

BUILDING INSTITUTIONS THAT VALUE TALENT IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR IN VIETNAM TODAY

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Abstract

Building an institutional framework for talent acquisition in the public sector is essential and urgent in order to cultivate an elite workforce with strategic thinking, innovative capabilities, and the ability to create and lead reforms. In recent years, alongside the process of institutional reform and administrative modernization, Vietnam has made initial progress in building an institutional framework for talent acquisition in the public sector. This article delves into analyzing Vietnam's development of a talent acquisition institutional framework in the public sector, proposing solutions to improve recruitment and appointment mechanisms, incentive systems, create a dynamic and transparent work environment, fundamentally reform the approach, and refine the talent acquisition policy system in a strategic, feasible manner, closely aligned with sustainable development goals in the current context of Vietnam.

Keywords: *Institutions, talent, innovative thinking, public sector, context*

Introduction

In modern public administration, the institution of talent utilization in the public sector is one of the key elements for improving institutional quality, governance effectiveness, and the state's capacity for development. The rapid development of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, in the context of globalization, digital transformation, and increasingly fierce competition for high-quality human resources, necessitates practical application in Vietnam. This serves both theoretical purposes and meets the needs of institutional reform, enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of human resource policy implementation in the public sector.

History has proven that the prosperity of a nation is closely linked to the utilization of talent. Looking back at the history of our country's revolution in the 20th century, the role of outstandingly talented individuals cannot be denied. President Ho Chi Minh surpassed his contemporaries in vision, strategic thinking, and the ability to rally the support of the people. General Secretary Le Duan stood out with his unwavering determination and iron will in the aspiration for national reunification; General Secretary Truong Chinh left his mark with his steadfast adherence to principles but also his willingness to think outside the box, becoming a spiritual pillar for the reform process. Alongside them were professional talents, such as Generals Vo Nguyen Giap, Nguyen Chi Thanh, and Le Trong Tan... in the military field. Numerous prominent intellectuals, artists, and writers with significant social influence rallied under the banner of revolution, including Tran Dai Nghia, Ta Quang Buu, Ton That Tung, Van Cao, Xuan Dieu, and Che Lan Vien... Although their contributions may have varied, they all shared a common trait: they were all exceptional talents. They were the finest products that the nation produced during a historical period.

It is evident that the role of talented individuals in the formation and development of Vietnam is a historical reality. During the early years of the Doi Moi (Renovation) period, full of difficulties and challenges, Vietnam produced leaders of exceptional character such as General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh, General Secretary Do Muoi, President Le Duc Anh, Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, and Prime Minister Phan Van Khai... Their steadfastness and genuine superiority compared to others were key factors in helping our country stand firm amidst the numerous difficulties of the early years of change. Since the 2000s, Vietnam has still had outstanding individuals, but we haven't seen a large, diverse group that has made such a clear difference as previous generations. The context of the resistance war and the early stages of national renovation, fraught with challenges, provided the environment for these exceptional individuals to emerge and contribute. It is difficult to imagine what Vietnam would be like, or what the revolutionary cause of the Party and the people would be like, without those generations of talented leaders and intellectuals. Currently and in the years to come, the aspiration for a strong nation and the realization of the goal of Vietnam becoming a developed, high-income country by 2045 is creating an urgent need for leadership talent, both politically and professionally, in a new context with many completely different requirements.

It can be seen that the Party's views and policies on attracting, retaining, and utilizing talent in the new context have been evident since the 8th National Congress (1996), especially the Central Committee Resolution No. 3 on "Cadre Strategy during the period of accelerated industrialization and modernization of the country." In 2008, the 10th

Central Committee issued Resolution No. 27-NQ/TW on "Building a team of intellectuals during the period of accelerated industrialization and modernization of the country." In 2016, the requirements for qualities and capabilities of strategic cadres were addressed at the 4th Central Committee meeting of the 12th Party Congress. In May 2018, the 7th Central Committee meeting of the 12th Party Congress issued Resolution No. 26-NQ/TW "On focusing on building a team of cadres at all levels, especially at the strategic level, with sufficient qualities, capabilities, and prestige, commensurate with the tasks." Regulation No. 214-QD/TW, issued in January 2020, set out requirements for job titles and criteria for evaluating cadres under the management of the Central Committee, the Politburo, and the Secretariat. Generally, from a very early stage, the Party recognized the need to build a team of cadres with sufficient capacity to meet the tasks of the new era. The issue of attracting talent was emphasized, particularly intellectuals, with the viewpoint of "Utilizing intellectuals based on accurate assessment of their qualities, abilities, and contributions; having special policies for the country's talents."

1. An honest, intelligent government based on knowledge

Resolution 26-NQ/TW dated May 19, 2018, of the 12th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam stated: "Overall, the cadre is large but not strong... There is a shortage of skilled leaders and managers, scientists, and leading experts in many fields... many cadres, including high-ranking officials, lack professionalism... their ability to work in an international environment is still limited." The policy of building a strategic-level cadre can be seen as a move to create the Party's most outstanding leadership force. Recently, several laws and resolutions of the National Assembly have created specific mechanisms for provinces and cities to attract and utilize talent and develop high-quality human resources.

However, to date, Vietnam still lacks a specific process and method for selecting talented leaders, tailored to the current context of the country. Regulations and criteria for evaluating leaders generally prioritize political and moral qualities, followed by talent. On April 28, 2000, the Ministry of Interior issued Decision No. 297/QD-BNV on the plan for developing a national strategy for attracting and utilizing talent, but to date, Vietnam has yet to institutionalize a comprehensive and specific policy regarding talent.

The most pressing issue is that Vietnam has yet to clearly distinguish between the selection of political leaders and administrative and professional leaders and managers in the public sector. While Vietnam can use a voting system for political leaders, applying the same voting principle to administrative and professional positions in the public sector could create difficulties for talented candidates. The current evaluation and promotion mechanisms also don't truly rely on concrete contributions and the positive changes they've

made to their agencies, units, or localities. When a new official is appointed, we may know their career path, but it's difficult to know what they've accomplished in the past or what contributions they've made to the development of the organization or community. This reality risks creating "phantom talents"—individuals with limited abilities and no concrete contributions who can advance through skillful handling of situations or personal connections. Furthermore, the compensation system in state agencies is very limited, even unreasonable, due to the lack of clear differentiation between positions and the specific abilities of individuals. To attract talented and skilled people to the public sector, Vietnam needs to ensure a consistent general principle: while compensation may not make officials and civil servant wealthy, it must be commensurate with their different contributions and ensure they have at least a moderately good standard of living compared to the cost of living in their place of residence and work.

Historical evidence from Vietnam and some countries in the region shows that while organizational structures may be cumbersome, institutions may be incomplete, and administrative procedures may be complicated, if leaders and managers are competent, dedicated, and have a desire to contribute, then agencies and organizations can still function smoothly. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (Singapore) concluded from his experience that even with a weak government system, if there are talented people, the people can still have a relatively stable government with a fairly good level of progress. He also emphasized that leadership is a crucial issue, determining the survival and prosperity of a nation. He likened development to swimming against the current; a talented leader is the locomotive guiding the country's development, while a poor leader will hinder the talented, impeding the nation's progress.

In today's knowledge-based economy, innovation is increasingly asserting its crucial role in development strategies, contributing to increased competitiveness and enhanced prosperity for nations; many countries with strong economic foundations and good working conditions have sought every means to attract talented individuals from around the world to work for them.

As an entity that makes and implements collective decisions (public policy), and to realize the aspiration for social equality and national prosperity, the government needs to be organized and operated based on knowledge. An honest and intelligent government is one that is organized and operated transparently, enacting policies that meet the legitimate needs of the people, implementing policies effectively and efficiently, and being accountable to citizens. An honest and intelligent government also does not tolerate cronyism, short-sighted group interests, special privileges, or discrimination in the process

of policy making and implementation. This means that an honest and intelligent government must be a place where talent and dedication converge. Therefore, the government must attract and utilize the most capable individuals in society. The public service must be a collection of outstanding individuals – those with sufficient intellectual capacity and passion, and a desire to contribute to society. For those holding positions in the public system to be recognized for their greater effort, diligence, and creativity, the government needs to build an institution that values talent. This institution will help the government become more honest and intelligent, thereby realizing the expectations of members of society. Furthermore, establishing an honest and intelligent government based on a talent-valuing institutional process will increase political trust among citizens, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of the government itself and the entire political system.

From a socio-structural perspective, a meritocratic society recognizes the division of individuals into different classes based on talent, not on wealth, privilege, background, or social status. From a public administration perspective, it is a system of public sector personnel selection processes based on the principle of competitive merit, through which the most talented individuals can change their lives through their ability to contribute to society. Thanks to a meritocratic system, diverse job positions will select the most suitable candidates. In other words, a meritocratic system gives jobs to the most deserving individuals, allowing them to contribute the most to the organization and society. Therefore, a meritocratic system promotes social mobility, thereby ensuring social equality and fairness. Talented individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds will not be hindered by class or social group barriers. This also means that individuals from more privileged social groups or classes, holding high positions in government, can be easily replaced by more talented individuals from disadvantaged social strata. Thanks to a talent-based system, talented individuals are always guaranteed opportunities to contribute and receive deserved rewards. All they need to do is strive to learn, train, and perform their best in their work. A leadership challenge for nations aiming for prosperity and strength is to create and implement a talent-based system in the public sector.

In modern society, a talented and successful leader is not simply someone who gathers and utilizes talented people around them. Rather, a talented leader is someone who creates and builds an institution that values and employs talent within the state. Only in this way can talented individuals consistently secure a stable position within the nation's public administration system.

1. The current state of institution building for the effective utilization of talent in Vietnam

In the context of global competition for high-quality human resources, the institution of talent recruitment in the public sector plays a strategic role in the process of institutional reform and improving the quality of national governance, as demonstrated in the following aspects:

i) It is an important prerequisite for building an elite team of public officials, ensuring high efficiency in policy planning and implementation, and enhancing adaptability and flexible management in a rapidly changing governance environment.

ii) It creates a strong impetus for innovation and reform in the public service system, improving the quality of human resources, innovating organizational methods, and building a modern and efficient public service culture.

iii) It contributes to strengthening the legitimacy of the public administration and enhancing social trust, when key positions in the administrative system are given to talented individuals through transparent, fair, and scientific selection mechanisms. Institutional efforts to attract talent to the public sector are not only a human resources solution, but also a crucial strategic tool for improving institutional quality, governance capacity, and the image of the state during the transition to a new growth model and international integration.

The system of valuing talent is often mentioned in relation to East Asian countries and is considered a decisive factor in the miraculous success of Japan, South Korea, China, and Singapore from the latter half of the 20th century onwards. A common characteristic of talented leaders and managers is that they are all well-trained, especially abroad. They are recruited through a rigorous process, appointed, and promoted based on competitive ability, concrete results, and practical contributions to their work. Generally, East Asian countries have a tradition of valuing human resources, especially talented individuals. For example, in Singapore, they consider public officials a superior social class in many aspects, a value highly regarded in society. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was always proud of the people who had been and were bearing the responsibility of developing Singapore – those who belonged to the “A-list group” according to his assessment: “We must have an A-list group... We need first-class people with wise minds, a sense of responsibility to work for the public” [7]. This talented team of officials was the force that successfully implemented political resolutions to bring Singapore to a breakthrough, miraculous development “from the first world to the first world” in less than three decades.

In the past, in Vietnam as well as in many East Asian countries, competitive examinations were the primary method by which feudal governments selected individuals capable of holding official positions at all levels. These individuals were typically academically gifted, achieved high examination results, and were appointed to positions

based on their performance. Essentially, rewards and promotions for this group of officials were primarily based on individual ability and genuine contributions, rather than any preferential criteria outside of competence. Besides being guaranteed benefits commensurate with their position and responsibilities, government officials are also recognized and admired by society, as evidenced by the mindset of "study hard to become an official," and ceremonies such as "returning home in glory to pay respects to ancestors," etc. After being appointed, government officials simultaneously assume many different roles: political leadership, administrative management, judicial, security, education, ethics, etc. Most importantly, there is no clear separation between political (leadership) and administrative (management) roles. This reality stems from the centralized power system characteristic of traditional governance models in many East Asian countries. This tradition of integrating roles remains a feature of the national governance system in our country today. The majority of political leaders begin their careers from a position within the administrative or professional system. While there are no specific statistics, the above fact can be proven by the publicly available resumes of the current members of the 13th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, most of whom began their leadership and management careers from low-level professional positions. When promoted to heads of administrative units, especially at the departmental/office level and below, many also assumed political leadership roles (Secretary of the Party). This characteristic suggests that the quality of the cadre will depend heavily on the recruitment, appointment, evaluation, and promotion processes applied to professional cadres.

Because the risks of abuse of power associated with centralized and unified power are ever-present, the selection process for appointing officials in the past was extremely rigorous. Individuals typically had to be academically gifted, achieve higher exam results than others, and possess strong moral character to advance in their official careers. Historical tradition, the reality of the current cadre, the integrated role of the governance system in our country, as well as experiences from other countries in the region, show that competition based on professional competence will be one of the most decisive factors in developing a high-quality cadre, aiming for the criteria of being "politically sound," "professionally competent," and "clean." This also means that a personnel management process that values competition in knowledge and professional skills, also known as a "talent-oriented system," needs to be established. It is a set of principles, procedures, and standards used to identify, select, appoint, promote, supervise, evaluate, and replace the workforce of officials and public employees. The most important characteristic of a talent-based system is that it operates on the principle of competitive merit. The concretization of this principle is through rigorous selection or examination processes; the abilities and work

results of individuals are quantified specifically to classify the quality of personnel for different positions. Thanks to a talent-based system, all individuals have equal opportunities to work in the public sector, regardless of their background, assets, social status, privileges, or personal connections. In other words, building a talent-based system means establishing a rigorous personnel management process to minimize, or even eliminate, the influence of personal emotions, cronyism, or factors outside of professional competence. The principle of competitive merit is not only a key condition for state agencies to select truly talented individuals, but also a mechanism to weed out incompetent people, ensuring the quality of the public service workforce.

In recent years, alongside institutional reforms and administrative modernization, Vietnam has made initial progress in building a talent-focused institutional framework in the public sector. From being a supporting element in administrative personnel policy, talent-focused institutions are increasingly being established as independent, strategic public policies aimed at creating a team of elite officials capable of leading reforms and fostering national development with many notable achievements. However, current practice in Vietnam reveals significant shortcomings, ranging from inconsistent understanding of the concept and role of talent to inflexible solutions, ineffective evaluation mechanisms, and a lack of an attractive work environment to retain talent. These limitations necessitate a fundamental shift in approach and improvement of the talent-focused policy system towards a strategic, feasible approach closely aligned with sustainable development goals.

Overall, Vietnam's national governance system operates on the principle of unified power, with the Party as the leading core. This is a favorable condition for building an institution that values talent because the unified power structure is less influenced by the principle of majority rule. Therefore, the core entity of the unified power structure can set strict criteria to attract and utilize talented individuals – who are often a minority in society. Unlike Western countries, where the institutional system is merely a tool of a governing core within a unified power structure, and because it does not prioritize objective checks and balances, the current unified power structure in Vietnam requires a high degree of self-control from the power holders at all levels. This also leads to a need for talented public servants, based on the belief that talented individuals are often honest, dedicated, and thereby enhance their own prestige and influence, as well as ensure the success and legitimacy of the governance system.

3. Some solutions to improve the institutional framework for talent recruitment in Vietnam's public sector in the current context

The policy of valuing talent in the public sector is a politically and legally sound policy that receives social attention as an opportunity to realize equal rights and fulfill workers' needs for self-expression and personal development. Despite ongoing efforts, Vietnam is currently facing challenges, particularly in its implementation.

The concrete manifestation of a competitive institutional system is the rigorous selection or examination process; it operates on the principle of competition, and the results of that competition are the most decisive factor in recruitment or promotion. Several solutions can be considered:

Firstly, it is necessary to innovate thinking and enhance the responsibility of leaders at all levels, sectors, and localities, as well as of officials, civil servants, officers, and soldiers of the armed forces and the entire society, regarding the position, role, contributions, and immense role of talented individuals...; identifying the attraction and utilization of talented individuals as an important part of the Party's personnel strategy; it is both an urgent immediate task and a strategic, regular, and long-term task of Party committees and governments.

Secondly, gradually build personnel procedures for political leadership groups and administrative leadership and management groups, as well as civil servants and professional public sector officials.

For political leadership positions (Party, association, and mass organization work), Vietnam should consider combining the use of a planning mechanism with an electoral system within the Party to secure talented Party members for leadership positions. Elections serve as a screening mechanism, mitigating cronyism and the negative practices of seeking positions and power through illicit means. Therefore, internal Party elections can complement the limitations of the planning mechanism. Specifically, all Party members meeting the prescribed standards can register to run for leadership positions within the Party.

Step 1: Candidates must pass selection committees to be eligible to participate in the election.

Step 2: Candidates compete publicly to select the most outstanding individuals. For important positions, candidates may need to campaign directly on local or national television, depending on whether the position is a local or national leadership role.

First, conduct a trial run of open elections for district and provincial Party committee members, then learn from the experience and, if successful, implement open elections for Central Party committee members.

For leadership and administrative staff in state agencies, only competitive selection or examination-based recruitment methods should be used. Open and competitive

examinations not only select the most outstanding individuals but also instill a sense of legitimacy and pride in those who pass the rigorous process, thus fostering greater respect, appreciation, and responsibility for their roles. Simultaneously, it prevents those with ulterior motives from climbing the ranks and damaging the reputation and competence of the public administration.

Thirdly, a system for organizing recruitment examinations should be established for central-level public sector agencies and a system for provincial/city-level public sector agencies, in line with the current two-tiered local government model. These two examination systems at two levels will increase equal opportunities for all candidates, enhance objectivity, and reduce the influence of nepotism or negative practices currently prevalent in fragmented, individual agency-level examinations. This selection model allows anyone to participate if they meet the criteria, with the examination results being the sole criterion for successful candidates. The time and location of the examination should be determined based on the convenience of the candidates. Information about the examination should be widely publicized so that many people are aware and candidates everywhere have sufficient time to prepare and take the exam. Transparency regarding the number of positions to be filled, the criteria, and the selection process is essential.

Fourth, consideration should be given to supplementing the evaluation process, appointment and promotion system, which should be based on specific results and contributions, conducted annually with clear quantifiable criteria. Each newly appointed official should be accompanied by a description of their previous achievements and contributions. These quantitative statistics should be publicly available on the website of the recruiting unit so that interested parties can access them, allowing candidates to assess their own competitiveness for government employment opportunities. Furthermore, the State needs to implement a policy of promotion and rapid advancement based on actual work performance. After recruitment, whether an official is promoted, how quickly or slowly they are promoted, and to what extent, should depend on their work results, contributions, and potential, not on their qualifications, seniority, or nepotism. Regulations need to be revised to prioritize competence and achievements over qualifications or connections, and an attractive compensation system should be built to attract and retain talent, while also creating opportunities for them to contribute.

Along with recruiting talented individuals, Vietnam needs a strong "filter" to weed out officials who do not meet job requirements, while simultaneously creating opportunities for talented and dedicated individuals. Institutionalizing this "filter" for officials can be done as follows:

First, a clear task assignment mechanism needs to be implemented for the heads of agencies and organizations. For example, annually, the heads of ministries and departments, and the chairpersons of provincial and city People's Committees, sign task assignments with the Prime Minister, agreeing on specific goals, results, measurement scales and methods, as well as a detailed plan for completion.

In step 1, the head of the agency or organization develops a strategy, identifies objectives, and creates a specific plan to achieve those goals.

Step 2 involves signing a task assignment agreement with the head of the immediate superior, agreeing on specific goals, results, measurement scales and methods, and a detailed plan for completion. The goals need to be quantified specifically with measurable criteria...

In step 3, a mid-term evaluation is conducted to check progress and the level of work achieved against the set plan and objectives, and to discuss plans for strengthening efforts to achieve the established goals.

In step 4, evaluate the results, the extent to which objectives have been achieved, and make evaluation decisions.

Next, a specialized council is established to assist the head in evaluation and inspection. The council comprises elected representatives (National Assembly or People's Council) with expertise, and highly reputable experts and scientists. This council is formed when it is time for evaluations and inspections and is dissolved after completing its task. The evaluation results serve as the basis for rewarding, promoting, or dismissing the head of the agency or organization. Heads of agencies and organizations that achieve excellent results and exceed targets are rewarded or promoted to higher positions, while those with poor results or failing to meet minimum targets are dismissed. The evaluation is conducted annually at the end of the year, and the results are publicly announced through mass media so that officials and the public can monitor and assess the current state of each agency or organization, determining whether it is progressing or regressing compared to the previous year based on each indicator and criterion, and to conduct oversight. Therefore, those in leadership positions who lack the health, qualities, and capabilities to shoulder the responsibilities will be forced to step down and make way for others.

Fifth, strengthen the implementation of policies for identifying and recommending talent in the public sector, emphasizing the search for talent to identify individuals with exemplary moral character and lifestyle; a desire to contribute and serve the nation and the people; outstanding skills and creative abilities; and exceptional projects, products, achievements, merits, or contributions that bring about progress and development in a field, industry, locality, or country.

Vietnam needs more policies to attract professors and leading experts from around the world to teach; lead research and apply science and technology; and attract cultural, artistic, and sports stars, as well as great talents in various fields, to work and live in Vietnam. It should proactively cooperate and participate in forums to exchange and share experiences with other countries on attracting and utilizing talent; promote programs to invite and attract Vietnamese talents abroad to return to work and support their integration into life in Vietnam; establish a global network of Vietnamese talents, a global network of Vietnamese experts and scientists; and strengthen exchanges between Vietnamese intellectuals abroad and those in Vietnam, creating an incentive for them to return to work and contribute to their homeland.

To effectively utilize a "recruitment branding" model to attract talent, it's essential to build the prestige and appeal of the public service in general, and of specific agencies and units in particular, through outstanding values. Brand value will attract talented individuals and foster a sense of pride, encouraging them to choose to become part of the organization. Ensuring fairness in career opportunities and advancement is a principle and a comprehensive solution for creating a healthy public service environment that fosters cohesion among all participants, including outstanding individuals. A truly robust compensation policy (primarily salary, benefits, and working environment) is a practical solution for maintaining the workforce of the entire public service system, including high-quality personnel. Furthermore, education and training policies are considered the "golden key" to preparing this workforce.

Conclusion

The gap between policy and implementation is a problem facing many areas of law in general and in the development of institutions that value talent in particular. Many efforts have been made to identify obstacles in the planning and implementation of mechanisms and policies, from the irrationality of regulations to the methods, resources, and conditions for ensuring their effectiveness. Building institutions that value talent based on the principle of competency-based competition will require each individual to strive to develop their full potential, thereby changing their social status and receiving deserved rewards. This system will gradually form a pyramidal social stratification model, with the apex always belonging to a minority of outstanding individuals who lead their units, organizations, and even the entire community. Job positions and compensation must accurately reflect their abilities to provide opportunities and motivate them to contribute. The principle of competitive merit is not only a key condition for selecting truly talented individuals, but also a mechanism for identifying and weeding out incompetent people, ensuring that personnel management always involves "entry, exit, promotion, and

demotion," guaranteeing the quality of personnel. With rigorous and objective examination and selection processes, a system of institutions that value talent will help ensure that diverse job positions can be filled by individuals with the most suitable abilities. Performance during work and the quality of work results will be the most crucial factors determining an individual's position within their unit, organization, and even the community.

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