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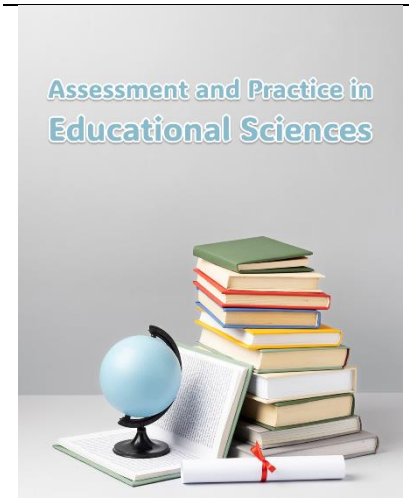

Designing a Career Advancement Model for Employees in Iranian Governmental Organizations (Case Study: Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance)

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ABSTRACT

The present study was conducted with the aim of designing a career advancement model for employees in Iranian governmental organizations, with the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance as the case study. In terms of purpose, the research was applied; in terms of data type, it followed a sequential mixed-methods approach with an exploratory orientation; regarding the research paradigm, it adopted a pragmatic stance; and in terms of nature, the qualitative phase was based on meta-synthesis and Delphi methods, while the quantitative phase was descriptive-analytical of the survey/correlational type. The qualitative research population included theoretical experts (university professors) and practical experts (relevant officials from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance). Based on the principle of theoretical saturation and purposive sampling, 20 interviewees were selected. In the quantitative phase, the statistical population comprised all employees of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, from which 254 employees were selected through simple random sampling and based on the minimum sample size calculation required for confirmatory factor analysis. Data collection methods included Delphi in the qualitative phase and researcher-made questionnaires in the quantitative phase to assess the model's validity both from the experts' and respondents' perspectives. The validity and reliability of the instruments were examined and confirmed in both qualitative and quantitative phases. Data analysis in the qualitative phase was conducted using thematic analysis via Maxqda-V18 software, while in the quantitative phase, descriptive and inferential statistics (confirmatory factor analysis and one-sample t-test) were performed using SPSS-V27 and SmartPLS-V3. The results indicated that career advancement in the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance comprises three dimensions: need-based career advancement, value-based career advancement, and talent-based career advancement. Need-based advancement includes autonomy, economic empowerment, and social status. Value-based advancement encompasses internal and external excellence, skill development, and knowledge enhancement. Talent-based advancement consists of technical and functional competencies, managerial qualifications, and creativity and innovation. The validation results further demonstrated that the proposed model possesses sufficient credibility, making it applicable for use by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance to support employee career advancement.

Keywords: career advancement, need-based advancement, technical and functional competencies, managerial qualifications

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving global landscape, the sustainability and growth of governmental organizations rely heavily on their ability to effectively manage, retain, and develop human capital. Career advancement, as one of the foundational elements of human resource development, serves not only to enhance individual motivation and performance but also to align organizational goals with employee aspirations. Particularly in the public sector, where rigid bureaucratic structures often

hinder agility and adaptability, the development of a robust and dynamic career advancement model becomes essential for cultivating a committed and competent workforce (1, 2).

The dynamic interplay between personal development and organizational performance has been the focus of several conceptual and empirical studies over the past two decades. Research indicates that when employees perceive a clear and attainable path for career progression, they are more likely to exhibit organizational citizenship behavior, experience reduced burnout, and demonstrate higher levels of job satisfaction and performance (3, 4). Career advancement is no longer seen as a linear movement up the hierarchical ladder but is now considered a multidimensional concept encompassing skill development, increased responsibilities, and horizontal mobility (5, 6).

From a strategic human resource management perspective, establishing a transparent and structured career advancement model contributes to improved organizational legitimacy, employee engagement, and innovation capacity (7, 8). This is particularly crucial in public sector institutions such as the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, where employee performance and job satisfaction directly influence the quality of public services and fiscal policy outcomes. As such, investing in career development frameworks is not merely a human resources function but a strategic imperative (9, 10).

Globalization and digital transformation have significantly altered the expectations and behaviors of employees. The millennial and Gen Z cohorts now entering the workforce place considerable value on meaningful work, skill acquisition, and long-term career prospects (11, 12). These generational shifts necessitate a rethinking of traditional models of career progression. Employees are no longer content with static job descriptions and routine promotions; instead, they seek tailored career paths that recognize their individual strengths, preferences, and aspirations (13, 14).

Empirical evidence supports the view that well-designed career advancement systems are instrumental in fostering both individual and organizational resilience. For instance, the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model illustrates how access to career development opportunities can serve as a critical resource that mitigates job stress and enhances engagement (3). Moreover, employees who perceive fairness and clarity in promotion criteria report lower levels of job-related anxiety and higher motivation levels (15, 16). This underscores the need for systemic efforts to institutionalize transparent, merit-based advancement mechanisms in both private and public organizations.

The Iranian public sector, and specifically the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, is currently undergoing a period of transformation aimed at improving efficiency, transparency, and accountability. As part of this reform agenda, human resource development has gained prominence, with career advancement frameworks emerging as a key component of talent management strategy (17, 18). However, despite these policy aspirations, many governmental organizations in Iran still lack a comprehensive and evidence-based model for facilitating career growth among employees (19, 20).

Designing a career advancement model tailored to the specific conditions of Iranian public institutions involves not only contextualizing global best practices but also addressing indigenous structural, cultural, and procedural barriers (21, 22). For instance, the prevalence of centralized decision-making, limited job mobility, and subjective promotion processes can significantly diminish employee trust in the fairness of the system. Therefore, the construction of a model must be grounded in empirical data, stakeholder input, and theoretical coherence to ensure both feasibility and effectiveness.

From a methodological standpoint, the development of such a model requires a hybrid approach that incorporates both qualitative insights and quantitative validation. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of engaging diverse stakeholder groups, including policymakers, administrators, and employees, to ensure the model's relevance and applicability (23, 24). Moreover, the use of confirmatory factor analysis and Delphi techniques can help refine the dimensions and indicators of the model, ensuring statistical rigor and practical clarity (14, 25).

Three major dimensions often cited in career advancement models are: advancement based on needs (e.g., financial stability, autonomy), advancement based on values (e.g., meaningful work, ethical alignment), and advancement based on talent (e.g., technical and leadership competencies) (5, 6, 9). These dimensions are particularly relevant to the public sector, where the integration of professional goals with national service ideals is critical. Each dimension must be operationalized through measurable components, such as decision-making authority, access to training, recognition systems, and performance feedback loops (25, 26).

One challenge in the implementation of such models is ensuring organizational alignment and executive support. Without top-down commitment to fairness, meritocracy, and accountability, even the most well-conceived models risk being sidelined in bureaucratic inertia (18, 22). Additionally, performance appraisals and promotion systems must be linked directly to career planning frameworks to ensure consistency between evaluation and advancement (7, 8).

Furthermore, effective career advancement models are not only backward-looking (based on past performance) but also forward-looking, helping employees set developmental goals and track their growth trajectory (13, 24). This dual focus helps bridge the gap between individual ambition and organizational strategy, fostering a mutually reinforcing relationship. Career conversations, individualized development plans, and mentoring programs can serve as key tools in this process (4, 11).

The present study seeks to design a comprehensive and validated model for career advancement within the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, integrating global theoretical perspectives and local contextual realities.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study is applied in terms of purpose, and methodologically, it follows a sequential mixed-methods design with an exploratory orientation. From the paradigm perspective, the study adopts a pragmatic (combination of interpretivist and positivist) approach. In terms of nature (research design), it begins as exploratory research and subsequently becomes descriptive-analytical. Regarding the type of reasoning (logic of implementation), it is a mixed-methods study (inductive–deductive), employing inductive reasoning in the qualitative phase (meta-synthesis and Delphi technique) and deductive reasoning in the quantitative phase (survey and correlational analysis).

A: Qualitative Phase:

The statistical population in the first stage of the qualitative phase (meta-synthesis) included all articles and scientific works from domestic and international databases, as well as relevant documents and regulations. At this stage, 23 articles were selected using a purposive non-random sampling method, based on the PRISMA selection protocol. The article selection criteria included: relevance and recency, high scientific quality and credibility, inclusion in reputable domestic and international databases, appropriate methodology, and diversity of perspectives.

In the second stage (Delphi technique), the population included university professors and researchers specializing in organizational behavior management, human resource management, and public administration. Following the Delphi panel size recommendation of 10 to 20 experts (Linstone & Turoff, 2011), 20 experts with direct or indirect experience in career advancement in governmental organizations were selected via purposive non-random sampling. The selection criteria for experts included: minimum doctoral degree, teaching experience in related fields, subject matter expertise, involvement in applied projects, relevant research experience, awareness of policies, challenges, and barriers, the ability to provide analytical opinions, diversity of viewpoints, commitment to participation, having managerial responsibilities or decision-making roles, and relevant practical experience.

B: Quantitative Phase:

In this phase, the statistical population comprised all employees of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance as key respondents. Following recommendations from prominent theorists in structural equation modeling and confirmatory factor analysis (e.g., Kline, 2015), a minimum sample size of 100 is considered appropriate. Accordingly, to enhance generalizability and given the use of confirmatory factor analysis, a sample of 256 employees was selected via simple random sampling. The questionnaire was distributed both online and in person. Two questionnaires were excluded due to incompleteness, resulting in 254 valid responses for statistical analysis.

Data Collection

A: Qualitative Phase:

In the first stage, the data collection instrument was a systematic review of scholarly literature and credible sources. This process involved targeted searches in scientific databases, articles, books, and dissertations related to the research topic. Content validity analysis revealed that the reviewed content and concepts were comprehensively covered in the existing literature. Articles were carefully screened using a flow diagram (search and selection process) for identifying appropriate studies in the target field. The applied filters included temporal (publication dates), spatial (databases), methodological (synthesis, review, qualitative, quantitative), and topical (keywords) domains. Both coarse and fine screenings were conducted.

Internal validity analysis confirmed that the qualitative findings were not influenced by external biases and were accurately interpreted. The process included: a 27-item PRISMA checklist, independent analysis by the researcher and a statistician, Cohen's Kappa agreement coefficient, use of standard criteria, reproducibility (transparent methodology), precise tracking of analysis and coding steps via meta-synthesis, and expert review for identifying contradictions.

For qualitative reliability, methods such as accurate documentation of the research process, intra-researcher alignment, and inter-researcher alignment were used. These steps confirmed the validity and reliability of the qualitative findings.

In the second stage of the qualitative phase (Delphi technique), a Delphi worksheet was employed. Experts were asked to score indicators and provide comments or suggest additional indicators they deemed important. For worksheet validity, items were carefully designed to be simple, clear, and relevant using comprehensible language. Prior to deployment, content validity was assessed using the Content Validity Ratio (CVR), which confirmed that the worksheet adequately represented the intended concepts.

Reliability of the Delphi worksheet was assessed through internal and temporal consistency, and results demonstrated that the tool was both valid and reliable.

B: Quantitative Phase:

In the quantitative phase, researcher-made questionnaires were used to measure internal (based on qualitative findings) and external (based on the final model) validity. The questionnaire development process for internal validity began with a systematic literature review using the PRISMA protocol in domestic and international databases to identify components of employee career advancement. The identified articles were screened based on specific criteria, yielding 20 articles analyzed via thematic analysis to extract evaluation dimensions. These dimensions served as the basis for designing the Delphi worksheet. The identified indicators, components, and dimensions were finalized and localized through expert consensus over three Delphi rounds.

The final questionnaire included 31 items measured using a five-point Likert scale (from very high to very low). It assessed career advancement based on:

- **Need-based factors** (autonomy, economic empowerment, social status)

- **Value-based factors** (internal/external excellence, skill development, knowledge enhancement)
- **Talent-based factors** (technical/functional competencies, managerial qualification, creativity/innovation)

Content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed using Lawshe's CVR and Content Validity Index (CVI) with input from 10 experts. Questions were revised for clarity and completeness prior to distribution.

Construct validity was evaluated through convergent and discriminant validity using SmartPLS 3 software.

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and McDonald's omega. All variables exceeded the 0.70 threshold, indicating satisfactory reliability of the measurement tool.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Phase:

The qualitative phase focused on designing a career advancement model for employees in Iranian governmental organizations. In the Delphi stage, mean and standard deviation were used to evaluate responses and measure expert consensus, while Kendall's coefficient of concordance was used to assess agreement on priorities in the closed-ended questionnaire. All analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 16.

Quantitative Phase:

The quantitative phase employed descriptive statistics (for demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and work experience using frequency, tables, and charts; for research variables using mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis) and inferential statistics. Confirmatory factor analysis (for assessing internal validity) and one-sample t-tests (for assessing external validity) were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 23 (2015) and SmartPLS Version 3 (2016).

Findings and Results

Most participants hold degrees in human resource management, and more officials have doctoral degrees compared to those with master's degrees. Moreover, it is notable that the number of male participants significantly exceeds that of female participants. Most individuals are in the age range of 45 to 50 years and have 10 to 20 years of work experience.

In the quantitative phase, the age distribution of respondents is as follows: 6% are under 40 years old, 22% are between 40–45, 41% between 46–50, and 31% over 50 years. These results show the highest frequency in the 46–50 age group and the lowest in those under 40. Regarding work experience, 11% have less than 7 years, 29% have 7–13 years, 32% have 14–20 years, and 28% have over 20 years of experience. Thus, the highest frequency is in the 14–20 year group and the lowest in the group with less than 7 years. Finally, 57% of the respondents are male and 43% female, indicating a higher male representation in the sample.

Based on the sub-themes (semantic units) derived from interview transcripts, the following table presents the dimensions, components, and indicators identified as foundational to career advancement in the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance:

Table 1. Delphi Results for Dimensions, Components, and Indicators of Career Advancement in the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance

Dimension	Component	Indicator
Need-Based Career Advancement	Autonomy	Work–life balance
		Ability to enjoy life after work
		Access to long holidays
	Economic Empowerment	Annual salary level
		Receiving incentives, bonuses, or promotions
		Ability to meet basic needs

		Earning high income and family welfare
	Social Status	Satisfying life outside the workplace
		Receiving respectful treatment due to one's career path
		Career path recognized by others
		Contributing to national prosperity and public welfare through one's job
Value-Based Career Advancement	Internal & External Excellence	Job security
		Impact of career decisions on organizational performance
		Fulfillment of needs/preferences through desired occupation
		Meaningful work
	Skill and Knowledge Development	Continuous education
		Development of transferable skills and knowledge
		Participation in training and workshops
		Enhancement of job-related knowledge capabilities
		Developmental coaching
Talent-Based Career Advancement	Technical & Functional Competence	Job-specific technical skills
		Mastery of job-related technical expertise
		Participation in team projects and group activities
		Higher education (Master's and above)
		Involvement in the Ministry or related fields
	Managerial Competence	Strategic decision-making
		Ability to lead teams toward high performance
		Communication skills
	Creativity and Innovation	Opportunities for innovation in work activities
		Ability to find creative solutions to emerging challenges
		Experience with challenging job tasks

Based on the obtained results, the research model is illustrated as follows:

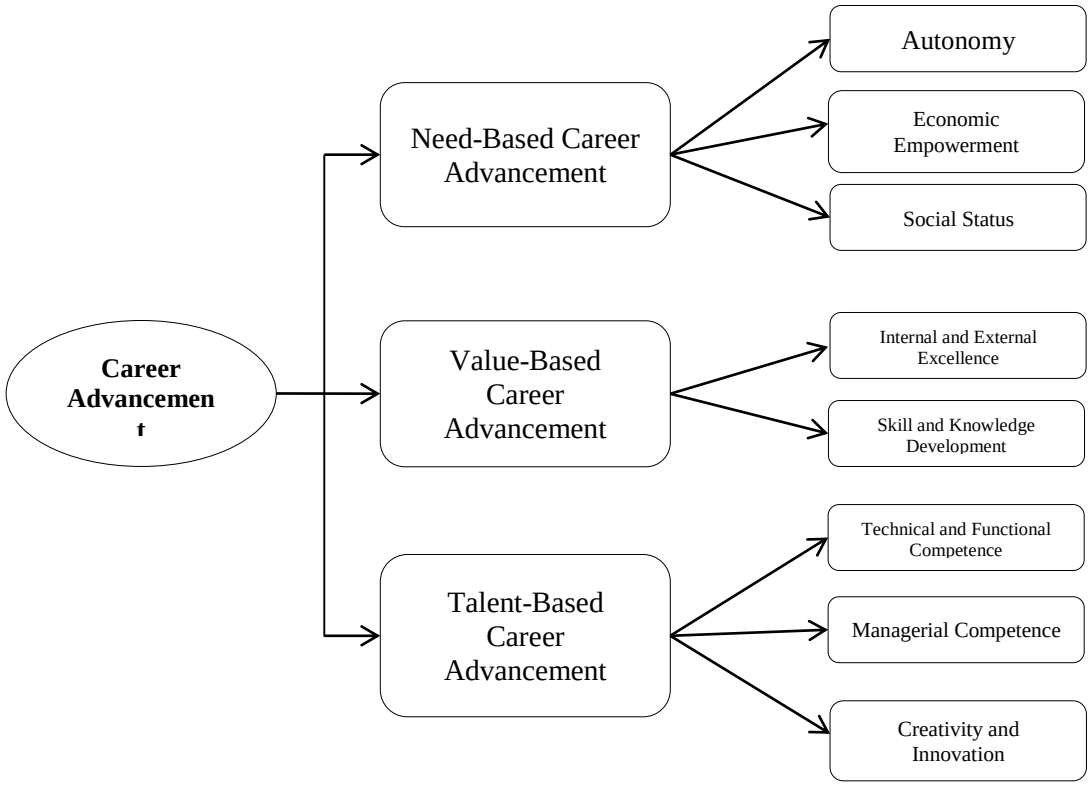

Figure 1. Preliminary Conceptual Model of Career Advancement Based on Theoretical Framework

The following table displays the central tendency and dispersion indicators for the research variables. It is worth noting that the minimum and maximum values for each of the variables range from 1 to 5.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Career Advancement Model for Employees in Iranian Governmental Organizations

Kurtosis	Skewness	Std. Deviation	Mean	Component	Dimension
-0.06	-0.10	0.84	3.38	Autonomy	Need-Based Career Advancement
0.45	-0.05	0.74	3.31	Economic Empowerment	
0.35	-0.25	0.63	3.27	Social Status	
-0.52	-0.11	0.86	3.37	Internal and External Excellence	Value-Based Career Advancement
-0.57	-0.07	0.79	3.29	Skill and Knowledge Development	
-0.33	-0.12	0.67	3.27	Technical and Functional Competence	Talent-Based Career Advancement
0.09	0.08	0.81	3.17	Managerial Competence	
0.07	0.05	0.76	3.23	Creativity and Innovation	

Table 2 presents the statistical characteristics such as mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis for the study variables. Considering that the skewness and kurtosis values fall within the acceptable range (between -2 and +2), the assumption of data normality is justified. Based on the results, the highest mean is observed in the autonomy component, while the lowest mean pertains to managerial competence.

Model validity, as a key component of research, not only reflects the precision and accuracy of the designed model's results but also indicates its applicability in real-world settings. Accordingly, in the process of developing a model for the dimensions and components of career advancement in the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, the model's validity was assessed. For this purpose, a 34-item questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale (from "very low" to "very high") was distributed among 20 experts in the research domain and related fields.

This questionnaire evaluated the external validity of the model based on components such as objective, research design, control of confounding variables, and alignment, and the internal validity based on logical review, expert feedback, and sensitivity analysis. In this study, a one-sample t-test was used to assess the validity of each component. The results of this test, in general, indicate a high level of validity for the various components of the career advancement model in terms of both internal and external validity. The statistical results of the one-sample t-test are detailed in the table below.

Table 3. Results of the One-Sample t-Test for Assessing the Validity of the Career Advancement Model in the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance

Component	Mean	Std. Deviation	t Value	Significance Level	Mean Difference	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
External Validity	4.20	0.65	9.00	0.000	1.20	3.90	4.50
Objective	4.20	0.70	8.90	0.000	1.20	3.90	4.50
Research Design	4.25	0.70	9.10	0.000	1.25	3.90	4.60
Control of Confounding Variables	4.10	0.75	8.30	0.000	1.10	3.80	4.40
Alignment	4.05	0.80	7.50	0.000	1.05	3.70	4.40
Internal Validity	4.35	0.60	9.20	0.000	1.35	4.00	4.70
Logical Review	4.15	0.75	8.00	0.000	1.15	3.80	4.50
Expert Feedback	4.30	0.60	9.50	0.000	1.30	4.00	4.60
Sensitivity Analysis	4.40	0.55	9.80	0.000	1.40	4.10	4.70

According to Table 3, the significance level for both internal and external validity and all respective components is less than 0.001, and the calculated means fall between 4.05 and 4.40. This clearly demonstrates statistical significance of the findings with 99% confidence. This means the obtained results are not due to chance and confirm the high validity of the model. Therefore, it can be concluded that the designed health tourism development model with an emphasis on online marketing—

focusing on its dimensions—possesses substantial validity and can be effectively utilized as a practical model for analyzing and improving career advancement in the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to develop and validate a comprehensive model of career advancement tailored to the organizational context of the Iranian public sector, specifically the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance. The findings confirmed that career advancement in this setting is best conceptualized through three primary dimensions: need-based advancement, value-based advancement, and talent-based advancement. Each dimension was further defined by measurable components and indicators validated through expert consensus (Delphi technique) and statistical analysis. The results from the one-sample t-test showed high mean scores across all internal and external validity components, indicating that the proposed model is both conceptually sound and practically applicable.

The need-based advancement dimension, encompassing autonomy, economic empowerment, and social status, emerged as a foundational motivator for public sector employees. Among the indicators, autonomy—including work–life balance and post-retirement well-being—received the highest mean score. This aligns with previous research emphasizing the significance of autonomy in employee motivation and engagement (3, 6). Financial compensation, rewards, and the ability to meet personal and familial needs also played a pivotal role in career satisfaction, which supports the JD-R model's emphasis on material resources as buffers against work stress (4, 24). Furthermore, social status—reflected in respect from the community and acknowledgment of professional contributions—corresponds with the findings of (12), who highlighted the importance of perceived societal value in enhancing employee morale.

The value-based advancement dimension incorporated internal and external excellence, skill development, and knowledge enhancement. The high mean scores in this category affirm the theoretical proposition that meaningful work and opportunities for personal growth significantly affect career trajectory satisfaction (11, 13). The inclusion of continuous learning, participation in workshops, and developmental coaching as indicators resonates with the evolving expectations of younger generations, who prioritize developmental feedback and self-actualization over traditional promotion hierarchies (9, 14). The findings confirm that employees who perceive their work as contributing to both personal and organizational growth demonstrate higher levels of commitment and intention to remain within the public sector (3, 25).

The third dimension—talent-based advancement—proved equally vital. Technical and functional competencies, managerial qualifications, and creativity and innovation were all validated as core subcomponents. The emphasis on technical mastery and involvement in high-impact projects reflects global trends in competency-based career frameworks, where skills are recognized as more critical than tenure (7, 27). Managerial competence, although receiving slightly lower mean values, remains a crucial indicator of upward mobility, particularly in hierarchical government structures (8, 17). Creativity and innovation, increasingly emphasized in modern public administration, received strong support from the expert panel, echoing (23) and (18), who argue for embedding innovation as a strategic priority in civil service development frameworks.

The statistical confirmation of both internal and external validity of the model further underscores its robustness. The internal validity components—logical review, expert feedback, and sensitivity analysis—all scored above 4.0 on a 5-point Likert scale, reflecting consensus on the model's coherence and contextual relevance. These findings mirror best practices in model development as suggested by (24) and (25), who emphasize the integration of stakeholder perspectives and iterative validation. External validity, assessed through clarity of objectives, research design, and control over confounding variables, also scored highly, reaffirming the model’s potential for broader application beyond the immediate case study.

In terms of distributional characteristics, the descriptive statistics revealed that most dimensions and components demonstrated normal distribution, with skewness and kurtosis values within the acceptable range. The component of autonomy recorded the highest mean score, reaffirming its primacy in employee satisfaction and alignment with findings from (26) and (20), who both emphasized personal freedom and stability as critical motivators for career commitment. Conversely, managerial competence showed the lowest mean, indicating a potential area of weakness or development need within the current structure. This is consistent with (16), who highlighted the challenges of leadership capacity-building in rigid public bureaucracies.

Taken together, the findings illustrate a well-rounded and validated career advancement model that can address the multi-layered motivational, developmental, and competency-related needs of public employees. The three-fold structure captures both extrinsic and intrinsic dimensions of career success, allowing for differentiated strategies in employee development. Importantly, the integration of both psychological (value-based) and performance-oriented (talent-based) factors supports the argument made by (13) and (6) that career advancement must cater to the whole person—not just the job role.

Furthermore, the model addresses several challenges previously identified in Iranian public organizations, including opaque promotion pathways, lack of individual development planning, and inadequate recognition of innovation and leadership potential (19, 21). By providing a structured yet flexible model grounded in empirical evidence, this study offers a viable roadmap for integrating career development into broader organizational strategy and public service reform.

Despite the promising results, the study has certain limitations. First, the research was limited to a single governmental institution—the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance—reducing the generalizability of findings to other public sectors. Second, although the Delphi method allowed for expert validation, the selection of experts was limited to those with immediate relevance to public service, potentially excluding valuable insights from adjacent disciplines such as organizational psychology or labor economics. Third, the cross-sectional nature of data collection precludes any longitudinal understanding of how career advancement perceptions evolve over time or across policy reforms.

Future research should consider replicating this model across other ministries and public organizations to validate its adaptability and to identify sector-specific variations. Longitudinal studies could offer deeper insights into how changes in leadership, policy, or resource availability affect the model's effectiveness. Additionally, comparative studies between public and private sectors could help elucidate how contextual variables such as job security, performance incentives, or organizational culture shape career advancement frameworks differently.

Policymakers and HR managers should institutionalize this model by integrating it into performance appraisal, training, and succession planning systems. Training programs should be aligned with the three dimensions of the model to foster holistic development. Furthermore, organizations should enhance communication around promotion criteria and development opportunities to build trust and transparency. Lastly, investing in digital platforms to track and personalize career advancement plans can enhance employee engagement and long-term retention in the public sector.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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