



Challenges of Personnel Management in Local Government: A Case Study of Phonethong District, Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR

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Abstract

This study aims to contribute to the discourse on decentralization and civil service reform in developing contexts. As governments pursue decentralization and administrative reform, effective human resource management at the district level becomes increasingly critical. However, few studies have examined human resource management at the district level. Rural districts such as Phonethong continue to face systemic challenges that undermine institutional efficiency, staff motivation, and the quality of public service delivery. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study collected data from 50 civil servants through structured questionnaires and conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 key informants, including administrative leaders and human resource officers. The results reveal five major areas of concern: (1) inadequate access to relevant and regular training programs; (2) ineffective and often symbolic performance evaluations; (3) low staff motivation, driven by unclear promotion pathways and poor working conditions; (4) limited digital skills and infrastructure; and (5) institutional rigidity and cultural barriers in managing diverse communities. The findings suggest that, although national policies aim to promote decentralized governance and strengthen human resource capacity, implementation at the district level remains weak and fragmented. Staff development is hindered by limited resources, favoritism in training allocation, and a lack of strategic planning. Furthermore, digital transformation efforts are minimal, and civil servants continue to rely on outdated administrative processes. The study concludes that addressing these human resource management challenges requires a multi-faceted strategy involving policy alignment, localized capacity-building, transparent performance evaluation systems, and greater administrative autonomy for district authorities. This research offers practical insights for policymakers, administrators, and development partners seeking to improve human resource systems in local governments across Laos. It also contributes to the broader discourse on public sector reform and decentralization in developing countries.

Keywords: Personnel management, Human resource development, Public administration, Local governance, Civil service reform

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Article Info:

Submitted: February 03, 2026

Revised: February 015, 2026

Accepted: February 23, 2026

1. Introduction

Effective personnel management within public administration is critical for enabling local governments to fulfill their mandate of public service delivery, development planning, and sustainable community engagement. In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, rural districts such as Phonethong in Luang Prabang Province face unique challenges in recruiting, retaining, and governing human resources compounded by decentralization efforts, limited training infrastructure, and uneven resource allocation. This introduction explores the broader landscape of personnel management issues in Lao PDR, then focuses on how these manifests in districts similar to Phonethong.

Laos has pursued a national strategy to develop and professionalize its civil service sector, particularly through human resource development planning for the period 2020–2025. The National Committee on Human Resource

Development, involving multiple ministries, was tasked with addressing labour shortages in priority areas and recruitment of skilled workers to rural and underserved zones. Key sectors such as agriculture, education, and healthcare were identified as suffering from staffing imbalances excess personnel in urban centres and acute shortages in rural districts (Phouthonesy, 2019)

Empirical studies conducted within Lao districts highlight recurring personnel management problems related to recruitment, absenteeism, unclear roles, limited training, and insufficient planning capacity. For instance, in Sangthong District within Vientiane Municipality, interviews with district-level chiefs revealed stark mismatches between staffing needs and actual staff numbers. The eleven offices surveyed had a cumulative requirement for 153 staff, yet lacked systematic planning or forecasting to match supply with demand (Syharath & Simalavong, 2015).

Other qualitative research in infrastructure institutions underscored confusion over roles and poor communication between local branch offices and central ministries. Regional executives admitted they lacked clarity over their responsibilities, planning mandates, or operational frameworks a gap that undermined stable service delivery (Phomsoupha, 2018). In the telecommunications sector, research by (Southiseng & Walsh, 2013) deployed factor analysis on HRD practices, highlighting deficiencies in compensation systems, information exchange, job security, career development, and performance appraisal processes in Lao organizations. From available literature, the following recurring domains emerge as central to understanding HRM issues in Lao rural districts: Recruitment and Staffing Imbalance: Difficulty attracting qualified personnel especially teachers, health workers, agricultural specialists to rural districts like Phonethong, while urban offices accumulate surplus civil servants, Absenteeism and Low Morale: Chronic absenteeism due to low wages, poor supervision, and limited incentives, negatively impacting service operations at the district level (Syharath & Simalavong, 2015). In remote parts of Laos, health staff often work under severely constrained conditions, with sporadic attendance tied to morale issues and infrastructure deficits (Wikipedia, 2024). Role Ambiguity and Planning Weaknesses: District-level executives report unclear mandates and lack of coordination with central ministries, impairing essential functions such as demand forecasting and policy implementation (Phomsoupha, 2018). Training and Development Deficits: Human resource development initiatives are often centralized; training opportunities for rural personnel remain limited, stagnant or mismatched to local needs (Phouthonesy, 2019). Weak performance management frameworks: absence of systematic evaluation, inconsistent feedback, and lack of performance-based incentives undermine motivation and accountability (Sibounhueang et al., 2019). Local government units often face constrained budgets for personnel training, recruitment, and retention (Sihalath & Akkasaeng, 2016). Mismatch between required competencies and current staffing: e-government and tourism demand new skillsets (e.g. digital proficiency, language ability), yet many current civil servants lack them (Vientiane Times, 2021). Demotivation and low accountability: ethnographic accounts of local government personnel highlight lack of proactive responsibility, poor responsiveness, and limited work ethic ("staff are not willing to take responsibility") (Sihalath and Akkasaeng, 2016).

Despite province-wide initiatives, few studies have systematically investigated personnel management at the district level in Phonethong. This district shares many of the socioeconomic dynamics of Luang Prabang Province such as agricultural growth, SME expansion, and digital

transformation but also possesses unique local needs, including ethnic diversity, rural infrastructure, and local governance capacity. Phonethong falls within the zones where e-government and Smart City initiatives are being piloted, including payment systems like U-money for salary and allowances (Vientiane Times, 2021). For these pilots to succeed, district officials and employees must have sufficient administrative competence, capacity for ICT, and professional motivation. Furthermore, the district's proximity to cultural heritage sites and villages with weaving groups and ethnic communities (Khokmanh, H'mong, Khmu) creates complex administrative work requiring intercultural skills and participatory personnel approaches (Dung, 2023).

There are several research gaps that this study seeks to address: District-level specificity: existing literature tends to focus on provincial or municipal-level challenges; few studies evaluate district-level personnel administration in places like Phonethong. Intersection with digital reforms: little is known about how personnel issues influence the rollout of e-government tools and digital payments at the district level. Ethnic, linguistic, and socio-cultural dynamics: while regional research examines demand for Chinese language at SMEs, less is known about administrative staff capacity in multi-ethnic, heritage-sensitive contexts such as Phonethong. Local performance frameworks: although results-based management models have been studied in provinces like Champasak, there is minimal empirical evidence regarding Phonethong's current mechanisms for evaluation, planning, and performance improvement.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the discourse on decentralization and civil service reform in developing contexts of the public sector administration of Phonethong District, Luang Prabang Province. Specifically, it investigates how training, performance evaluation, resources, digital skill demands, and motivation staff effectiveness and service delivery in the context of local modernization efforts.

2. Material and Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of personnel management problems in Phonethong District, Luang Prabang Province. The qualitative component allows for in-depth exploration of administrative challenges, perceptions, and institutional culture, while the quantitative component provides measurable insights into the scope, frequency, and patterns of key personnel issues.

While the mixed-method approach ensures depth and breadth, some limitations include: Possible response bias due to the sensitive nature of discussing administrative weaknesses, Limited generalizability beyond Phonethong District, though findings may inform similar contexts,

Time constraints that may affect prolonged engagement with key stakeholders. These limitations are mitigated through methodological rigor, ethical research practices, and triangulation of data.

The researcher conducted data collection from May 1, 2025, to July 30, 2025, covering a period of three months. This phase was one of the most crucial parts of the research process, as it involved not only gathering relevant information but also developing a comprehensive understanding of the actual situation within the study area. Various methods were employed during this period, including observations, interviews, surveys, and document analysis, depending on the nature and requirements of the research objectives. The data collection process required extensive planning and coordination to ensure that all relevant stakeholders were included and that the information obtained was accurate and reliable.

The process took a considerable amount of time due to several factors such as the availability of participants, the geographical spread of the research sites, and the need to cross-check data for validity and consistency. During this period, the researcher also faced certain challenges, including delays in responses, logistical constraints, and the necessity to adapt research instruments to local contexts. Despite these challenges, the extended timeframe allowed for deeper engagement with the community and provided valuable insights into the real dynamics influencing the research problem. Overall, the period between May and July 2025 was instrumental in ensuring that the collected data truly reflected the authentic conditions and perspectives within the research area, forming a strong foundation for subsequent analysis and interpretation.

2.2. Population and Sampling

2.2.1 Target Population

The target population for this research includes:

- Public officials working in the Phonethong District Administration Office such as HR officers, departmental heads, support staff.
- Provincial officials in Luang Prabang who oversee or interact with Phonethong District
- Key stakeholders such as village chiefs, school administrators, and representatives from civil society organizations

2.2.2 Sampling Techniques

A combination of purposive sampling and stratified random sampling is used:

- Purposive sampling selects key informants based on their knowledge of personnel management practices, such as district directors, HR officials, and senior department heads.
- Stratified random sampling is applied for selecting rank-and-file civil servants from different departments such as planning, finance,

public health, education to ensure diversity in roles, ranks, and perspectives.

There were 60 participants, including 10 senior officials for semi-structured interviews. 50 mid- and lower-level staff for survey questionnaires. This sample size is appropriate for a focused district-level case study.

2.3 Data Collection Tools

This study uses three primary data collection tools as Covers survey, interviews, and document review.

2.3.1 Survey Questionnaires

Structured questionnaires are administered to civil servants in Phonethong District to collect quantitative data on Training frequency and relevance, Job satisfaction and motivation, Performance evaluation practices, Digital skill readiness, Perceptions of institutional support and constraints. The questionnaire uses Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree) and includes both closed- and open-ended questions.

To ensure validity, the research instruments (questionnaire and interview guide) were reviewed by three experts in public administration, with each question receiving an Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) score ranging from 0.60 to 1.00. The instruments were then piloted with a small sample in the personal office of Phon, and adjustments were made to improve clarity, cultural relevance, and comprehension.

2.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth interviews are conducted with District officials involved in personnel management, Provincial HR supervisors, Local leaders and community stakeholders. Interview topics include staffing policies, training provision, performance evaluation, bureaucratic culture, and institutional bottlenecks. Each interview lasts 15–20 minutes and follows a flexible guide to explore themes while allowing respondents to elaborate on their experiences. And during the implementation of interviewing, it was recorded by mobile phone to make sure all information were collected to analyse.

2.4 Data Analysis

2.4.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Survey response data were analyzed using the descriptive statistics program SPSS version 27 to calculate percentages (%) and to identify trends and patterns.

2.4.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and open-ended response data were analyzed using thematic content analysis ‘using the words or sentences from interview to write in quotationmark’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The key themes that emerged included capacity-building barriers, performance management experiences, digital skill readiness, motivation and morale, and administrative constraints.

3. Results

The findings of this study are presented in two parts: (1) quantitative survey results from 50 government

officials and civil servants working in Phonethong District, and (2) qualitative insights derived from semi-structured interviews with 10 key informants, including district administrators, HR personnel, and local leaders. The results are categorized under five major themes: training and capacity development, performance evaluation, staff motivation and morale, digital competency and modernization, and institutional and cultural barriers.

3.1. Training and Capacity Development

Survey found A significant portion of respondents reported inadequate access to training programs: Only 31.3% of civil servants had attended at least one formal training program in the past 12 months. 62.5% agreed that the training they received was “not relevant” to their daily responsibilities. 78% felt that training opportunities were allocated based on internal favoritism rather than performance or need. These results suggest limited strategic planning for capacity building.

Interview informants confirmed that professional development in Phonethong District is both irregular and insufficient. A senior HR officer noted:

“Most of the time, we do not have a budget for training, and when there is a workshop, only a few senior staff are sent usually the same people.” Furthermore, many interviewees observed that training programs were often theoretical, short-term, and not aligned with local development goals such as tourism, smart city management, or community engagement.

3.2. Performance Evaluation and Promotion Practices

Survey Findings Respondents indicated weak implementation of performance evaluation systems: 52% reported that their work had never been formally evaluated. 66.7% were unaware of the performance criteria used by the district office. Only 14.6% believed that promotions in their department were based on merit. These findings highlight gaps in accountability mechanisms and human resource policy enforcement.

Interview Findings Multiple interviewees pointed out that evaluation forms were completed mechanically, often at the end of the year without real reflection on job performance. A department head remarked: “*We submit the same evaluation forms every year... there is no follow-up, no consequences, and no reward system.*” The lack of meaningful feedback loops was said to reduce motivation and create a sense of stagnation among younger employees.

3.3 Staff Motivation and Morale

Survey Findings Low levels of motivation were reported, especially among lower-level staff: 70.8% of respondents said they were “not satisfied” or “somewhat dissatisfied” with their work conditions. 59.2% cited “lack of career development” as the main cause of dissatisfaction. 45.8% said they had considered leaving the civil service for opportunities in the private or tourism sector.

Interview Findings Motivational issues were tied closely to perceived favoritism, low salaries, lack of

recognition, and poor working conditions. One junior staff member explained: “*We work with limited resources, broken office equipment, and no clear path forward. People are not motivated unless they have political connections.*” Interestingly, some officials expressed a deep sense of public duty despite these limitations, especially those involved in community-facing roles such as health, education, and environmental protection.

3.4 Digital Competency and Administrative Modernization

Survey Findings The survey revealed widespread digital illiteracy and lack of technical support: Only 16.7% of respondents reported being proficient in basic office software. 83.3% stated they had never received formal training in digital tools or e-government systems. 68.8% said they rely on handwritten forms and manual data processing for most administrative tasks.

Interview Findings Digital modernization efforts in Phonethong are still in the early stages. Although some departments have begun using digital reporting systems, most staff members struggle with technical aspects due to poor training and lack of infrastructure. A planning officer mentioned:

“*We hear about digital governance and smart city plans, but we still use paper files. Internet service is also unreliable.*” There is interest in modernizing, but no clear roadmap or resource allocation to support digital transformation at the district level.

3.5 Institutional and Cultural Barriers

Survey Findings, 72.9% of respondents agreed with the statement: “There is a lack of coordination between departments.” 62.5% felt that ethnic or cultural dynamics sometimes caused communication breakdowns or misunderstandings. 50% noted a “centralized decision-making culture” that discouraged local initiative.

Interview Findings, Interviewees consistently pointed to the bureaucratic structure as a hindrance to responsive governance. Even though decentralization is promoted in national policy, actual authority over staffing, budgeting, and planning remains tightly controlled by the provincial or central government.

A local leader commented: “*We are supposed to have autonomy, but in practice, every decision must go through layers of approval. This delays service and makes staff feel powerless.*” In multi-ethnic villages within Phonethong, language and cultural barriers also affect the ability of district officials to engage communities. While some officers are from minority groups themselves, others lack cultural training, which affects communication and trust.

4. Discussion

This study explored personnel management problems in Phonethong District, Luang Prabang Province, focusing on five key dimensions: training and capacity development, performance evaluation, staff motivation,

digital competency, and institutional-cultural barriers. The findings reveal several systemic and interrelated challenges that not only mirror national-level issues in Laos but also expose unique district-level constraints that hinder effective human resource management.

4.1. Inadequate Training and Capacity Development

The study found that most civil servants in Phonethong District lack access to structured, relevant training programs. Less than one-third of respondents had attended training in the past year, and many reported that existing training was not aligned with their work responsibilities. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that professional development in Lao PDR's public sector is irregular, underfunded, and centrally driven (IMF, 2008; UNCDF, 2015).

The lack of training undermines administrative capacity and adaptability, especially in the context of decentralization and public sector modernization. As documented by Phothong et al. (2024), local-level government institutions in Laos face capacity gaps in budgeting, planning, and project implementation, often due to limited technical support and skills training. Without deliberate investment in local capacity-building strategies, district administrations will continue to struggle with service delivery and development planning.

Moreover, the finding that training opportunities are perceived to be allocated through favoritism rather than merit is particularly concerning. This perception, if widespread, may erode trust in leadership and reduce staff engagement a pattern observed in other studies of bureaucratic culture in Southeast Asia (Cheung, 2011).

4.2. Weak Performance Evaluation and Meritocracy

A majority of civil servants in Phonethong District reported that their job performance was not formally evaluated or that evaluations lacked transparency and follow-up. These findings point to a critical weakness in the district's personnel management system: the absence of effective performance appraisal mechanisms. This confirms previous findings by the IMF (2004), which noted that Lao public institutions suffer from poor enforcement of civil service rules and a lack of performance incentives.

Research by Sihalath and Akkasaeng (2023) similarly found that civil servants in environmental offices lacked clear feedback on their performance, leading to low accountability and inefficiency. In the present study, respondents described annual performance evaluations as "mechanical" and non-consequential highlighting a disconnect between formal HR policy and actual practice.

The lack of a merit-based promotion system further contributes to low morale and a culture of stagnation. In public organizations, when promotion and recognition are not based on performance or qualifications, employees are less likely to be motivated or committed to institutional goals (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008). Establishing transparent, competency-based evaluation systems is

therefore crucial for improving both individual performance and institutional credibility.

4.3. Low Motivation and Organizational Commitment

Staff motivation emerged as a major concern. The majority of respondents were dissatisfied with their jobs, citing limited career advancement, inadequate resources, and perceived favoritism. Nearly half indicated they had considered leaving government service, with many pointing to more attractive opportunities in the private or tourism sector.

These findings align with motivation theory in public administration, particularly Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, which distinguishes between hygiene factors as salary, working conditions and motivators, recognition, responsibility (Herzberg, 1966). In Phonethong, both sets of factors appear deficient: staff work under challenging conditions without recognition or incentives, contributing to high dissatisfaction.

This trend is also reflected in research conducted at Souphanouvong University in Luang Prabang, which found that lack of professional development and institutional support contributed to staff burnout and disengagement (Vongsouangtham et al., 2024). Without targeted interventions to improve working conditions and morale, it is likely that local government offices will face increasing difficulties in retaining capable personnel.

4.4. Digital Competency and Administrative Modernization

One of the most striking findings of this study is the extremely low level of digital literacy among civil servants in Phonethong District. Over 80% of respondents reported no formal training in basic digital tools, and the majority continue to rely on paper-based systems for administrative tasks. These challenges are at odds with the Lao government's stated commitment to e-governance and smart city initiatives, particularly in heritage-rich provinces like Luang Prabang (Phothong et al., 2024).

Digital governance requires not only infrastructure but also human capacity to operate, maintain, and innovate using technology. As noted by UNESCAP (2019), digital inclusion in public administration depends heavily on upskilling and digital transformation strategies that reach the local level. In the absence of such support, rural and district-level institutions like Phonethong risk being left behind in the country's modernization process.

Moreover, digital capacity is essential for data-driven planning, transparency, and citizen engagement core elements of effective decentralized governance. The current state of digital unpreparedness may therefore undermine broader goals of good governance and participatory development at the district level.

4.5. Institutional Rigidity and Cultural Challenges

The study also found that bureaucratic rigidity and limited administrative autonomy hinder personnel management in Phonethong. Despite national policy shifts

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