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Original Research

ANALYSIS OF TRAINING NEEDS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF SENIOR CIVIL SERVANTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

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Abstract: One key resource for efficient public administration is a senior civil servant (SCS), who plays a fundamental role in integrating political decisions into administrative implementation. Therefore, the state's investment in their professional development and training is vital for the quality of public administration services. In order to achieve a high quality of public services, it is necessary to determine the real need for professional development of civil servants in managerial positions. After surveying 110 SCSs in Serbia, the results show that they generally positively evaluate the proposed features of the training program, with a particularly high level of agreement for the elements of practical application, use of technology, interactivity and creative thinking. The highest percentage of strong agreement was recorded for practical examples and enabling knowledge transfer through useful methods, indicating a preference for an applicable and dynamic approach to learning.

Keywords: public administration, senior civil servants, training needs, professional development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although no universally accepted definition of SCS exists, several generally accepted frameworks can be identified. According to the definition cited by UNDP (2020:5), derived from the SIGMA Methodological Framework for the Principles of Public Administration, Public Service, and Human Resource Management (2019), SCSs are defined as "professional civil servants employed in the highest-level managerial positions in the national civil service, formally or informally recognized as a distinct group." This definition highlights their special

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status within the civil service and their role in ensuring professionalism and continuity in governance. In line with this, the role of SCSs is further clarified through their daily work and practical application. As stated by Rijksoverheid (2022), "SCSs are responsible for and guide the achievement of organizational goals in the context of societal challenges. They are political-strategic advisers and the first point of contact for ministers." This emphasizes their dual role—as professional managers within the administration and as key advisers to political decision-makers.

An important aspect of the work of SCSs is their professional development, as insufficient expertise among staff can lead to inadequate managerial decisions, which may negatively affect the quality of governance at the national, regional, or local level (Zinich et al., 2022). Training and development of civil servants can be viewed as a mechanism to ensure the quality of meeting the needs of a nation's citizens (Le et al., 2023). According to Cuong & Phuong (2018), "training refers to acquiring new skills, while retraining involves updating and expanding the knowledge and skills of civil servants in line with societal developments. Today, various approaches are taken to training and professional development of SCSs. It is important to highlight that, according to UNDP (2020), SCSs are required to undergo a mandatory level of training in most EU member states. Since training is conducted to improve existing competencies, evaluating the training process after its implementation is necessary. According to Safety Culture (2024), "training evaluation is a systematic process of analyzing a training program to ensure it is implemented effectively and efficiently. Evaluation identifies training gaps and reveals opportunities for improvement." Various training evaluation methods exist, depending on the type of training, with one of the most well-known being the Kirkpatrick Model.

The 2024 training program for managers in government agencies in Serbia has been developed in collaboration with the relevant authority for personnel management within the public sector, along with individuals responsible for managing personnel in state bodies. This executive training initiative is designed to address the specific requirements of the target audiences, such as civil servants preparing for managerial responsibilities. Therefore, the paper aims to analyze and determine the needs for professional development of SCSs in the Republic of Serbia. This type of research creates the foundation for creating targeted, effective and relevant training programs. By determining specific knowledge, skills and competencies necessary for modern challenges in public administration, it contributes to strengthening the capacity of the civil service, improving management and making decisions based on knowledge, which is crucial for efficient, responsible and professional public administration.

2. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Author Kettunen discussed the importance of training in public administration in 2001, using Finland as an example. Back then, it was said that adequate programs were necessary due to the variety of client demands and needs. These programs were important in maintaining and increasing the professional knowledge of participants in public administration and expanding their competencies in various fields (Kettunen, 2003).

Some papers provide an overview of education and training programs in the broader public administration and management field in Europe. (Reichard & Schröter, 2017). The trends and developments over time and across nation states are studied with particular attention to

institutional arrangements of programs, their contents, curricular developments, and their teaching philosophies (Reichard & Schröter, 2017). While several converging trends can be identified, e.g., regarding commonalities of institutional patterns and program content, divergent forces—such as traditional recruitment patterns and teaching styles—are still at work (Reichard & Schröter, 2017).

Public service staff, managers, and politicians must also embrace the necessity to mediate between societal and individual value creation and between value creation aspirations of different stakeholders to a public service (Osborne et al., 2022). The importance of providing continuous training for employees in public administration is also shown by research on the motivation of employees in public administration (Ponomariov & McCabe, 2017). Over the last three decades, investigation on motivation in public service has experienced rapid growth (Ritz et al., 2016). Notably, in the discussion of professional education in public administration programs, a decline in empathy is positively associated with exposure to clients/patients (Ponomariov & McCabe, 2017). It is difficult to imagine that public servants whose commitment to the public interest declines with increased exposure to the diverse stakeholders they are expected to serve (Ponomariov & McCabe, 2017). For these reasons, a more active involvement of academic institutions in the professional training of employees in public administration is also necessary. Institutional leaders feel challenged in their search for effective strategies to encourage faculty participation in public service activities (Holland, 2023). The perception of the role of public service as a legitimate component of the institution's goals is crucial for those faculty who lack personal or disciplinary motivations for engagement (Holland, 2023).

2.1. Regulatory framework for the professional development of civil servants in Serbia

In the Republic of Serbia, the system of professional development for civil servants is regulated by several legal and bylaw acts, with the most significant being the *Law on Civil Servants*, the *Decree on Professional Development of Civil Servants*, and the *Decree on Determining Competencies for the Work of Civil Servants*. These documents define obligations, types and methods of training, and the responsibilities of relevant institutions. The *National Academy for Public Administration (NAPA)* plays the central role in implementing training programs, while the *Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government* is responsible for shaping and monitoring professional development policies.

Within the strategic framework for public administration reform, particular importance is given to improving civil servants' professional development. The key document in this area is the *Public Administration Reform Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2021–2030*, which sets the foundation for an efficient human resource development system, emphasising training quality, effect evaluation, and digital learning.

This strategy defines several specific objectives related to civil service human resources, including: attracting and employing competent staff (Specific Objective 2); retaining and motivating employees in a stimulating work environment (Specific Objective 3); and modernizing professional development and examinations based on competency needs analysis (Specific Objective 4). Notably, Objective 4 introduces reforms in civil service professional examinations, previously excluded from development efforts, and calls for the modernization and standardization of training programs (Стратегија, 2021).

Although no longer in force, the *Strategy for Professional Development of Civil Servants* provides a solid foundation for further improvements. It emphasizes the continuous enhancement of competencies and defines principles of professional development for all individuals falling under the legal definition of a civil servant. According to the *Law on Civil Servants*, a civil servant is a person employed in state administration bodies and other institutions performing legal, IT, financial, accounting, and administrative tasks (Стратегија, 2013).

The strategy also highlights the creation of a sustainable and efficient training system, including programs for new employees, continuous training, and managerial development. Training is understood as a planned process for acquiring knowledge and skills necessary for specific duties. Training needs are determined through strategic documents, evaluations, and specific job requirements. Effectiveness is measured through reports and evaluations to ensure the direct impact on civil servants' performance and public service quality (Стратегија, 2013).

Importantly, the legal definition of civil servants extends beyond ministries to include other state bodies whose functions align with standard public administration roles. This broad definition is relevant for designing general training programs (Стратегија, 2013).

The *Law on Civil Servants* represents the legal backbone for regulating rights, duties, and professional development. Article 10 states that civil servants have both the right and obligation to pursue professional development based on institutional needs. Article 96 defines professional development as a continuous process including various training programs. Article 97 mandates that such programs be based on identified needs and financed through the state budget, while Article 97v assigns *NAPA* the role of program development, implementation, and accreditation (Закон, 2025).

The *Decree on Determining Competencies* (Уредба, 2022) defines standards for identifying and evaluating the competencies necessary for quality public service delivery. It supports objective assessment processes through recruitment and performance evaluation, forming a foundation for targeted training and career advancement (Уредба, 2022).

The *Decree on Professional Development* (Уредба, 2019) specifies program types, development needs, and general training categories, ensuring a structured approach to enhancing civil servants' competencies and administration efficiency (Уредба, 2019).

Finally, the *National Academy for Public Administration (NAPA)*, established in 2017, is the key institution for coordinating professional development. It organizes and implements training, accredits providers, promotes e-learning, and supports competency-based public sector management (*HAJV*, 2025).

2.2. Effects and needs for training in the public administration of Serbia and international comparisons

The effective and efficient utilisation of human resources is valuable to brace sustainable national development (Zacharias et al., 2021). Obtaining a community with dependable human resources requires quality education, offering various social facilities, and adequate employment (Yusriadi et al., 2019). However, weaknesses in distributing these facilities will cause social disturbance, influencing public safety (Zacharias et al., 2021).

In the first example of this paper, the professional training study examines the impact of demographic characteristics on the effectiveness of the training and development programs in the national public administration of Serbia (Štrbac et al., 2024). In particular, the aim is to assess the effectiveness of the training programs in public administration and to examine how components such as gender, educational level, years of work experience and job title affect the result of training programs. The study sample included over 1,000 public administration

employees in Serbia who participated in at least one training program in the National Academy of Public Administration during 2022. The effectiveness of the training programs is evaluated to the extent to which they contribute to meeting the established objectives. The study outputs indicate that age, gender and education level do not affect the effectiveness of the training programs in public administration. Nevertheless, training effectiveness is remarkably affected by professional experience and job titles in public administration (Štrbac et al., 2024).

The professional development and training of employees in public administration is a continuous, methodically planned and established process in which, via studying and practical service, knowledge is enhanced, and abilities refined gave the authors Zlatanović & Antonijević (2007) in a second example of this paper analysing professional training in public sector in Republic of Serbia. Nowadays, in the "knowledge society", the continuous improvement of knowledge and abilities in professional life is needed; so, civil servants must continually upgrade their knowledge and abilities. The authors find that the main motive that regulates the significance and requirement for continual professional training and development is the fact that in transition countries, such as Serbia, we experience changes in the legal system. Specifically, every year, a significant number of laws are passed which pose new challenges for employees in public administration and require, besides sufficient understanding, their appropriate implementation (Zlatanović & Antonijević, 2007).

The first analysed international study in this paper examines cultural and organizational motivations for success in the Department of Public Works in the province of Maluku, Indonesia (Zacharias et al., 2021). The approach utilised for this research was quantitative, using a survey. The Department of Public Works of the Province of Maluku was the research site with a sample of 149 contributors in public administration. The main discovery was 1) organizational culture has a direct impact on o to employee performance, 2) organizational culture effects organization performance, 3) organizational environment has a straight impact on employee performance and motivation and 4) organizational environment contribute to organization performance. The outcomes show that the organizational environment can be enhanced by composing regulatory policies and implementing strategies for professional development and rules for employees to perform their duties. Motivation for performances can be raised by awarding, for example, through professional training. In establishing an organizational culture, awareness must be given to the values held in organizational culture, professional development and organizational goals (Zacharias et al., 2021).

Another example of international professional training in public administration is Finland's case (Kettunen, 2003). They noted that it is necessary to provide diversity training for public administration employees, given the various nature of their jobs and the clients they interact with. These educational trainings of employees in Finland's public administration included continuous training that was oriented towards the client. From the characteristics when contracting such training, the following are noticed: training goals, methods by which those goals will be achieved, time frame for the completion of the training, evidence that the goals are met, the means to achieve the goals, and evaluation of the level of goal fulfilment. Interestingly, these professional development programs support the development of each individual employee. Such programs of continuous development of employees supported by the University of Helsinki led, among other, to an increase in competence in understanding changes in the environment, developing strategies and adopting the latest knowledge in the field; increasing management performance; developing goal-oriented management and change management; and supporting motivation for continuous development (Kettunen, 2003).

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study is part of the IPA project aimed at enhancing the professional capacities of SCSs in Serbia. The project's goal is to improve SCS training programs and strengthen public administration efficiency. A research survey was distributed to identify the professional development needs of SCSs in Serbia. A questionnaire was chosen as one of the methods and techniques for determining the professional development needs of SCSs. The questionnaire consists of three groups of questions. The first collects mandatory demographic data such as gender, age, and work experience. The second gathers information about the respondent's position and role within the state administration. The third identifies training needs and evaluates key functions of SCSs, incorporating statements based on the Kirkpatrick and Anderson quality models, rated on a Likert scale. The questionnaire was developed using the LimeSurvey platform and sent by the National Academy of Public Administration to 247 email addresses of civil servants in managerial positions. It was available for completion from November 20 to December 2, 2024. A total of 179 participants responded, with 110 SCSs fully completing the survey.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before conducting a detailed demographic analysis, the reliability of the measuring instrument was assessed using Cronbach's a, which yielded a high value of 0.935, indicating excellent reliability. Most surveyed SCSs (66.4%) have over 10 years of experience in state administration, while smaller percentages fall into lower experience categories. This dominance of experienced respondents strengthens the relevance and credibility of their insights regarding work in public administration. Most respondents (36.4%) have been in their current positions for 1 to 3 years, while only 11.8% have held their roles for 10 or more years. Other groups include those with 4–6 years (18.2%), 7–9 years (20%), and less than a year (13.6%) of service. This distribution shows a predominance of newer employees, while also ensuring a diversity of perspectives based on varying lengths of tenure. The majority of respondents (62.7%) have over 10 years of management experience, while smaller groups have between four and nine years (28.2%) and fewer than three years (9.1%). This dominance of highly experienced managers enhances the value and credibility of their insights for the research. Women made up a slightly larger portion of the sample, accounting for 56.4% of respondents, while men represented 43.6%. The majority of respondents were aged 41-50 (43.6%) and 51-60 (39.1%), while smaller shares were aged 31–40 (9.1%) and 61 or older (8.2%). No respondents were under 30 years old. Most respondents work in special organizations (30%) and ministries (29.1%), followed by those in administrative bodies within ministries (15.5%), government services (12.7%), and the "Other" category (12.7%), which includes one respondent from the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality. This distribution reflects the diversity of state administration structures represented in the sample. The majority of respondents (57.3%) are appointed civil servants in positions filled through competition, while 33.6% are acting officials. The remaining 9.1% fall into the "Other" category, which includes roles such as group leader, head of a narrower internal unit, and acting civil servant. The majority of respondents (41.8%) have an education in legal sciences, followed by economic sciences (20.9%) and technical/technological sciences (15.5%). Smaller groups are represented in social/humanistic sciences (10%), natural/mathematical sciences (8.2%), and other fields like medical sciences, arts, and political sciences (0.9% each), with one respondent indicating a background in veterinary science. This distribution highlights the prominence of legal and economic expertise among the respondents, influencing their work in state bodies and public institutions. Finally,

descriptive statistics reveal varying perceptions of role importance within the organization. Problem-solving (49.1%), advocacy (47.3%), and coordination (36.4%) are seen as the most crucial, reflecting their impact on organizational stability and efficiency, while roles like finance specialist are viewed as less important, with only 10% of respondents considering them essential. Roles like mentors, trainers, and transparency promoters receive moderate support, suggesting their importance may not always be fully recognized. This highlights the need for clear definitions of core competencies and priorities to ensure each role is adequately supported and aligned with organizational goals.

Table 1 results show a generally positive response to the training program, with most agreeing on aspects like practical examples, workshops, and simulations. The least common response was "I completely disagree," indicating strong acceptance of the proposed features. However, some statements, such as the need for post-training mentoring support, received more neutral responses, suggesting varied perceptions. The higher number of "Strongly Agree" responses for creative thinking and work application highlights the importance of these elements, emphasizing the need for an interactive, practical, and technology-supported training approach.

Table 1. SCS's needs for the training program

The training program should:	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	I agree (%)	I strongly agree (%)
to use methods that would help the more efficient transfer of knowledge and the development of skills	0.9	-	4.5	27.3	22.7
to meet my needs in terms of acquiring complex knowledge and skills	0.9	-	4.5	29.1	20.9
to include more workshops and simulations to ensure practical application of acquired skills	0.9	-	5.5	27.3	21.8
to enable the use of technology and tools that improve my engagement and interest	0.9	-	5.5	30.0	19.1
to be focused on how to apply what I have learned in my daily tasks	0.9	-	5.5	26.4	22.7
to focus on practical examples	0.9	-	2.7	22.7	29.1
to enable greater interactivity to engage participants more	-	-	10.9	23.6	20.9
to enable mentoring support after the end of the training	0.9	1.8	16.4	25.5	10.9
to include more group activities and discussions that encourage the exchange of ideas	0.9	0.9	10.9	26.4	16.4
to contain a section for individual consultations with lecturers or mentors	0.9	0.9	10.9	30.0	12.7
to provide adequate support that helps me master the material	0.9	1.8	10.0	34.5	8.2
to include more activities that encourage creative thinking and innovation	0.9	0.9	5.5	30.9	17.3
to directly contribute to my ability to make better decisions	0.9	1.8	6.4	24.5	21.8
to help improve my work performance in specific areas of my work	0.9	1.8	5.5	27.3	20.0
to provide access to resources that help me acquire new skills	0.9	1.8	7.3	29.1	17.3
to include regular evaluation and feedback	0.9	0.9	9.1	32.7	15.5

The most valued learning method was small group discussions, with 72.7% of respondents finding them useful, highlighting the importance of interactivity and idea exchange. Other highly valued methods include study visits (66.4%), case studies (50.9%), simulations (43.6%), and advanced training with experts (43.6%). All of these methods emphasize practicality, active involvement, and specialized knowledge, making them key for personal development (Figure 1).

The most popular personal development activity was reading professional literature, with 70.9% of respondents engaging in it. Conferences (56.4%) and direct participation in training or workshops (48.2%) were also common. Fewer respondents acted as mentors (16.4%) or had their own mentor (2.7%). Only 3.6% reported not engaging in any personal development activities, suggesting strong involvement in training (Figure 2).

Most respondents (54.5%) can dedicate less than two hours daily to professional development, while 35.5% can allocate two to four hours. Only 7.3% can devote the entire workday to it, and 2.7% fall into the "Other" category, with one respondent noting they can allocate 3-4 hours weekly.

The majority of respondents (44.5%) can allocate two to three days per month for professional development, followed by 33.6% who can dedicate about one day per month. Smaller groups can allocate four to five days (11.8%) or more than five days (3.6%), while 4.5% can commit less than one day, and 1.8% fall into the "Other" category.

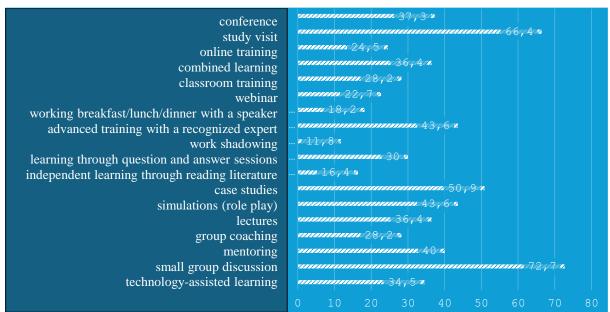


Figure 1. The most useful learning methods

Finally, the topics most frequently mentioned by respondents as having the most significant impact on improving their knowledge, abilities, and skills in the past three years include: ethics and integrity, public appearance, performance appraisal, leadership, information security, strengthening professional capacities of civil servants in Serbia, public procurement, and assertive communication.

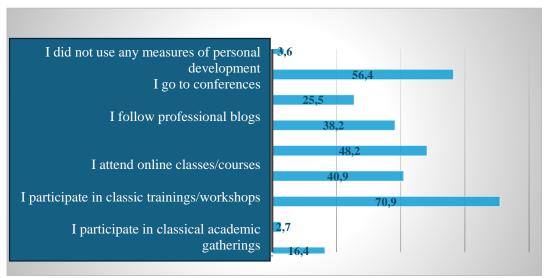


Figure 2. Personal development activities

5. CONCLUSION

This paper examined the professional development needs of senior civil servants (SCSs) in Serbia, recognizing their pivotal role in ensuring effective, accountable, and responsive public administration. Through the conducted survey of 110 SCSs, most of whom have over a decade of experience in state administration, the study revealed strong alignment among participants on the importance of practical, technology-supported, and interactive training approaches, with a strong emphasis on applicability, creative thinking, and group-based learning methods like small group discussions, study visits and case studies. Most respondents indicated that they are able to dedicate two to three days per month to professional development activities. The research confirms that targeted training, based on clearly identified competencies and real professional challenges, is crucial for strengthening managerial performance in the public sector. Furthermore, the analysis of Serbia's strategic and regulatory framework illustrates that, while a foundation for professional development exists, continuous adaptation and modernization of training content and evaluation mechanisms remain essential to meet contemporary public governance demands. This paper contributes to that effort by offering evidence-based insights to support the design of future training programs aligned with the evolving role and expectations of SCSs.

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