

Executive Summary

Good public governance relies on people with outstanding talent performing their duties and displaying leadership skills in their positions. In Hong Kong, the Government appoints individuals to the Executive Council, the various advisory bodies, and the political accountable team through the Political Appointment System. The Legislative Council, District Councils, political parties, and other social organisations are the platforms to develop such potential.

According to Hong Kong's Civil Service Code, the Civil Service is the backbone of the HKSAR Government. It is responsible to, and supports, the Chief Executive and the Government of the day in formulating, explaining and implementing policies; conducting administrative affairs; and serving the community by delivering public services; and undertaking law enforcement. Directorate-Grade and Administrative-Officer-Grade Civil Servants play an important role in the governance landscape of the HKSAR as many of the Principal Officials of the Governance Team come from within the Civil Service. As a result, the Civil Service is another important channel for training government officials in the territory. Civil Service is also one of the most popular career choices for young people who help to ensure its continuity and sustainability.

However, with the changes in recent years to the city's political and social landscape that have jeopardised the credibility of the SAR Government, it is unsurprising that the Civil Service is at the centre of this storm. Given the city's increasingly complicated social development, and the full implementation of the "patriots administering Hong Kong" principle, it is inevitable that the public would have a higher expectation of the Civil Service regarding its capability and quality.

Given this background, there is concern about whether the Civil Service will still be attractive enough to attract, retain and nurture the needed talent.

This study looks at the challenges of talent development in the Civil Service through exploring young peoples' considerations in joining this part of the workforce. Recommendations will be put forward with an aim of

making the Civil Service better prepared to perform its various roles and functions through the current set of difficulties. By doing so, this study hopes to present some insights about how the Hong Kong Government can maintain good governance.

In conducting this study, data was collected between March and April 2021 through: an on-site survey of 527 young people (aged 18 to 34); parallel-case interviews with 15 similar individuals; and research-exclusive interviews with 5 academics and experts.

Main Discussion

- 1. According to respondents, the contribution made by the Civil Service is highly rated, but its performance in recent years is regarded as unremarkable.**

Seventy percent (70.4%) of the respondents believed the greatest contribution of the Civil Service was serving the public (the largest proportion of the total), while 47% (47.1%) considered maintaining the effective operation of the government, and 45% (44.6%) viewed it as stabilising society. Nevertheless, respondents had reservations when it came to rating the efficiency and the professionalism of the Civil Service in recent years; averaging 4.83 and 5.19 respectively (on a scale of 0-10 with "5" being the passmark; "10" denoting very good). Approximately 68% (67.9%) did not think that they were proud of the performance of the Civil Service.

Hong Kong's Civil Service has been in operation for a long time. Its contribution gaining wide recognition. It is inevitable that along with the speedy development of society, the public's expectations of the Civil Service's performance would increase commensurately. It raises a concern about how to improve its efficiency and professionalism to keep it in line with the development of society.

2. Respondents have various concerns or worries when thinking about if they would join the Civil Service. There are also concerns raised about the possibility of a brain drain.

2.1 The majority of respondents are not interested in joining the Civil Service. Various reasons need to be taken into account.

Excluding the 14 respondents who are currently Civil Servants, 63% (62.8%) of the remaining 513 respondents said that they did not want to be a Civil Servant (322 respondents). Some of the main reasons for their unwillingness to join the workforce related to the political landscape of the current government and society. Around 30% referred to heavy political pressure (30.1%); reluctance to make an oath of allegiance (29.5%), and 28% (28.3%) simply declined to work for the current government. Some reasons related to respondents' perceptions of the Civil Service, such as the tedious job nature (31.4%), slow promotion (16.1%), and limited opportunities to put their abilities to good use.

However, 23% of the 513 respondents (118 respondents), wanted to join the Civil Service. Asked about the hurdles blocking them from joining, the largest proportion referred to the severe competition (59.3%), followed by lack of suitable posts (33.1%). Some said the obstruction came from peer pressure (20.3%), or the complexity of the city's political situation (17.8%).

In the perception of all 527 respondents, the Civil Service has a problem in attracting talent, the severity of which was rated at an average of 6.42 (on a scale of 0-10; "5" being medium severity; "10" denoting very severe). Data from the government noted a lessening of competition in applications for Administrative Officer (AO) and Executive Officer II (EOII) posts from 2016 to 2020.

The SAR Government should pay attention to the concerns or worries of the younger generation about the Civil Service. The Government should also expand its channels or connections in recruiting talent.

2.2 The rate of resignations from the Civil Service has been increasing in recent years; posing the problem of a brain drain.

Data from the Government has highlighted an upward trend in the rate of resignations over the past 10 years, from 0.46% in 2011/12 to 1.05% in 2020/21. The number of young Civil Servants who have resigned from the workforce each year has also increased recently. Civil Servant posts are considered an iron bowl, so it is unusual for individuals to take the initiative to resign from their posts. The continuation of the rising resignation rate has triggered discussion about the possible reasons and raising concerns about a brain drain.

Referencing overseas studies, one of the major motivations for civil servants to strive for excellence in their work was to maintain the public good, and for improving society; their motivation for public service was stronger than those in other sectors. It is worth examining what other factors, other than salary and benefit packages, could help retain and realise the potential of talent.

It is worth noting that experiences or knowledge transfer within the system might be affected if its resignation rate continues to rise. Added to this is the implication of wasted public resources to train and nurture talent in the first place. This will threaten the development of the talent pool within the HKSAR in the long term.

- 3. In amongst the ever-changing and complicated social environment, Civil Servants' acumen to the needs of society and the country, as well as their ability to take a forward-looking perspective in connecting to the world, is being challenged.**

3.1 Under the "One Country, Two Systems" principle, it is important for Civil Servants to have a sense of national identity. Dealing with the public they need to approach tasks with political shrewdness.

The Civil Service provides policy alternatives in addition to implementing policy so they play an important role in collaborating with different stakeholders. With the full implementation of the "patriots

administering Hong Kong” principle, an increased sense of national identity among Civil Servants becomes more important. The public’s expectations of the Civil Service’s capabilities and qualities also increases.

In respondents’ perceptions (using the same point scale referred to earlier), the average severity rating of the Civil Service in facing the problems of social division was 6.96. In addition, more than half said that grasping the public sentiment (53.9%), or collaborating with different stake holders (51.4%) were the most needed capabilities for today’s Civil Servants. Some 30% and 10%, respectively, opted for the capabilities of exercising political judgement (31.3%) or understanding the country’s situation (10.8%).

Experts in the interviews and some youth in the parallel-case interviews pointed out that Civil Servants should be open-minded in understanding and learning the strengths of the country’s different systems. From the experts’ point of view, arranging for secondments of Hong Kong’s Civil Servants to Mainland Government departments could be a possible way to strengthen and deepen their national perspective and understanding of the country.

3.2 The work of nurturing the talents of the Civil Service is important to Hong Kong. The soon-to-commence Civil Service College’s role and position in training the Civil Service is crucial.

Experience overseas shows that a civil service college that is open for training and partnering with universities/ institutes for policy formulation, plays a positive role in developing the system itself, in addition to nurturing governance talent.

An overwhelming majority (92.3%) of the 527 respondents took the view that talent nurturing of the Civil Service was important to Hong Kong. Many (47.4%), however, said that Hong Kong’s Civil Service system was not an effective platform to nurture that talent; fifty-two percent (52.3%) found it effective.

Asked about the expected role of the soon-to-commence Civil Service College, more than half of the respondents said that they wanted it to foster leadership and management skill (55.8%), or inheriting knowledge and experiences (54.1%). Thirty percent (30.7%) hoped that it could help promote the political awareness of Civil Servants, while 17% (16.7%) referred to promoting understanding of the country's Constitution, the Basic Law, and the development of the country.

There seems to be an expectation by society that the Civil Service College's role and function is to lead the talent development of the Civil Service. The Government should make good use of this by granting the College more power/ terms of reference so that it could more effectively enhance the nurturing work of the Civil Service.

4. The Government lacks public trust. Trust between the Government and the Civil Service also faces challenges. A concerted, joint effort to support each other so good performances in policy formation and governance can flourish is a primary approach to rebuild mutual trust.

In the respondents' perception, the severity of the lack of public trust in the Government stood at an average of 7.97 (using the previously referenced scale). Close to 70% (69.1%) thought that they did not trust the Government.

Meanwhile, the Civil Service itself has experienced many tough challenges in recent years. These have not only added worries to its work, but also prompted concerns regarding its communication and trust with the Government.

One of the primary ways for the Government to build public trust is to enact policies whereby the public can share in and enjoy the benefits. Another possible approach is to develop a closer working partnership with the Civil Service to smoothen policy implementation.

The city has long endured many deep-rooted social problems so the livelihood of the general public needs to be urgently addressed. The Government should think profoundly about how to rebuild public trust

on the one hand, while on the other, mutually consolidating the trust of the Civil Service.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings and discussion above, this study proposes the following recommendations so the Civil Service is able to maintain and consolidate its role in attracting, retaining and building-up talent, and facilitating cooperation between stakeholders in society.

1. Open up channels for the expansion of the spotting and identification of talent.

This study reflects that due to the younger generation's concerns and worries about joining, Hong Kong's Civil Service is suffering the serious problem of not being able to attract talent. There witnessed a reduced level of competition for AO and EOII posts from 2016 to 2020.

In view of the above problems, and with reference to experience overseas, the study recommends that the Government should introduce a new programme. This needs to be in addition to the existing scholarships, with secondary school students as the main target. The stipulation being that scholarship recipients should work in the Government on a part-time or full-time basis for a period of time during their studies or after graduation. If the scholarship recipient is considered to be of exceptional merit, the Government may offer further promotion.

For the Administrative Service Internship Programme, the Government may consider expanding the channels by which students can be recommended to join the programme beyond the current tertiary institutions. These could include think-tanks, large community-service and other community-based organisations.

2. Set up a framework to broaden Civil Servants' perspective of society, the country, and the international community.

Under the "One Country, Two Systems" principle, there is a continuous demand for governance talent in Hong Kong. As an international city, Hong Kong's Civil Service also needs to develop itself, as well as learn from the strengths of other systems in order to keep up-to-date.

The study recommends that the Government should develop a framework for the improvement of the Civil Service that helps it connect with society, the country and the world. This covers the enhancement to the team's political awareness, such as grasping the pulse of society, strengthening their national identity, and possessing a world view. This also provides a blueprint for nurturing development of the team with a clearer scope and direction. Key initiatives include:

2.1 Societal level: To consider arranging senior Civil Servants to interact with members of the public in various ways, so as to enhance the team's understanding and empathy for the livelihood of the community through in-depth contacts and to enrich their ability to understand public sentiments.

2.2 National level: A thorough understanding of the spirit of "One Country, Two Systems", the country's Constitution, and the Basic Law takes time and requires personal experience. The Administration should strengthen cooperation with the Mainland and expedite the arrangement for Hong Kong Civil Servants to be seconded into Mainland Government departments to strengthen the national identity of the team and deepen their understanding of the country.

2.3 At the global level: The Government should strengthen the posting scheme by actively liaising with different regional and international organisations to create more opportunities for Hong Kong Civil Servants to take up temporary postings. This is with the aim to enhance the international perspective and practical experience of the

team. Long term, it is necessary to set a target number of participants in the scheme to strengthen the governance talent pool available to the Government.

3. The soon-to-commence Civil Service College to lead collaborations with academic institutions to enhance the quality of Civil Servants' capabilities in formulating policies and internationalising the Civil Service.

Using examples overseas, there are governments partnering with local public administration and policy research institutions to initiate different courses and policy research for Civil Servants. This could enhance policy analysis, understanding the public's opinion of the Civil Service and, in the longer term, improve the quality of policies.

The study recommends the soon-to-commence Civil Service College collaborates with local academic institutions. With academic staff provided by the institutions in the relevant programs, it is expected that the participants' (i.e. Civil Servants) public administration knowledge, as well as their capability to formulate quality policies, could be improved. By placing the research findings into training materials, they could be put into practical use.

The public administration of the HKSAR government has been operating under "One Country, Two Systems" for more than 20 years. Experience and characteristics have been accumulated. If the administration can cooperate with local institutions to periodically collate the best practices of the Civil Service in terms of good governance, talent around the globe may find such practices worthwhile. In turn this would validate the local civil-service training, and encourage its move towards internationalisation.

4. Promote public service spirit of the profession.

Faced with various challenges, the morale of the Civil Service has been adversely affected in recent years.

The Government should make good use of current resources to strengthen Civil Servants' sense of mission, positive image and team morale, and promote the public-service aspect of the Civil Service. Sharing stories or experiences with the public via Social Media, Civil Servants, in different departments or grades, can make their work more personal, touching and inspiring. This might help deepen the public understanding of the meaning and spirit of the Civil Service.