

Sekcia 1.01 Enhancing Work Engagement in the Public Sector: The Social Dimension of ESG Through Servant Leadership, Emotional Intelligence, and Needs Satisfaction

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Abstract: *The concept of sustainability within the ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) framework is gaining substantial prominence not only in the private sector but also among public institutions. For numerous business companies, the primary impetus often lies in the legislative and regulatory requirements mandated by European Union directives. Conversely, the public sector operates under distinct conditions, necessitating a robust commitment to the public interest to drive responsible initiatives. This is because ESG activities are typically voluntary and extend beyond statutory obligations. Our research focuses on the Social Pillar of the ESG framework, specifically on Human Capital. We examined how servant-leadership orientation affects work engagement in public administration. The goal was to determine the mediating role of line managers' emotional intelligence and their basic needs satisfaction at work. We tested this model on 597 local government managers in Slovakia. The results indicate a significant positive relationship between managers' servant-leader orientation and supervisors' work engagement in local governments. This relationship is stronger among younger employees and more pronounced in smaller organizations. The results also illustrate that basic needs satisfaction at work mediates the effects of this relationship, both separately and interactively. Understanding these dynamics can improve social responsibility within public administration. This aligns with ESG principles.*

Keywords: *ESG; public sector managers; work engagement; servant-leadership, basic needs satisfaction at work*

1 Introduction

Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) criteria have become essential for evaluating organizations' ethical practices and sustainability. These principles help balance environmental responsibility, social impact, and governance standards. Growing global concerns drive firms to integrate ESG principles [1]. Compliance with regulations, especially EU directives, is a key driver. At the same time, companies also recognize the benefits of ESG. Research links ESG disclosure to improved corporate efficiency. Governance disclosure has the strongest impact [2]. ESG also enhances financial performance and reduces legal risks [3]. Sustainability is increasingly vital in the public sector, where climate action, social responsibility, and financial prudence drive policy. Although governmental institutions differ from private firms, their ESG adoption is influenced by institutional and regulatory frameworks. Voluntary ESG initiatives can optimize resource use and service delivery, ensuring long-term sustainability [4][5]. ESG evaluates public administration's environmental and social impacts, yet systematic research on internal ESG adoption remains scarce.

ESG is increasingly conceptualized not only as a reporting framework, but also as a governance paradigm that shapes organizational behavior, leadership practices, and employee outcomes in both private and public sectors.

ESG comprises:

Environmental: Resource management and climate initiatives

Social: Workforce relations and community impact

Governance: Transparency and accountability

Our study focuses on Social Sustainability, particularly stakeholder engagement. Social factors should address both internal (employees) and external (communities) stakeholders, fostering workforce well-being and local development. While ESG reporting on environmental and governance aspects has progressed, social impact remains underdeveloped. Failures in the "S" category, such as Volkswagen's emissions scandal, illustrate the importance of the social dimension of ESG in organizational behavior [6] to identify five key social areas:

1. Workforce engagement
2. Customer relations
3. Community impact
4. Data security
5. Human rights

Work engagement (WE) is a crucial component of the ESG social pillar and a key research topic in public administration. Few studies explore the interaction of individual and organizational factors in WE. This research examines how servant leadership influences WE, with a focus on the mediating role of line managers' emotional intelligence (EI) and basic needs satisfaction at work (BNSW). The model was tested on 597 local government managers in Slovakia.

From a theoretical perspective, the study integrates the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explain how leadership and socio-emotional resources translate into employee motivation and engagement. This integration allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how social ESG mechanisms operate at the micro-organizational level.

2 Theoretical Framework

Local Governments (LG) increasingly emphasize Work Engagement (WE) as disengaged employees are costly. WE supports organizational goals, reduces turnover [7], and enhances resilience. Most studies examine WE generally, but in LG, line managers play a key role. They influence both organizational and employee performance [8]. Middle managers connect organizational levels, and their engagement impacts subordinates. They are expected to act as both proactive leaders and engaged followers, who reduce hierarchical distance and foster a culture of engagement [9]. In contrast to private-sector settings, public organizations are characterized by higher bureaucratic constraints, limited autonomy, and stronger institutional rigidity, which makes the role of leadership in shaping engagement even more critical. High bureaucracy and low job autonomy in LG make engagement challenging. This context requires efficient use of organizational resources. Servant leadership (SL) enhances engagement, creativity, and ethical behavior, making it particularly relevant in LG [10]. When adopted by senior management, SL strengthens the development of line managers. Given the bureaucratic nature of the public sector, enhancing WE is essential [11]. Modern HRM, based on the job demands-resources model [12], emphasizes employee satisfaction as a driver of client satisfaction. Research underlines the need for emotional maturity, public service motivation [13], and an ethical climate [10].

2.1 Work Engagement of Line Managers in Local Governments

Paper [14] defined WE as the simultaneous engagement and expression of one's preferred self in work, involving physical, cognitive, and emotional presence. [7] describe WE as a positive, satisfying work-related state of mind. Engaged managers exhibit high energy and a sense of success, leading to lower turnover, higher productivity, increased organizational commitment, and better job performance [7].

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model explains WE's psychological dynamics [15]. It posits that job resources aid goal attainment and personal growth, while job demands contribute to stress and burnout. Personal resources (e.g., prosocial motivation) and job resources (e.g., work climate, manager support) are WE antecedents in the public sector [13]. [16] highlight the relationship between employee engagement and leader behavior, emphasizing feedback and organizational justice. The importance of employee engagement in the public sector is constantly growing. It helps address the global problem of low employee engagement. [17] confirmed that managerial behavior has a strong impact on employees' satisfaction. Within the JD-R framework, leadership can be understood as a key job resource that shapes both motivational pathways (engagement) and health impairment pathways (burnout prevention).

2.2 Managers' servant-leader orientation (MSLO)

SL prioritizes subordinates' welfare over the leader's interests, fostering the development of future leaders [18]. SL, a multidimensional construct [19], focuses on successor development and motivation [20]. Key SL characteristics include fairness, openness, trust-building, and career development opportunities [21]. SL enhances organizational justice and fosters trust and creativity [22]. SL is associated with higher work engagement as it clarifies work purposes, empowers employees, and respects their opinions [23]. [18] argue SL indirectly influences WE through job autonomy, goal specification, and organizational trust, indicating SL positively affects job resources. Studies show SL has been linked to higher employee engagement, satisfaction, and productivity [23], supports an ethical climate [10] and leads to positive organizational outcomes [19]. Research on SL in the public sector is limited [24], particularly regarding its impact on WE [25] and ethical climate [10]. SL in public service inspires higher public service motivation [26], fostering innovative behavior beneficial to the organization. Recent research suggests that servant leadership is particularly relevant in value-driven environments such as public administration, where moral responsibility, transparency, and service orientation are central to organizational identity.

H1: We expect that MSLO is positively related to WE

2.3 Emotional Intelligence and Need Satisfaction as Moderators of Servant Leadership and Work Engagement

Emotional intelligence (EI), the ability to process emotional information accurately and regulate emotions, is debated [27]. Public sector employees face higher emotional demands than private sector employees [28]. EI is considered an important factor in effective leadership. EI enhances team interaction and productivity. Emotionally intelligent leaders understand others' needs, improving servant leadership (SL) [29]. However, the EI-SL relationship is inconclusive. [30] found it insignificant, while [31] noted women leaders exhibit higher EI in

emotional healing and altruism. EI has been shown to positively influence employee engagement in public organizations, particularly when supported by managers' emotional competencies [32]. Managers with high EI help subordinates use emotional resources effectively, increasing engagement and reducing burnout [15]. From a JD-R perspective, emotional intelligence can be conceptualized as a personal resource that enables leaders to transform job demands into motivational experiences rather than stressors.

H2: We expect that the relation between MSLO and WE is mediated by EI

Self-determination theory (SDT), rooted in basic needs theory [33], posits that satisfaction of three psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—is associated with higher intrinsic motivation [34]. Studies show that job autonomy and supervisor support enhance intrinsic motivation, leading to positive work outcomes [35]. [36] emphasizes that managers must consider generational differences to effectively address employee motivation. In the public sector, [37] found that emotions and psychological needs foster public service motivation (PSM), suggesting that autonomy and achieving real outcomes support PSM. Work motivation relies on supervisory authority, impacting tasks, rewards, and resources [33]. Top managers can enhance intrinsic motivation through leadership practices that allow subordinates autonomy and competence [38]. Servant leaders boost subordinates' engagement by providing opportunities and encouraging success [39]. SDT suggests that unmet BNSW result in disengagement and lower autonomous motivation [40]. In public administration, SL positively affects BNSW and service attitudes [38]. Thus, supporting BNSW through SDT principles is crucial for enhancing engagement and motivation in the workplace. The combination of SDT and servant leadership literature suggests that leadership style is a key antecedent of basic psychological need satisfaction, which subsequently translates into sustained work engagement.

H3: The relation between MSLO and WE is mediated by BNSW

Since both variables can act simultaneously in organizations, we also examined their mutual indirect effect.

H4: The relation between MSLO and WE is mediated by BNSW and EI simultaneously

Described relations are illustrated in Figure 1.

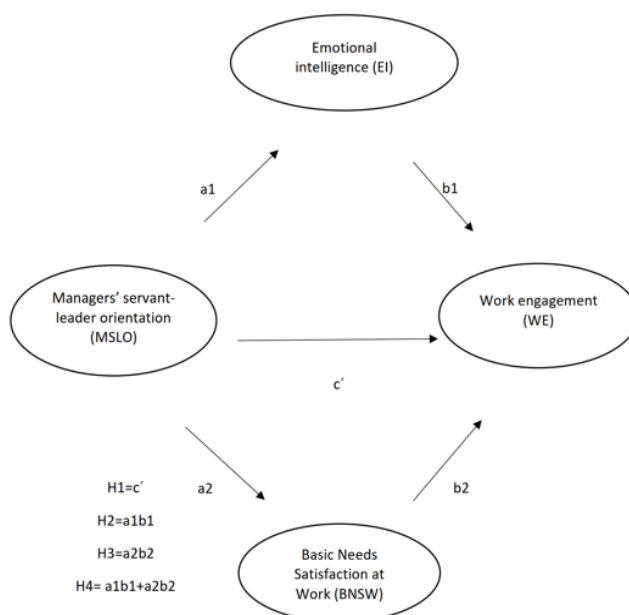


Figure 1

Theoretical model of the study

Source: Own research

3 Methods

Data Collection: In April-May 2022, a survey was conducted among Slovak municipal/city government managers. We sent questionnaires to 2950 respondents via email. The response rate was 20.2% (597 respondents), which is acceptable for organizational survey research in public administration studies. Respondents' demographics were as follows: average age 46.84 years, average management experience 12.65 years, 54% women, 46% men, 88% with a university degree. Regions were proportionally represented. The highest share of responses came from Bratislava (22%), the capital city of Slovakia.

The target population consisted of line and middle managers in Slovak municipal and city governments. The sampling procedure followed a non-probability convenience sampling design based on available municipal contact databases. Although the response rate (20.2%) is acceptable for organizational survey research, potential non-response bias should be considered, as non-respondents may systematically differ from respondents in their leadership behavior or engagement levels. To assess potential non-response bias, early and late respondents were

compared on key constructs, and no statistically significant differences were observed.

Measures: The survey was tailored to Slovak conditions and translated accordingly, employed a 5-point Likert scale. All instruments were translated using a back-translation procedure to ensure conceptual equivalence in the Slovak public administration context. Prior to full data collection, a pre-test was conducted to ensure clarity and contextual relevance of the measurement scales.

The managers' servant-leader orientation (MSLO) is a condensed servant leadership instrument [41] with high predictive validity, assessing leaders' behaviors. WE was measured using the 9-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) [7]. Emotional Intelligence (EI) was measured using [42], encompassing self-awareness, other-awareness, and self-regulation domains. Basic Needs Satisfaction at Work (BNSW) was measured with a 14-item scale adapted by [37], which includes autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

Control Variables: Age, education, gender, size of the municipal authority, and region were considered due to their potential impact on the studied relationships [43].

Common Method Bias Mitigation: The measures included the random distribution of indicators and the inversion of response scales. The questionnaire had multiple parts, and VIF indicators were applied in SmartPLS. All inner VIF values remained below 3.3, which prevented collinearity [44].

Data analysis: We employed partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) [45] to test the research model, formulate hypotheses, and explore relationships between constructs. PLS-SEM was chosen not only due to sample size and model complexity, but also due to its suitability for prediction-oriented research and complex mediation models.

This method is particularly appropriate in public sector research, where theoretical models are still developing and require empirical validation.

This method is appropriate for the sample size ($n = 597$) and the complexity of the model. It allows simultaneous testing of multiple hypotheses, including direct and indirect effects [46]. SmartPLS 3.0 software was used to evaluate both measurement and structural models, which enables simultaneous analysis of both.

In this study, we present findings from two models: a measurement model and a structural model. The measurement model assesses reliability and validity, while the structural model evaluates relationships and hypotheses depicted in Figure 1, including direct, indirect, and interaction effects.

Measurement Model: Our analysis shows that the measurement model meets reliability criteria. All standardized loadings are above 0.70. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) values range from 0.813 to 0.939, which falls within the acceptable range of 0.70 to 0.95. Rho-A values lie between Cronbach's alpha and

CR, with values from 0.822 to 0.942, which confirmed acceptable reliability. Convergent validity is supported since the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeds 0.5 for all constructs. Discriminant validity is confirmed through the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the heterotrait-monotrait ratio, and cross-loadings. Although measurement quality is high, the relatively strong correlations among constructs suggest partial conceptual proximity between servant leadership and work engagement, which is theoretically expected given their motivational nature.

Structural Model: The structural model was used to test the proposed hypotheses. We examine predictive relationships among constructs and report empirical support for the proposed hypotheses. Predictive capability is assessed through R^2 and Q^2 values. All R^2 values exceed 0.1, and Q^2 values range from 0.612 to 0.823, confirming satisfactory predictive relevance. Model fit, based on SRMR, shows a value of 0.070, which meets the ≤ 0.100 criterion for an acceptable fit. Individual paths, direct and indirect effects, and mediating variables such as EI and BNSW are examined through bootstrapping. Theoretical hypotheses on mediations between MSLO, EI, BNSW, and WE are tested and described.

Table 1
Direct and indirect effects in the investigated model

	Original Sample	Sample Mean	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	P Values
Direct effect					
MSLO -> WE (direct effect)	0.967	0.967	0.002	388.203	0.000
Indirect effects					
Mediation through BNSW and EI simultaneously					
BNSW -> WE	0.359	0.363	0.048	7.504	0.000
EI -> WE	0.482	0.478	0.041	11.770	0.000
MSLO -> WE (total effect)	0.968	0.968	0.003	379.459	0.000
MSLO -> WE (direct effect)	0.154	0.154	0.035	4.476	0.000
MSLO -> WE (total indirect effect)	0.814	0.814	0.033	24.455	0.000
MSLO -> BNSW -> WE (specific indirect effect)	0.348	0.352	0.046	7.545	0.000
MSLO -> EI -> WE (specific indirect effect)	0.465	0.461	0.040	11.705	0.000
MSLO -> BNSW	0.971	0.970	0.003	335.500	0.000
MSLO -> EI	0.966	0.966	0.003	354.198	0.000
BNSW -> WE	0.359	0.363	0.048	7.504	0.000
EI -> WE	0.482	0.478	0.041	11.770	0.000
Mediation through EI					
MSLO -> WE (total effect)	0.968	0.968	0.003	370.743	0.000
MSLO -> WE (direct effect)	0.292	0.292	0.031	9.509	0.000

MSLO -> EI -> WE (indirect effect)	0.676	0.676	0.030	22.892	0.000
EI -> WE	0.700	0.700	0.031	22.787	0.000
MSLO -> EI	0.966	0.967	0.003	347.846	0.000
Mediation through BNSW					
MSLO -> WE (total effect)	0.968	0.968	0.003	377.206	0.000
MSLO -> WE (direct effect)	0.289	0.288	0.033	8.756	0.000
MSLO -> BNSW -> WE (indirect effect)	0.679	0.680	0.031	21.568	0.000
BNSW -> WE	0.699	0.701	0.033	21.217	0.000
MSLO -> BNSW	0.971	0.971	0.003	327.493	0.000

Source: Own processing

- Hypothesis H1 is confirmed. It indicates a significant direct effect of MSLO on WE ($\beta=0.967$, $p<0.05$).
- Hypothesis H2 is supported. It reveals a significant indirect effect of EI, constituting incomplete mediation as the indirect effect contributes 70% of the total effect, while the direct effect accounts for 30%.
- Hypothesis H3 is also upheld. It shows a significant indirect effect of BNSW with incomplete mediation, where BNSW contributes 70% of the total effect via the indirect pathway, with a 30% direct effect, similar to EI.
- Hypothesis H4 is supported. It indicates full mediation by two mediators. Only 16% of the direct effect of MSLO contributes to the total effect on WE, with the remaining 84% mediated by both EI and BNSW. The proportion of the indirect effect is similar, slightly favouring EI (57% of the indirect effect).
- Moderation analysis explores the influence of management practice and education on the MSLO-WE relationship, with detailed results presented in table 1 and 2 and figures 2 and 3.

Table 2
Moderating effect of management and education practice variables

	Original Sample	Sample Mean	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	P Values
MSLO -> WE (tenure)	0.950	0.949	0.014	69.128	0.000
MSLO -> WE (office size)	0.795	0.795	0.022	35.027	0.000
Moderating Effect tenure -> WE	-0.108	-0.109	0.013	8.585	0.000
Moderating Effect office size -> WE	-0.112	-0.111	0.009	12.192	0.000
tenure -> WE	0.006	0.006	0.009	0.671	0.503
office size -> WE	0.147	0.148	0.024	6.197	0.000

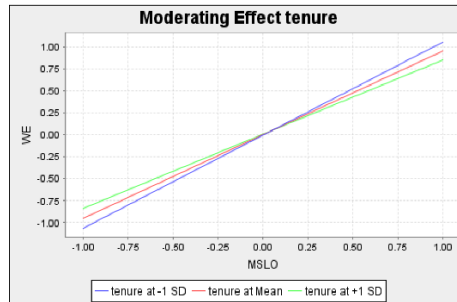


Figure 2

Moderating effect of tenure

Source: Own research

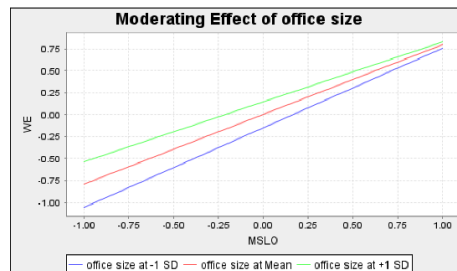


Figure 3

Moderating effect of office size

Source: Own research

The moderating effect of tenure is significant but negative. This means that the relationship between MSLO and WE is strengthened by lower levels of tenure. Similarly, the moderating effect of office size is significant but negative. This indicates that the relationship between MSLO and WE is strengthened by smaller office size.

4 Discussion

Our study contributes to current ESG research in public administration (PA). We examined the impact of leadership on employee engagement (WE), particularly for line managers [47]. Several studies confirm the role of public leadership in enhancing organizational performance [47]. All hypotheses are confirmed. The direct effect of MSLO (Managers' Servant-Leader Orientation) for top managers on middle-level WE is significant, which supports the idea that servant leadership (SL) at the highest level can directly influence work commitment at lower levels. This

aligns with [23], which shows SL enhances employee engagement by creating psychologically safe environments. Our results indicate that MSLO's impact on WE is stronger among younger managers. It is due to generational characteristics and a greater need for psychological safety. This may reflect generational differences in leadership expectations, value orientation, and sensitivity to psychological safety and autonomy in the workplace. Smaller self-governing organizations with closer relationships between top and middle managers create an optimal environment for relational MSLO. This finding suggests that organizational size may function as a boundary condition for the effectiveness of servant leadership, reinforcing the importance of contextual factors in public sector leadership models. Managers supported by servant leaders can enhance subordinate engagement.

Hypothesis H2, regarding EI's mediation of MSLO's effect on WE, is supported. This indicates that emotional intelligence functions as a key personal resource translating leadership behaviour into employee engagement. EI accounts for 70% of the total indirect effect. This finding highlights the central role of psychological need satisfaction as a motivational mechanism in public sector workplaces. This confirms its key role in usage of servant leadership to strengthen employee engagement. High EI increases job engagement and satisfaction [48] and it makes it valuable for PA organizations [28]. These results are consistent with the JD-R framework, which positions emotional intelligence as a personal resource that enhances motivational processes and reduces the impact of job demands. Hypothesis H3 is confirmed, it showed that BNSW (Basic Needs Satisfaction at Work) also mediates the effect. It contributes 70% of the total indirect effect. This underscores the importance of a supportive work environment in enhancing performance. This finding aligns with research on autonomy and motivation in public sector organizations [35][37]. Hypothesis 4, regarding the simultaneous mediation of EI and BNSW, is supported with full mediation. 84% of the total effect is mediated by both factors, and EI contributes slightly more (57%). This highlights the value of integrating individual and organizational resources to increase WE. The model therefore supports a dual-pathway mechanism combining JD-R and SDT perspectives. The practical implications suggest that promoting SL in local government (LG) can increase the WE of middle managers, who can then transfer these behaviours to their subordinates. MSLO is a key variable for increasing WE.

For resource-constrained organizations, strategies promoting SL at the senior management level can significantly boost middle management's WE, which is critical to organizational success. This will result in reduced turnover and improved performance. Our study also identifies factors supporting MSLO's impact. This suggests that leadership development programs should not focus solely on leadership style, but also on developing emotional competencies and work design that supports psychological needs. When SL is combined with high levels of EI and BNSW, the effect on engagement is enhanced. Like other organizations, LG needs committed employees. A supportive work environment is essential. More autonomy at the middle management level helps as well. Managers need more choice instead of control, and their views deserve respect. This approach strengthens the effect of

servant leadership on their engagement. LG offices should focus on developing leadership skills at the top levels, particularly in SL. Managers need more training in LG. Business organizations have invested heavily in this area. Leadership development is a sustainable way to foster WE and retain key talent in a competitive environment. SL with EI support in middle managers amplify positive effects. This is especially important for younger employees who need early career support. Ultimately, leadership and followership coexist, and developing these factors at various levels creates conditions to transfer leadership qualities downward within the organizational pyramid. This cascading leadership effect may represent an important mechanism for strengthening ESG's social dimension in public administration systems.

5 Conclusions

In today's world, where sustainability and responsible governance are key topics, the public sector is increasingly expected to adhere to environmental, social and governance (ESG) principles. Our study contributes to ESG research in public administration. We examined how leadership impacts work engagement, especially for line managers. We find that servant leadership at the top organizational level significantly influences middle managers' work engagement. This relationship is primarily indirect and operates through emotional intelligence and basic psychological needs satisfaction. This effect is stronger among younger managers who value psychological security.

This study also reveals that emotional intelligence (EI) and a supportive work environment mediate this relationship. EI alone accounts for 70% of the indirect effect. This highlights its importance in leveraging servant leadership to enhance work engagement. Basic needs satisfaction at work (BNSW) also contributes 70%. This emphasizes the importance of a supportive environment for performance. EI and BNSW together fully mediate the impact of servant leadership on work engagement. This provides empirical support for an integrated JD-R and SDT-based explanation of employee engagement in public sector organizations. This underscores the need to integrate individual and organizational resources to foster engagement. Promotion of servant leadership in local government can significantly boost work engagement among middle managers, who play a key role in organizational success. Given the resource constraints in local government offices, investing in leadership development at the senior management level can be a cost-effective strategy to improve work engagement, reduce turnover, and enhance job performance, which contributes to a strong ESG framework.

While public sector functioning may be constrained by limited budgets, many socially responsible activities require little or no funding. The ESG model emphasizes a comprehensive approach to managing stakeholder relationships, understanding the needs and impacts of activities on key partners. Local government offices should focus on developing leadership skills at the highest levels, particularly in servant leadership, to better engage middle managers. This

approach is especially beneficial for younger employees, who need more support early in their careers.

To effectively implement ESG principles and achieve sustainable development, ongoing stakeholder dialogues and relationship-building are essential. This inclusive strategy helps organizations meet growing sustainability expectations and foster a committed, engaged workforce.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our research contributes to the understanding of the promotion of work engagement (WE) in organizations; however, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study was geographically limited to the Slovak Republic, which may limit the generalizability of the findings, although the results may still have broader implications. The sample included 597 respondents, which was relatively modest but sufficiently diverse to support insights across Slovak local governments. Furthermore, the study relied solely on managers' perspectives; future research should include the views of superiors and subordinates to provide a more comprehensive understanding. We also took steps to mitigate common method bias through careful survey design, although some unobserved variables may still influence the observed relationships. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits causal inference. Future studies could benefit from longitudinal or experimental designs to better capture the causal mechanisms and temporal dynamics between leadership and engagement.

Abbreviations

Basic Needs Satisfaction at Work (BNSW), Emotional Intelligence (EI), Environmental, Social, And Governance (ESG), Job Demands-Resources (JD-R), Local Governments (LG), Managers' Servant-Leader Orientation (MSLO), New Public Management (NPM), Public Administration (PA), Public Service Motivation (PSM), Self-determination theory (SDT), Servant Leadership (SL), Work Engagement (WE).

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