

Strategies to increase employee motivation in public administration

Dieser, Karl-Heinz *

European Polytechnical University, EPU Green Energy, Pernik, Bulgaria.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the theoretical significance of employee motivation in the public sector against the backdrop of current challenges such as demographic change and increasing staff shortages. In view of rising fluctuation rates, motivation is seen as a key success factor for performance and innovation in the public sector. The aim of the study is to analyze the relevance of individual motives and situational incentives for the development and maintenance of motivation in the context of public administrations.

Methodologically, the work is based on a systematic literature review with a focus on scientific sources from the European Economic Area. The focus is on a thematic synthesis of relevant theoretical and empirical contributions to motivation theory. Particular attention is paid to the critical classification of Maslow's pyramid of needs. Based on these approaches, an extended motivation model is developed that takes into account current work-cultural conditions and differentiated employee needs. The study is conducted in accordance with scientific quality criteria and leads to a hypothesis-oriented discussion. The central assumption is that increased fluctuation is associated with a decline in employee motivation. The results suggest that motivation in the public sector cannot be promoted by structural incentive systems alone, but that an integrative approach is required that includes both individual dispositions and organizational framework conditions. The article thus makes a contribution to the further development of motivation-promoting personnel strategies in the public sector.

Keywords: Employee Retention; Public Administration; Motivation; Turnover; Maslow

1. Introduction

Motivation is a key factor in personnel development in the public sector (cf. Haus 2025) and is a central driver of human action. It acts as a stimulus for goal orientation and ensures that individuals carry out goal-oriented activities even when more pleasant alternatives are available (cf. Conte 2023). Employee motivation plays a particularly important role in the context of employer responsibility. Success is directly linked to the level of employee motivation. This insight applies not only to private sector organizations (cf. Mayrhofer et al. 2023), but also to the same extent to the public sector, which is increasingly confronted with a growing personnel gap (cf. Kanning 2025).

Motivation depends on various factors. A key challenge is to motivate existing staff despite the additional burden of staff shortages and at the same time to create an external image that positions the public service sector as an attractive employer for potential skilled workers (cf. Dindorf 2023).

Maslow's pyramid of needs is an established model that is still used in many areas. Nevertheless, the model has been criticized several times, as its assumptions are sometimes considered outdated and not universally applicable. Critics complain in particular that the hierarchical, pyramidal representation does not adequately reflect the complexity of human needs and neglects the interactions between the individual levels. In addition, in view of intercultural and

* Corresponding author: Dieser, Karl-Heinz.

individual differences, it seems questionable whether a rigid hierarchy actually applies to all people (cf. Becker 2025). This problem gives rise to the following question, which this article aims to clarify: To what extent can work motivation in the public sector be explained by an extended model of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, taking into account individual motives and situational incentives, and what influence does it have on the turnover of skilled workers?

2. Material and methods

This article is based on a systematic literature review as the primary research method. The focus is on the evaluation of relevant scientific literature from the European Economic Area that deals with employee motivation in the context of public administration. The aim of this methodological approach is to record the current state of research in a theory-based manner, identify key influencing factors and provide a well-founded answer to the research question formulated at the beginning.

The literature analysis is based on a content-related and thematic synthesis procedure, supplemented by a critical reflection of the identified evaluations, taking into account common scientific quality criteria (objectivity, validity, reliability). As part of the analysis, an extended explanatory model is developed that conceptually supplements Maslow's pyramid of needs and adapts it to current work-psychological and organizational conditions.

The methodological approach is theoretical and deductive. Based on the analyzed literature, a hypothesis-oriented discussion takes place in the concluding part of the thesis. The central assumption here is that there is a negative correlation between the level of employee turnover and the extent of employee motivation. The discussion aims to theoretically substantiate this hypothesis and derive implications for personnel development strategies in the public sector.

3. Results

A key shortcoming in current research is the limited adaptability of existing models to diverse and fluctuating emotional inputs in real educational contexts. Most models are not able to continuously adapt their strategies based on real-time emotional feedback. This gap highlights the need for more dynamic systems that can process complex emotional data and provide personalized learning support in real time (cf. Convea et al. 2024). In order to avoid ambiguity and to sharpen the thematic understanding, key terms that are of particular relevance in the context of this article are explained below.

Motivation refers to the entirety of psychological processes that initiate, control and maintain the goal-oriented behavior of individuals (cf. Bak 2024). It represents an inner drive that causes people to direct their energy and behavior towards achieving specific goals. Motivational processes are essentially shaped by individual dispositions, such as personality traits, biographical experiences and situational factors. As a result, motivation exhibits inter-individual variance and is context-dependent, as it arises dynamically in the interaction between the person and their environment (cf. WeKa 2025).

Extrinsic motivation occurs when goal-oriented behavior is primarily triggered and maintained by external stimuli. These incentives originate from the social or material environment and are aimed at achieving positive consequences - such as rewards - or avoiding negative sanctions (cf. Lindner-Lohmann 2023). External sources of motivation include both material incentives, such as financial rewards, bonus payments or promotions, and immaterial factors, such as social recognition, status gains or symbolic appreciation.

Central to the effectiveness of extrinsic incentive systems is their fit with the desired behavior and a relationship between performance and reward that is perceived as fair. In an organizational context, extrinsic incentives act as a strategic management tool to specifically promote desired behaviors. For example, a performance-related commission can be used in a targeted manner to intensify or perpetuate certain behaviors (cf. LPB 2023). Intrinsic motivation describes a motivational state in which actions are not carried out due to external incentives, but out of an inner need (cf. Lepper et al. 2022). The focus here is on the activity as such, which is experienced as satisfying, meaningfulness or joyful. The motivation is fed by personal interest, curiosity, a sense of competence or the pursuit of self-realization and autonomy (cf. Fiske 2024).

In contrast to extrinsic motivation, the drive here lies in the activity itself, not in the prospect of external rewards. Intrinsically motivated individuals often show a high degree of perseverance, determination and commitment, even under challenging conditions. Such motivational processes are considered to be particularly stable and sustainable, as

they are based on a deep personal meaningfulness of the action and are not dependent on external contingencies (cf. Lepper et al. 2022).

In motivational psychology, motives are understood as stable, psychological dispositions that influence and control the behavior of individuals in specific situations. They function as internal orientation variables that guide actions towards certain target states and thus represent a central basis for goal-oriented behavior. According to Vaculikova (2025), three fundamental motive classes can be distinguished within motivational psychology research, which are considered particularly relevant to action:

- The achievement motive (striving for success and competence)
- The power motive (need for influence and control)
- The affiliation motive (striving for social ties and affiliation)

Employee motivation is a key factor in organizational performance and is considered an essential component of successful HR and management strategies (cf. Mayrhofer et al. 2023). All three motives are relevant here. However, the employee decides which motive is most important to them. This is not a static or directly measurable phenomenon, but a theoretical construct that can only be inferred through observable behavior. Motivation manifests itself, for example, in goal-oriented, persistent or committed action, but is always context-dependent and subject to situational fluctuations (cf. Glebbeek 2025).

From the perspective of motivational psychology, motivation arises from the tension between individual motives and external incentives. Motives refer to dispositional, relatively stable motives, such as the pursuit of achievement, recognition, security or social affiliation (cf. Bak 2024). They form the inner basis for willingness to act and goal orientation. Incentives, on the other hand, are situational environmental factors - such as monetary compensation, social esteem, opportunities for advancement or a supportive work environment - that make certain behaviors appear attractive (cf. Haus 2025).

Motivation therefore arises from the mutual fit between an individual's personal motives and the incentives provided in the organizational context. This interaction can be formalized. Motivated behavior only results if both motives and incentives are present to a sufficient degree. If one of the two factors is missing, motivation fails to materialize. This interaction model underlines the need for a differentiated, context-sensitive design of working conditions in order to systematically promote individual motivation.

$$\text{Personal motives} \times \text{Environmental incentives} = \text{Motivated behavior}$$

Formula 1 : Motivation function
Source: Own representation

In an organizational context, motivation can be theoretically differentiated into two basic categories: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (cf. Archivers 2024). This distinction is based on the origin of the drive to perform a certain behavior. Intrinsic motivation arises from the individual themselves and is characterized by a genuine interest or the experience of meaningfulness and self-realization in the activity. In contrast, extrinsic motivation results from external stimuli such as rewards, sanctions or social expectations (cf. Bak 2024).

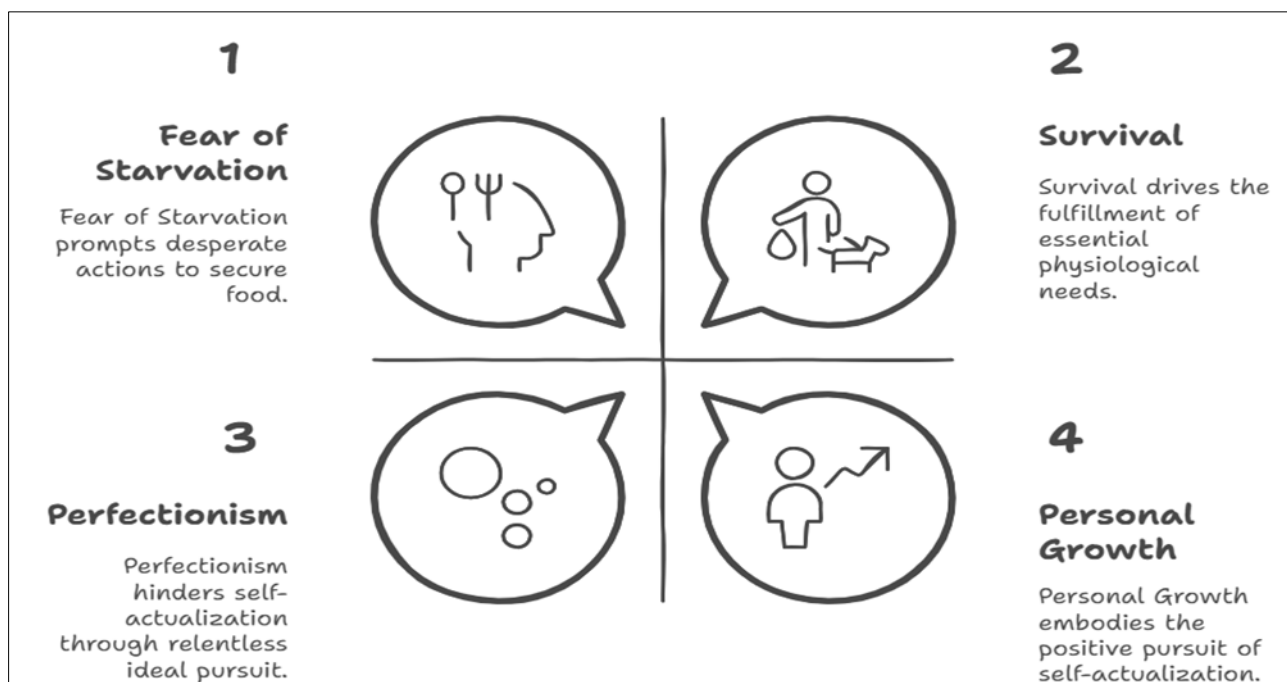
Empirical evaluations suggest that intrinsic motivation is more stable and has a more long-term effect than extrinsic motivation. It correlates significantly with increased job satisfaction, greater commitment and stronger identification with the tasks performed and organizational goals (cf. Vaculikova 2025). Against this background, the promotion of intrinsic motivation processes in organizations is of particular importance, especially with regard to sustainable motivation and personal commitment.

Companies and organizations, including public employers, pursue the goal of maintaining the performance of their employees at a high level. In this context, job satisfaction plays a central role, as it is determined by both intrinsic and extrinsic influencing factors (cf. Lindner-Lohmann 2023). Among other things, job satisfaction is created by appropriate working conditions, transparent communication, fair pay and a supportive working atmosphere (cf. WeKa 2025). A healthy working environment helps to ensure that employees are in balance both physically and mentally. Companies that succeed in creating a positive working atmosphere generally have lower staff turnover rates and a lower prevalence of psychological stress symptoms such as burnout (cf. Haufe 2022).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs as an analytical model of human motivation: positive and negative motives in the context of basic psychological needs. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is one of the most influential theoretical models in motivational psychology. It classifies human needs into five hierarchically arranged levels, starting with basic physiological needs and ending with self-actualization as the highest expression of individual development, and was first presented in 1943 (cf. Maslow 1943). Despite its widespread dissemination and reception in research and practice, the model has long been the subject of critical debate, particularly with regard to its universal validity and temporal appropriateness. While Maslow explains human behavior primarily through growth-oriented and positively directed motivations, it is increasingly emphasized that within each stage, deficit-oriented or avoidance-based motives can also be identified, which have a significant codetermination effect on behavior (cf. Becker 2025). This differentiated view allows the pyramid of needs to be interpreted not only as an idealized upward movement, but also as a complex field of tension between deficiency and growth needs (cf. Kanning 2025).

In the context of current research, Quatishat (2025) problematizes the applicability of Maslow's model, particularly in the context of humanitarian crises. He shows that basic needs, such as safety and physical integrity, often cannot be met in crisis contexts. This fundamentally calls into question the practicality and universal transferability of the hierarchical model (cf. Quatishat 2025).

Work-life balance is increasingly becoming a central megatrend in the world of work. It describes the desire to strike a balance between work, private life, family and personal health (cf. SHRM 2025). In view of demographic change and the associated staff shortage, it is essential for companies to develop appropriate concepts in order to remain competitive and attractive as an employer in the long term (cf. Dindorf 2023).



Source: Own representation

Figure 1 Motivational Dynamics in Human Needs

Figure 3 shows the balance between work and private life. In response to this criticism, alternative conceptualizations have been proposed. One suggestion is to divide the needs into four equally weighted functional categories ("quartiles") rather than in hierarchical order. This form of presentation is intended to do better justice to the complex, context-dependent reality of human needs. A corresponding visualization of this classification can be found in the following figure.

The modified division of human needs into four functional quartiles allows a more differentiated view of motivational processes than Maslow's classic hierarchy and presents the needs in a more contemporary way.

- The first quartile (Fear of Starvation) focuses on basic physiological needs that ensure survival (cf. Eberz & Antoni 2021). Positive motives are expressed here in the pursuit of food, fluids and protection, while negative drives such as fear of deprivation can lead to impulsive or risky behavior.
- The second quartile (survival) comprises security needs that relate to physical and psychological stability. The need for order, structure and reliability has a positive effect. In contrast, fears of threat or loss of control can lead to withdrawal or overprotective behavior (cf. Hansen & Amabile 2024).
- Social needs such as attachment, acceptance and belonging are located in the third quartile (perfectional). The desire for interpersonal closeness motivates integration into groups and prosocial behavior (cf. Zhang et al. 2023). Isolation and social rejection, on the other hand, can promote emotional dependence or unreflected adaptation to social norms (cf. Fiske 2024).
- The fourth quartile (personal growth) describes the pursuit of self-actualization, personal development and creative development (cf. Maslow 1943). Positive characteristics can be seen in intrinsic goal orientation and self-reflection. Negative tendencies can manifest themselves in fear of failure, perfectionism or excessive demands on oneself (cf. Bak 2024).

In addition, recent studies show that emotions act as evaluative instances in all these areas, guiding actions, enabling learning and preparing for future events. Models from affective informatics, such as those based on reinforcement learning, can increasingly be used for the simulation and recognition of human emotions (cf. Jokinen 2024). These developments point to the potential of technology-supported, empathic interaction between humans and machines.

As part of human resource management, it is the task of personnel management to reconcile the different needs and expectations of the various employee groups, in particular long-term employees and career starters (cf. Robinson 2025). Life-phase-oriented HR development is particularly relevant here, as it takes into account the individual development needs and biographical life situations of employees (cf. Dohmen 2022). In the course of dynamic social and technological change, the knowledge and skills of employees are becoming increasingly important. It is therefore essential for the public sector to promote employee motivation in its many forms in order to maintain its own competitiveness (cf. Becker 2025).

4. Discussions

Fluctuation should not be seen as negative per se. To a moderate extent, it can be seen as an expression of organizational dynamics. It offers the opportunity to break up entrenched structures, provide new impetus and supplement existing teams with new perspectives (cf. Valet et al. 2023). In addition, a balanced turnover can contribute to the promotion of age diversity (cf. Haufe 2022). However, staff turnover takes on a problematic dimension when it goes beyond a healthy level and qualified specialists in particular leave the company. In such cases, not only do substantial costs arise from recruiting and training new employees, but company experience is also lost, the reconstruction of which requires considerable time and personnel resources.

In practice, the so-called turnover rate is often used to quantify staff turnover (cf. Haufe 2022), which is a key figure that shows the number of departures in relation to the average size of the workforce within a defined period (cf. WeKa 2023). Due to company-specific differences, it is not possible to determine an optimum fluctuation rate across the board. However, if an above-average value is identified, targeted countermeasures are required. This requires a differentiated analysis of the causes, which can be both individual and organizational in nature. A common cause of increased fluctuation rates is insufficient employee retention (cf. Haufe 2023).

$$\frac{\text{Staff attrition}}{\text{Total staff}} \times 100 = \text{employee turnover rate}$$

Formula 2 : Employee turnover rate
Source: Own representation

The term "retention management" is often used in the context of staff retention. The aim of this concept is to bind employees to the company in the long term in order to ensure staff continuity, reduce costs due to fluctuation and increase operational performance. Proactive and strategic retention management can also have a positive influence on the perceived value of the workforce. The basis for its effectiveness is the differentiated consideration of the four central levels of employee retention: normative, affective, calculative and behavioral (cf. TechMinds 2023).

Normative loyalty is based on employees' inner sense of duty towards the company and their colleagues. Affective loyalty arises when there is an emotional identification with the company, for example through the alignment of values

and goals (cf. Fiske 2024). Calculative commitment reflects a weighing up of the costs and benefits of a potential change of employer and includes aspects such as remuneration, job security and development prospects (cf. Hays 2024). Finally, behavioral commitment describes the decision to stay based on habits, regardless of objectively more attractive alternatives (cf. Gesundheitsbenefits 2023).

Motivation is a key driver for individual work performance. This in turn is reflected in perceived job satisfaction. As job satisfaction is closely linked to work motivation, a well-founded analysis of motivation also requires a holistic understanding of satisfaction (cf. National Governors Association 2025). Individual moments of dissatisfaction are not representative of the overall situation. Rather, the long-term perception of the working environment is decisive. Satisfaction always relates to the job performed and its framework conditions (cf. Hans Böckler Foundation 2024).

In light of the findings presented above, it is clear that employee turnover is a complex, multifactorial phenomenon. Retention management plays a key role here: Sustainable measures to reduce employee turnover can only be derived through a holistic understanding of the levels and pillars of employee retention (cf. Maturson 2024). Work motivation is a significant, albeit not the only, influencing factor. In order to effectively counter staff turnover, an integrative approach is required that takes into account both structural company characteristics and the individual needs and expectations of employees (cf. Haufe 2022).

The question posed at the beginning can be answered as follows: To what extent can work motivation in the public service be explained by an extended model of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, taking into account individual motives and situational incentives, and what influence does this motivation have on the turnover of qualified professionals?

The analysis shows that work motivation in the public sector cannot be adequately explained by classic, hierarchically structured models such as Maslow's original pyramid of needs. Instead, an extended model is required that integratively captures the dynamic interactions between individual motives and situational incentives. The modified structuring of human needs into functional quartiles, instead of a rigid hierarchical sequence, takes better account of current findings in occupational psychology as well as cultural and individual differentiations. The motivation of employees in the public sector is largely dependent on whether personal needs are addressed by suitable structural and social conditions. Studies show that intrinsic motivation in particular has a long-term stabilizing effect on performance behavior, while extrinsic incentives alone are not sufficient to generate lasting loyalty and commitment. A key finding of the study is the direct correlation between motivation levels and turnover behavior. A lack of fit between individual needs and organizational circumstances leads to declining job satisfaction and an increasing tendency to leave, especially among highly qualified specialists. The fact that a lower level of motivation goes hand in hand with increased fluctuation can therefore be confirmed theoretically. This results in the need for a differentiated HR strategy that systematically addresses both structural incentive systems and individual development needs.

5. Conclusion

The present analysis makes it clear that Maslow's classic hierarchy of needs in its hierarchical, static structure no longer meets today's requirements for a differentiated understanding of work motivation. The proposed division of human needs into four functional quartiles represents a contemporary alternative that integrates both individual and contextual factors (cf. Becker 2025). In the context of the public sector, this model offers a practical framework for explaining motivational dynamics and their influence on the turnover of qualified professionals.

Work motivation is a complex, multidimensional process that interacts with organizational structures, social relationships and individual life realities (cf. National Governors Association 2025). The high relevance of intrinsic motivation for ensuring long-term job satisfaction and retention potential has been confirmed by numerous studies. Extrinsic incentives, on the other hand, only have a short-term stabilizing effect and cannot compensate for unfulfilled needs. In terms of an integrative understanding, retention management must therefore be understood as a strategic management tool that not only prevents fluctuation, but above all taps into motivational potential (cf. Maturson 2024). Emotional employee retention, which is often neglected in this context, proves to be central to long-term staff retention in the public sector.

Modern HR management must recognize the individual needs of employees, take them seriously and systematically translate them into structured measures in order to sustainably promote motivation, satisfaction and loyalty (cf. Mayrhofer et al. 2023). Only by turning away from one-dimensional explanatory patterns and consistently focusing on complex, adaptive needs models can the staff shortage be effectively countered and the public sector positioned as an attractive employer.

A number of recommendations for action can be derived from the results. Effective HR management in the public sector requires a differentiated, strategically sound focus on the changing needs of employees. In this context, life-phase-oriented personnel management is becoming increasingly important. Different life realities make flexible and individualized measures necessary. This applies in particular to the design of working time models; development prospects and targeted support offers that are geared towards the respective phases of life. The systematic assessment of individual needs using modern diagnostic procedures is also key. The use of digital tools to record motivational preferences and needs enables evidence-based and tailored management of strategic HR measures. In this way, existing potential can be better identified and promoted in a targeted manner.

Another crucial aspect relates to strengthening the normative bond with the public sector. While formal incentive systems continue to play a role, it has been shown that emotional identification, perceived appreciation and alignment with a clearly communicated, participatory mission statement are key influencing factors for long-term employee retention (cf. Fiske 2024).

In addition, the targeted development of a resilient culture makes a significant contribution to promoting motivation and a willingness to innovate. A culture of openness, error tolerance and psychological safety creates a working environment in which employees can contribute, develop and identify with the public service (cf. Bak 2024). In addition, the monitoring of staff turnover should be used as a strategic early warning system. A continuous and differentiated analysis of the causes of staff turnover provides important indications of structural deficits and enables effective countermeasures to be taken at an early stage.

Finally, the promotion of intrinsic motivation through participative workplace design is a central starting point. Working conditions should be designed in such a way that they enable autonomy, promote a sense of competence and encourage social integration, three fundamental prerequisites for intrinsic commitment and sustained motivation (cf. Fiske 2024).

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Author's short biography

**Authors Name: Karl-Heinz Dieser**

Karl-Heinz Dieser, born in 1967, has over 35 years of professional experience in the field of logistics. He holds a Bachelor's degree from FOM Essen and a Master's degree from Fernhochschule Hamburg, and is currently pursuing a PhD at a university in Bulgaria. His research focuses on mobility, sustainable energy systems, and freight logistics. In addition to his professional career, he has been teaching at various German universities for more than 17 years.