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# Determinants of Employee Satisfaction with Career Development in the Public Sector

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**Background/Purpose:** Employee satisfaction with career development is an important factor influencing motivation, commitment, and long-term retention, particularly in the public sector, where career paths are often constrained by legal and institutional frameworks. The purpose of this paper is to analyse employee satisfaction with career development in a selected public institution and to examine the influence of selected demographic and organisational factors.

**Methods:** The study is based on a quantitative empirical research design. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to a sample of 113 employees in a public institution. Due to deviations from normal distribution, non-parametric statistical methods were applied, including the Mann–Whitney U test, the Kruskal–Wallis test, and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient.

**Results:** The results show that length of service and gender do not have a statistically significant effect on satisfaction with career development. In contrast, material forms of rewards have a stronger positive impact on satisfaction than non-material rewards, which deviates from some prevailing theoretical assumptions. Supervisory support was identified as the strongest predictor of satisfaction with career development.

**Conclusion:** The findings highlight the importance of supervisory support and development-oriented leadership in fostering satisfaction with career development in institutionally constrained public-sector environments and contribute to a better understanding of career development dynamics in Slovenian public institutions.

**Keywords:** Employee satisfaction, Career development, Public sector, Supervisory support, Employee rewards

## 1 Introduction

Employee satisfaction is widely recognised in contemporary organisations as one of the key determinants of organisational success, as it significantly influences motivation, work engagement, performance quality, and long-term organisational commitment (Locke, 1976; Spector, 1997; Auer Antončič, 2024; Lalwani, 2024). Satisfied employees are more likely to demonstrate proactive be-

haviour, lower turnover intentions, and higher levels of psychological well-being, which in turn contributes to organisational stability and effectiveness (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). Within this broad construct, satisfaction with career development represents a particularly important dimension, as it reflects employees' perceptions of future opportunities, professional growth, and the meaningfulness of their work trajectories.

Career development satisfaction extends beyond immediate job-related attitudes and encompasses employees' expectations regarding advancement, skill acquisition, and long-term employability (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2010). It is closely linked to perceptions of fairness, recognition, and organisational support, which shape how employees evaluate their current position and future prospects within an organisation. As a result, satisfaction with career development plays a central role in sustaining motivation over time, especially in environments where formal career progression may be limited or slow (Blažič, 2017; Arulmani, 2014).

The relevance of employee satisfaction with career development is particularly pronounced in the public sector, which represents one of the largest and most stable employers in many countries. Public institutions play a crucial role not only in economic terms but also in ensuring the quality, accessibility, and legitimacy of public services. In this context, employee satisfaction is closely connected to service quality, organisational performance, and public trust (Robbins & Judge, 2023). When employees in public institutions perceive limited opportunities for development or advancement, this may negatively affect their motivation and, indirectly, the effectiveness of public service delivery.

Career development in the public sector is shaped by specific institutional characteristics arising from legally regulated employment systems, formalised promotion procedures, and highly structured reward mechanisms. While such arrangements are designed to ensure transparency, equity, and accountability, they often limit organisational flexibility and individualised career management (Repnik, 2024). Career paths are frequently predefined, and advancement is closely linked to formal criteria such as length of service and educational attainment, which may weaken the perceived connection between individual effort and career outcomes.

In recent years, the Slovenian public sector has undergone a comprehensive reform of the pay system aimed at addressing wage disparities and enhancing transparency and fairness (GOV.SI, 2025; ZSTSPJS, 2024). Although the reform sought to improve systemic equity, it has also reopened important questions regarding motivation, reward effectiveness, and employee satisfaction. Research suggests that in highly regulated environments, where material rewards and promotions are limited and standardised, employees may reassess the relative importance of different factors influencing their satisfaction with career development (Mihalič, 2010; Armstrong & Taylor, 2020).

Despite the extensive international literature on employee satisfaction and career development, empirical studies that specifically examine satisfaction with career development in public-sector organisations remain relatively limited. Existing research has predominantly focused on general job satisfaction or on private-sector

contexts, while the distinctive institutional features of the public sector have often been addressed only marginally (Urošević & Milijić, 2012). Moreover, career development has received less empirical attention than other dimensions of job satisfaction, despite its importance for long-term motivation and retention.

This gap is particularly evident in the context of the Slovenian public sector, where empirical evidence on the determinants of satisfaction with career development is scarce. Given the institutional constraints characterising public organisations, it is not self-evident that relationships identified in private-sector studies can be directly transferred to public-sector environments. Consequently, there is a need for context-sensitive empirical research that examines how employees in public institutions perceive career development and which factors most strongly influence their satisfaction.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse employee satisfaction with career development in a selected public institution and to examine the influence of selected factors, namely length of service, gender, material and non-material forms of rewards, and supervisory support. The study is based on a quantitative empirical approach and seeks to contribute to the existing literature by providing insights into career development dynamics within an institutionally constrained public-sector setting.

The scientific contribution of the paper is reflected in three key aspects. First, the study empirically examines the relationship between satisfaction with career development and selected demographic and organisational factors in a public institution where formal advancement opportunities are systemically constrained. Second, the findings reveal deviations from some prevailing theoretical assumptions, particularly regarding the relative importance of non-material rewards. Third, the paper offers practical implications for human resource management in public institutions, highlighting the role of supervisory support and leadership practices in fostering employee satisfaction with career development.

Recent scholarship in organizational and HRM research highlights employee motivation, work-related well-being, and leadership processes as central for understanding employee outcomes. Existing evidence indicates that career-related perceptions are context-dependent and influenced by managerial practices (Jarkovská & Jarkovská, 2024; Murko et al., 2024; Arslan et al., 2024). In line with these insights, the present study investigates how rewards and supervisory support jointly shape career development satisfaction in the public sector.

In addition to tenure-related differences, gender has been identified as a potentially relevant factor in shaping career development perceptions, even in formally regulated public-sector environments. Although employment and promotion systems in the public sector are formally regulated and designed to ensure equality and transparen-

cy, previous research suggests that gender differences in career development perceptions may persist even in highly institutionalised environments. Formal equality in rules and procedures does not necessarily eliminate gendered career experiences, as informal organisational practices, access to developmental opportunities, and supervisory interactions may differ between male and female employees (Urošević & Milijić, 2012; Robbins & Judge, 2023).

Several studies indicate that women in public-sector organisations may experience career development differently due to factors such as greater concentration in horizontal career paths, more limited access to informal networks, and a disproportionate involvement in work–family reconciliation arrangements. These structural and relational factors can shape employees’ perceptions of advancement opportunities and long-term career prospects, even when formal promotion systems appear gender-neutral (Acker, 1990; Blau, Ferber, & Winkler, 2014; Broadbridge & Fielden, 2018).

In this context, satisfaction with career development represents a particularly relevant outcome variable, as it captures employees’ subjective assessments of future career opportunities rather than solely formal advancement outcomes. Given the potential influence of gendered organisational dynamics on such perceptions, it is theoretically justified to examine whether satisfaction with career development differs between male and female employees, even within formally standardised public-sector systems.

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses were formulated:

*H1: Employees with longer length of service are more satisfied with career advancement opportunities.*

*H2: There is a statistically significant difference in satisfaction with career development with respect to gender.*

*H3: Non-material forms of rewards have a stronger impact on satisfaction with career development than material forms.*

*H4: Employees who receive supervisory support are more satisfied with career development.*

## Theoretical Background

### Employee satisfaction and career development

Employee satisfaction is widely recognised in organisational research as a multidimensional construct encompassing employees’ cognitive, affective, and evaluative responses to their work and work environment (Locke, 1976; Spector, 1997). Rather than representing a single attitude, employee satisfaction reflects a complex interplay between individual expectations, job characteristics, organisational practices, and broader institutional conditions. Numerous

studies have demonstrated that higher levels of employee satisfaction are associated with increased work engagement, organisational commitment, job performance, and psychological well-being, while simultaneously reducing absenteeism, turnover intentions, and counterproductive work behaviours (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020; Bhatti & Qureshi, 2007; Dragman, 2014).

Within this broad construct, satisfaction with career development constitutes a particularly important dimension, as it relates to employees’ perceptions of long-term prospects, opportunities for growth, and the meaningfulness of their work trajectories. Career development satisfaction extends beyond immediate job satisfaction by incorporating expectations regarding future advancement, skill development, and employability. Greenhaus, Callanan, and Godshalk (2010) conceptualise career development as a lifelong process through which individuals navigate a sequence of work roles and experiences, continuously reassessing their goals, competencies, and values. Accordingly, satisfaction with career development depends not only on objective career outcomes, such as promotions or salary progression, but also on subjective perceptions of fairness, support, and developmental opportunities within the organisation.

Contemporary career theories increasingly challenge traditional linear models of career advancement, which assume hierarchical progression within a single organisation. Instead, modern approaches emphasise boundaryless, protean, and individually managed careers, characterised by flexibility, adaptability, and personal agency (Blažič, 2017; Arulmani, 2014). In this context, employees are expected to take an active role in managing their careers, while organisations function as facilitators by providing learning opportunities, feedback, and supportive leadership. Satisfaction with career development thus emerges from the alignment between individual aspirations and organisational structures that enable or constrain development.

### Career development in the public sector

Career development in the public sector takes place within a distinct institutional and regulatory environment that differentiates it from private-sector contexts. Employment relationships, promotion systems, and reward structures in public institutions are typically governed by legal frameworks and formalised procedures designed to ensure transparency, equity, and accountability. While such systems contribute to procedural fairness, they often limit organisational flexibility and the possibility of tailoring career paths to individual needs and performance (Repnik, 2024).

In the Slovenian public sector, career advancement is closely linked to formal criteria such as length of service, educational attainment, and predefined promotion intervals. These characteristics can reduce employees' perceptions of control over their career progression and weaken the perceived link between individual performance and advancement outcomes. Previous research suggests that when career progression is perceived as slow or predetermined, employees may experience feelings of stagnation, reduced motivation, and lower satisfaction with career development, particularly in mid-career stages.

The recent reform of the pay system in the Slovenian public sector aimed to address wage disparities and enhance transparency and fairness (GOV.SI, 2025; ZSTSP-JS, 2024). However, this reform also highlighted the limitations of motivational mechanisms primarily based on material incentives. In highly regulated systems, financial rewards are often standardised and infrequent, which may reduce their motivational impact while simultaneously increasing employees' sensitivity to material changes when they do occur. As a result, the institutional framework plays a critical role in shaping how employees perceive and evaluate career development opportunities.

Given these constraints, informal and relational aspects of career development gain increased importance in the public sector. Factors such as supervisory support, access to feedback, participation in decision-making, and opportunities for skill development can partially compensate for limited formal advancement possibilities. Research consistently identifies supervisory support as a key predictor of employee satisfaction in public-sector settings, as it enhances perceptions of recognition, fairness, and personal value within the organisation (Urošević & Milijić, 2012).

## Rewards and supervisory support

Rewards constitute a central mechanism through which organisations influence employee attitudes and behaviour. The literature commonly distinguishes between material rewards, such as salary, bonuses, and financial allowances, and non-material rewards, including recognition, praise, autonomy, flexible work arrangements, and development opportunities (Brnad, Stilin, & Tomljenović, 2016; Mihaljić, 2010). Material rewards are primarily associated with extrinsic motivation and the fulfilment of basic economic needs, whereas non-material rewards are closely linked to intrinsic motivation, job meaning, and long-term engagement.

A substantial body of research suggests that non-material rewards play a particularly important role in sustaining employee motivation and satisfaction over time, as they address higher-order psychological needs such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Baxi & Atre, 2024; Kaminsa, 2022). However, the relative importance

of material and non-material rewards is context-dependent and may vary across sectors and institutional settings. In the public sector, where pay systems are highly regulated and performance-based incentives are limited, material rewards may acquire heightened symbolic value, signalling recognition and career progression in ways that non-material rewards cannot fully replace.

Supervisory support represents a critical non-material factor influencing career development satisfaction. It encompasses a range of behaviours, including mentoring, coaching, providing constructive feedback, facilitating access to training, and encouraging employees to take on new responsibilities. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that perceived supervisory support positively affects employee satisfaction, commitment, and perceptions of career progress, while reducing feelings of career stagnation (Balinda, 2023).

Taken together, the reviewed literature suggests that satisfaction with career development emerges from the interaction between individual characteristics, organisational practices, and institutional constraints. In public-sector environments, where formal career mechanisms are limited, supervisory support and reward structures play a particularly important role in shaping employees' career-related attitudes. On this basis, the present study formulates hypotheses to examine the relationships between satisfaction with career development and length of service, gender, forms of rewards, and supervisory support.

## Methodology

The study was designed as a quantitative empirical investigation aimed at analysing employee satisfaction with career development in a selected public institution and examining the influence of selected demographic and organisational factors. A quantitative research approach was chosen to enable systematic data collection and statistical testing of the proposed hypotheses. The research was conducted in a medium-sized public institution operating within the Slovenian public sector. To ensure organisational anonymity, additional information about the institution is not disclosed. The study population consisted of employees performing diverse professional and administrative roles within the institution. The final sample included 113 employees, reflecting a heterogeneous structure in terms of gender, education level, and length of service. Such diversity enables a more comprehensive examination of differences in satisfaction with career development across employee groups.

Regarding demographic characteristics, the sample included both female and male employees, with variation in educational attainment ranging from secondary to higher education levels. Employees differed considerably in length of service, allowing for an examination of career

development satisfaction across different career stages. This variability is particularly relevant in the public-sector context, where career progression is often closely linked to tenure and formal qualifications. Detailed demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed electronically via internal organisational email. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous, which reduced the likelihood of social desirability bias and encouraged honest responses. Data collection took place between 1 June and 23 July 2025.

The questionnaire comprised 17 items related to employee satisfaction with career development, perceptions of advancement opportunities, forms of rewards, and supervisory support. Most items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. The instrument was developed based on a review of relevant literature on employee satisfaction, career development, rewards, and supervisory support, ensuring content validity.

Prior to hypothesis testing, descriptive statistics were used to examine the basic characteristics of the data. The normality of data distribution was assessed, revealing deviations from normal distribution for most variables. Consequently, non-parametric statistical methods were applied. Differences between multiple independent groups were tested using the Kruskal–Wallis test, while differences between two independent groups were analysed using

the Mann–Whitney U test. Relationships between variables were examined using Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS.

The selected methodological approach and statistical techniques were appropriate to the research objectives and the nature of the data and enabled a robust examination of the proposed hypotheses within the constraints of the study design.

## Results

This section presents the results of the empirical analysis of employee satisfaction with career development in the selected public institution. First, descriptive results related to career development perceptions, supervisory support, rewards, and general working conditions are presented. This is followed by hypothesis testing using appropriate non-parametric statistical methods.

### Descriptive results

This section presents descriptive statistics for the main variables related to career development, supervisory support, rewards, and working conditions.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

Variable	Category	n	%
<b>Gender</b>	Male	10	8.8
	Female	103	91.2
<b>Educational level</b>	Secondary education	3	2.7
	Higher vocational education	6	5.3
	First-cycle higher education	61	54.0
	Second-cycle degree (Master’s)	42	37.2
	Phd	1	0.9
<b>Length of service</b>	≤ 5 years	15	13.3
	6–10 years	21	18.6
	11–20 years	38	33.6
	21–30 years	22	19.5
	> 30 years	17	15.0
<b>Type of employment contract</b>	Permanent	97	85.8
	Fixed-term	16	14.2

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of key career development-related variables

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
Overall satisfaction with career development	3.10	1.11
Satisfaction with career advancement opportunities	3.00	1.10
Perceived clarity of advancement opportunities	3.20	1.16
Supervisory support for career development	3.99	0.75
Employee involvement in career development planning	3.40	0.90
Frequency of feedback on work and development	3.30	0.90
Usefulness of career development discussions	3.30	0.90
Non-material recognition	2.60	1.00
Overall working conditions	3.90	0.86
Access to education and training	3.80	1.03
Opportunities for professional development	3.70	1.01
Opportunities for personal development	3.60	1.04
Consideration of employees' suggestions	3.40	0.98

The analysis of mean values for selected statements related to career development indicates a moderate level of satisfaction among employees. The highest mean value ( $M = 3.20$ ) was recorded for the statement that employees have clearly defined opportunities for advancement within their current position. Overall satisfaction with career development was rated with a mean value of 3.10, while satisfaction with concrete career advancement opportunities received a slightly lower mean score ( $M = 3.00$ ). These results suggest that employees perceive a certain degree of clarity regarding career paths, yet their overall satisfaction remains only moderate, indicating room for improvement, particularly in relation to actual advancement opportunities.

A substantial majority of respondents (65.5%) reported receiving encouragement and support from their supervisors in relation to career development, whereas 34.5% indicated that they do not perceive such support. Although the majority experience supervisory encouragement, the relatively high proportion of employees who do not perceive adequate support highlights potential shortcomings in mentoring-oriented leadership practices. Among those who reported receiving support, most assessed the level of support as good (44.6%), followed by average (28.4%) and very good (27.0%). The mean score for supervisory support was 3.99 ( $SD = 0.75$ ), indicating generally positive but not uniformly high perceptions.

Employees who perceived supervisory support were also asked about their involvement in career development planning. Most respondents indicated partial involvement (39.2%), followed by involvement to a greater extent (29.7%). A smaller proportion reported involvement to a lesser extent (16.2%) or to a very great extent (14.9%).

Notably, none of the respondents indicated complete exclusion from the planning process. The mean value of 3.40 suggests a mildly positive assessment, while simultaneously indicating that employees' participation in career planning could be further strengthened.

With regard to feedback, most respondents (45.9%) reported receiving feedback on their work and development opportunities only occasionally. Regular feedback was reported by 28.4% of respondents, whereas 14.9% indicated receiving feedback rarely and 9.5% very frequently. One respondent reported never receiving feedback. The mean value of 3.30 indicates that feedback practices are present but not sufficiently systematic, pointing to a need for more regular and structured communication between supervisors and employees.

Nearly seventy percent of respondents (69.9%) reported that their supervisor conducts an annual discussion on career goals and development opportunities, while 30.1% indicated that such discussions have not taken place. Although the majority participate in development-related discussions, the fact that nearly one-third of employees are excluded suggests uneven implementation of career management practices across the institution.

Among employees who participated in career development discussions, most assessed these conversations as moderately useful (43.1%), followed by useful (31.6%). Fewer respondents perceived them as very useful (8.9%) or of little use (13.9%), while a small proportion (2.5%) considered them completely useless. The mean usefulness rating was 3.30 ( $SD = 0.90$ ), indicating moderate perceived value and highlighting opportunities to enhance the quality and effectiveness of these discussions.

Regarding rewards, respondents ranked salary and monetary rewards as the most important form of reward (64.0%), followed by bonuses and allowances (35.0%). Flexible working hours and opportunities for education were both selected by 24.0% of respondents. Praise from supervisors and formal recognition were ranked as least important. These findings suggest that material rewards play a dominant role in employees' perceptions of career development within the institution.

The frequency of receiving non-material recognition was generally low. Most respondents reported receiving recognition occasionally (43.4%) or rarely (27.4%), while 15.9% indicated that they never receive recognition for good performance. Only a small proportion reported frequent (11.5%) or very frequent (1.8%) recognition. The mean value of 2.60 (SD = 1.00) suggests that non-material recognition practices are not consistently embedded in the organisation.

When assessing general working conditions, the highest mean score was assigned to overall working conditions (M = 3.90), followed by access to education and training (M = 3.80). Opportunities for professional development (M = 3.70) and personal development (M = 3.60) were also rated relatively positively. The lowest mean score was recorded for the statement that employees' suggestions for improvement are taken into account (M = 3.40), indicating potential deficiencies in participatory practices.

Finally, employees' openness to job mobility was examined. While 38.9% of respondents stated that they would remain in their current position, a substantial proportion (42.5%) indicated that they would consider changing jobs if better conditions were offered. Only 18.6% reported a clear intention to leave. This finding suggests a latent risk of turnover and highlights the importance of career development and support mechanisms for employee retention.

## Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis H1 proposed that employees with longer length of service are more satisfied with career advancement opportunities. Due to the non-normal distribution of satisfaction scores ( $p < 0.05$ ), the Kruskal–Wallis test was applied. The results showed no statistically significant differences between groups with different lengths of service ( $p = 0.171$ ). Although minor differences in mean ranks were observed, these were not sufficient to support the hypothesis. Therefore, H1 was rejected.

Hypothesis H2 examined whether satisfaction with career development differs by gender. As the data were not normally distributed, the Mann–Whitney U test was used. The results indicated no statistically significant differences in satisfaction between male and female employees ( $p = 0.286$ ). Median satisfaction scores were identical for both groups, although greater variability was observed among

female respondents. Consequently, H2 was rejected.

Hypothesis H3 proposed that non-material rewards have a stronger impact on satisfaction with career development than material rewards. Spearman's rank correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between material rewards and satisfaction with career development ( $p = 0.009$ ), whereas non-material rewards showed a weak negative correlation ( $p = 0.019$ ). Additional ordinal regression analysis confirmed that material rewards exert a stronger positive effect on satisfaction. These findings contradict the hypothesis, leading to the rejection of H3.

Hypothesis H4 examined the relationship between supervisory support and satisfaction with career development. The Mann–Whitney U test revealed a statistically significant difference between employees who receive supervisory support and those who do not ( $p < 0.001$ ). Employees who perceived supervisory support reported substantially higher satisfaction levels. Thus, H4 was confirmed.

Overall, the results indicate that supervisory support and material rewards play a more important role in shaping satisfaction with career development than demographic characteristics or tenure.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine employee satisfaction with career development in a selected public institution and to analyse the influence of length of service, gender, forms of rewards, and supervisory support. The findings provide important insights into how career development is perceived within the institutional constraints of the public sector and offer both theoretical and practical implications.

The results do not support the assumption that employees with longer length of service are more satisfied with career advancement opportunities. Although previous studies often suggest that tenure is associated with greater organisational familiarity, stability, and perceived security, the present findings indicate that longer tenure does not necessarily translate into higher satisfaction with career development. One possible explanation lies in the formalised nature of career progression in the public sector, where advancement is governed by predefined criteria and time-based requirements. In such systems, longer tenure may increase job security but does not necessarily create new development opportunities. Employees who have already reached higher career grades may therefore experience a sense of stagnation, as further progression is perceived as limited or predetermined. This finding aligns with research highlighting career plateaus in institutionalised environments and suggests that length of service alone is an insufficient predictor of career development satisfaction.

Similarly, the analysis revealed no statistically significant differences in satisfaction with career development with respect to gender. This result is consistent with studies emphasising that formal employment and promotion systems in the public sector tend to reduce overt gender-based disparities by applying standardised rules and procedures. An additional explanation may be that satisfaction with career development is shaped more strongly by organisational practices, leadership quality, and perceived support than by demographic characteristics. While gender inequalities may still exist in more subtle forms, such as access to informal networks or leadership roles, these factors may not be sufficiently captured through overall satisfaction measures. The findings therefore suggest that institutional frameworks can mitigate certain demographic differences, although further research is needed to explore more nuanced gendered career experiences. In addition, this result suggests that H2 should be interpreted with theoretical caution in highly formalised public-sector settings, where standardised employment and promotion rules may attenuate observable gender differences in aggregate satisfaction measures.

One of the most notable findings of the study concerns the relationship between forms of rewards and satisfaction with career development. Contrary to Hypothesis H3 and to dominant theoretical perspectives emphasising the long-term importance of non-material motivators, the results indicate that material forms of rewards have a stronger positive impact on satisfaction with career development than non-material forms. This deviation from prevailing assumptions highlights the importance of contextual factors in shaping motivational dynamics. In highly regulated public-sector environments, where financial rewards and promotions are limited and infrequent, material rewards may acquire heightened symbolic and psychological value. They may be perceived as rare and tangible indicators of recognition, progression, and institutional appreciation, thereby exerting a stronger influence on career-related satisfaction.

At the same time, the weak or negative relationship between non-material rewards and satisfaction with career development should not be interpreted as evidence of their irrelevance. Rather, it may reflect employees' perceptions that non-material rewards, such as verbal recognition or occasional praise, cannot adequately compensate for the lack of concrete advancement opportunities. In institutional contexts characterised by rigid career structures, employees may place greater emphasis on outcomes that directly affect their economic security and formal status. This finding underscores the need to reconsider universal claims regarding motivational hierarchies and highlights the context-dependent nature of reward effectiveness. This context-based interpretation is consistent with prior public-sector research showing that motivational dynamics and job satisfaction are strongly shaped by institutional

and work-environment characteristics (Wright & Davis, 2003; Buelens & Van den Broeck, 2007; Homberg et al., 2015).

The strongest empirical support was found for the positive impact of supervisory support on satisfaction with career development. Employees who perceived supervisory support reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction, confirming Hypothesis H4. This finding suggests that supervisory support plays a crucial compensatory role in public-sector career development. In environments where formal career mechanisms are constrained, supervisors act as key intermediaries between institutional structures and individual career aspirations. Through mentoring, regular feedback, involvement in development discussions, and encouragement to acquire new skills, supervisors can meaningfully influence how employees perceive their career trajectories, even in the absence of frequent promotions or substantial material incentives.

To better connect the empirical results with the theoretical framework, three points are particularly important. First, the positive effect of supervisory support is consistent with leadership and career development theory, which emphasizes mentoring, feedback quality, and developmental communication as key drivers of employee growth and satisfaction. Second, the reward-related findings are only partially aligned with dominant motivational assumptions: while theory often prioritizes non-material motivators in the long term, our results show a stronger role of material rewards in this public-sector setting. Third, the weak or negative association of non-material rewards should be interpreted as a context-specific mismatch between symbolic recognition and limited concrete advancement opportunities, rather than as evidence of irrelevance. Overall, the findings support a context-sensitive interpretation in which leadership effects appear robust, whereas reward effects vary with institutional constraints.

This finding has important implications for understanding career development in institutionalised environments. It indicates that informal and relational aspects of career management may be more influential than formal structures in shaping employee satisfaction. Supervisory support not only contributes to immediate job satisfaction but also affects employees' long-term perceptions of career viability and organisational commitment. Consequently, leadership practices and managerial competencies emerge as critical levers for enhancing satisfaction with career development in the public sector.

Taken together, the findings indicate that satisfaction with career development in public institutions is not primarily determined by demographic characteristics or formal career rules, but rather by employees' perceptions of support, recognition, and tangible outcomes. The results contribute to the literature by demonstrating that widely accepted theoretical assumptions regarding motivation and rewards may not fully apply in institutionally constrained

settings. By highlighting the central role of supervisory support and the context-dependent importance of material rewards, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of career development in the public sector.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that public institutions can enhance employee satisfaction with career development without fundamental systemic reforms. Investments in leadership development, training supervisors to conduct meaningful development discussions, and ensuring transparent communication about career opportunities may significantly improve employees' perceptions of career progress. While material rewards remain constrained by institutional frameworks, their symbolic importance should not be underestimated, particularly in periods of systemic change.

The findings extend recent research on motivation, leadership, and employee well-being by showing that, in regulated public-sector environments, material and non-material rewards do not operate with equal strength, while supervisory support remains a central driver of perceived career progress (Jarkovská & Jarkovská, 2024; Arslan et al., 2024; Murko et al., 2024). This contribution reinforces the importance of context-sensitive HRM and organizational behavior analysis.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based on a single public institution and a relatively small sample ( $n = 113$ ), which limits external validity and the broader generalizability of the findings. Institutional specificities, including internal HR procedures, promotion practices, and organizational culture, may have influenced the observed relationships. Second, the sample is gender-imbalanced, with a substantially higher share of female respondents. This may have affected the non-significant gender-related result, as potential gender differences can be more difficult to detect in an unbalanced sample structure. Therefore, the non-significant gender effect should be interpreted with caution rather than as conclusive evidence of no gender-related differences in career development satisfaction. Future studies should include larger and more diverse multi-institutional samples, with improved gender balance, and should also apply comparative, longitudinal, and complementary qualitative approaches to test the robustness and broader applicability of the reported findings, including gendered career dynamics (e.g., informal networks, leadership pipelines, and work–family reconciliation) that may not be fully visible in cross-sectional survey data.

## Conclusion

This study examined employee satisfaction with career development in a selected public institution and empirically tested the influence of length of service, gender, forms of rewards, and supervisory support. The findings confirm

that satisfaction with career development in the public sector is not primarily shaped by formal career mechanisms or demographic characteristics, but rather by employees' perceptions of support, recognition, and meaningful developmental opportunities within their immediate work environment.

The key theoretical contribution of the study lies in highlighting the context-dependent nature of career development and motivation. While dominant theories often emphasise the long-term importance of non-material rewards and individual career agency, the present findings demonstrate that such assumptions do not fully apply in institutionally constrained public-sector settings. In this context, material rewards retain a strong symbolic and motivational role, as they represent tangible indicators of recognition and career progression within highly regulated systems. This finding extends existing literature by showing that motivational hierarchies are shaped not only by individual preferences but also by institutional frameworks.

An additional and particularly important contribution of the study is the confirmation of the central role of supervisory support in shaping satisfaction with career development. Supervisory support emerges as a compensatory mechanism that can partially offset the limitations of formal career structures in the public sector. Through mentoring, regular feedback, involvement in development discussions, and encouragement of skill development, supervisors can significantly influence how employees perceive their career trajectories, even in the absence of frequent promotions or substantial material incentives. This underscores the importance of leadership quality and development-oriented management practices in public institutions.

The findings also have clear practical implications. They suggest that public institutions can enhance employee satisfaction with career development without extensive systemic reforms. Investments in leadership development, particularly in strengthening supervisors' competencies related to communication, mentoring, and career guidance, represent a cost-effective and feasible strategy for improving employee satisfaction. At the same time, policymakers and managers should be aware of the continued importance of material rewards, even in regulated systems, and consider how existing reward structures can be used more strategically to signal recognition and progression.

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The research was conducted in a single public institution and relied on a cross-sectional design based on self-reported data, which limits the generalisability of the findings and prevents causal inference. In addition, broader psychological, organisational, and contextual factors influencing career development satisfaction were not directly examined. Future research should therefore include multiple public-sector organisations, adopt longitudinal research designs, and combine quantitative and qualitative

methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of career development dynamics in institutionalised environments.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that effective management of career development in the public sector is possible even within existing systemic constraints. However, it requires a shift away from an exclusive focus on formal career mechanisms toward a more relational, supportive, and development-oriented approach to leadership. By emphasising the role of supervisory support and recognising the contextual importance of rewards, the study contributes to both theory and practice and offers valuable insights for improving career development management in public institutions.

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