

Executive Summary

Civil servants are an essential part of the government, and are vital to maintaining good governance. They also play an important role in executing policies and striving for public trust, thereby fostering social development and effective governance.

According to the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China (hereafter called "Basic Law"), public servants are a key component of the HKSAR's political structure. The Basic Law stipulates that public servants (including civil servants) must be dedicated to their duties and are responsible to the HKSAR government¹.

In recent years, the number of HKSAR government civil servants has hovered around 160,000, while the government receives several hundred thousand applications for the civil service jobs every year. In the year 2011/12, the number was particularly high, with around 880,000. However, government figures showed a trend of resignation among young civil servants. The number of resignations among civil servants aged 39 or under increased from 519 in 2012/13 to 787 in 2015/16.

Along with the rapid changes in society, citizens' expectations of public services grow and change constantly. The complex sociopolitical environment has represented a hurdle to governance. This also puts tremendous pressure on civil servants at work. The trust between civil servants and the public is in a critical situation. The challenges faced by civil servants arouse our concern.

This study aims to explore the challenges faced by Hong Kong civil servants in today's challenging environment from young people's views. Recommendations to improve the situation will be proposed.

In conducting this research, data were collected for analysis through a random sampling telephone survey of 523 young people aged 18 to 39; face-to-face case studies of 20 young people, some of whom were civil servants;

¹ Basic Law Article 99.

and interviews with four scholars and/or experts.

Major Findings

- 1. About 57% of the respondents regarded the civil service as an ideal job. Most believed the greatest contribution of civil servants was serving the public. 44% would join the civil service if they had the chance.**

The results of the telephone survey showed that 56.5% of the 523 respondents agreed with the notion that the civil service was an ideal job; 45.9% regarded serving the public as the greatest contribution of civil servants. The respondents gave an average of 5.94 points on a scale of 0–10 (5 points being a passing score) when asked to rate the overall performance of civil servants, and 44% said that they wanted to be a civil servant.

The results of the case studies of young civil servants showed that they were positive about their role, including executing and implementing government policies. However, some stated that they sometimes felt discouraged by the atmosphere where complaint, not appreciation, was prevalent in society.

- 2. Around 57% of the respondents trusted civil servants more than politically appointed officials; 45% believed that civil servants would tell the truth.**

The survey results showed that 57.3% of the respondents were of the view that civil servants are more trustworthy than politically appointed officials. About 45% (44.9%) believed that civil servants tell the truth when performing their duties. Some 40% (39.4%), however, thought otherwise, and 15.8% had no opinion.

With the development of information technology and the public's increasing awareness of the right to know, some young civil servant interviewees of the case studies showed hesitation about providing information, as they worried that information would make it easier for

the public to criticise the civil service.

- 3. More than 30% of the respondents referred to inflexibility when asked about the strongest impression that the civil service had left on them. About 27% said there was a lack of accountability in the civil service.**

The survey showed that 32.1% of the respondents were most impressed by civil servants' inflexibility or routinism. This was followed by the impression that the less one does, the less chance there is of doing something wrong (22.6%). In terms of drawbacks, 26.8% said that there was a lack of accountability in the civil service. This was followed by a lack of adaptability to change (16.2%), serving spirit (14.7%), and innovation (13.5%).

The young civil servant interviewees attached great importance to guidelines and procedures, which is, however, usually overlooked by the general public. Meanwhile, some respondents revealed that it seemed to be the norm in the civil service that one's position could be secured as long as one had not violated the code of practice or committed serious mistakes. This is the so-called "iron bowl" of civil service, which to a certain extent implies a lack of accountability for mistakes.

- 4. The respondents gave an average of around 6 points when asked to rate the performance of civil servants in upholding core values, which was above the passing mark.**

In the survey, the respondents generally gave a passing mark when asked to rate the performance of civil servants in upholding the core values stipulated in the Civil Service Code. "Commitment to the rule of law" obtained the highest mark at 6.11 points, followed by "dedication, professionalism, and diligence" and "honesty and integrity", with 6.01 and 6.00 points, respectively. "Accountability for decisions and actions" and "objectivity and impartiality" secured 5.85 and 5.65 points respectively.

- 5. The respondents believed that civil servants faced tremendous challenges in terms of political pressure, mutual trust with politically appointed officials, and the difficulty of attracting talent.**

The survey showed that in the respondents' view, civil servants encountered political pressure, with an average severity level of 6.79 points (on a scale of 0-10, with 10 points denoting "very serious" and 5 points being "normal"). The severity level of civil servants' failure to establish mutual trust with politically appointed officials, and to attract talent, stood at 6.31 points and 5.83 points, respectively.

Some civil servant interviewees of the case studies said that they felt a fragmented relationship with politically appointed officials. Some said that they were responsible for implementing government decisions only, not policy formulation, and therefore their sense of belonging to the HKSAR government was quite low. Their intention to help defend government decisions was also low.

Some civil servant respondents of the case studies said that they were wary of making suggestions or reflecting problems at work. On the one hand, they were worried that they would be regarded as someone who messed around or did not comply with the rules. On the other hand, they were worried that they would be viewed as incompetent. As a result, problems and difficulties were not effectively addressed. In the eyes of the respondents, internal communication was inadequate and may hinder attracting and retaining talent.

Main Discussions

- 1. The respondents acknowledged the role and contribution of civil servants. However, amidst a general atmosphere of complaint, some civil servants prefer to follow traditions in order to avoid provoking complaints about mistakes during innovation. This will adversely affect the quality of public services in the long run.**

To maintain highly efficient governance, and to promote high-quality public services, a dedicated team of civil servants is indispensable. The

study shows that the respondents appreciated the role and contribution of civil servants.

However, some young respondents did not find it easy to be a good civil servant given the societal atmosphere where complaint, not appreciation, is prevalent. This discourages some civil servants from making something new or taking the risk to pursue innovation in an attempt to avoid provoking public criticism of any mistakes. As a result, some civil servants prefer to follow the beaten track, or even abandon the pursuit of high-quality services. This hinders the improvement of public service in the long run.

2. Amidst the ever-changing social environment, the following areas of the civil service are worthy of attention.

2.1 The public has high expectations of the responsiveness and accountability of public services, while civil servants attach importance to guidelines and procedures. There is a gap between the two.

The civil service, as a large public service team, operates according to procedures in order to maintain and ensure stability. However, the civil service today serves a society which is more demanding and has higher expectations of public services. If civil servants only follow guidelines or procedures at work, or only focus on implementing policies, they may not be able to meet the expectations of the public.

It is worthwhile to explore how civil servants should respond to the public appropriately when facing increasing public expectations, and how they should prepare themselves to be more responsive, including to public expectations of accountability.

2.2 Society is getting more politicized, which makes it harder for civil servants to adhere to core values at work. They need to improve their coping ability.

The core values to which civil servants adhere are an important consideration for the performance of their duties and decision-making, which are also of great importance in building public trust. In respondents' view, civil servants in general uphold core values.

However, as Hong Kong society has become increasingly complex, it is more difficult for civil servants to uphold these core values at work. It is very important that civil servants be trained better to help them adhere to core values and gain better social recognition.

2.3 The mutual trust between civil servants and the public is insufficient. The public demands transparency regarding public services. The so-called "squeezing toothpaste" approach to provide information used by the government seems no longer able to meet the needs of the community

With the increasing public awareness of the right to know, society has higher expectations of transparency on public services today. The so-called "squeezing toothpaste" approach to provide information used by the government not only fails to meet the expectations of society, but also brings negative effects on the civil service

Sufficient transparency and effective communication are important for building mutual trust. If government departments were more active and transparent in providing information, it could help reduce unnecessary speculation among the public, and thereby help enhance public confidence in the government's data and information processing, and present a responsible image of civil servants.

3. Civil servants encountered three major challenges in recent years, and viable solutions are needed.

3.1 Political Pressure

The HKSAR government implements a political appointment system. Politically appointed officials are responsible for formulating, promoting, explaining, and lobbying policies, while civil servants are responsible for implementing and executing government policies. The two complement each other. In line with the principle of political neutrality, civil servants should be spared from unnecessary political pressure.

However, in reality, for various reasons, civil servants are still loaded with the burden of explaining and defending policies to councils, the public, and stakeholders. Hong Kong society has become increasingly politicized. The extra political pressure put on civil servants is tremendous. It would be worthwhile exploring how politically appointed officials could further demonstrate their political commitment, and how the political pressure on civil servants could be relieved.

3.2 Mutual trust with politically appointed officials

Young civil servant respondents of the case studies showed a relatively weak relationship with the HKSAR government, and they have little motivation to defend the government's decisions. Moreover, some politically appointed officials are not from the civil service and may be unfamiliar with the operation of the government. They may have difficulty working with civil servants as a result. It is very important that there is satisfactory coordination between policy formulation from the top and policy implementation from the bottom to ensure the quality and efficiency of policy administration.

The political appointment system of the HKSAR government has been running for nearly 15 years. There are still problems, such as mutual trust and cooperation, between civil servants and politically accountable officials. This is a phenomenon worth noting.

3.3 Talent Attraction

Talented individuals are an important asset of every government. In recent years, the HKSAR government has received hundreds of thousands of applications for civil service jobs annually, indicating that it has a very considerable talent pool. However, an increasing number of young civil servants have been leaving in recent years. The face-to-face interviews revealed that young civil servants' potential is not fully utilized, their enthusiasm for work, eagerness to perform, and creativity are being wasted. It is worth pondering what other factors could help retain and realize the potential of talent apart from welfare, such as building enthusiasm for serving society, adopting the principle of meritocracy, and improving job satisfaction.

Recommendations

This study proposes the following recommendations.

1. Organizing a Civil Service Week/ Day to enhance mutual trust and understanding between the government, civil servants, and the public.

Some of the civil servant respondents of the case studies pointed out that the public might not be familiar with the work of the civil service, and that this creates an impediment when civil servants carry out their duties. Drawing inspiration from overseas practice, the study recommends that a Civil Service Week/Day be organized to provide a direct interactive platform for the government, civil servants, and the public to facilitate mutual understanding, and thereby building mutual trust.

2. Conducting regular opinion collection exercises to strengthen communication.

Some of the civil servant respondents of the case studies said that their sense of belonging to the HKSAR government is relatively weak, and they are wary of taking the initiative to express views or reflect problems.

Drawing inspiration from overseas practice, the study recommends conducting regular and systemic opinion collection exercises about public services among both civil servants and members of the public, to provide solid evidence for improvement.

Civil servants' opinions should be collected for analysis anonymously. The public's opinions could keep the government abreast of the latest thoughts and views of the public on their expectations of public services.

3. Strengthening the transparency of government departments through information provision to enhance trust between civil servants and the public, and to build a responsible image of the civil service.

A considerable percentage of the respondents had reservations about whether civil servants would tell the truth. The study recommends strengthening the transparency and initiative of the government in disseminating information, in order to reduce unnecessary speculation among the public on the one hand, and on the other, to assist the public in understanding the rationale and reasons behind the decisions made by the government. This could also help build a responsible image of the civil service.

4. Affirming and consolidating the professionalism of the civil service.

The study shows that the professionalism of civil servants was widely recognized by the respondents, who also valued the maintenance of the civil service's political neutrality. The study recommends that the Hong Kong government and civil servants strive to ensure that standards are maintained in today's changing and complex sociopolitical environment.