

Balancing Seniority and Merit in Local Government: Evaluating the Effects of Seniority-Based Promotion Systems on Employees and Institutional Performance

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Abstract

Promotion policies are critical to the functioning of public service organizations, shaping leadership progression, employee morale, and institutional performance. In local governments, seniority-based promotion systems have historically been adopted to ensure fairness, reduce political interference, and provide predictable career pathways. Drawing on equity theory, institutional theory, and human capital theory, this paper examines the effects of seniority-based promotions on employees and local government institutions. While these systems enhance job security, loyalty, and retention, they may also reduce intrinsic motivation, discourage innovation, and alienate high-performing or younger employees. Using Ghana's Local Government Service as a case study, the paper highlights how seniority-based promotions preserve institutional knowledge, facilitate workforce planning, and maintain stability, but also pose challenges for performance, modernization, and talent attraction. The findings suggest that integrating merit-based criteria alongside seniority can balance stability with innovation, supporting both effective governance and employee development. This study contributes to understanding the evolving role of promotion policies in modern public administration and offers guidance for designing hybrid promotion frameworks that promote fairness, competence, and organizational effectiveness.

Keywords: Seniority-based promotions; Employee motivation; Local government; Public sector human resources; Workforce retention; Organizational performance

1. Introduction

Promotion policies are central to the structure and functioning of public service organizations. They not only determine who ascends to leadership roles but also influence employee morale, organizational culture, and service delivery outcomes. Local governments, which serve as the closest point of contact between citizens and the state, rely heavily on human resources systems that emphasize fairness and administrative neutrality. This is because fairness is perceived to influence employees' behaviors [1, 2]. In Romania, for instance, between 1989 and 1990, when the country became a democratic state, although legal provisions stated that public servant positions should be occupied by the best-prepared professional, there was still significant political influence [3]. In such situations, promotions based on seniority have been widely adopted in local governments to prevent patronage and ensure predictable career progression.

However, the evolving demands of public administration, the rise of performance-based management, and increasing public expectations for efficiency and innovation have raised questions about the continued relevance of seniority-based promotion practices. This paper evaluates the effects of these practices on employees and local government institutions, drawing from public administration theories, human resources research, and organizational behavior scholarship.

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2. Historical and Theoretical Background

2.1. Origins in the Civil Service Tradition

Seniority-based promotions have their roots in the civil service reform movements that took place during the late 19th and early 20th centuries [4]. These reforms were primarily driven by the desire to eradicate political patronage, where jobs and promotions were often awarded based on political connections rather than merit. The civil service reform movements were a struggle for equal rights and protection for public employees [4, 5, 6, 7]. The focus on tenure was intended to establish a more stable workforce, ensuring that employees were protected from the whims of political interference. The emphasis on seniority not only aimed at fostering loyalty and continuity within the workforce but also to recognize and reward the experience that employees accumulated over time. The system was designed to create a more competent government workforce by ensuring that those with proven track records could ascend to higher positions based on their years of service and expertise.

2.2. Theories Informing Seniority-Based Promotion Systems

Several theoretical frameworks help explain why seniority-based promotions continue to persist in local governments:

2.2.1. *Equity Theory of Motivation*

The Equity Theory of motivation posits that employees value systems that appear fair and predictable. As noted by Al-Zawahreh et al. (2012) [8], perceptions of equity and inequity play a significant role in driving workplace motivation. Advocates of this theory suggest that employees assess their job inputs against the outcomes they receive; thus, if they perceive inequities, they may reduce their productivity [8]. When considering seniority-based promotions, the theory explains that it is reasonable for those who have dedicated considerable time to an organization to be promoted over newer employees or those with less tenure. Failing to recognize this can lead to disparities that may increase absenteeism and ultimately result in employees resigning from the organization [9]. Therefore, seniority provides a clear and objective criterion for promotion and advancement.

2.3. Institutional Theory:

According to Lammers et al. (2014) [10], institutional theory seeks to explain the mechanisms by which rules and requirements evolve within organizations to secure support and establish legitimacy. This theory argues that organizations are driven to adopt and maintain practices that not only convey stability but also reinforce their legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders. Consequently, certain practices, such as seniority systems, become entrenched as widely accepted institutional norms. These norms play a crucial role in shaping organizational behavior and decision-making processes, as they provide a framework within which organizations operate. By adhering to these established practices, organizations can enhance their credibility and foster trust among employees, clients, and other external entities, thereby facilitating their long-term sustainability and success.

2.3.1. *Human Capital Theory:*

Human capital encompasses the knowledge, skills, attitudes, aptitudes, and other acquired traits that enhance productivity [11, 12]. Human capital theory explains that experience is a vital source of expertise. This perspective suggests that the length of service is positively correlated with the acquisition of skills and the accumulation of organizational knowledge. Essentially, the time invested in one's role not only boosts proficiency but also deepens one's understanding of the organizational context, ultimately leading to improved overall performance and productivity.

Despite these theoretical justifications, the complexity of modern public service delivery requires a closer examination of the actual impact of seniority-based promotions.

3. Effects on Employees

3.1. Career Stability and Reduced Anxiety

One of the most frequently cited advantages of seniority-based promotions is the sense of security they offer. Such systems establish clear guidelines regarding the relationship between tenure and advancement opportunities, enabling employees to recognize that their ongoing service is directly linked to their chances for promotion. When employees understand that their continued service enhances their likelihood of advancement, it alleviates workplace anxiety and helps maintain workplace harmony by diminishing the perceptions of favoritism [13]. This clarity allows employees to

be their authentic selves, freeing them from the pressures of political dynamics and empowering them to work for the greater good of the public.

3.2. Commitment, Loyalty, and Retention

Employees who believe that their long-term service will be acknowledged through promotion opportunities typically demonstrate greater loyalty and commitment to the organization. This enhanced dedication contributes to workforce stability and results in lower turnover rates [14]. Such stability is particularly advantageous in local governments, where resources for recruiting and training new employees are often limited, ensuring that valuable institutional knowledge is preserved.

3.3. Potential Decline in Motivation and Innovation

In accordance with motivation theory, which underscores the importance of performance-reward connections in sustaining effort [15, 16], promotions based solely on seniority may lead to a decline in performance levels. While longevity-based promotion systems can enhance employee retention, they may inadvertently stifle high performance by undermining intrinsic motivation. When employees perceive that advancement is predominantly tied to tenure rather than effort or results, they may come to believe that exerting additional effort yields little personal or professional benefit. This perception can weaken motivation, diminish initiative and creativity, and ultimately decrease overall organizational productivity.

3.4. Impact on Younger and High-Performing Employees

While seniority-based promotions are intended to create fairness, the perception of fairness varies. Some employees appreciate the clarity and structure, while others see them as rigid and unresponsive to individual contributions and exceptional performances [2]. Employees who exhibit strong performance early in their careers may feel disadvantaged by promotion systems that favor length of service over merit. When advancement opportunities are postponed despite commendable performance, these employees may experience frustration, disengagement, and a decline in organizational commitment. Over time, high-performing individuals are more likely to seek employment outside the public sector, where merit-based advancement and performance-related rewards are more common.

4. Effects on Local Government Institutions

4.1. Preservation of Institutional Knowledge

Local governments often depend on experienced employees who understand historical decisions, community expectations, and operational practices. This promotion system allows individuals with a strong knowledge of the local government, its historical decisions, community expectations, and operational practices to direct the institution's affairs. In rural areas, for instance, the role of public administrators is crucial, so they need to possess the necessary expertise to address public problems effectively, despite limited resources [17]. Without the institutional knowledge that experienced personnel bring, local governments risk undermining the provision of necessary public goods and services [18].

4.2. Predictable Workforce and Budget Planning

The alignment of promotion timelines with employee tenure in local governments plays a significant role in enhancing organizational predictability and effectiveness in human resource planning. By establishing structured promotion pathways that correlate with tenure, local governments can anticipate and manage staffing changes with greater precision, thus maintaining continuity in governance and service provision [19]. This structured approach not only aids in developing a reliable workforce but also fosters stability in financial planning, particularly regarding salaries, benefits, and succession strategies.

4.3. Limitations in Organizational Performance

When promotion decisions in local governments prioritize length of service over demonstrated competency, it creates a significant risk of placing individuals in critical roles without the essential skills or leadership abilities. This practice can severely hinder organizational performance and reduce the overall effectiveness of public service delivery. When there is inadequate alignment of skills with job requirements, the quality of services can decline, ultimately eroding the community's trust in local governance [20].

4.4. Impact on Innovation and Modernization

Public administration is increasingly centered on fostering innovation, implementing evidence-based policymaking, and embracing advanced technologies. These approaches have the potential to significantly enhance efficiency, productivity, transparency, and the overall quality of service delivery [21]. However, when promotion decisions within local governments prioritize seniority over competence and adaptability, they can hinder the progress toward these essential modernization goals. Employees who ascend the ranks solely based on their tenure may lack the contemporary skills and flexibility required to navigate the rapidly changing landscape of public administration effectively. This reliance on seniority not only stifles innovation but also limits the organization's ability to respond to evolving challenges and opportunities, ultimately affecting public trust and satisfaction. Therefore, local governments must adopt promotion practices that recognize and reward ability, drive, and a commitment to continuous learning to achieve their modernization objectives.

4.5. Public Trust and Accountability Concerns

Inefficiencies stemming from poorly aligned promotional strategies can lead to significant public scrutiny and erode trust in local government institutions. Citizens rightfully expect competent and proactive leadership; when systems are perceived as outdated or inequitable, they may be viewed as obstacles to progress. This perception can result in mounting criticism and a loss of confidence in governance, highlighting the urgent need for responsive and effective promotional approaches that align with community values and aspirations.

4.6. Challenges in Attracting New Talent

Rigid promotion systems that prioritize seniority over merit can significantly deter highly skilled applicants who seek environments where advancement is linked to performance rather than tenure. When potential candidates perceive that promotions are more influenced by length of service than by competencies, they are less likely to apply, fearing that their contributions may not be adequately recognized or rewarded. This perception can undermine recruitment efforts and diminish the overall quality of the applicant pool, ultimately leading to inefficiencies in public service delivery.

5. The Local Government Service of Ghana as a Case Study

5.1. Structure of Ghana's Local Government

Ghana's local government system is established under the 1992 Constitution, which formally enshrines decentralization as a central principle of governance. The country is administratively divided into sixteen regions, each overseen by a Regional Minister appointed by the President. Beneath the regional level, governance is structured through Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies (MMDAs), which serve as the primary units of local administration to enhance local participation in governance [22]. Metropolitan Assemblies operate in large urban cities, Municipal Assemblies govern medium-sized towns, and District Assemblies administer predominantly rural areas. These assemblies are responsible for local economic development, public health and education, environmental management, and revenue mobilization [23]. Executive authority within each assembly is vested in a chief executive who is appointed by the President in accordance with constitutional provisions.

5.2. Legal Framework of Ghana's Local Government System

Ghana's local government framework is established in Article 241(3), alongside the principle of decentralization found in Article 240(2). Furthermore, Article 35 mandates the state to implement appropriate measures that promote both administrative and financial decentralization, while also providing opportunities for citizen participation in decision-making at all levels of national governance [24].

Region	Number of assemblies		
	Metropolitan	Municipal	District
Ahafo	0	3	3
Ashanti	1	18	24
Bono	0	5	7
Bono East	0	3	8
Central	1	7	14
Eastern	0	13	20
Greater Accra	2	23	4
North East	0	2	4
Northern	1	10	5
Oti	0	2	6
Savannah	0	1	6
Upper East	0	3	12
Upper West	0	4	7
Volta	0	6	12
Western	1	8	5
Western North	0	3	6
TOTAL 10	6	111	143

Source: Commonwealth Local Government Forum [25]

Figure 1 Distribution of assemblies

5.3. General Conditions for Promotions in the Local Government Service of Ghana

Staff members of Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies (MMDAs) are organized by grades, reflecting promotions earned through years of service with the Local Government Service and various other factors. As noted by Adam et al. (2016) [26], "The procedure for implementing promotions shall adhere to the relevant Scheme of Service and is contingent upon the availability of vacancies at the respective grade. Promotions will be grounded in merit and aligned with the approved Scheme of Service. In assessing merit, considerations will include efficiency, qualifications and experience in the relevant field, work attitude and overall conduct, leadership qualities, performance appraisal ratings of very good, and seniority. When comparing candidates with similar qualifications, seniority will be determined based on the date of the most recent promotion."

This framework takes into account various factors beyond seniority, although seniority remains a fundamental basis for staff promotions. In practice, it establishes a transparent and predictable method for distinguishing between candidates with comparable qualifications and performance records. This nuanced understanding promotes a balanced approach to policymaking by reinforcing commitment to the service while simultaneously acknowledging other significant qualities and performance records [27].

Recommendations

Local governments can effectively integrate both seniority and merit by assigning appropriate weight to each factor. For instance, eligibility for promotion may require a combination of years of service, performance evaluations, and demonstrated leadership competencies. Before employees advance into management or supervisory positions, it is essential to assess whether they possess the necessary skills. This process promotes high-quality leadership and mitigates the risk of performance gaps. Furthermore, training, workshops, certifications, and ongoing education should be encouraged and aligned with promotion criteria to ensure that employees stay informed about best practices and emerging trends. Additionally, given that not all employees can be promoted quickly, local government institutions can implement non-promotional incentives, such as recognition awards, special assignments, or bonuses, to acknowledge exceptional contributions.

6. Conclusion

Promotions based on seniority or longevity of service have played a significant role in the history and stability of local government administration. They support fairness, reduce political interference, and encourage employee loyalty. However, the demands of modern governance, greater efficiency, accountability, and performance, reveal important limitations of strictly seniority-based systems. Balancing longevity with merit-based factors can help local governments maintain the benefits of stability and experience while promoting innovation and high performance. As local governments continue to evolve, adopting hybrid promotion models that value both experience and competence will be essential for building effective, accountable, and resilient public institutions.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The present research work does not contain any studies performed on animals/humans subjects by any of the authors.

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