

“Strengthening Public Sector Continuity: A Policy Framework for Enhancing Talent Retention in Ghana’s Civil Service”

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Abstract: High rates of attrition within Ghana's civil service present a significant policy challenge, undermining institutional memory and the capacity to implement national development programs. While competitive remuneration is often the focal point of policy debates, this article argues that sustainable solutions lie in strengthening the governance of human resource systems. Through a qualitative analysis of Ghanaian government strategies, including the Civil Service Medium-Term Development Plan, and secondary data on employee sentiment, this article identifies a critical gap between policy intent and frontline experience. It reveals that perceived inequities in career progression, a lack of transparent performance management, and weak mechanisms for professional recognition are primary drivers of turnover. We propose a four-pillar policy framework focused on strategic workforce planning, modernized compensation governance, enhanced talent development systems, and credible performance management. The article concludes that for Ghana to achieve its developmental goals, public sector reform must prioritize governance interventions that rebuild employee trust and demonstrate a tangible commitment to their value and growth.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE RETENTION IMPERATIVE IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The efficacy of the state is fundamentally linked to the competence, stability, and morale of its civil service. For Ghana, a nation pursuing ambitious developmental objectives outlined in agendas like the Ghana CARES Obaatan Pa program, a capable public administration is not an option but a necessity. However, this capacity is under threat. Data from the Office of the Head of Civil Service (OHCS) confirms a troubling trend of rising voluntary attrition, particularly among technical and professional staff (OHCS, 2022). The costs are multifaceted: depleted institutional memory, constant expenditure on recruitment and training, and ultimately, diminished service delivery to citizens.

Prevailing policy responses often gravitate towards narrow financial incentives. This article contends that such measures are palliative, not curative. The root causes of attrition are often embedded in the very systems that govern a civil servant's career, the rules, procedures, and cultural norms that define their daily experience. Drawing on documentary analysis and qualitative insights, this article examines the governance-retention nexus in Ghana. It posits that a strategic overhaul of workforce governance, making it more transparent, equitable, and developmental, is the most critical policy lever for building a resilient and high-performing civil service.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: GOVERNANCE AS THE ARCHITECTURE OF RETENTION

In this analysis, governance refers to the formal and informal rules, processes, and accountability mechanisms that structure human resource management within the public sector. It is the institutional architecture that shapes an employee's journey from recruitment to retirement. Effective governance reduces uncertainty and builds trust by ensuring predictability, fairness, and alignment between individual contributions and organizational goals (World Bank, 2021).

We draw on motivational theories in public administration, which distinguish between extrinsic motivators (e.g., pay) and intrinsic motivators (e.g., sense of purpose, autonomy, recognition) (Perry & Wise, 1990). Weak governance erodes intrinsic motivation. When promotion systems are perceived as opaque, or performance evaluations as arbitrary, the public service mission loses its power to inspire loyalty. Therefore, governance reform is not merely an administrative exercise; it is a strategic intervention to rekindle the public service ethos and create an environment where talent can thrive.

3. ANALYSIS: DISCONNECTS BETWEEN POLICY AND PRACTICE IN GHANA

A review of key policy documents, notably the OHCS's Medium-Term Development Plan (2022-2025), reveals a clear institutional awareness of these challenges. The plan's strategic objective to "Improve Human Resource Management and Development for a Motivated and Productive Workforce" aligns perfectly with the governance approach advocated here. However, qualitative evidence points to a significant implementation gap, creating a crisis of credibility that fuels attrition.

3.1. The Perception of Inequitable Career Progression

The Single Spine Pay Policy (SSPP) was designed to ensure uniformity and equity in compensation. Yet, in practice, its rigidity is often cited as a demotivator. More critically, qualitative data from employee testimonials and sector analyses highlight profound frustrations with posting and promotion processes. Civil servants frequently describe transfer decisions as lacking transparency, and promotions as being influenced by factors other than merit.

A mid-level officer observed: "You see positions advertised, but often the outcome feels predetermined. It discourages you from even applying after a while."

This perception of procedural injustice fundamentally undermines the psychological contract between the employee and the state. When hard work and talent are not perceived to be reliably rewarded, exit becomes the rational choice.

3.2. The Credibility Deficit in Performance Management

The government's Performance Management System (PMS) is a cornerstone of its modernization agenda, intended to link individual objectives to departmental goals. However, frontline accounts suggest it often suffers from a credibility deficit. Employees commonly describe the PMS as a bureaucratic compliance exercise rather than a meaningful tool for feedback and development.

An IT specialist noted: "The appraisal is a formality. We filled in the forms, but there is no discussion about career development or the skills I need to develop. It feels disconnected from reality."

When a key governance tool like the PMS is perceived as irrelevant, it ceases to function as a mechanism for alignment and motivation. Instead, it becomes a symbol of a system that does not genuinely value or understand employee contributions.

4. A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR RETENTION-FOCUSED GOVERNANCE

Addressing the retention crisis requires moving from diagnosis to actionable policy prescription. We propose a framework built on four interconnected pillars, designed to close the gap between policy intent and employee experience.

Pillar 1: Data-Informed and Transparent Workforce Planning

Policy Action: Mandate and resource each Ministry, Department, and Agency (MDA) to conduct annual skills-gap audits aligned with strategic objectives. Publish the results and create a publicly accessible, online portal for vacancies and promotion opportunities. **Intended Impact:** This moves workforce planning from a reactive to a proactive function, demonstrating a strategic commitment to managing talent. Transparency in opportunities rebuilds trust in the system's fairness.

Pillar 2: Modernized and Equitable Compensation Governance

Policy Action: Empower the Fair Wages and Salaries Commission, in collaboration with OHCS, to develop and pilot flexible pay structures for "hard-to-fill" specialist roles (e.g., data scientists, engineers). This would operate alongside the SSPP, introducing market-sensitive premiums without dismantling the core structure.

Intended Impact: This directly addresses the market competitiveness gap for critical skills, while governance ensures the process for awarding premiums is transparent and merit-based.

Pillar 3: Institutionalized Talent Development and Mobility

Policy Action: Legislate a minimum annual training budget for each MDA and establish a governed, inter-agency mobility program. Staff applying for lateral moves to gain experience would be guaranteed a return to their home agency, removing the perceived risk of internal mobility.

Intended Impact: This signals a concrete investment in employee growth, combating stagnation. Structured mobility enhances skills and fosters a more cohesive, cross-governmental perspective.

Pillar 4: A Credible and Developmental Performance Management System

Policy Action: Reform the PMS by training managers in continuous feedback and coaching. Introduce a 360-degree feedback component for senior roles and make performance ratings with clear, objective criteria the primary determinant for promotion eligibility.

Intended Impact: This transforms the PMS from a perfunctory exercise into the central nervous system of talent management, linking performance directly to tangible outcomes and growth.

5. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The challenge of retaining talent in Ghana's civil service is a governance problem masquerading as a compensation problem. While adequate pay is necessary, it is insufficient. The qualitative evidence is clear: attrition is driven by a breakdown in trust, perceived inequity, and a lack of meaningful professional growth opportunities.

The policy framework proposed here is not a quick fix but a roadmap for systemic change. Its implementation requires sustained political will and leadership accountability. Heads of MDAs must be measured not only on their departmental output but also on their success in nurturing and retaining human capital.

For Ghana and other nations facing similar challenges, the imperative is clear. Investing in the governance of the civil service is an investment in the state's fundamental capacity to govern. By building systems that are transparent, equitable, and developmental, policymakers can foster a public service that is not only competent and efficient but also stable, trusted, and capable of steering the nation toward its developmental ambitions.

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