positions in their agency. This competency is evident in the ability to research, analyze, and evaluate for researching, proposing, and criticizing policies; and the ability to edit documents so that all works are transformed from ideas into specific professional products to advise competent authorities on implementation.

WC2: Having the ability to perform tasks well. Civil servants are capable of performing professional tasks to ensure the completion and quality of assigned tasks. This capability necessitates basic requirements for civil servants, such as identifying and analyzing the situation of performing professional duties in a scientific and timely manner; and developing a plan to execute the task reasonably and feasibly.

WC 3: Having great examining and evaluative ability. Civil servants can inspect and evaluate to proactively comprehend the situation, promote advantages, and promptly overcome mistakes or unjustified problems; they must also proactively analyze, evaluate and summarize how assigned tasks were performed.

d) Work performance results (WR)

The criteria for evaluating the quality of civil servants based on work performance results and frequently used in numerous research works are to ensure the completion of assigned tasks, ensure the quality of assigned activities, and increase people's satisfaction (Khanh, C.X. et al., 2010; Trung, N.S., 2022). In Vietnam, these criteria are clearly outlined in the law as one of the components of the yearly appraisal of civil servants (VNA, 2008; VG, 2020), and they include:

WR1: Ensuring assigned tasks must be completed on schedule. Because, in public service activities, each task assigned has a deadline for completion, civil servants are responsible for ensuring the progress of their assigned tasks.

WR2: Ensuring the quality of assigned tasks. Commune-level civil servants are responsible for ensuring the quality of assigned tasks since achieving product quality is a requirement for every assignment.

WR3: Generating satisfaction among the people. Public servants must devote themselves to serving and respecting the people. As a result, their attitudes toward serving them are reflected in their work performance results, leading to pleasure when their requests are satisfied.

Using the data presented above, the author creates a theoretical framework for the investigation. The research scale and model use four independent variables, one dependent one, and a total of sixteen observed ones to examine the quality of public servants (Table 1, Figure 1).

Table 1. Summary of research scales on quality of civil servants

No	Scales	Encode	Rating levels				
			1	2	3	4	5
I	Politics and Ethics	PE					
1	Having excellent political ideology	PE1					
2	Having good ethics and a healthy lifestyle	PE2					
3	Possessing a good working style	PE3					
4	Having a strong sense of discipline	PE4					
II	Professional qualifications and skills	QS					
1	Possessing qualified professional credentials	QS1					
2	Having a standard state management qualification	QS2					
3	Getting specialized skills to meet the job's requirements	QS3					
III	Working competency	WC					
1	Having strong consulting abilities	WC1					
2	Having the ability to perform tasks well	WC2					
3	Having great examining and evaluative ability	WC3					
IV	Work performance results	WR					
1	Ensuring assigned tasks must be completed on schedule	WR1					
2	Ensuring the quality of assigned tasks	WR2					
3	Generating satisfaction among the people	WR3					
V	The quality of civil servants	QCS					
1	Qualities, capacity to meet current job position requirements	QCS1					
2	Qualities and capabilities to meet future job position requirements	QCS2					
3	Dedication to serving the state and the people	QCS3					

Source: The authors' synthesized results from the literature review

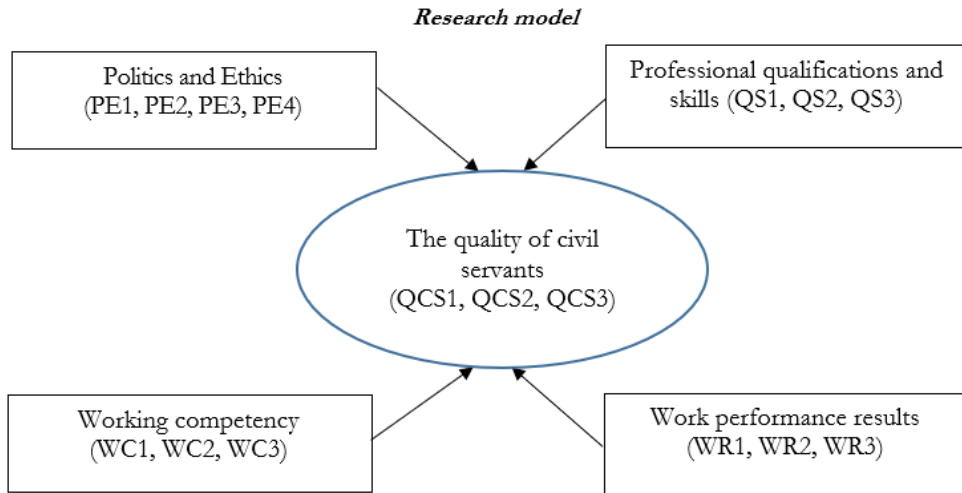


Figure 1. Research model

Research hypothesis

H1: Politics and ethics are related to/influenced by the quality of civil servants.

H2: Professional qualifications and skills are related to/influenced by the quality of civil servants.

H3: Working competency is related to/influenced by the quality of civil servants.

H4: Work performance results is related to/influenced by the quality of civil servants.

Research methods

In this study, secondary data are collected and analyzed from published documents combined with primary ones from the direct investigation, include: Preliminary and official surveys.

a) Preliminary surveys

From the theoretical framework for studying the quality of civil servants under the model of 04 independent and 01 dependent variables with a total of 16 observed ones, a survey consisting of 16 questions and 16 observed variables were designed (Table 1). All observed ones are measured using a 5-level Likert measure: 1 - Strongly disagree; 2 - Disagree; 3 - No comments; 4 - Agree; 5 - Strongly agree.

With 16 observed variables, the minimum sample size needed for factor analysis is $N = 16 \times 5 = 80$ (Hai, D.H. et al., 2018). In this study, we performed with a sample size of $N = 400 > 80$, showing high reliability when conducting survey research. After designing and completing the survey form, we conducted a preliminary survey in Son La province with a sample size of $N = 100$ managers

from commune-level authorities. Its results show that the observed variables are reliable enough to be used in the official survey on a broader scale.

b) Official surveys

We conducted an official survey in 5 localities representing three regions of Vietnam, including the provinces: Son La province, Hoa Binh province (Northern), Nghe An province (Central), Bac Lieu province, and Ca Mau province (Southern).

The survey was carried out in 2022. Its subjects were 400 managers from commune-level authorities, who have held managerial positions for three years or more. We conducted a preliminary interview to capture the respondents' standards and distributed the survey based on their consent.

The survey results collected 400/400 valid votes, reaching a 100% response rate. The characteristics of the research sample show that the majority of survey respondents are experienced managers, more than 5 year (Table 2).

Table 2. Statistics of the study sample

Case Processing Summary						
		Cases		Total		
		Valid	Missing			
		N	Percent	N	Percent	Percent
Gender * Age * Time		400	100.0%	0	0.0%	100.0%

Gender * Age * Time Crosstabulation						
Count						
Time	Gender		Age			Total
			< 40	41-50	>50	
3-5 years	Gender	Male	47	7	4	58
		Female	34	5	2	41
	Total		81	12	6	99
6-10 years	Gender	Male		102	15	117
		Female		63	6	69
	Total			165	21	186
> 10 years	Gender	Male		3	44	47
		Female		7	61	68
	Total			10	105	115
Total	Gender	Male	47	112	63	222
		Female	34	75	69	178
	Total		81	187	132	400

Source: Author's survey results

From the collected data, the author performs scale testing, exploratory factor analysis and regression analysis to test the research hypothesis.

Research results

a) Results of testing the scale

The testing of the scale reliability (Cronbach's alpha test) was conducted to remove the garbage variables, avoiding the case that they create a dummy factor when analyzing the exploratory factor. The author conducts Cronbach's Alpha test to identify the reliability of the scales and observed variables in the research model.

The test results show that all 5 scales and 16 observed variables have reliability when meeting the standard conditions: Cronbach's alpha > 0.6; Corrected Item-Total Correlation > 0.3 (Hai, D.H. et al., 2018) (Table 3).

Table 3. Results of testing the scale reliability

STT	Scales	Observed variables	Reliability coefficients (Cronbach' Alpha)	The correlation coefficient of the smallest total variable
1	Politics and Ethics (PE)	PE 1, PE 2, PE 3, PE4	.778	PE2 = 3.58
2	Professional qualifications and skills (QS)	QS1, QS2, QS3	.740	QS2 = .467
3	Working competency (WC)	WC1, WC2, WC3	.846	WC1 = .494
4	Work performance results (KQ)	WR1, WR2, WR3	.668	WR3 = .404
5	The quality of civil servants (QCS)	QCS1, QCS2, QCS3	.784	QCS3 = .524

Source: The authors' survey results

With the standard test value, 5 scales and 16 observed variables in the model continue to be used to perform exploratory factor analysis.

b) Result of exploratory factor analysis

The author conducts exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation to preliminarily evaluate the unidirectionality, convergence value, and discriminant value of the scales.

The results of the analysis are shown in Tables 4 and 5 below.

Table 4. Total Variance Explained

KMO and Bartlett's Test	
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	.747
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square
	3196.679
	df
	120
	Sig.
	.000

Total Variance Explained

Table Continues

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	4.985	31.155	31.155	4.985	31.155	31.155	2.862	17.890	17.890
2	2.465	15.405	46.560	2.465	15.405	46.560	2.480	15.497	33.387
3	1.894	11.837	58.396	1.894	11.837	58.396	2.277	14.233	47.620
4	1.275	7.968	66.364	1.275	7.968	66.364	2.121	13.258	60.878
5	1.016	6.348	72.713	1.016	6.348	72.713	1.894	11.834	72.713
6	.768	4.798	77.511						
7	.645	4.034	81.545						
8	.609	3.804	85.349						
9	.457	2.857	88.206						
10	.379	2.370	90.577						
11	.362	2.261	92.838						
12	.299	1.868	94.706						
13	.296	1.850	96.556						
14	.229	1.433	97.988						
15	.186	1.160	99.148						
16	.136	.852	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Source: The authors' survey results

Table 5. Rotated Component Matrix

Rotated Component Matrix^a

Scales	Observed variables	Component				
		1	2	3	4	5
Politics and Ethics (PE)	PE1	.647				
	PE2	.548				
	PE3	.624				
	PE4	.662				
Professional qualifications and skills (QS)	QS1		.815			
	QS2		.635			
	QS3		.522			
Working competency (WC)	WC1			.756		
	WC2			.745		
	WC3			.654		
Work performance results (WR)	WR1				.796	
	WR2				.759	
	WR3				.645	
The quality of civil servants (QCS)	QCS1					.703
	QCS2					.617
	QCS3					.589

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 8 iterations.

Source: The authors' survey results

In quantitative research, exploratory factor analysis is performed in accordance with the data set through the following values: $0.5 \leq KMO \leq 1$; Bartlett's test has the Sig level of significance. <

0.05; Eigenvalue ≥ 1 ; Total Variance Explained $\geq 50\%$; Factor Loading ≥ 0.5 (Hair, J.F. et al., 2009).

The data from Table 4 and Table 5 with KMO = 0.747 > 0.5 show that exploratory factor analysis is suitable for the data set. Bartlett's test with the Sig level of significance = 0.000 < 0.05 indicates that the observed variables linearly correlate with the representative factor. Total Variance Explained with Cumulative % = 72.713% > 50% reveals that 72.713% variation of the representative factors is explained by observed variables. All observed variables with the Factor Loading > 0.5 denote that they have good statistical significance. The observed variables were extracted into 05 factors with Eigenvalues > 1, showing that the research model consists of 01 dependent variable (QCS) and 04 independent ones (PE, QS, WC, WR) with a total of 16 variables with good statistical significance. They can perform multivariable linear regression analysis (Table 6).

c) Results of multivariable linear regression analysis

The regression analysis is carried out to consider the relationship between the independent variables (PE, QS, WC, WR) and the dependent one (QCS). Results of regression analysis are shown in Tables 6 below.

Table 6. Multivariable linear regression results

Coefficients ^a		Unstandardized		Standardized		t	Sig.	VIF
		Coefficients		Coefficients				
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta				
1	(Constant)	.640	.234			2.730	.013	
	Politics and Ethics (PE)	.439	.051	.417		8.647	.002	1.000
	Professional qualifications and skills (QS)	.206	.049	.199		4.215	.033	1.000
	Working competency (WC)	.085	.051	.080		1.667	.000	1.000
	Work performance results (WR)	.116	.054	.098		2.139	.000	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: The quality of civil servants (QCV)

R Square: 0.771

Durbin-Watson: 2.255

Source: The authors' survey results

It can be seen the regression results in Table 6: R Square = .771 shows that the factors PE, QS, WC, WR explain 77.1% of the variation of the QCS in the research model; the built multivariable linear regression model is suitable for the data. The factors with VIF = 1.000 < 2 shows that the regression model does not have multicollinearity. Durbin-Watson = 2.255 (1 < d < 3) indicates that the regression model does not have autocorrelation. The regression coefficients of four independent variables are statistically significant (Sig. < 0.05), showing that the factors of PE, QS, WC, WR all correlate with the QCS. The unstandardized regression coefficients have positive values so that the ones in the research model have a positive relationship. Thus, the hypotheses

H1, H2, H3, H4 are accepted. On the basis of the generalized regression model $Y = B_0 + B_1 * X_1 + B_2 * X_2 + \dots + B_i * X_i$ (Hair, J.F. et al., 2009), a regression model can be identified the multivariate of this study is as follows: $QCS = 0.640 + 0.439 * PE + 0.206 * QS + 0.085 * WC + 0.116 * WR$ Based on the unstandardized regression coefficient, it can be seen that the correlation level of the independent variables and the dependent one in increasing order is Working competency (WC), Work performance results (WR), Professional qualifications and skills (QS), Politics and Ethics (PE).

Conclusion

The aforementioned research findings demonstrate that local leaders significantly underestimate the practical working capacity of civil servants, which has a negative impact on the quality of the work results. As a result of these findings, the author advises that the management policies for civil servants be reviewed and altered in the following areas: Reevaluating a civil servant's ability to perform their job, with a focus on evaluation by the competency framework of each job position. Following is an explanation of this:

First, the evaluation of the quality of civil servants is carried out annually by Vietnamese law (VG, 2020) with the main form of internal assessment, which means the civil servants will self-assess themselves. Then, the agency accepts and acknowledges such outcomes by their department. This assessment method is internally beneficial but also constrained due to the shortage of multi-dimensional assessment data.

Second, no legal standards for the assessment according to the competency framework of each job title and position have yet been developed under the provisions of Vietnam's law on evaluating the quality of civil workers (VG, 2020). As a result, numerous local government agencies have not given the development and assessment of civil servants using the capacity framework any thought.

The updated civil servant quality evaluation makes it easier to quantify the criteria for evaluating their qualities by the traits and requirements of each title. Additionally, it contributes to establishing consistency in the evaluation process and criteria used by regional government agencies to evaluate the performance of their civil servants.

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