



Article

Faktors Influencing Career Success in Rural Public Administrations

Milovan Mirkov ¹, Slavica Mandić ², Nemanja Lekić ², Zoran Pavlović and Jelena Vapa Tankosić ^{4,*}

¹ Municipal Public Library "Veljko Petrović" Žabalj, Nikole Tesle 40, 21230 Žabalj, Serbia

² Belgrade Business and Arts Academy of Applied Studies, Department of Business and Information Studies, Kraljice Marije 73, 11050 Belgrade, Serbia

³ Faculty of Law for Commerce and Judiciary in Novi Sad, University Business Academy in Novi Sad, Geri Karolja 1, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia

⁴ Faculty of Economics and Engineering Management in Novi Sad, University Business Academy in Novi Sad, Cvečarska 2, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia

* Correspondence: jvapa@fimek.edu.rs

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Abstract: Career success in rural public administrations is increasingly analysed through human capital theory and organisational behaviour, emphasising the interaction between institutional support, individual competences, and organisational culture. In the Republic of Serbia, career advancement in rural local self-governments represents a key factor in improving employment stability and strengthening overall public administration efficiency. This study, based on a survey of 869 employees, examines the factors influencing career success, focusing on the relationship between current career state variables and perceived success, as well as gender-based differences. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, multiple regression, and the Mann–Whitney U test were applied. The results show that career success is weakly but significantly predicted by collegial support and managerial encouragement, confirming the importance of social and organisational factors. Male respondents reported higher job satisfaction and managerial support, whereas women emphasised autonomy and professional training. Although gender asymmetries persist, interpersonal collaboration and institutional support remain crucial for enhancing motivation, satisfaction, and equitable career growth. The results provide a foundation for developing sustainable human resource strategies and career development policies that improve institutional effectiveness and gender equity across rural administrations.

Keywords: *Career success; influencing factors; rural public administration; gender differences; human capital; institutional support.*

1. Introduction

Career success in rural self-governments depends on the advancement of individual knowledge and skills, continuous learning, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), and institutional support that enables employees to work efficiently and progress professionally. Cooperation between local administrations, the business sector, and local communities plays a central role in promoting sustainable economic growth and social stability in rural areas. In the Republic of Serbia, rural regions represent a vital part of the national economy, closely linked to agriculture, food production, and the management of natural resources. Understanding the determinants of professional achievement and satisfaction in these administrations is therefore essential for improving institutional performance and retaining skilled employees. Strengthening

human capital and creating transparent career development systems are prerequisites for innovation, technological progress, and sustainable development at the local level.

Rural communities continue to face structural and demographic challenges, such as population ageing, the outmigration of young professionals, and limited access to professional training. These difficulties hinder the adaptability of local administrations to the changing economic and technological environment. Previous research emphasises that integrating education, management, and rural development policies provides a sustainable response to such limitations by creating adaptive and knowledge-based local governance systems [1]. This approach encourages the empowerment of rural populations and supports institutional resilience through participatory and inclusive management practices that strengthen the social fabric of rural communities.

The integration of the Republic of Serbia into global markets remains a key driver of development, while technological progress and growing international competition require public institutions to operate efficiently and transparently [2]. Rural self-governments, as intermediaries between national objectives and local implementation, play a crucial role in translating strategic priorities into concrete development initiatives. Their capacity to achieve strategic goals depends on structured frameworks that encourage coordination, communication and commitment to purpose, as defined in the Six Cs model: coalition building, citizen involvement, conflict management, compensation and rewards, cross unit collaboration and control [3]. By consistently applying these mechanisms, rural administrations can strengthen organisational cohesion and enhance the implementation of local strategies.

Employee satisfaction and opportunities for professional advancement have a measurable effect on the efficiency of local administrations and the quality of public services they provide [4]. For this reason, programmes of professional education, lifelong learning, and digital training should form the foundation of human resource development in local self-governments. Digitalisation increases transparency and decision-making efficiency, improving both institutional performance and public trust [5–7]. Nevertheless, modern management practices and gender equality policies are not yet fully established in post-socialist administrative systems, which limits the potential of human resources to contribute to sustainable local development [8]. Identifying the individual, organisational, and institutional factors that shape career success is therefore vital for achieving effective human resource strategies. Enhancing institutional capacities and adopting inclusive management approaches can increase employee motivation, professional satisfaction, and retention, supporting the long-term resilience of rural administrations. In this way, investing in people becomes a key mechanism for building efficient, innovative, and socially responsive rural administrations.

Promoting gender-balanced opportunities, developing career pathways, and aligning employee competencies with local development goals are essential elements of sustainable human resource management in rural self-governments. This study therefore examines the main factors influencing career success among employees in rural local administrations of the Republic of Serbia, highlighting how human capital development contributes to innovation, efficiency, and competitiveness within the rural public sector. The findings aim to provide an empirical basis for policy recommendations focused on professional advancement, employee retention, and equitable career growth in rural administrations.

2. Literature review

Digital transformation in rural self-governments represents a strategic process of institutional learning and human capital development rather than a mere introduction of technology. It also functions as an important factor influencing employees' professional growth and career success. By enhancing knowledge exchange, continuous training, and professional advancement, digital tools improve employee competence and organisational performance. The success of such transformation depends on the digital literacy and adaptability of employees and managers [9], which strengthen institutional resilience and enable rural administrations to deliver efficient public services despite limited resources. International studies confirm that investing in digital skills fosters innovation, transparency, and citizen participation [10,11]. In the Republic of Serbia, digitalisation contributes to

the modernisation of rural self-governments by improving administrative coordination and aligning local initiatives with national strategic priorities [8]. Developing digital competencies and cross-sector cooperation further enhances adaptability to economic and technological changes, encouraging innovation and competitiveness within rural communities [6,12]. These processes also support motivation, retention, and long-term professional development within public administrations, making digital transformation a catalyst for sustainable institutional growth and community development.

2.1. Contemporary management approaches influencing career success in rural public administration

The evolution of public management reflects the growing need to integrate technological, strategic, and human resource dimensions into governance systems. Contemporary administrations are no longer focused solely on procedural efficiency but on developing adaptive and knowledge-driven institutions capable of responding to dynamic socio-economic challenges. They increasingly apply approaches that merge innovation, evidence-based decision-making, and digital capacity development to ensure sustainable institutional performance [13]. In this context, management models increasingly recognise the link between institutional performance and employees' professional advancement. Within this framework, rural self-governments hold a dual responsibility: to provide efficient public services and to act as catalysts of local development and community progress through innovation and knowledge-based management.

In modern public administration, management concepts emphasise the strategic role of digital transformation and human resource development as determinants of career success and institutional effectiveness. The capacity of local administrations increasingly depends on connecting technological tools with education reforms, introducing technology-oriented services, and creating long-term strategies for employee advancement. Such processes have given rise to new governance paradigms that encourage collaboration, experimentation, and continuous improvement. They permeate institutional practice, fostering adaptive and learning-oriented cultures that align with the evolving demands of public service [14]. In rural administrations, these changes manifest through initiatives that enhance organisational efficiency, support sustainable governance, and strengthen employee competence and motivation.

Employee engagement plays a decisive role in enabling local administrations to design and implement sustainable policies, ensure accountability, and deliver high-quality services that meet citizens' expectations. Unlike central institutions, local self-governments are directly responsible for implementing policies in education, social welfare, infrastructure, and local economic development. Their efficiency and credibility depend on creating supportive working environments and investing in continuous professional development, which together strengthen institutional resilience and adaptability to complex societal challenges [15,16]. By linking employee engagement and competence development with broader management strategies, rural administrations improve both individual career trajectories and collective organisational outcome.

2.2. The role of education and digital skills in career development within public administration

Modern public administrations play a crucial role in promoting sustainable rural development by aligning technological innovation with the continuous improvement of human resources. Education and digital skills development represent key factors influencing employees' career success and institutional effectiveness. Without quality education and targeted training, the introduction of new technologies into the public sector does not yield the expected results. Employees who lack the knowledge to effectively use digital tools cannot fully benefit from technological change. This increasingly raises the question of whether technology itself can drive progress without adequate training and institutional readiness among staff [7,17,18]. Continuous learning and professional education therefore represent a strategic investment that enables rural administrations to strengthen institutional performance and create the foundation for long-term community development.

Recent research highlights that digital transformation in local governments should be understood as a dynamic, two-way process between technology and organisational structures.

Technological advancement not only reforms administrative processes but also reshapes how institutions learn, adapt, and deliver public value [19]. Enhancing education systems and digital literacy supports employees' competence growth, motivation, and adaptability, enabling local administrations to integrate innovation into daily operations, create adaptive institutions, and build stronger connections with citizens. Through this process, public administration becomes a driver of social inclusion, innovation diffusion, and sustainable rural development.

The digitalisation of the public sector has an intermediary role in linking competence development with administrative efficiency. Successful implementation of technological innovation depends on harmonising technical solutions with institutional values and the regulatory framework of the public service [20]. Beyond modernising procedures, digital transformation enables adaptation to citizens' needs, improving transparency and efficiency in decision-making. Continuous development of digital skills therefore serves not only as a prerequisite for e-government but also as a pathway to professional growth and long-term career advancement. In rural self-governments, where technological and human resources are often limited, these competencies represent the key link between innovation, effective governance, and inclusive local development. By integrating education and digital literacy into human resource strategies, rural administrations create a framework for institutional capacity building and sustainable career development that supports long-term administrative effectiveness.

2.3. Institutional capacity building and sustainable governance

The development of employees within local self-governments, particularly in rural areas, is increasingly shaped by digital transformation, educational policies, and continuous professional development strategies that strengthen institutional capacity in public administration. These capacities represent crucial factors influencing employees' career development and organisational effectiveness. Building them enables rural governments to become active drivers of sustainable growth and social stability by aligning their internal systems with national and global sustainability agendas. Local administrations play a key role in shaping educational programmes that reflect the needs of the local economy and community, fostering a stronger connection between human resource development and labour market requirements. This contributes to balanced regional development and reduces socio-economic disparities that often hinder the long-term sustainability of rural territories [4,8,22,23]. In this sense, institutional capacity building represents not only an administrative priority but also a foundation for advancing local resilience, innovation, and the competitiveness of rural communities.

In this process, digital transformation represents more than a technical upgrade of services; it reflects the strategic use of information and communication technologies to improve efficiency, accountability, and transparency in the work of public institutions. However, the extent to which these initiatives succeed depends on the ability of public administrations to convert digital resources into measurable outcomes. Coordinated management of digital initiatives and intersectoral cooperation are therefore critical for achieving institutional efficiency and governance effectiveness. Empirical evidence shows that institutional learning, leadership, and organisational culture significantly affect both administrative performance and career advancement opportunities within public administration [6,24,25]. By fostering such balance, local administrations can transform digital governance into a driver of sustainable institutional development and greater accountability.

Sustainable rural governance also depends on the integration of digital innovations with long-term institutional resilience, human resource development, and risk management. When local administrations strategically link technological development with social and environmental objectives, they create the foundation for inclusive and adaptable governance systems. As highlighted in recent analyses, rural areas represent complex socio-economic systems where employment, education, environmental protection, and access to public services are deeply interconnected. Achieving sustainability in such environments requires recognising the interplay between economic, social, and ecological dimensions and reinforcing the institutional mechanisms that support them. This multidimensional perspective allows rural self-governments to design more coherent policies and direct resources to sectors with the greatest development potential [26]. In doing so, rural self-

governments enhance their strategic capacity to balance growth, equity, and environmental protection as complementary dimensions of sustainable governance.

Career development in the public sector, especially within rural administrations, emerges as a dynamic process positioned at the intersection of individual competencies, institutional support, and organisational policies that foster continuous learning and adaptability. When combined with digital capacity building and sustainable management practices, these efforts enhance both the stability and resilience of administrative systems [27]. By linking human resource development with innovation and sustainability, rural administrations strengthen their capacity to deliver long-term value and drive the transformation of local governance. The continual evolution of these interrelated processes provides a basis for understanding how institutional capacity influences career success and the overall performance of rural public administrations.

3. Materials and Methods

The research presented in this paper was conducted to examine the current career situation, career development, and perceptions of career success among employees in local self-governments located in rural areas of the Republic of Serbia. Understanding the key variables influencing career success in rural public administration is particularly important due to limited opportunities for professional advancement, institutional constraints, and the growing need for strategic human resource development in these environments.

The survey instrument consisted of three sections:

1. Socio-demographic characteristics: gender, age, educational level, career stage;
2. Career success (X);
3. Perception of current career state (Y): personality characteristics and self-confidence, job satisfaction, enthusiasm and dedication at work, professional qualification and practical training, knowledge and competence, autonomy in the work process and support from managers, and support from colleagues.

Employees from various organisational units within rural self-governments in the Republic of Serbia participated in the survey, ensuring diversity among respondents in terms of socio-demographic and career-related variables. Data collection was carried out between April 2024 and May 2025. Out of 1,000 distributed questionnaires, 869 were validly completed and processed, yielding a response rate of 86.9%.

The questionnaire design was based on previous studies in human resource management, career development, professional success, and organisational behaviour, particularly those exploring the concepts of career capital, employability, and perceptions of professional success [28–30]. The instrument was adapted to the specific context of local self-government and the research objectives. Respondents rated the career parameters on a five-point Likert scale (1 – completely disagree to 5 – completely agree).

In accordance with the subject and objectives of the research, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: There is a statistically significant relationship between the current career status and career success of employees in rural local administrations in the Republic of Serbia.

H2: There is a statistically significant gender-based differences in the assessment of career success and current career status among employees in rural local administrations in the Republic of Serbia.

Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, multiple regression analysis, and the Mann–Whitney U test were used for data processing and hypothesis testing. The level of statistical significance was set at $p = 0.05$.

4. Results and Discussion

Results of the survey provide an overview of the key characteristics of employees in rural public administrations in the Republic of Serbia, emphasising the factors that shape their career development and perceived career success. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were

applied to identify relationships and patterns among variables, while graphical representations were used to facilitate interpretation and highlight the most relevant findings.

4.1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Respondents were employed in various departments of rural public administrations across the Republic of Serbia. The collected data on gender, age, education, and career stage outline the main socio-demographic characteristics of the group included in the study.

Regarding gender distribution, 55.35% of the 869 employees were men and 44.65% women (Figure 1). This slight male predominance reflects the traditional structure of rural administrations, while the notable share of women indicates steady progress towards gender balance and their expanding participation in administrative and managerial roles.

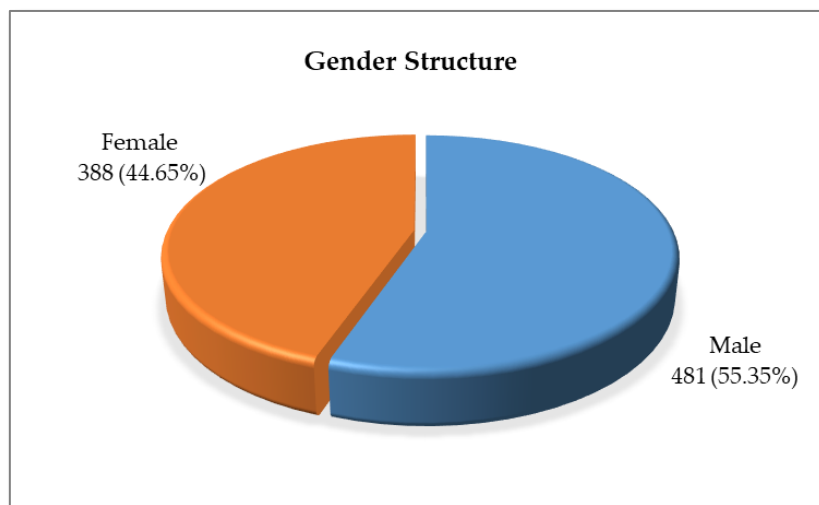


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by gender.

The age distribution (Figure 2) shows a predominance of younger and middle-aged employees. The largest share belongs to those aged 18–30 (41.79% of men and 33.51% of women), followed by the 46–60 group (30.98% of men and 29.90% of women). The 31–45 range includes 19.13% of men and 35.31% of women, while those over 60 are least represented (8.11% of men and 1.29% of women). The average age of 39.8 years indicates a workforce in professional maturity, combining experience with active engagement in administrative work.

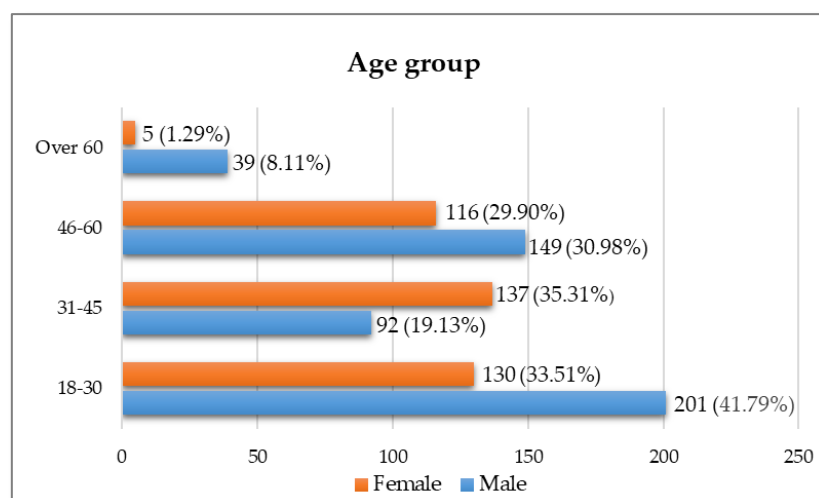


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents by age group and gender.

Data on educational attainment (Figure 3) show that most employees completed secondary school. Among men, 51.35% hold a high school diploma, while 56.44% of women fall into the same category. Higher vocational or university degrees were reported by 45.11% of men and 35.82% of women, whereas postgraduate qualifications (MA, MSc, PhD) were obtained by 3.53% of men and 7.73% of women. These results suggest that most employees possess a solid educational foundation for administrative and managerial roles, while the growing share of women with higher degrees highlights their professional engagement and commitment to lifelong learning.

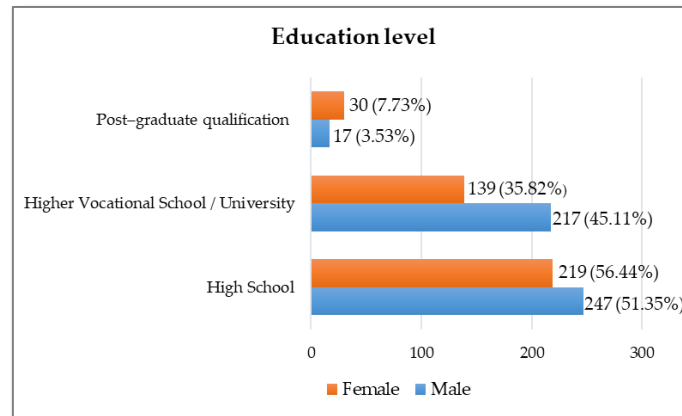


Figure 3. Distribution of respondents by educational level and gender.

Analysis of career stages (Figure 4) shows that most respondents are in the employment or early career phases. Among men, 34.62% are employed and 24.36% in the early stage, while among women, 29.90% are employed and 31.44% in early career development. The established phase includes 22.44% of men and 27.84% of women, reflecting the presence of experienced professionals. Only a small share are in the preparation or late-career stages, indicating that rural administrations are largely composed of employees in their most active professional years. This structure suggests strong potential for innovation and adaptability, as the workforce combines experience with openness to learning and technological change.

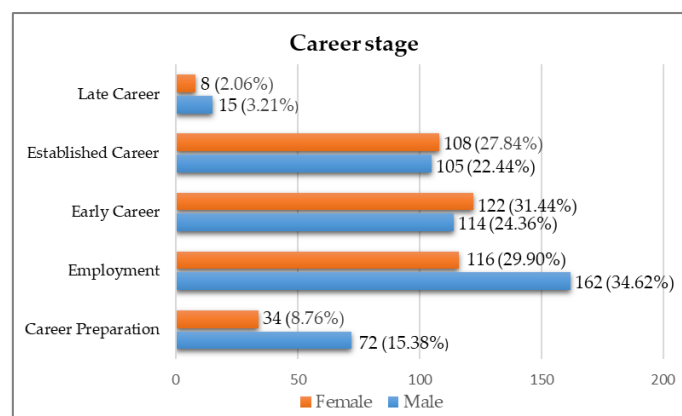


Figure 4. Distribution of career stage of respondents by gender.

The socio-demographic profile of respondents confirms the representativeness of the sample for the analysed population. Diversity in age, education, and career stage provides a realistic picture of employees in rural self-governments across the Republic of Serbia. The balanced gender ratio and mix of younger and experienced employees form a solid basis for further statistical analysis and examination of relationships between individual characteristics, institutional context, and career success. This structure also reflects the ongoing generational transition within local administrations, where knowledge transfer and professional development play a key role in maintaining institutional continuity and fostering innovation.

4.2. Descriptive statistics of career success and current career state

Descriptive statistics were calculated for variables related to career success (X) and the current career state (Y) to identify gender-based differences in perception.

As shown in Table 1, male respondents reported a higher average score for career success (M = 4.16, SD = 0.961) compared with female respondents (M = 3.79, SD = 1.066).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for career success (X).

	Gender	Mean	Std. Dev.	Skewness	Kurtosis	Jarque-Bera (probability)
Assessment of career success (X)	M	4.16	0.961	-1.5278	5.5305	315.4521 (0.0000)
	F	3.79	1.066	-0.7550	3.0725	36.94265 (0.0000)

The descriptive results for the current career state (Y) are presented in Table 2. Among men, mean scores range from 3.76 to 4.22, while among women they range from 3.11 to 4.36.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of current career state variables (Y).

Current career state variable	Gender	Mean	Std. Dev.	Skewness	Kurtosis	Jarque-Bera (probability)
Personality characteristics and self-confidence (Y-1)	M	4.22	1.24	-1.345041	3.4828	149.7033 (0.0000)
	F	3.89	1.21	-0.84661	2.611298	48.78912 (0.0000)
Job satisfaction (Y-2)	M	4.05	0.75	-0.7318	3.985416	62.39098 (0.0000)
	F	3.65	1.28	-0.76608	2.546865	41.26482 (0.0000)
Enthusiasm and dedication at work (Y-3)	M	4.02	1.20	-1.12978	3.247704	103.5431 (0.0000)
	F	4.36	0.71	-0.85685	3.24108	48.41363 (0.0000)
Professional qualification and practical training (Y-4)	M	3.76	1.42	-0.91085	2.4441	72.69780 (0.0000)
	F	4.32	0.92	-1.5628	5.3047	243.7996 (0.0000)
Knowledge and competence (Y-5)	M	4.13	1.13	-1.31408	3.8471	152.7989 (0.0000)
	F	4.29	0.81	-1.13118	4.2179	106.7211 (0.0000)
Autonomy in the work process and support from managers (Y-6)	M	3.82	0.73	-0.2797	3.3712	7.286080 (0.026173)
	F	3.11	1.273	-0.4077	1.9903	27.23414 (0.0000)
Support from other employees (Y-7)	M	4.10	0.91	-0.8388	3.4018	59.63434 (0.0000)
	F	3.54	1.45	-0.6377	1.9944	42.64449 (0.0000)

Male respondents rated Y-1 “Personality characteristics and self-confidence” (M = 4.22), Y-5 “Knowledge and competence” (M = 4.13), and Y-7 “Support from other employees” (M = 4.10) highest, with Y-4 “Professional qualification and practical training” (M = 3.76) lowest. For female respondents, the highest means were for Y-3 “Enthusiasm and dedication at work” (M = 4.36), Y-4 “Professional qualification and practical training” (M = 4.32), and Y-5 “Knowledge and competence” (M = 4.29), while the lowest was Y-6 “Autonomy in the work process and support from managers” (M = 3.11). As shown in Figure 5, the mean distribution confirms clear gender differences, particularly in enthusiasm, professional training, and managerial support.

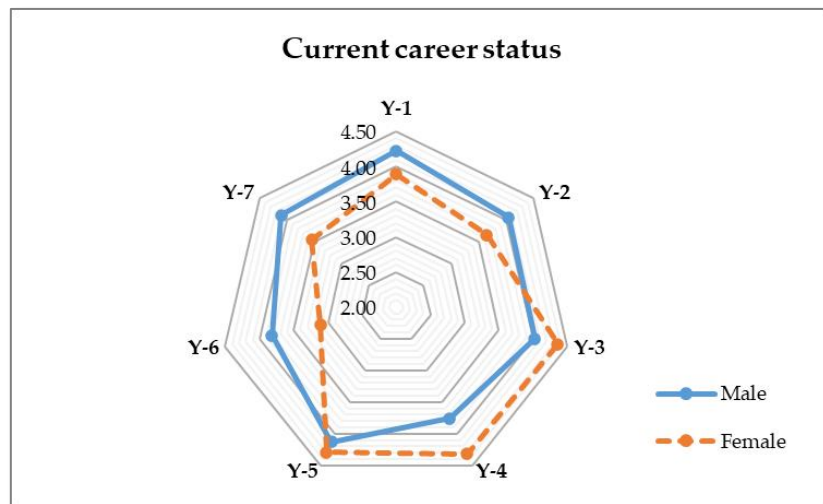


Figure 5. Distribution of current career state variables (Y) by gender.

For most variables, the response distributions display negative skewness and high kurtosis, particularly among female respondents, indicating a concentration of responses around higher values with few outliers. The Jarque–Bera test confirmed statistically significant deviations from normality ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that non-parametric methods are more appropriate for subsequent analysis.

4.3. Correlation analysis of current career state variables

To examine the relationships among the dimensions of the current career state (Y), a correlation analysis was performed separately for male and female respondents.

As shown in Table 3, correlations among variables for male respondents were generally weak and mostly statistically insignificant, ranging from -0.17 to 0.11 . The strongest positive link appeared between Y-5.M “Knowledge and competence” and Y-6.M “Autonomy in the work process and support from managers” ($r = 0.113$), while the strongest negative correlation was between Y-6.M and Y-7.M “Support from other employees” ($r = -0.168$). These results indicate that job satisfaction, professional training, and managerial support function largely independently, with no consistent interdependence across the analysed career dimensions.

Table 3. Pearson’s correlation coefficients of current career state variables for male respondents.

	Y-1.M	Y-2.M	Y-3.M	Y-4.M	Y-5.M	Y-6.M	Y-7.M
Y-1.M	1.000						
Y-2.M	0.044	1.000					
Y-3.M	-0.031	-0.033	1.000				
Y-4.M	-0.047	0.055	0.009	1.000			
Y-5.M	-0.029	-0.027	-0.068	-0.064	1.000		
Y-6.M	-0.021	-0.021	0.065	-0.040	0.113	1.000	
Y-7.M	-0.023	-0.148	-0.048	-0.038	0.026	-0.168	1.000

Analysis of Table 4 reveals slightly stronger and more structured relationships among the analysed variables for female respondents. The strongest positive correlation appeared between Y-1.F “Personality characteristics and self-confidence” and Y-3.F “Enthusiasm and dedication at work” ($r = 0.303$), followed by Y-1.F and Y-7.F “Support from other employees” ($r = 0.177$). The weakest negative association was between Y-3.F and Y-4.F “Professional qualification and practical training” ($r = -0.060$). These results indicate that, for female respondents, enthusiasm, self-confidence, and collegial support act as mutually reinforcing aspects of career experience, while the connection between enthusiasm and professional training remains weak.

Table 4. Pearson’s correlation coefficients of current career state variables for female respondents.

	Y-1.F	Y-2.F	Y-3.F	Y-4.F	Y-5.F	Y-6.F	Y-7.F
Y-1.F	1.000						
Y-2.F	0.147	1.000					
Y-3.F	0.303	0.129	1.000				
Y-4.F	0.063	0.019	-0.060	1.000			
Y-5.F	0.076	0.098	0.077	-0.058	1.000		
Y-6.F	-0.002	0.130	0.123	0.029	0.063	1.000	
Y-7.F	0.177	0.078	0.178	-0.001	0.064	0.009	1.000

Correlation analysis revealed predominantly weak, though occasionally moderate, links between job attitudes, competence, and support. To further examine these relationships, multiple regression analysis was applied to assess how current career state variables (Y) predict perceived career success (X).

4.4. Regression analysis of current career status by gender

Regression analysis assessed the influence of current career state variables (Y-1 to Y-7) on perceived career success (X), separately for male and female respondents.

Table 5. Linear regression (male respondents).

Dependent Variable: X.M
 Method: Least Squares
 Sample: 481
 Included observations: 481

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-statistic	Probability
C	2.904455	0.505422	5.746599	0.0000
Y-1.M	0.033649	0.035261	0.954288	0.3404
Y-2.M	0.069675	0.058697	1.187023	0.2358
Y-3.M	0.051286	0.036402	1.408880	0.1595
Y-4.M	-0.040499	0.030876	-1.311685	0.1903
Y-5.M	-0.021946	0.038867	-0.564654	0.5726
Y-6.M	0.075646	0.053014	1.426895	0.1543
Y-7.M	0.141342	0.049474	2.856908	0.0045

Model summary	Value	Model summary	Value
R-squared	0.029703	Mean dependent var	4.155925
Adjusted R-squared	0.015343	S.D. dependent var	0.961017
S.E. of regression	0.953616	Akaike info criterion	2.759381
Sum squared resid	430.1383	Schwarz criterion	2.828834
Log likelihood	-655.6310	Hannan-Quinn criterion	2.786679
F-statistic	2.068487	Durbin-Watson statistic	1.881863
Prob (F-statistic)	0.045498		

As shown in Table 5, the regression model for male respondents was statistically significant ($F = 2.068, p = 0.045$), with an R^2 of 0.0297, indicating that about 3% of the variance in career success is explained by the observed predictors. Among the independent variables, only Y-7.M “Support from other employees” ($\beta = 0.141, p = 0.0045$) had a statistically significant effect on perceived career success. This result implies that collegial support is the main determinant of career satisfaction and achievement among male employees in rural local self-governments. Other factors, such as job satisfaction, autonomy, and professional training, showed no statistically significant predictive effects. The Durbin–Watson statistic (1.88) indicates the absence of autocorrelation, while the model’s standard error (0.95) confirms an adequate model fit.

Table 6. Linear regression (male respondents)

Dependent Variable: X.F				
Method: Least Squares				
Sample (adjusted): 388				
Included observations: 388 after adjustments				
Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-statistic	Probability
C	2.930172	0.512982	5.712038	0.0000
Y-1.F	-0.086488	0.046660	-1.853601	0.0646
Y-2.F	0.086349	0.042212	2.045595	0.0415
Y-3.F	-0.001442	0.079657	-0.018098	0.9856
Y-4.F	0.088951	0.057636	1.543332	0.1236
Y-5.F	-0.063294	0.065731	-0.962926	0.3362
Y-6.F	0.155766	0.042032	3.705906	0.0002
Y-7.F	0.082114	0.037398	2.195677	0.0287
Model summary	Value	Model summary	Value	
R-squared	0.074530	Mean dependent var	3.791237	
Adjusted R-squared	0.057482	S.D. dependent var	1.066388	
S.E. of regression	1.035286	Akaike info criterion	2.927635	
Sum squared resid	407.2903	Schwarz criterion	3.009305	
Log likelihood	-559.9612	Hannan-Quinn criterion	2.960016	
F-statistic	4.371737	Durbin-Watson statistic	1.785627	
Prob (F-statistic)	0.000111			

Table 6 presents the regression model for female respondents, which is statistically significant ($F = 4.372, p < 0.001$), with an R^2 of 0.0745, indicating that about 7% of the variation in perceived career success is explained by the included predictors. Statistically significant positive effects were observed for Y-2.F “Job satisfaction” ($\beta = 0.086, p = 0.0415$), Y-6.F “Autonomy in the work process and support from managers” ($\beta = 0.156, p < 0.001$), and Y-7.F “Support from other employees” ($\beta = 0.082, p = 0.0287$). These results suggest that, for female employees, perceived career success primarily depends on job satisfaction, managerial trust, and collegial relationships. The Durbin–Watson statistic (1.79) indicates no autocorrelation, while the adjusted R^2 (0.057) confirms modest yet meaningful explanatory power of the model.

After multiple linear regression analysis was applied to identify significant predictors of the current career state for perceived career success, the following regression equations were derived:

For male respondents, a very weak but statistically significant joint effect was found between variables Y-1.M–Y-7.M and X.M ($F(1, 477) = 5.65, p = 0.018$). The regression equation was:

$$\hat{Y} = 3.682 + 0.115 \times Y-7.M \tag{1}$$

The R^2 value of 0.012 indicates that the model explains approximately 1.2% of the variability in career success, with the predictor Y-7.M “Support from other employees” remaining statistically significant ($p = 0.018$).

For female respondents, a weak but statistically significant overall effect was observed between Y-1.F–Y-7.F and X.F ($F(2, 385) = 10.07, p < 0.001$). The regression equation was:

$$\hat{Y} = 3.015 + 0.167 \times Y-6.F + 0.073 \times Y-7.F \tag{2}$$

The R^2 value of 0.05 indicates that the model explains around 5% of the variance in career success among women, with Y-6.F “Autonomy in the work process and support from managers” ($p < 0.001$) and Y-7.F “Support from other employees” ($p = 0.048$) identified as statistically significant predictors.

The obtained results indicate that career success (X) is only weakly explained by the analysed dimensions of the current career state (Y) in both gender groups. Nevertheless, support from other employees (Y-7) consistently contributes to perceived career success among both male and female respondents, underscoring the significance of collegial relationships, cooperation, and a supportive work climate within rural local administrations. For female respondents, autonomy in the work process and support from managers (Y-6) also emerged as significant predictors, suggesting that managerial encouragement, trust, and empowerment are critical elements in strengthening both job satisfaction and professional advancement.

These findings confirm that career success in rural public administration is shaped less by formal structures and more by interpersonal and organisational dynamics. The presence of teamwork, managerial communication, and mutual respect fosters higher motivation and greater perceived achievement among employees, regardless of gender. Although the models explain a relatively small proportion of variance in career success (1.2% for men and 5% for women), the detected relationships reveal important behavioural and institutional mechanisms that influence how individuals perceive progress and satisfaction within their careers. Strengthening such mechanisms through mentoring, internal networking, and inclusive management practices can therefore enhance professional fulfilment, retention, and overall institutional effectiveness in rural local self-governments.

4.5. Gender differences in career perceptions

The Mann–Whitney U test was employed to examine gender-based differences in the perception of career success (X) and current career state variables (Y-1–Y-7), as the data did not meet the assumption of normality. The significance level was set at $p = 0.05$. Results in Table 7 indicate statistically significant differences in most analysed variables. Male respondents reported higher scores for career success (X), personality and self-confidence (Y-1), job satisfaction (Y-2), autonomy and managerial support (Y-6), and colleague support (Y-7), suggesting a more favourable perception of their current career position. In contrast, female respondents rated enthusiasm and dedication at work (Y-3) and professional qualification and practical training (Y-4) higher, reflecting stronger motivation and commitment to continuous learning. No statistically significant difference was found for knowledge and competence (Y-5), indicating a shared perception of expertise between male and female employees in rural local administrations.

Table 7. Gender differences in career perceptions (Mann–Whitney U test).

Variable	U test	Z-Score	p-value	Interpretation
X	73654	5.25609	< 0.00001	Male respondents rated career success higher.
Y-1	74173.5	5.1144	< 0.00001	Higher self-confidence among male respondents.
Y-2	81159.5	3.20905	0.00132	Greater job satisfaction among men.
Y-3	84009.5	-2.43174	0.0151	Higher enthusiasm and dedication among women.
Y-4	75289	-4.81016	< .00001	Better rating of professional training among women.
Y-5	91116.5	-0.49338	0.62414	No significant gender difference.
Y-6	68069.5	6.7792	< 0.00001	Greater autonomy and managerial support among men.
Y-7	76835	4.38851	< 0.00001	Stronger perceived colleague support among men.

Significance level: p = 0.05

These findings confirm gender-specific patterns in the perception of professional success and workplace conditions among employees in rural local self-governments. Male respondents tend to associate career success with self-confidence, managerial support, and collegial relations, whereas female respondents emphasise enthusiasm, professional training, and continuous development as key dimensions of their career development.

4.6. Discussion and hypothesis verification

The conducted analyses confirmed both hypotheses, providing a comprehensive insight into the determinants of career success among employees in rural local self-governments in the Republic of Serbia. The findings indicate that professional achievement in these environments is determined not only by individual skills and attitudes but also by interpersonal relations and institutional support mechanisms.

Hypothesis H1, which states that the current career status has a statistically significant influence on the career success of employees in rural local self-governments in the Republic of Serbia, has been confirmed. The analysis revealed that autonomy in performing work tasks, together with managerial and collegial support, are the most relevant predictors of perceived career success. Independence in performing work activities positively affects employee performance and their sense of professional accomplishment within local administrations [30]. Previous studies have also shown that implementing gender-sensitive and inclusive management strategies contributes to stronger engagement and improved performance among public sector employees [31]. Additionally, the importance of professional inclusion during the earliest stages of employment has been highlighted [32], confirming that recruitment processes and initial job roles are key determinants of long-term career development in the public sector in rural areas. These results jointly suggest that the professional advancement of employees in rural local self-governments depends on early career support, managerial trust, and an organisational culture that encourages independence, initiative, and competence. Such an approach enhances individual performance while strengthening the long-term sustainability and institutional resilience of rural administrations by developing human capital and reducing employee turnover.

Hypothesis H2 was also confirmed, revealing statistically significant gender-based differences in perceptions of career success and current career state. The Mann–Whitney U test showed that men rated confidence, job satisfaction, autonomy, and colleague support higher, whereas women placed greater emphasis on enthusiasm, professional training, and continuous learning. These findings align with previous research [33–35] highlighting the persistence of gender asymmetries in public administration, especially in career advancement and managerial opportunities. Similar patterns appear in other institutional settings, where organisational culture and structural barriers continue to shape women’s career progression and professional perceptions [36]. Recent studies also show that fostering gender equality and inclusive initiatives enhances women’s empowerment and resilience in public and rural sectors [1,37,38]. Despite growing female participation in local governance, structural and cultural constraints still affect career paths and perceptions of success. The observed differences therefore reflect distinct adaptation strategies: men rely more on organisational authority and external recognition, while women strengthen professional legitimacy through competence, education, and interpersonal relations.

In conclusion, the confirmation of both hypotheses underscores that career success in rural local self-governments is shaped more by interpersonal, psychological, and organisational factors than by formal hierarchical progression. The results align with contemporary career development theories [28,29], according to which adaptability, continuous learning, and social capital represent key components of professional growth. Enhancing internal support systems, mentoring practices, and gender-sensitive development programmes can therefore serve as strategic instruments for improving satisfaction, competence, and retention within the rural local self-government system in the Republic of Serbia. These findings also provide valuable practical implications for policymakers seeking to modernise rural governance and build a more motivated, competent, and stable local administrative workforce.

5. Conclusion

Career success in rural public administrations is determined by numerous interrelated dimensions, including employees' personal characteristics, as well as normative, legal, organisational, and socio-economic systems. The observed interdependence confirms that an effective human resource strategy in local administrations requires a structured and systemic approach, in which the development of individual competences must be supported by coherent institutional policies and a stable legal framework that promotes professional growth and organisational resilience.

The empirical findings confirmed that current career state variables significantly influence perceived career success, while gender-based differences remain an important factor in explaining variations in employees' experiences. Male respondents reported higher levels of confidence, job satisfaction, and managerial support, whereas female respondents showed greater enthusiasm and commitment to continuous learning. These results demonstrate that gender asymmetries and differentiated professional strategies continue to shape career success, reflecting both institutional culture and unequal access to advancement opportunities within rural administrations.

Although the analysed models explain only a modest proportion of the total variance in career success, they emphasise the importance of interpersonal and organisational dimensions in shaping individual career trajectories. Strengthening managerial trust, teamwork, mentoring mechanisms, and professional autonomy can enhance motivation, performance, and institutional effectiveness. Improvements in human resource management at the local level therefore contribute not only to individual career satisfaction but also to the broader socio-economic development and balanced regional progress of the Republic of Serbia.

As the research was conducted exclusively within rural local self-governments, the findings should be interpreted within this specific context. Nevertheless, they provide a valuable basis for policymakers and local authorities in designing strategic measures for human resource management, staff retention, and professional advancement. Particular attention should be devoted to developing retention strategies that counter the migration of skilled employees, especially women, from rural to urban administrations, since such movements reflect both gender disparities in career progression and broader structural constraints that weaken institutional capacity and threaten the sustainability of rural governance.

Future research should broaden the analytical scope by including comparative studies between rural and urban administrations and adopting longitudinal approaches to capture changes in career dynamics over time. It would also be beneficial to further explore perceptions and variables related to career growth, motivation, and institutional support, in order to better understand how individual aspirations and organisational factors interact in shaping sustainable career development within rural public administration systems.

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