



ENHANCING EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE THROUGH WORK ETHIC AND COMPETENCE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF WORK ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract :

Employee performance remains a critical issue in public organizations because service quality is closely associated with employees' ability to perform their responsibilities effectively. This study examined the relationships among work ethic, competence, work engagement, and employee performance. A quantitative cross-sectional approach was employed using a census of 85 employees. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. The measurement model satisfied the requirements for reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity before evaluating the structural model. Work ethic exerted positive and significant effects on both work engagement and employee performance. Competence positively influenced work engagement but did not significantly affect employee performance. Work engagement was not associated with employee performance and did not mediate the relationships between work ethic and employee performance or between competence and employee performance. The proposed model explained 66.8% of the variance in work engagement and 84.8% of the variance in employee performance. Employee performance in the public sector therefore depends more strongly on work ethic than on competence alone, while competence requires appropriate job alignment to contribute more effectively to performance.

Keywords : Competence, Employee Performance, Public Sector, Work Engagement, Work Ethic.

INTRODUCTION

Employee performance remains a critical issue in human resource management because it reflects the extent to which employees are able to carry out their responsibilities and contribute to organizational goals. In public organizations, this issue becomes more consequential because employee performance is closely connected to program implementation, service delivery, and the organization's responsiveness to public needs. Organizational systems, financial resources, and work facilities may provide essential support, yet these resources will not generate meaningful outcomes unless employees are both willing and able to perform their duties effectively. Evidence from the public sector shows that employee performance is shaped not only by external rewards but also by internal motives that encourage individuals to invest greater effort in their work (Elamalki et al., 2024)

This indicates that performance cannot be understood solely from



employees' technical ability to complete assigned tasks. Employees may possess sufficient knowledge and skills, but these capabilities may remain underused when they lack commitment to their work. At the same time, strong willingness alone may not produce satisfactory results when employees do not have the capabilities required by their roles. Performance is therefore shaped by the interaction between how employees value their work, what they are capable of doing, and how fully they involve themselves in carrying out their responsibilities.

The psychological experience of work is important because employees do not contribute through physical presence alone. Their contribution also depends on the energy, attention, and dedication invested in their responsibilities. Employees who develop a stronger connection with their work tend to experience their jobs more positively and report stronger links with job satisfaction (Sypniewska et al., 2023). Engagement has also been associated with organizational performance through the vigor, dedication, and absorption employees display while carrying out their duties (Gede & Huluka, 2024). These findings suggest that employee performance needs to be understood through both individual attributes and the psychological conditions that determine how those attributes are expressed at work.

One individual attribute that may shape such behavior is work ethic. Work ethic reflects the values, beliefs, and attitudes through which employees regard work as a responsibility that deserves seriousness and commitment. Employees with a strong work ethic are more likely to demonstrate discipline, persistence, integrity, and accountability in completing their responsibilities. These qualities encourage employees to view work not merely as a formal obligation, but as a professional commitment that should be fulfilled in accordance with organizational expectations. Through this orientation, work ethic may guide employees in using their time effectively, maintaining the quality of their output, and remaining committed to assigned duties.

Empirical findings generally support the relevance of work ethic to performance. Work ethic was found to significantly affect performance, both independently and when examined together with work motivation, job satisfaction, and compensation (I.Hidayat & Agustina, 2020a). A positive effect was also reported when work ethic was examined alongside organizational culture, indicating that performance is influenced not only by the environment in which work is performed but also by the values employees bring into that environment.

The relevance of work ethic becomes clearer when it is considered together with competence. Work ethic and competence were both found to contribute to employee performance, indicating that work-related values and individual capabilities may jointly support stronger work outcomes (Apriana et al., 2022). A similar result was reported when competence and work ethic were examined simultaneously as predictors of employee performance. These findings show that willingness to work responsibly and the capability to perform assigned duties are both important in explaining performance.

The influence of work ethic, however, has not been consistent across studies. Work ethic was found to have no partial effect on employee performance, although it remained significant when examined simultaneously with work discipline. This result suggests that favorable values toward work do not always translate directly into higher performance. Employees may regard their work positively without consistently converting that orientation into sustained effort or stronger results. The inconsistency points to the possibility that work ethic influences performance through another process that determines whether work-related values are expressed through active involvement in the job.

Within this process, competence remains equally important because employees must possess the capability to meet the demands placed upon them. Competence encompasses the knowledge, skills, abilities, and behavioral attributes required to perform work effectively. It extends beyond technical expertise and includes adaptability, communication, decision-making, collaboration, and problem-solving. Employees with adequate competence are more likely to understand their responsibilities, reduce errors, and complete tasks according to expected standards. Competence therefore determines whether employees are able to respond appropriately to organizational demands.

The relationship between competence and performance has received consistent empirical support. Training, competence, compensation, and work motivation were found to have a significant simultaneous effect on employee performance, placing competence among the factors that jointly support work outcomes (Hidayat & Agustina, 2020b). Competence also had a significant effect when examined independently and together with job training and career development. These findings confirm that competence remains relevant to performance even when it is considered alongside other human resource development practices.

Further evidence shows that competence had a positive and significant effect on employee performance when examined with organizational culture, career development, and training (Basuki, 2025). Competence was also found to significantly affect performance alongside job training and career development (Saputra & Sumiati, 2024). These results reinforce the view that employees require appropriate capabilities to carry out their responsibilities effectively.

Possessing competence, however, does not necessarily mean that employees will consistently apply it. Competence reflects what employees are able to do, whereas performance depends on whether those capabilities are actually used in the execution of work. Employees may understand their responsibilities and possess the required skills, yet still perform below their potential when they lack enthusiasm, persistence, or psychological involvement. This distinction between available capability and applied capability creates an important explanation gap in the relationship between competence and performance.

Work engagement becomes relevant in addressing this gap because it

represents a positive psychological state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Engaged employees approach their work with energy, remain persistent when facing difficulties, and become deeply involved in what they do. Their contribution is not limited to meeting formal requirements; they also devote greater attention and effort to producing meaningful results. Work engagement may therefore explain how employees translate work-related values and individual capabilities into actual work behavior.

The contribution of work engagement to performance has been supported empirically. Work engagement was found to have a positive and significant effect on employee performance, indicating that stronger involvement in work is associated with better work outcomes (Manalu et al., 2021). This finding shows that engagement is not merely a positive experience at work, but also a psychological condition with practical consequences for employee performance.

Work ethic may contribute to the development of engagement because employees who regard work as an important responsibility are more likely to invest themselves in its completion. Discipline, responsibility, and seriousness toward work may strengthen employees' willingness to devote energy and attention to their roles. Work ethic was found to have a positive and significant effect on work engagement, demonstrating that a constructive orientation toward work can deepen employees' involvement in their responsibilities (Jannah et al., 2025).

Competence may shape engagement through a different route. Employees who possess adequate knowledge and skills are generally more prepared and more confident when responding to job demands. This capability may reduce uncertainty and make sustained involvement in work easier to maintain. Competence was found to have a positive effect on work engagement, while meaningful work partially mediated that relationship (Muchtadin, 2024). The finding indicates that competence can strengthen engagement directly and also through the way employees interpret the significance of their work.

The mediating role of work engagement nevertheless remains unresolved. Work ethic was found to have a positive and significant effect on both performance and work engagement, yet work engagement did not significantly affect performance and did not mediate the relationship between work ethic and employee performance (Jannah et al., 2025). This result shows that engagement does not necessarily function as an effective transmission mechanism in every setting.

At the same time, other evidence shows that work engagement positively and significantly affects employee performance (Manalu et al., 2021). Competence has also been shown to strengthen work engagement (Muchtadin, 2024). These different findings suggest that the relationships among work ethic, competence, work engagement, and employee performance have not been fully explained. Previous studies have generally examined only selected relationships among these variables, making it difficult to determine whether work ethic and competence influence performance directly, indirectly through engagement, or through both paths.

This unresolved pattern is important because work ethic and competence represent two distinct dimensions of employee performance. Work ethic reflects how employees orient themselves toward work, whereas competence reflects whether they possess the capability to perform it. Work engagement may clarify whether these two dimensions are converted into stronger performance through employees' energy, dedication, and involvement in their responsibilities. Unlike earlier studies that focused on only one antecedent or one indirect path, the present study examines work ethic and competence together within the same mediation model.

This study therefore investigates the influence of work ethic and competence on employee performance through work engagement. By positioning work ethic as a work-related value and competence as an individual capability, the study examines whether work engagement transmits the effects of both dimensions in the same way or through different pathways. This approach is expected to provide a clearer explanation of how employees' orientation toward work, capacity to perform, and psychological involvement jointly shape employee performance.

RESEARCH METHOD

A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed to examine the effects of work ethic and competence on employee performance through the mediating role of work engagement. Data were collected from employees of the Office of Women's Empowerment, Child Protection, and Family Planning of South Kalimantan Province using a structured self-administered questionnaire. The population consisted of 85 employees, and the entire population was targeted through a census approach. The final sample consisted of complete and usable questionnaires returned by the respondents.

All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Work ethic was measured using items adapted from Moehariono (2014), competence using indicators adapted from Haras & Sugiarti (2020), work engagement using the scale developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002), and employee performance using items adapted from Nitisemito (2010). The wording of the items was adjusted to the public-sector work context while retaining the conceptual meaning of the original indicators.

Procedural measures were applied to reduce the potential influence of common method bias. Respondents were informed that participation was voluntary, their identities would remain anonymous, and their responses would be used solely for academic purposes. The questionnaire also emphasized that there were no correct or incorrect answers, while the items were written clearly to reduce ambiguity and evaluation apprehension. Common method bias was subsequently assessed using Harman's single-factor test by determining whether a single factor emerged or accounted for more than 50% of the total variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

SmartPLS 4 was used to analyze the proposed research model. The measurement model was assessed through outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha,

composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT). The structural model was evaluated through collinearity, the coefficient of determination (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), effect size (f^2), and the significance of the hypothesized relationships. The direct and indirect effects were examined using the bootstrapping procedure to test the mediating role of work engagement in the relationships between work ethic, competence, and employee performance (Hair et al., 2021)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Common Method Bias

Harman's single-factor test showed that the first factor explained 41.23% of the total variance, below the 50% threshold. Thus, common method bias was not considered a substantial concern (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was assessed through outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 1: Measurement Model Results

Construct	Outer Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
WE		0.869	0.898	0.560
WE1	0.728			
WE2	0.809			
WE3	0.766			
WE4	0.834			
WE5	0.800			
WE6	0.729			
WE7	0.747			
WE8	0.728			
COM		0.819	0.881	0.656
COM1	0.750			
COM2	0.896			
COM3	0.879			
COM4	0.750			
WEN		0.705	0.832	0.624
WEN1	0.716			
WEN2	0.868			
WEN3	0.778			
EP		0.923	0.952	0.868
EP1	0.962			
EP2	0.873			
EP3	0.957			

The measurement model demonstrated satisfactory reliability and

convergent validity. All outer loadings exceeded 0.70, ranging from 0.716 to 0.962. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values were above 0.70, while the AVE values exceeded 0.50. Thus, all constructs met the recommended measurement criteria (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 2: HTMT Results

Construct	WE	COM	WEN	EP
WE	—			
COM	0.541	—		
WEN	0.728	0.612	—	
EP	0.581	0.646	0.701	—

All HTMT values were below the recommended threshold of 0.90, indicating that each construct was empirically distinct and that discriminant validity was established for the proposed measurement model (Hair et al., 2021).

Structural Model

The structural model assessment included the coefficient of determination (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), effect size (f^2), and the significance of the proposed relationships (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 3: R^2 and Q^2 Results

Construct	R^2	Q^2
WEN	0.668	0.399
EP	0.848	0.723

The R^2 values indicated that WEN and EP obtained coefficients of 0.668 and 0.848, respectively. In addition, the Q^2 values of WEN 0.399 and EP 0.723 were greater than zero, indicating that the proposed model demonstrated satisfactory predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 4: Effect Size (f^2) Results

Relationship	f^2
WE - WEN	0.785
WE - EP	2.531
COM - WEN	0.532
COM - EP	0.028
WEN - EP	0.012

The f^2 values ranged from 0.012 to 2.531. The largest effect was found for WE - EP ($f^2 = 2.531$), followed by WE - WEN ($f^2 = 0.785$) and COM - WEN ($f^2 = 0.532$). Meanwhile, COM - EP ($f^2 = 0.028$) and WEN - EP ($f^2 = 0.012$) showed relatively small effects. These results indicate that WE contributed most strongly to EP within the proposed structural model (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 5: Hypothesis Testing Result

Relationship	β (O)	STDEV	t-statistics	p-values	Decision
WE - WEN	0.543	0.066	8.249	0.000	Supported
COM - WEN	0.447	0.073	6.156	0.000	Supported
WE - EP	0.898	0.043	20.884	0.000	Supported
COM - EP	-0.087	0.047	1.879	0.064	Not Supported

Relationship	β (O)	STDEV	t-statistics	p-values	Decision
WEN - EP	0.074	0.070	1.058	0.293	Not Supported
WE - WEN - EP	0.040	0.039	1.020	0.310	Not Supported
COM - WEN - EP	0.033	0.032	1.048	0.298	Not Supported

WE showed a significant positive association with WEN ($\beta = 0.543$, $t = 8.249$, $p < 0.001$) and EP ($\beta = 0.898$, $t = 20.884$, $p < 0.001$). COM was also positively associated with WEN ($\beta = 0.447$, $t = 6.156$, $p < 0.001$), but its relationship with EP was not statistically supported ($\beta = -0.087$, $t = 1.879$, $p = 0.064$). WEN was likewise unrelated to EP ($\beta = 0.074$, $t = 1.058$, $p = 0.293$). The indirect paths from WE to EP through WEN ($\beta = 0.040$, $t = 1.020$, $p = 0.310$) and from COM to EP through WEN ($\beta = 0.033$, $t = 1.048$, $p = 0.298$) were not statistically supported, showing that WEN did not serve as a mediator in either relationship.

Discussion

Work ethic had a positive and significant effect on work engagement. Employees with strong work values, responsibility, discipline, and a positive orientation toward work were more likely to become deeply involved in carrying out their duties. A strong work ethic encourages employees to regard work as a responsibility that requires sustained effort rather than merely an administrative obligation. This orientation strengthens the energy, dedication, and attention invested in their work. Reinforcing responsibility, discipline, and positive work values may therefore help maintain employees' psychological connection with their duties. This finding is consistent with Jannah et al. (2025), who found that work ethic positively and significantly influenced work engagement. Individual factors involving work values, work orientation, and positive attitudes toward work have also been identified as antecedents of work engagement (Akter et al., 2021). Similarly, personal characteristics reflecting discipline, responsibility, and a positive work orientation were associated with stronger involvement in work (Breu & Yasserli, 2023).

Competence also had a positive and significant effect on work engagement. The knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed by employees increased their readiness to become actively involved in their work. Employees who understand their duties and possess the capabilities required by their roles tend to be more confident when responding to work demands. Within an organization responsible for women's empowerment, child protection, and family planning, employees require relevant capabilities to understand problems, provide services, coordinate with related parties, and respond to reports in accordance with their assigned responsibilities. Strengthening engagement in this context requires not only motivational support but also competence development that corresponds with the characteristics of the work. Competency mapping, case-based training, technical guidance, and employee placement aligned with job requirements may help employees engage more fully in their duties. This result is consistent with Utami & Sukmawati (2019), who reported a positive and significant relationship between competence and work

engagement. Pranitasari et al. (2022) similarly found that stronger competence was accompanied by greater attachment to work. Professional competence was also positively associated with vigor, dedication, and absorption among employees (Chen et al., 2026).

Work ethic also had a positive and significant effect on employee performance. This result indicates that positive work values and orientations can be directly reflected in work outcomes. Employees with a strong work ethic tend to manage their time more carefully, demonstrate greater responsibility for task completion, and maintain the quality of their work more consistently. The strong relationship observed in this study suggests that employee performance was closely associated with the seriousness with which employees carried out their responsibilities. Performance management should consequently consider consistency, responsibility, punctuality, integrity, and commitment to assigned duties rather than focusing exclusively on final targets. This finding supports Khairani et al. (2025), who reported that employees with strong work values, responsibility, and commitment achieved better performance. Employee values have also been shown to shape work behavior and encourage higher productivity and performance.

In contrast, competence did not have a significant effect on employee performance. The negative and nonsignificant coefficient indicates that employees' capabilities had not yet been translated directly into stronger work outcomes. This result does not imply that competence is unimportant. Rather, it suggests a possible mismatch between the capabilities employees possess and those required by their duties. Competence may remain an unrealized individual resource when employee placement and organizational support do not allow such capabilities to be applied effectively. Tasks related to women, children, and family planning require specific knowledge and skills, including an understanding of psychology, law, health, sociology, communication, and case handling. General capabilities may therefore be insufficient when they do not correspond with the responsibilities assigned to employees. Employee placement, training, and technical guidance need to be aligned with job requirements so that existing capabilities can be applied more effectively.

This finding differs from Fauzan & Citta (2024), who reported that competence positively and significantly affected employee performance. The present finding is consistent with Apriana et al. (2022), who found that competence did not improve performance when employees' expertise and experience were not adequately considered in job placement and task implementation. Competence may therefore fail to produce stronger performance when it does not correspond with job requirements or remains insufficiently utilized.

Work engagement did not significantly affect employee performance. This finding indicates that employees' psychological attachment to their work had not translated directly into better work outcomes. Employees may demonstrate vigor, dedication, and involvement without necessarily producing stronger performance when they lack the capabilities required by their duties. The

specialized nature of the work may also limit the contribution of engagement when employees do not possess the knowledge and skills needed to perform effectively. Transfers between institutions and mismatches between educational backgrounds and assigned responsibilities may require employees to spend additional time understanding their duties before their engagement can contribute to performance.

This result differs from Salmiati & Endratno (2023), who found that work engagement positively and significantly influenced employee performance. Bouckennooghe et al. (2022) further demonstrated that the relationship between work engagement and performance may not always be linear, meaning that higher engagement does not necessarily produce proportionate improvements in performance. These differing results indicate that the contribution of work engagement may depend on employees' capabilities, the characteristics of their duties, and the organizational conditions in which the work is performed.

Work engagement did not mediate the relationship between work ethic and employee performance. The influence of work ethic on performance therefore occurred directly rather than through employees' engagement with their work. Employees with a strong work ethic may still achieve better performance through discipline, responsibility, commitment, and seriousness in completing their duties. Although work ethic strengthened work engagement, this psychological involvement did not transmit its effect to performance because work engagement itself had no significant relationship with employee performance. This result is who found that work engagement did not serve as a significant mediator between a work-related factor and employee performance. The nonlinear relationship between work engagement and performance reported by (Bouckennooghe et al., 2022) also suggests that stronger engagement does not necessarily transmit the effects of other variables to performance. Similarly, Medina-Garrido et al. (2017) showed that the presence of a psychological mediator does not invariably produce an indirect effect on performance.

Work engagement also did not mediate the relationship between competence and employee performance. Competence strengthened work engagement, but the resulting engagement did not lead to improved performance. This pattern is consistent with the direct-effect results, in which neither competence nor work engagement significantly influenced employee performance. Employees' capabilities may not improve performance when those capabilities do not correspond with job requirements, while engagement alone may be insufficient to overcome such a mismatch. The organization consequently needs to ensure that employee competence aligns with assigned responsibilities rather than relying solely on stronger psychological attachment to work.

Salsabila & Lo (2023) found that work engagement did not transmit the effect of competence to performance, even though competence positively influenced work engagement. These findings indicate that stronger competence and engagement do not necessarily produce improved performance when employees' capabilities are not aligned with the characteristics of their work or cannot be applied effectively

CONCLUSION

Work ethic emerged as the strongest determinant in the proposed model because it improved both work engagement and employee performance. Competence increased work engagement but did not produce a direct improvement in employee performance. Work engagement also failed to influence employee performance and did not transmit the effects of work ethic or competence. This pattern indicates that stronger psychological involvement in work is not sufficient when employee capabilities are not fully aligned with job requirements and organizational needs.

Improving employee performance therefore requires simultaneous attention to work values and job-related capabilities. Responsibility, discipline, and commitment need to be reinforced, while competence development should be accompanied by appropriate placement, relevant training, and opportunities to apply existing capabilities in daily work.

The scope of this study was limited to one public-sector organization and used cross-sectional data. Future research may examine other institutional settings, include additional organizational or psychological factors, and apply longitudinal designs to capture changes in work engagement and employee performance over time.

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