

**The resilience of public servants – what it is, what helps and what hinders it.**

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## The resilience of public servants – what it is, what helps and what hinders it.

### ABSTRACT

*Employee resilience is the capability to adapt and remain effective at work, even when faced with challenging circumstances. Based on a large-n survey of New Zealand civil servants, about half of respondents report adequate to high levels of resilience. Using multi-level analysis, we find that employee resilience is positively associated with (i) PSM and job motivation, (ii) pro-social (interpersonal) political behaviours at work, (iii) role and goal clarity, and (iv) constructive leadership. We also find that post-NPM challenges of (v) increased collaboration across organizations and (vi) job insecurity decrease employee resilience. This article contributes by furthering understanding of how public sector work environments affect the nature of public sector work and offers suggestions about how to manage for employee resilience in post-NPM environments.*

## **Employee Resilience in the Public Workplace:**

### **The Impact of Workplace Conditions and Collaboration in New Zealand**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Post-NPM governance arrangements and continuing demands for heightened responsiveness, performance and accountability are realities for many civil servants. Pressures include heightened accountability and politicization, complexity arising from multi-actor and multi-level governance and implementation (e.g., Fossetøl, Breit, Andreassen and Klemsdal 2015), continuing restructurings, and public demands for prompt and effective responses to myriad crises and changes (Carter, Danford, Howcroft, Richardson, Smith and Taylor 2013; Diefenbach 2009). Such conditions demand employee resilience which involves more than ‘just’ managing periods of high workloads; resilience also includes performing well and even realizing opportunities for lifting organizational and human capital capabilities.

This research examines the concept of employee resilience and empirically investigates the following, main research question: What workplace conditions and job practices are associated with employee resilience? We also examine the influence of organization-level variables related to the above concerns. From our findings, suggestions are made for Human Resource Management (HRM) practice and further research. Empirical data are based on a large-n survey of civil servants in New Zealand.

To date, the term ‘resilience’ in public administration research is commonly used in connection with the performance of organizational process (Boin and Van Eeten 2013; Comfort, Waugh and Cigler 2012), but the time has come to deepen this by focusing on employees, as well. Scholarship increasingly acknowledges that past resilience research has underestimated the role of

human agency in enabling resilient organizations (Duit 2015). Notably, multi-level learning in ‘high reliability organizations’ is found to be one key to avoiding system failure (e.g., breakdown under stress, Weick and Sutcliffe 2011). In short, an organisation is unlikely to be resilient if its workers are not (U.S. GAO, 2004). These concerns point to the role of human resources in organizational resilience.

The time has now come to better understand how workplace conditions can further resilience. As the above challenges of continuing demands and governance changes are unlikely to go away for employees, understanding factors that strengthen resilient employee behaviours is a useful line of research that can lead to better organizational and supervisory strategies for building up and maintaining resilience among their employees.

### **Understanding Employee Resilience**

The notion of employee resilience has changed significantly in recent years. Early conceptualizations that regard resilience as the capacity to maintain wellbeing and performance levels through crises (cf. Wagnild and Young 1993) have given way to the contemporary, adaptive perspective, which views resilience also as a capability linked to continuous learning and growth through adversity (Youssef and Luthans 2007). This study defines employee resilience as “employee capability, facilitated and supported by the organisation, to utilize resources to continually adapt and flourish at work, even when faced with challenging circumstances” (Kuntz, Naswall and Malinen 2016; Näswall, Kuntz and Malinen 2015). Thus, resilience is more than having an attitudinal buffer against hardship; it also includes behaviours that further adaptation and performance.

Resilient behaviours involve developing and utilizing adaptive processes. Positive attitudes toward change are associated with responding effectively to changing conditions, using change as an

opportunity for growth, and being able to handle intense performance demands (Campbell 2016; Shin, Taylor and Seo 2012). This corresponds very closely to the definition of resilience used in this study (see also Näswall, Kuntz and Malinen 2015). However, in addition to such individual attributes, many studies also find social support one of the most robust single markers of resilience and the main route for expanding “resources” (Schumm, Briggs-Phillips and Hobfoll 2006). Specifically, group members’ support widens the range of potential coping strategies and positive emotions during times of stress, enhancing their resilience against hardship (Fredrickson and Losada 2005; Halbesleben and Wheeler 2015). Thus, employee resilience involves network leveraging behaviours that, to varying degrees, occur in a group or interdependent context.

We examine three foci of motivation: general, job and PSM. Research suggests that PSM is associated with increased discretionary behaviours aimed at improving the functioning of the organization (Campbell and Im 2015; Mostafa, Gould-Williams and Bottomley 2015; Schott, van Kleef and Steen 2015), and a person’s PSM may provide additional drive for addressing challenges in the public sector context. Examining the relative importance of PSM to other motivations offers a substantive contribution as many current studies in public administration do not often examine a broader set of non-PSM motivations (e.g., Kroll and Vogel 2014; Taylor 2007). Hence, the following is hypothesized:

*H1a: General work motivation will be positively associated with employee resilience.*

*H1b: Job motivation will be positively associated with employee resilience.*

*H1c: Public service motivation will be positively associated with employee resilience.*

Second, this study also tests pro-social political skill, which is defined as “the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways

that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives'' (Ferris, Treadway, Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, Kacmar, Douglas and Frink 2005, p.127). Also, pro-social political skill includes genuine communication and support of others that builds social capital (Kimura 2015; Munyon, Summers, Thompson and Ferris 2015). These interpersonal skills, may be associated with increased likelihood of engaging in networking and collegial/group support when addressing dynamic conditions, which represent resilient behaviours. Hence, the following is hypothesized:

*H2: Pro-social political, skill will be positively associated with employee resilience.*

The third set of variables examined includes role clarity, autonomy, team empowerment, task interdependence, and job insecurity. Role clarity reduces mental load, reduces conflict and facilitates effective use of existing resources (e.g., support), which results in increased job performance (Landy 1989). Resilient behaviours may be more likely when individuals experience less mental strain, conflict and, importantly, have clear targets against which adaptive responses can be calibrated and assessed. We posit that resilient behaviours are fostered by autonomy, which enables the necessary discretion to explore better ways of doing one's job.

Task interdependence refers to the degree to which team members need to coordinate tasks and share access to material resources and information to achieve goals (Hu and Liden 2015). This has been associated with improved processes of optimally integrating team member capabilities, beliefs about the team's ability to perform (i.e., collective efficacy), and increased cohesion and support among team members (Courtright, Thurgood, Stewart and Pierotti 2015). In essence, task interdependence promotes human capital and social capital, and thus should lead individuals to enact resilient behaviours.

In post-NPM and tight budget environments, public employees in many countries are at risk of job loss, whereby fear of job loss triggers other worries about resource loss in the workplace, influencing psychological outcomes (Hoge et al. 2015). Hence,

*H3a: Role clarity will be positively associated with employee resilience.*

*H3b: Job autonomy will be positively associated with employee resilience.*

*H3c: Team empowerment will be positively associated with r employee resilience.*

*H3d: Task interdependence in the team will be positively associated with employee resilience.*

*H3e: Job insecurity will be negatively associated with employee resilience.*

Constructive leaders “actively influence groups and their members in accordance with the legitimate interests of the organization by supporting and enhancing the goals, tasks, and strategy of the organization, as well as enhancing the motivation, well-being, and job attitudes of their followers” (Skogstad, Aasland, Nielsen, Hetland, Matthiesen and Einarsen 2014, , p. 222 ). These behaviours include encouraging employees to engage in innovative thinking and to view challenges as opportunities rather than problems, sharing a compelling vision, and actively promoting employee growth and development. Thus,

*H4: Constructive leadership will be positively associated with employee resilience.*

**Workplace Contexts.** Three important aspects of the context of public sector workplaces are explored: Organizational goal clarity includes the extent to which managers have a clear strategic vision for their organization. Goal clarity is long standing issue in public administration research (Chun and Rainey 2005). Clear goals, that are well-communicated, can help further common norms and understandings of behavior. In turn, this builds internal social structure by enhancing co-operation between staff

through a shared sense of mission (Desmidt, Prinzie and Decramer 2011; Ryu 2015; Wright, Moynihan and Pandey 2012), and reducing conflict and enabling collaboration, support and development (Evans and Davis 2005). This should support pro-active and discretionary behaviours that are likely to help individuals thrive and develop in periods of high job demand (Bottomley, Mostafa, Gould-Williams and León-Cázares 2016). Thus,

*H5: Clear organisational goals will be positively associated with employee resilience.*

Public sector agencies are increasingly under pressure to collaborate more with other agencies. The extant research suggests, however, that inter- agency collaboration is difficult (Head and Alford 2015). Although collaboration provides opportunities, it also poses particular tensions in job and organisational role clarity, trust, reciprocity, and horizontal as well as vertical accountability, and thus may undermine resilience (Head and Alford 2015). Finally, resource constraints are generally associated with negative outcomes, including stifled innovation, inflexibility and poor customer service (Hope and Fraser 2003) and, at the individual level, they put pressure on public servants' work. We therefore examine the following:

*H6: Interagency collaboration will be associated with employee resilience.*

*H7: Resource constraints will be associated with employee resilience.*

**Insert figure 1 about here**

**Figure 1: Study Relationships**

## **METHOD**

**Data collection.** A survey was conducted by email in February 2016 among all 57,315 members of New Zealand's main public sector union, the Public Service Association. A total of 14,125 usable responses were received (25% response rate). The survey instrument has a total of 263 questions, 76 of which are filtered for managers only. Most participants are women [71.5%] and of European origin [68.9%] (see Table 1). The median age of respondents is 50 years (mean=48.9 years), 46.9% have a university degree, and 15% have supervisor or management responsibilities.

**Measures.** A seven-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' is used for the following variables. The outcome variable, employee resilience, is measured with a modified 9-item scale from Näswall, Kuntz and Malinen (2015). Example items are "I use change at work as an opportunity for growth", "I effectively collaborate with others to handle unexpected challenges at work" (Näswall, Kuntz and Malinen 2015). The behavioral resilience measure used here indicates how often people engage in desirable work behaviours, such as being proactive or leveraging networks. Other constructs were measured using psychometric scales. In exploratory analysis scales were reliable, apart from general motivation ( $\alpha = .54$ ) and job motivation ( $\alpha = .60$ ). For the organisational level analysis, inter-rater reliability was moderate but within accepted thresholds (LeBreton and Senter, 2008).

**Multi-level analysis.** As hierarchical regression analysis does not account for differences between organisations, we use multilevel modelling techniques (in MPlus 7.4) to account for between-organization variations. Gender, length in job, workplace size, role clarity, job autonomy, task interdependence, team empowerment and constructive leadership were modelled at Level 1 (within organisation). Organisational goal clarity, collaboration and resource constraints were modelled as between-organisational factors at Level 2.

## RESULTS

The results of the multilevel regression analysis are presented in Table 4. At Level 1, all predictors, with the exception of workplace size, job autonomy, and team empowerment, were significantly related to employee resilience check. All coefficients were in the expected direction. Hypotheses 1 through 4 are supported. The variance explained by the within-organization factors was  $R^2=.39$ . See table 2 for unstandardized coefficients at both levels.

### **Insert table 2 about here**

At Level 2, organisational goal clarity (H5) and interagency collaboration (H6) were significantly related to employee resilience. Resource constraints was not ( $p=.08$ ) (H7). The variance explained by the organizational level variables was  $R^2=.45$ .

## DISCUSSION

Our results show that motivation and pro-social political skills have the strongest associations with employee resilience. Drive to perform one's job and public service motivation are distinct sources of energy that are strongly associated with employee resilience. As predicted, pro-social political behavior at work fosters interpersonal interactions and capital that help people learn and adjust to change. We also find evidence of post-NPM challenges such as increased coordination across organizations and job insecurity negatively affecting employee resilience. While we find that role clarity is positively related to resilience, some reports suggest that roles are more fluid and uncertain in post-NPM settings. In line with the above, constructive leadership is also associated with employee resilience.

Constructive leadership, general motivation, political skill, and PSM are all linked to resilience. The strength of their link with resilience stands out and warrants further discussion.

The relationship between general motivation and resilience is consistent with the agency necessary for resilient behaviours. The causal direction is particularly hard to infer here, as non-resilient individuals are logically less likely to be motivated and more likely to be burnt out. However, it is clear that PSM can support resilience. Two scenarios stand out: the first is that PSM may counteract negative experiences such as competing demands or red tape, although the research on this is mixed (Giauque, Ritz, Varone and Anderfuhren-Biget 2012). The second is that it provides agency in a similar manner to other motivational constructs.

The role of pro-social political skill is particularly strong. This is unsurprising given prior research that it attenuates the negative effects of stressors (Kimura 2015). Politically skilled individuals are more likely to better manage interpersonal interactions, and predict trends involving different stakeholder groups, thus reducing uncertainty. In a similar manner, PSM is associated with more resilience. Study results also find that public servants linked high task interdependence with high resilience but team empowerment is related to less resilience. This suggests that although resilient people collaborate well together, teams are not empowered to function well and facilitate resilient behaviours. Given all this, it is clear how constructive leadership can shape employee development either directly (such as through modelling), or as a buffer against negative work experiences by intervening when, say collaborative behaviours go awry (Lee, Brotheridge, Cooper-Thomas, Gardner, O'Driscoll, Catley, Bentley and Trenberth 2013).

However at the organizational level, inter agency collaboration is linked with lower resilience. This is consistent with other research findings that agency collaboration is difficult and

time consuming and carries with it a loss of role clarity and increased risk. It requires trust and reciprocation (McGuire and Silvia 2010). It suggests that collaborating organizations should pay particular attention to job, inter-individual and leadership factors to better facilitate resilience and collaboration. Organisational goal clarity was also associated with higher resilience. This suggests that even in an environment with competing demands and greater complexity, a clear sense of organisational purpose helps.

### **Limitations and Next Steps**

While these study findings are important, further progress must eventually come from studies in other settings that triangulate and extend our large 'n' and reliable research findings as presented here. Although statistical analysis showed very little sign of CMV in this study, further research could draw from multiple data sources to better deal with common methods.

This research identified that resiliency is shaped by personal (e.g. gender), job and inter-individual factors, in particular pro-social political skill. Constructive leadership was also significant. At the organizational level collaboration was linked with less resilience, and organizational goal clarity with more. These findings have important implications. A clear focus on organisational goal clarity may be an effective way of managing the added complexity arising from collaboration. Enhanced prosocial political skill and active management of motivation may be effective means of building resilience to better cope with changing public sector demands.

It is clear that current pressures require civil servants to be resilient. There are many factors that affect their resilience, and some of the most importance ones according to our study are related public service motivation, interpersonal skills, and adapting to current contexts of greater collaboration, both within and between departments. This study of resilience among New Zealand

civil servants reinforces the importance of organizational practices and constructive leadership in response to on-going demands.

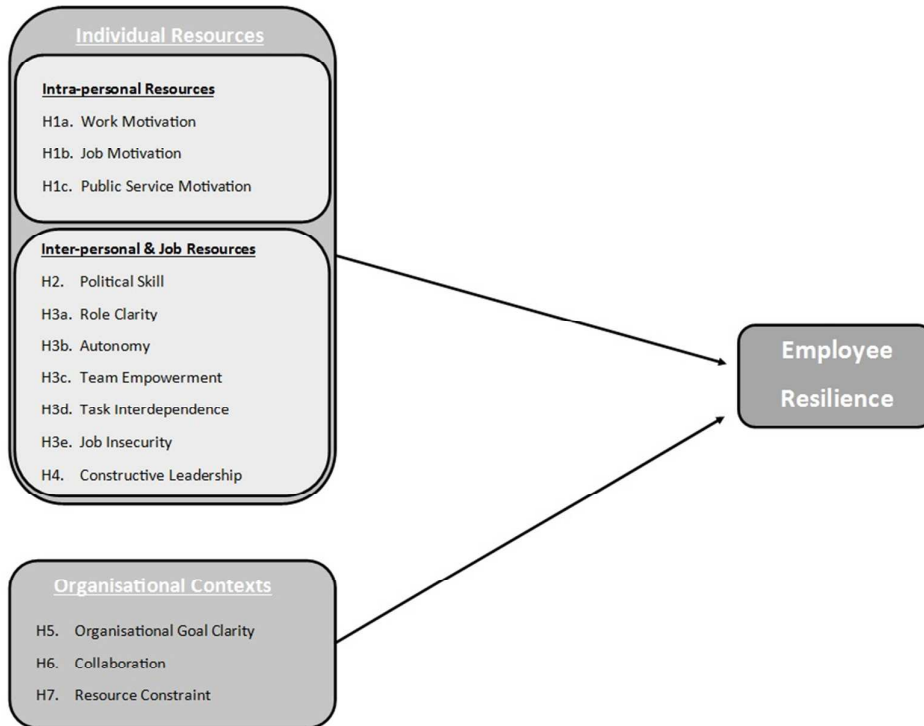
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**Figure 1: Study relationships**

**Table 2 - Multilevel Analysis Results. Unstandardized coefficients**

|                                                | Estimate | S.E. | Est/S.E. | <i>p</i> -value |
|------------------------------------------------|----------|------|----------|-----------------|
| <b><i>Level 1</i></b>                          |          |      |          |                 |
| Gender (Female=0, Male=1)                      | -.09     | .01  | -7.56    | .00             |
| Employment (0=0-10 years, 1=11 years or more)  | -.05     | .01  | -4.51    | .00             |
| Workplace (0=low [1-99], 1=high [100 or more]) | .00      | .01  | -.16     | .87             |
| Role Clarity                                   | .04      | .01  | 8.03     | .00             |
| Job Insecurity                                 | -.02     | .01  | -4.96    | .00             |
| Autonomy                                       | .01      | .01  | 1.56     | .12             |
| Task Interdependence                           | .02      | .00  | 3.76     | .00             |
| Social (political) skills                      | .22      | .01  | 31.58    | .00             |
| Team empowerment                               | -.01     | .00  | -1.61    | .11             |
| Constructive Leadership                        | .04      | .00  | 10.05    | .00             |
| General Motivation                             | .18      | .01  | 29.44    | .00             |
| Job Motivation                                 | .09      | .01  | 18.25    | .00             |
| Public Service Motivation                      | .11      | .01  | 18.00    | .00             |
| <b><i>Level 2</i></b>                          |          |      |          |                 |
| Organisational goal clarity                    | .06      | .03  | 2.15     | .03             |
| Collaboration                                  | -.13     | .03  | -3.94    | .00             |
| Resource Constraints                           | .02      | .01  | 1.78     | .08             |