

Research paper

Merit System Implementation and Employee Performance in Pekanbaru City Government

Desi Andarwati*^{ORCID}, Seno Andri^{ORCID}, Okta Karneli^{ORCID}, Adianto^{ORCID}

Universitas Riau, INDONESIA

*Corresponding Author: desiandarwati7075.grad@gmail.com

Citation: Andarwati, D., Andri, S., Karneli, O., & Adianto. (2026). Merit system implementation and employee performance in Pekanbaru city government. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/18748>

Published: June 14, 2026

ABSTRACT

Bureaucratic reform in Indonesia positions the merit system as a key mechanism for strengthening professionalism, fairness, and performance in civil service management. However, implementation at the local level remains uneven because formal rules interact with leadership practices, employee understanding, digital capacity, organizational culture, and political dynamics. This study examines the determinants of merit system implementation and its mediating role in the relationship between organizational-political factors and employee performance in the Pekanbaru City Government. Drawing on institutional theory, the merit system is conceptualized as a governance mechanism that translates formal rules into personnel practices. A quantitative explanatory design was used with survey data from 100 civil servants selected through proportional random sampling. The data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares. The findings show that leadership, employee understanding, and political factors significantly influence merit system implementation, whereas information and communication technology and organizational culture do not. Merit system implementation significantly improves employee performance and mediates the effects of leadership, employee understanding, and political factors. Leadership has a negative direct effect on employee performance, suggesting that formal authority may not improve performance unless it is aligned with meritocratic procedures. Political factors have a positive effect when interpreted as reform support rather than patronage. The study contributes to public administration literature by showing that merit-based governance operates as an institutional bridge between organizational conditions and bureaucratic performance.

Keywords: merit system, employee performance, institutional theory, local government, civil service reform, political factors

Civil service reform remains a central issue in Indonesian public administration. The state civil apparatus is expected to deliver accountable, professional, and responsive public services, yet these expectations depend on how public organizations manage recruitment, placement, promotion, career development, and performance evaluation. In this context, the merit system has become a core instrument of bureaucratic reform because it requires personnel decisions to be based on qualifications, competence, performance, integrity, and fairness rather than personal ties, informal pressure, or political loyalty.

The Indonesian regulatory framework places strong emphasis on merit-based management. Law Number 5 of 2014 concerning the State Civil Apparatus and Government Regulation Number 11 of 2017 concerning Civil Servant Management require government agencies to manage civil servants according to objective criteria, competency standards, and performance-based evaluation. Nevertheless, formal adoption does not automatically

ensure effective implementation. Merit-based personnel management must be institutionalized through leadership commitment, employee understanding, administrative capacity, digital systems, organizational norms, and political support. Without these conditions, formal merit rules may remain ceremonial rather than substantive.

The local government context is particularly important. Regional administrations operate as both administrative organizations and political arenas. Formal personnel rules interact with local leadership, bureaucratic routines, digital readiness, organizational culture, and political dynamics. Recent studies show that merit principles can improve public sector performance when they are implemented consistently, but implementation may be weakened by politicization, weak talent management, limited digital systems, and unclear career development mechanisms (Brewer et al., 2022; Oliveira et al., 2024; Roziqin et al., 2026; Turner et al., 2022). Critical institutional and feminist scholarship also reminds us that formal systems that appear neutral may reproduce informal exclusion when power relations, inequality, and everyday practices are not addressed (Griffin & Vehvilainen, 2021; Niko et al., 2024; Riahi, 2026). These perspectives are relevant because the merit system is not only a managerial instrument but also a mechanism for institutional fairness.

The Pekanbaru City Government provides a relevant case for examining these issues. As a local government institution, it has adopted merit system principles in civil servant management. However, as in many regional bureaucracies, implementation may still face challenges in career development, employee placement, performance appraisal, promotion mechanisms, bureaucratic neutrality, and the use of objective competency standards. These challenges suggest that the effectiveness of the merit system depends not only on regulations but also on the institutional environment in which personnel decisions are made.

This study is grounded in institutional theory. Institutional theory explains that organizational behavior is shaped by formal rules, norms, values, and pressures from the wider institutional environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2014). In this study, the merit system is conceptualized as an institutional mechanism that transforms formal rules into practical personnel management. When merit rules are strongly institutionalized, recruitment, promotion, placement, and evaluation become more objective and performance oriented. When they are weakly institutionalized, personnel decisions may continue to be influenced by informal practices, hierarchical routines, or political considerations.

The study addresses two research questions. First, what organizational and political factors influence merit system implementation in the Pekanbaru City Government? Second, does merit system implementation mediate the relationship between these factors and employee performance? By answering these questions, the study contributes to public administration literature by positioning the merit system as an institutional bridge between leadership, employee understanding, information and communication technology (ICT), organizational culture, political factors, and employee performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The merit system is a central principle of public sector human resource management. It requires that recruitment, promotion, placement, career development, and performance evaluation be based on competence, qualifications, integrity, fairness, and measurable performance. From a Weberian perspective, merit-based personnel management strengthens rational-legal administration by reducing personalistic decision-making and emphasizing rules, competence, and impersonal procedures (Weber, 2009). From an institutional perspective, however, merit rules become effective only when they are translated into organizational routines and accepted as legitimate by organizational members.

Recent scholarship confirms the importance of merit principles for government performance. Brewer et al. (2022) show that merit principles remain important for civil service systems, while Oliveira et al. (2024) synthesize evidence that merit principles are associated with government performance. Roziqin et al. (2026) further note that the Indonesian merit system is shaped by human resources, infrastructure, digital systems, environmental factors, and policy clarity. These studies support the argument that the merit system should be examined as a governance mechanism rather than as a narrow personnel procedure. Leadership is one of the most important internal drivers of merit system implementation. Public sector leaders translate regulations into administrative routines, allocate resources, enforce competency-based placement, and protect personnel decisions from inconsistency. Leadership commitment is particularly relevant in local government because personnel management may be exposed to political pressure and informal expectations. Therefore, leadership is expected to strengthen merit system implementation. Leadership may also influence performance by clarifying work targets, providing direction, and supporting organizational commitment. However, its effect is likely to be stronger when leadership operates through objective personnel procedures rather than through hierarchical control. Thus, this study proposes: H1: Leadership positively influences merit system implementation. H6: Leadership positively influences employee performance. H12: Leadership positively influences employee performance through merit system implementation.

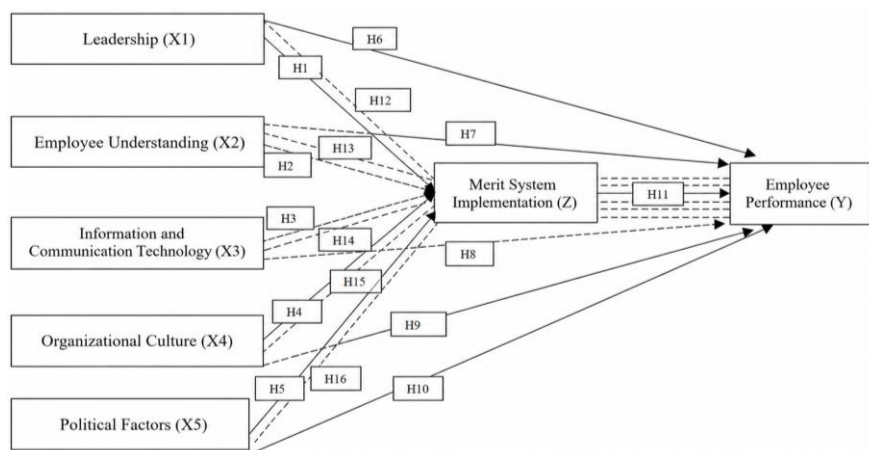
Employee understanding represents the cognitive dimension of institutionalization. Formal rules are unlikely to be implemented consistently if civil servants do not understand their objectives, procedures, and consequences. Employees need to understand competency standards, performance appraisal, career development, and promotion procedures so that merit rules are not perceived as mere administrative requirements. From a human capital perspective, employee knowledge and understanding are important organizational resources (Becker, 2002). Understanding can also improve role clarity and work motivation, but it is expected to improve performance most clearly when translated into actual merit-based management. Therefore, this study proposes: H2: Employee understanding positively influences merit system implementation. H7: Employee understanding positively influences employee performance. H13: Employee understanding positively influences employee performance through merit system implementation. ICT is increasingly used in public administration to improve transparency, data accuracy, and accountability. In personnel management, digital systems can support competency mapping, performance records, promotion histories, and evidence-based decisions. The role of e-government in supporting merit implementation has become more visible in recent Indonesian studies (Dwiputrianti et al., 2023; Roziqin et al., 2026). However, technology does not automatically improve governance. Digital systems must be integrated with personnel policy and used strategically rather than merely administratively. Accordingly, this study proposes: H3: ICT positively influences merit system implementation. H8: ICT positively influences employee performance. H14: ICT positively influences employee performance through merit system implementation.

Organizational culture refers to shared values, assumptions, and patterns of behavior that shape how employees interpret and enact formal rules (Schein, 2010). A culture that values professionalism, fairness, accountability, and performance orientation should support merit-based governance. Conversely, a culture that tolerates favoritism, excessive hierarchy, or informal networks may weaken meritocratic practices. Feminist institutional scholarship also warns that informal practices may preserve durable inequality even when formal rules are present (Griffin & Vehvilainen, 2021). Thus, culture is expected to influence both merit implementation and performance, especially when cultural values are embedded in formal systems. H4: Organizational culture positively influences merit system implementation. H9: Organizational culture positively influences employee performance. H15: Organizational culture positively influences employee performance through merit system implementation. Political factors are complex in local bureaucracy. Political intervention may undermine meritocracy when recruitment, placement, promotion, or evaluation are shaped by patronage and loyalty. Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen (2016) show that politicization is associated with weaker integrity in civil service systems. Recent work also indicates that political activity and bureaucratic impartiality remain under tension in contemporary administration (Cooper & Reggie, 2025). At the same time, political support may facilitate reform by providing policy commitment, legitimacy, and resources. Therefore, this study initially treats political factors as potential pressure on meritocracy while recognizing their ambivalent character. H5: Political factors negatively influence merit system implementation. H10: Political factors negatively influence employee performance. H16: Political factors negatively influence employee performance through merit system implementation.

Finally, merit system implementation is expected to improve employee performance. A well-implemented merit system aligns employee capacity with job requirements, improves fairness in placement and promotion, supports objective performance appraisal, and strengthens accountability. Recent studies on merit principles, meritocracy, and civil service performance support this relationship (Brewer et al., 2022; Oliveira et al., 2024; Park & Jeon, 2022; Suzuki & Hur, 2022). Thus, H11 states that merit system implementation positively influences employee performance. All hypotheses are drawn in the conceptual model that shown in [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1

Conceptual framework of the study



The conceptual framework positions leadership, employee understanding, ICT, organizational culture, and political factors as predictors of merit system implementation and employee performance. Merit system implementation is treated as the mediating institutional mechanism through which organizational and political conditions are converted into performance outcomes. This framework assumes that performance in local government is not produced only by individual effort or managerial instruction; rather, it is shaped by the institutional quality of personnel management.

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative explanatory design to test direct and indirect relationships among leadership, employee understanding, ICT, organizational culture, political factors, merit system implementation, and employee performance. The design was appropriate because the study aimed to test theoretically developed hypotheses using latent constructs and mediation analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Although the primary approach was quantitative, field observations and informal contextual insights were used to support interpretation of the statistical results.

The research was conducted in the Pekanbaru City Government, Riau Province, Indonesia. The population consisted of 7,367 civil servants working in local government agencies. A total of 100 respondents were selected through proportional random sampling across several Regional Apparatus Organizations. The sample included managerial and non-managerial civil servants who were familiar with personnel administration, performance appraisal, career development, placement, or promotion mechanisms. The research was conducted from February 2024 to March 2025.

The sample size was considered acceptable for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). First, PLS-SEM is suitable for complex models involving multiple latent constructs, mediation paths, and small to medium sample sizes (Hair et al., 2019). Second, the sample exceeded the 10-times rule, because the largest number of structural paths directed at an endogenous construct was six. Third, the sample was adequate for the specific institutional context of the study, although the study acknowledges that a larger sample would improve generalizability. The interpretation also considered Cohen's (1988) guidance on statistical power for medium effects in multiple-predictor models.

The independent variables were leadership, employee understanding, ICT, organizational culture, and political factors. Merit system implementation was the mediating variable, and employee performance was the dependent variable. Leadership was measured through commitment to merit principles, policy direction, consistency in personnel management, and support for reform. Employee understanding was measured through knowledge of merit principles, competency standards, performance evaluation, and career development mechanisms. ICT was measured through availability, accessibility, and usefulness of digital systems in personnel management. Organizational culture was measured through professionalism, fairness, accountability, and performance orientation. Political factors were measured through perceptions of political influence, support, pressure, or intervention in personnel decisions. Merit system implementation was measured through merit-based recruitment, placement, promotion, career development, and performance appraisal. Employee performance was measured through task achievement, work quality, responsibility, discipline, and contribution to organizational goals.

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. This scale is appropriate for measuring perceptions, attitudes, and evaluations of organizational practices in survey research (Sekaran & Bougie, 2017). The instrument was developed from public administration and human resource management literature and was pre-tested with 30 respondents. The pre-test assessed item clarity, validity, and reliability. Revisions were made before the main survey to improve clarity and alignment with the research objectives.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed to selected civil servants. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the academic use of the data. To reduce common method bias, questionnaire items were written in neutral language, grouped by construct, and administered with assurances of anonymity. These procedural remedies are consistent with recommendations for survey-based research (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Secondary data from regulations, official documents, and scholarly publications were used to support contextual interpretation.

Ethical Considerations. This study followed ethical principles for non-interventional survey research involving adult civil servants. The study did not involve clinical intervention, vulnerable participants, or the collection of sensitive personal identifiers. Before completing the questionnaire, all respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and the academic use of the data. Completion and return of the questionnaire were treated as informed consent. No names, employee identification numbers, or individual-level information were reported. The data were analyzed

in aggregate form only. Because no formal IRB approval number was issued for this non-interventional organizational survey, the authors transparently report the ethical procedures applied in the study.

Data was analyzed using SmartPLS 3.0. The analysis consisted of two stages. The measurement model was assessed through outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE). The structural model was assessed using R2 values, path coefficients, t-statistics, p-values, and mediation analysis through bootstrapping. A relationship was considered significant when the t-statistic exceeded 1.96 and the p-value was below .05. Because several reliability values were modest and the R2 value for merit system implementation was very high, the results were interpreted cautiously and supported with theoretical reasoning. The interpretation also follows the recommendation that PLS-SEM studies should consider possible common method bias and collinearity through diagnostic procedures in future research (Kock, 2015).

RESULTS

The respondents represented different demographic and professional backgrounds (Table 1). Female respondents formed a slightly larger proportion of the sample than male respondents. Most respondents held a bachelor's degree, and many had more than ten years of work experience. This profile suggests that respondents had sufficient educational and bureaucratic experience to evaluate merit system implementation in local government.

Table 1

Respondent Characteristics (n = 100)

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	44	44.0
	Female	56	56.0
Education level	Senior high school	2	2.0
	Diploma (D3/D4)	7	7.0
	Bachelor's degree	78	78.0
	Master's degree	10	10.0
	Doctoral degree	3	3.0
Tenure	1–5 years	12	12.0
	6–10 years	25	25.0
	11–15 years	28	28.0
	16–20 years	14	14.0
	21–25 years	11	11.0
	26–30 years	9	9.0
	≥31 years	1	1.0

Source: Processed survey data (2024).

The measurement model results (Table 2) indicate that all constructs had AVE values above .50, suggesting acceptable convergent validity. However, several constructs showed Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values below the conventional threshold. Rather than ignoring this issue, the study interprets the structural results cautiously. These modest reliability values may reflect the complexity of measuring institutional and political constructs in local government settings, especially where respondents have different experiences with personnel management.

Table 2

Convergent Validity and Construct Reliability

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
Leadership (X1)	0.623	0.580	0.700	0.793
Employee Understanding (X2)	0.592	0.555	0.531	0.706
Information and Communication Technology (X3)	0.551	0.792	0.731	0.771
Organizational Culture (X4)	0.523	0.675	0.722	0.743
Political factors (X5)	0.509	0.580	0.675	0.633
Implementation of the Merit System (Z)	0.671	0.891	0.706	0.794
Employee Performance (Y)	0.526	0.602	0.504	0.672

Source: SmartPLS 3.0 output (2024).

Indicator loading assessment (Table 3) was used to refine the measurement model. Several indicators were deleted because of weak or problematic loadings. Other indicators were retained with caution because they

represented theoretically important aspects of the constructs. The negative loading of one employee understanding item indicates that it may have been directionally different from other indicators; therefore, this issue is treated as a measurement limitation rather than as a basis for overclaiming the findings.

Table 3
Indicator Loading Summary and Indicator Retention

Construct	Initial / deleted indicators	Retained indicators and outer loadings	Decision
Leadership (X1)	Initial: 4; deleted: X1.2, X1.3	X1.1 = 0.931; X1.4 = 0.917	Retained
Employee Understanding (X2)	Initial: 3; deleted: none	X2.1 = 0.435; X2.2 = -0.702; X2.3 = 0.884	Retained with caution
Information and Communication Technology (X3)	Initial: 4; deleted: X3.3	X3.1 = 0.372; X3.2 = 0.951; X3.4 = 0.945	Retained with caution
Organizational Culture (X4)	Initial: 4; deleted: X4.2, X4.4	X4.1 = 0.968; X4.3 = 0.767	Retained
Political Factors (X5)	Initial: 3; deleted: X5.2	X5.1 = 0.534; X5.3 = 0.958	Retained with caution
Merit System Implementation (Z)	Initial: 4; deleted: Z3	Z1 = 0.667; Z2 = 0.636; Z4 = 0.690	Retained
Employee Performance (Y)	Initial: 5; deleted: Y2	Y1 = 0.747; Y3 = 0.412; Y5 = 0.733; Y6 = 0.512	Retained with caution

Source: *SmartPLS 3.0 output (2024)*

The structural model had strong explanatory power (**Table 4**). The R2 value for merit system implementation was .974 and the R2 value for employee performance was .727. The high R2 value for merit system implementation suggests that leadership, employee understanding, ICT, organizational culture, and political factors collectively explain a substantial share of the variance. However, such a high value should be interpreted carefully because it may also reflect conceptual proximity among predictors. The study therefore avoids unsupported claims about model superiority and recommends that future research report full collinearity diagnostics.

Table 4
Coefficient of Determination

Endogenous construct	R Square	Adjusted R2
Merit System Implementation (Z)	.974	.973
Employee Performance (Y)	.727	.712

Source: *SmartPLS 3.0 output (2024)*.

The direct effect results (**Table 5**) show that leadership significantly and positively influenced merit system implementation (beta = .332, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Employee understanding also significantly and positively influenced merit system implementation (beta = .532, $p < .001$), supporting H2. ICT had a positive but non-significant effect (beta = .178, $p = .268$), so H3 was not supported. Organizational culture was not significant (beta = .018, $p = .887$), so H4 was not supported. Political factors significantly and positively influenced merit system implementation (beta = .182, $p < .001$). Although significant, this result did not support H5 in the expected negative direction.

Table 5
Direct Effects

Hypothesis	Path	Beta	T Stat	P Values	Decision
H1	Leadership -> Merit System Implementation	.332	7.222	< .001	Supported
H2	Employee Understanding -> Merit System Implementation	.532	7.294	< .001	Supported
H3	ICT -> Merit System Implementation	.178	1.109	.268	Not supported
H4	Organizational Culture -> Merit System Implementation	.018	.142	.887	Not supported
H5	Political Factors -> Merit System Implementation	.182	4.920	< .001	Significant, opposite direction
H11	Merit System Implementation -> Employee Performance	1.139	3.159	.002	Supported
H6	Leadership -> Employee Performance	-.397	2.683	.008	Significant, opposite direction
H7	Employee Understanding -> Employee Performance	.010	.046	.963	Not supported
H8	ICT -> Employee Performance	-.107	.366	.715	Not supported
H9	Organizational Culture -> Employee Performance	-.165	.693	.489	Not supported
H10	Political Factors -> Employee Performance	.247	2.078	.038	Significant, opposite direction

Source: *Bootstrapping output (2024)*, beta = standardized path coefficient.

Merit system implementation significantly improved employee performance ($\beta = 1.139$, $p = .002$), supporting H11. Leadership had a negative and significant direct effect on employee performance ($\beta = -.397$, $p = .008$), so H6 was not supported in the expected direction. Employee understanding, ICT, and organizational culture did not significantly influence employee performance directly. Political factors positively and significantly influenced employee performance ($\beta = .247$, $p = .038$), which contradicted the expected negative direction of H10.

The mediation results (Table 6) show that merit system implementation significantly mediated the relationships between leadership and employee performance ($\beta = .378$, $p = .004$), employee understanding and employee performance ($\beta = .606$, $p = .004$), and political factors and employee performance ($\beta = .207$, $p = .011$). These results support H12, H13, and H16 statistically, although H16 operated in a positive rather than negative direction. ICT and organizational culture did not have significant indirect effects through merit system implementation.

Table 6
Indirect Effects Through Merit System Implementation

Hypothesis	Indirect path	Beta	T Stat	P Values	Decision
H12	Leadership -> Merit System Implementation -> Employee Performance	.378	2.864	.004	Supported
H13	Employee Understanding -> Merit System Implementation -> Employee Performance	.606	2.895	.004	Supported
H14	ICT -> Merit System Implementation -> Employee Performance	.203	1.190	.235	Not supported
H15	Organizational Culture -> Merit System Implementation -> Employee Performance	.020	.153	.878	Not supported
H16	Political Factors -> Merit System Implementation -> Employee Performance	.207	2.554	.011	Supported statistically, positive direction

Note. Source: Bootstrapping output (2024).

DISCUSSION

The findings provide an institutional explanation of how merit system implementation shapes employee performance in the Pekanbaru City Government. Not all organizational factors directly improved performance. Instead, leadership, employee understanding, and political factors became meaningful primarily when translated through merit system implementation. This finding supports the central argument that the merit system functions as an institutional mechanism connecting organizational-political conditions with bureaucratic performance.

The significant effect of leadership on merit system implementation confirms that leadership remains essential for bureaucratic reform. Leaders can enforce competency-based placement, transparent promotion, and objective performance appraisal. This finding is consistent with recent Indonesian studies showing that leadership commitment and human resource understanding are critical success factors in merit implementation (Dwiputrianti et al., 2023; Roziqin et al., 2026). However, the negative direct effect of leadership on employee performance suggests that formal authority alone may not motivate employees. In bureaucratic contexts, leadership may be experienced as hierarchical control or compliance pressure if it is not linked to fair personnel practices. The significant indirect effect through the merit system shows that leadership becomes performance-enhancing when it operates through meritocratic mechanisms (Clemons, 2025).

Employee understanding significantly influenced merit system implementation but did not directly improve performance. This result indicates that knowledge of merit principles is necessary but insufficient. Civil servants may understand competency standards, career development rules, and performance appraisal procedures, but understanding will not improve performance unless the organization applies these principles consistently. The merit system therefore bridges individual understanding and organizational outcomes. This supports institutional theory: rules become effective when they are cognitively understood and practically embedded in organizational routines (Dogutas, 2025).

ICT did not significantly influence merit system implementation or employee performance. This does not mean that technology is irrelevant. Rather, it suggests that digital tools may still be used mainly for administrative documentation instead of strategic personnel management. Recent public administration literature emphasizes that digital systems can support merit implementation when they are integrated with talent management, competency databases, and performance accountability (Suh & Battaglio, 2022; Roziqin et al., 2026). In the Pekanbaru context, ICT may need stronger policy integration before it can produce measurable reform effects (Sabrina et al., 2021; Hartanto et al., 2021; Acar et al., 2025; Dalgaldere, 2025; Shishakly, 2025; Sultan et al., 2025).

Organizational culture also did not significantly influence merit implementation or performance. This finding challenges the assumption that culture automatically shapes performance. In highly formal bureaucracies,

regulations, hierarchy, and administrative procedures may dominate behavior more strongly than shared values. Moreover, values such as professionalism and fairness may remain symbolic if they are not translated into personnel mechanisms. Critical studies of institutions show that informal practices can persist beneath formal commitments to fairness and equality (Griffin & Vehviläinen, 2021; Niko et al., 2024). Thus, culture must be reinforced by rules, incentives, and transparent procedures to support meritocracy.

The positive effect of political factors requires careful interpretation. The hypotheses expected negative effects because politicization can undermine meritocracy. Prior research shows that politicization can weaken administrative professionalism and integrity (Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016). However, the empirical result suggests that political factors in this setting may have been perceived as policy support, reform commitment, or institutional backing rather than only patronage. This illustrates the dual character of politics in local bureaucracy. Political influence can damage meritocracy when it bypasses rules, but political authority can also support reform when it strengthens formal merit mechanisms (Omoniyi, 2026).

The significant indirect effect of political factors through the merit system reinforces this interpretation. Political support improves performance only when it works through meritocratic rules rather than around them. This finding contributes to a more balanced understanding of politics in public administration. Politics is not inherently harmful; its effect depends on whether it is disciplined by institutional rules, transparency, and accountability. From a fairness perspective, the merit system is important because it can limit arbitrary decisions and protect employees from informal domination (Gatiningsih & Saputra, 2026).

The strong effect of merit system implementation on employee performance confirms the importance of merit-based personnel management. When employees are placed according to competence, evaluated objectively, promoted fairly, and developed based on performance, public organizations become more predictable and professional. This finding is consistent with evidence that merit principles are associated with better government performance and civil service quality (Johnson & Lewis, 2020; Brewer et al., 2022; Park & Jeon, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2024). It also supports the argument that personnel systems are not merely administrative tools but institutional foundations for performance.

Overall, the study shows that bureaucratic performance in local government depends on institutional alignment. Leadership, employee understanding, technology, culture, and politics matter, but their influence becomes stronger when organized through a consistent merit system. The findings also show why local government reform cannot rely only on regulations or digitalization. Reform requires the alignment of formal rules, leadership commitment, employee cognition, technological readiness, organizational values, and political accountability.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings have several theoretical implications. First, the study extends institutional theory by showing that the merit system operates as an institutional bridge between formal reform rules and everyday performance outcomes. Formal laws and regulations are necessary, but they are insufficient when not supported by leadership, employee cognition, and political accountability. This supports the view that public human resource management should be analyzed as part of public management and public administration, not merely as internal administration (Boselie et al., 2021). The result also reinforces the need to study meritocracy as a practical institutional arrangement, because merit principles may generate desirable outcomes only when implemented through fair and transparent procedures (Oliveira et al., 2024; Suzuki & Hur, 2022).

Second, the study contributes to the literature on local bureaucratic reform in Indonesia. Previous research highlights the persistent challenge of reforming large and politically embedded bureaucracies (Turner et al., 2022). This study adds evidence from Pekanbaru City Government by showing that leadership and employee understanding are important, but they must be mediated by a functioning merit system. This finding complements Indonesian studies that identify leadership commitment, human resource understanding, digital infrastructure, and policy clarity as determinants of merit system implementation (Dwiputrianti et al., 2023; Roziqin et al., 2026). It also supports earlier arguments that consistent merit principles can improve ASN performance when applied to promotion and career development processes (Daniarsyah, 2017).

Third, the study has implications for fairness and inclusion in public personnel management. Merit systems are often presented as neutral, but neutrality should not be assumed automatically. Recent research on merit-based selection shows that formal merit procedures may still reproduce inequality when informal bias, discrimination, or exclusionary practices remain embedded in institutions (Chudnovsky & Castaneda Farill, 2024; Sunam et al., 2022). The added discussion from Feminist Encounters strengthens this point by emphasizing that institutional rules must be examined alongside power relations, informal practices, and social exclusion (Griffin & Vehviläinen, 2021; Niko et al., 2024; Riahi, 2026). Therefore, merit system implementation should be evaluated not only by administrative compliance but also by whether it creates fair access to career development and reduces arbitrary personnel decisions.

Practically, the findings suggest four priorities for local governments. First, leadership development should focus on meritocratic governance rather than command-and-control supervision. Leaders need to demonstrate consistency in competency-based placement, objective performance appraisal, transparent promotion, and protection from informal pressure. Second, employee understanding should be strengthened through systematic socialization, technical guidance, and accessible information about merit procedures. Third, ICT should be integrated with strategic personnel management. Digital systems should support competency databases, performance records, talent management, and promotion decisions rather than merely storing administrative documents. Fourth, political actors should provide policy support without bypassing merit rules. Political commitment is productive when it reinforces formal procedures, but it becomes harmful when it turns into patronage. These priorities are consistent with recent public administration research emphasizing performance accountability, strategic program management, and the role of public sector HRM in organizational performance (Berman et al., 2025; Suh & Battaglio, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the determinants of merit system implementation and its impact on employee performance in the Pekanbaru City Government. By positioning the merit system as a mediating institutional mechanism, the study explains how organizational and political conditions are translated into performance outcomes. The findings show that leadership, employee understanding, and political factors significantly influence merit system implementation. ICT and organizational culture do not show significant effects. Merit system implementation significantly improves employee performance and mediates the effects of leadership, employee understanding, and political factors.

The study contributes to public administration literature in three ways. First, it develops an institutional model of merit-based governance in Indonesian local government. Second, it shows that leadership and employee understanding do not automatically improve performance unless they are embedded in meritocratic procedures. Third, it provides a nuanced interpretation of political factors by showing that political support may improve performance when it strengthens rather than bypasses the merit system.

Practically, the findings suggest that local governments should strengthen merit implementation through transparent promotion, competency-based placement, objective performance appraisal, and consistent career development. Leadership development should emphasize fairness, accountability, and institutional support for meritocracy. Employee socialization programs should improve understanding of merit principles. ICT should be integrated with strategic personnel management rather than used only for administrative reporting. Political actors should support reform by protecting bureaucratic neutrality and reinforcing formal rules.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted only in the Pekanbaru City Government, so the findings may not be generalized to all local governments in Indonesia. Future studies should examine multiple regions to compare institutional conditions. Second, the sample consisted of 100 respondents. Although acceptable for PLS-SEM and the specific context of the study, a larger sample would improve statistical power and external validity. Third, the study relied on self-reported survey data, which may be influenced by perception and social desirability. Future studies should combine surveys with interviews, administrative records, and longitudinal data.

Fourth, several constructs showed modest reliability values and some indicators required cautious interpretation. Future research should refine the measurement instrument and test it with larger samples. Fifth, the very high R² value for merit system implementation may indicate conceptual proximity among predictors. Future studies should report full collinearity diagnostics and consider alternative model specifications. Finally, future research may extend the model by including bureaucratic neutrality, perceived organizational justice, public service motivation, gender-sensitive career development, and employee trust as additional mechanisms linking merit systems and performance.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the civil servants of the Pekanbaru City Government who participated in this survey and provided information for the academic purposes of this study.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethical statement

This study followed ethical principles for non-interventional survey research involving adult civil servants. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and academic use of the data. Completion and return of the questionnaire were treated as informed consent. No formal IRB approval number was issued for this non-interventional organizational survey; therefore, the authors transparently report the ethical procedures applied.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Author contributions

Desi Andarwati contributed to conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and manuscript drafting. Seno Andri, Okta Karneli, and Adianto contributed to supervision, methodological guidance, manuscript review, and critical revision. All authors read and approved of the final manuscript.

Data availability

The primary survey data is not publicly available because the study involved civil servants and confidentiality was assured of respondents. Aggregated and anonymized data may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AI disclosure

The authors take full responsibility for the content, analysis, interpretation, and final version of this manuscript, including any use of AI-assisted tools for language editing or formatting support.

Biographical sketch

Desi Andarwati is a doctoral student in the Doctoral Program in Public Administration, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia. Her academic work focuses on public administration, bureaucratic reform, civil service management, merit-based governance, and employee performance in local government institutions.

Seno Andri is a lecturer in the Doctoral Program in Public Administration, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia. His academic expertise relates to public administration, public sector management, bureaucratic reform, governance, and human resource management in government organizations.

Okta Karneli is a lecturer in the Doctoral Program in Public Administration, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia. His research interests include public administration, organizational behavior, public sector performance, public policy, and institutional development in local government.

Adianto is a lecturer in the Doctoral Program in Public Administration, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia. His academic interests include public administration, governance, bureaucratic institutions, civil service reform, and performance-oriented public management.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note

The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Lectito Publications and/or the editor(s). Lectito Publications and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to persons or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.

REFERENCES

- Acar, E., Deiri, Y., & Yigit, F. (2025). A focused review of artificial intelligence in education: Evolution and challenges. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Artificial Intelligence and Society*, 1(1), Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.20897/jirais/17640>
- Becker, G. S. (2002). Human capital. In D. R. Henderson (Ed.), *The concise encyclopedia of economics* (2nd ed.). Liberty Fund.
- Berman, E. M., Prasojo, E., Fathurrahman, R., Samartini, A., Plimmer, G., Sabharwal, M., Neiva, V., Syarien, M. I. A., Hariyati, D., Puspasari, D., Wijayanti, F. W., & Ferdiansyah, J. (2025). Strategic program management:

- Performance accountability driving use in national governments. *Public Administration Review*, 85(3), 862–884. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13892>
- Boselie, P., Van Harten, J., & Veld, M. (2021). A human resource management review on public management and public administration research: Stop right there... before we go any further.... *Public Management Review*, 23(4), 483–500. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1695880>
- Brewer, G. A., Kellough, J. E., & Rainey, H. G. (2022). The importance of merit principles for civil service systems: Evidence from the U.S. federal sector. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 42(4), 686–708. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734371X211026008>
- Chudnovsky, M., & Castaneda Farill, C. E. (2024). Gender discrimination and merit-based selection: A case study of Mexico. *Public Administration and Development*, 44(2), 118–133. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.2041>
- Clemons, A. (2025). Supporting faculty resilience: Department chairs' role in community building amid trauma. *American Journal of Qualitative Research*, 9(1), 16–31. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/15877>
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cooper, C. A., & Reggie, J. (2025). Public sector employees' political activity across administrative traditions: Tensions between democratic participation and bureaucratic impartiality in an era of populism and democratic backsliding. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 49, 253–277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07349149241310404>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2022). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dalgaldere, S. (2025). Generative artificial intelligence in crisis journalism: A comparative analysis of ChatGPT and Gemini news texts. *ISophos: International Journal of Information, Technology and Philosophy*, 8(15), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.20897/isophos/18446>
- Daniarsyah, D. (2017). Implementation of the merit system in open recruitment for promotion of senior civil servant leadership positions: A critical thinking analysis. *Civil Service Journal*, 11(2), 39–48.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147–160. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101>
- Dogutas, A. (2025). A comparative analysis of immigrant children's educational policies: Türkiye and the United States. *European Journal of Education & Language Review*, 1(1), Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.20897/ejeler/17313>
- Dwiputrianti, S., Lestari, E. W. T., Sutiyono, W., & Purba, C. O. (2023). Critical success factors merit implementation of civil service management in Indonesia. In *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Administrative Science (ICAS 2022)* (pp. 112–120). Atlantis Press. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-104-3_12
- Gatiningsih, & Saputra, R. (2026). Population and civil registration as the spearhead of inclusive and effective domestic governance. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 13(3), 179–206. <https://doi.org/10.66815/ejecs/2974>
- Government Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia Number 11 of 2017 Concerning Civil Servant Management. (2017).
- Griffin, G., & Vehvilainen, M. (2021). The persistence of gender struggles in Nordic research and innovation. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 5(2), Article 28. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/11165>
- Hair, J. F., Risher, J. J., Sarstedt, M., & Ringle, C. M. (2019). When to use and how to report the results of PLS-SEM. *European Business Review*, 31(1), 2–24. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EBR-11-2018-0203>
- Hartanto, D., Agussani, A., & Dalle, J. (2021). Antecedents of public trust in government during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia: Mediation of perceived religious values. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 8(4), 321–341. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/975>
- Johnson, T., & Lewis, G. B. (2020). Inspecting the merit system's "pivotal idea": Does competitive examination increase the qualifications and quality of the U.S. federal service? *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 40(2), 202–221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734371X18794808>
- Kock, N. (2015). Common method bias in PLS-SEM: A full collinearity assessment approach. *International Journal of e-Collaboration*, 11(4), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4018/ijec.2015100101>
- Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 5 of 2014 Concerning the State Civil Apparatus. (2014).
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2), 340–363. <https://doi.org/10.1086/226550>
- Meyer-Sahling, J. H., & Mikkelsen, K. S. (2016). Civil service laws, merit, politicization, and corruption: The perspective of public officials from five East European countries. *Public Administration*, 94(4), 1105–1123. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12276>

- Niko, N., Widianingsih, I., Sulaeman, M., & Fedryansyah, M. (2024). Indigenous women's connection to forest: Colonialism, lack of land ownership and livelihood deprivations of Dayak Benawan in Indonesia. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 8(1), Article 22. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/14233>
- Oliveira, E., Abner, G., Lee, S., Suzuki, K., Hur, H., & Perry, J. L. (2024). What does the evidence tell us about merit principles and government performance? *Public Administration*, 102, 668–690. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12945>
- Omoniyi, T. O. (2026). Relevant, timely, and inclusive? A qualitative appraisal of INEC's voter education programme (VEP) in Ondo City, Nigeria. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education and Society*, 14(1), Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.20897/apjes/17956>
- Park, S., & Jeon, S. H. (2022). Merit principles merit further investigation: The influence on employee perception of whistleblowing. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 45(12), 894–906. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2021.1928185>
- Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., Lee, J. Y., & Podsakoff, N. P. (2003). Common method biases in behavioral research: A critical review of the literature and recommended remedies. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88(5), 879–903. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.5.879>
- Riahi, H. (2026). Intersectionality and Islamic feminism: Key tools for eradicating gender inequality in the Saudi labour market. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(1), Article 22. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/17997>
- Roziqin, A., Kamil, M., Ma'mur, R. M., & Bintang, R. M. (2026). Merit system in Indonesian government: Policy implementation and determinant factors. *Public Administration Quarterly*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07349149251413245>
- Sabrina, R., Akrim, A., Hartanto, D., & Dalle, J. (2021). Role of perceived religious values to facilitate predictors of public trust in government: The case of a Muslim-majority culture. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 8(4). <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1776>
- Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Scott, W. R. (2014). *Institutions and organizations: Ideas, interests, and identities* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Sekaran, U., & Bougie, R. (2017). *Research methods for business: A skill-building approach* (7th ed.). Wiley.
- Shishakly, R. (2025). Understanding AI in higher education: Gendered and intersectional students' experience with ChatGPT use. *European Journal of STEM Education*, 10(1), Article 36. <https://doi.org/10.20897/ejsteme/17646>
- Suh, J., & Battaglio, P. (2022). Assessing the mediating effect of internal communication on strategic human resource management and perceived performance: An intersectoral comparison. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 42(3), 464–491. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734371X21994185>
- Sultan, Y., Dautova, G., & Dalle, J. (2025). Examining the relationship among artificial intelligence literacy, cultural literacy, and intercultural communication proficiency of philology students. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 12(5), 345–362. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/2839>
- Sunam, R., Pariyar, B., & Shrestha, K. K. (2022). Does affirmative action undermine meritocracy? "Meritocratic inclusion" of the marginalized in Nepal's bureaucracy. *Development Policy Review*, 40(1), Article e12554. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12554>
- Suzuki, K., & Hur, H. (2022). Revisiting the old debate: Citizens' perceptions of meritocracy in public and private organizations. *Public Management Review*, 24(8), 1226–1250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.1895545>
- Turner, M., Prasojo, E., & Sumarwono, R. (2022). The challenge of reforming big bureaucracy in Indonesia. *Policy Studies*, 43(2), 333–351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2019.1708301>
- Weber, M. (2009). *The theory of social and economic organization*. Simon & Schuster.