

The Role of Incentives, Professionalism, and Work Discipline in Improving Employee Performance: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to analyze the relationships among incentives, professionalism, work discipline, and employee performance using a literature review approach. Previous studies have shown that employee performance is influenced by internal and external factors, including incentives and professionalism. However, the role of work discipline as a mediating variable has not yet been examined comprehensively, particularly in the public sector. The method used in this study is a systematic literature review of scientific articles obtained from databases such as Google Scholar and Scopus within the timeframe of 2015–2025. The results of the study indicate that incentives and professionalism consistently have a positive effect on work discipline and employee performance. Furthermore, work discipline has been proven to play a strategic role as a mediating variable that strengthens this relationship. This study contributes to enriching research on human resource management, particularly in the government sector.

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1. Introduction

Governance is a system of interaction among various stakeholders, including the executive and legislative branches, as well as the public, both individuals and groups. This interaction aims to formulate a mutual agreement regarding the management of development within a specific legal or administrative jurisdiction. In practice, local government officials require a foundation in the principles of good governance to guide them in carrying out their duties and responsibilities. Performance can be understood as a function of an individual's motivation and ability. In completing a task, a person must possess a certain level of readiness and specific skills. However, readiness and skills alone are insufficient without a clear understanding of the tasks to be performed and how to carry them out. Performance also reflects the actual behavior demonstrated by each individual as a result of work achieved by civil servants (ASN) in accordance with their roles within regional government agencies (OPD).

The evaluation of employee performance is conducted by integrating the assessment of Employee Work Targets (SKP) and work behavior. In this evaluation system, the SKP accounts for 60% of the weight, while work behavior accounts for 40%.

Employee performance is a key indicator of an organization's success, particularly in the public sector, which is focused on public service. Performance is influenced by various factors, both internal and external, including incentive systems, levels of professionalism, and employee work behavior.

Various studies indicate that incentives play a crucial role in enhancing employee motivation and performance. Incentives, whether financial or non-financial, serve as rewards that encourage employees to achieve organizational goals. Additionally, professionalism reflects employees' competence, sense of responsibility, and work ethic in performing their duties.

However, most studies still focus on the direct relationship between incentives, professionalism, and performance, without considering the role of mediating variables. Work discipline is one variable that has the potential to serve as a link in this relationship. Discipline reflects employees' compliance with organizational rules and their commitment to performing their duties.

Although important, the role of work discipline as a mediating variable has not been extensively studied, particularly in the context of the public sector. Therefore, this study aims to comprehensively examine the relationship between incentives, professionalism, work discipline, and employee performance through a qualitative approach based on a literature review.

Recent studies indicate that employee performance in the public sector still faces various challenges, particularly regarding work discipline, professionalism, and the effectiveness of organizational program implementation. Employee performance is influenced not only by individual capabilities but also by organizational systems that support employee productivity (Putra et al., 2023).

Low levels of work discipline remain one of the factors affecting suboptimal organizational performance outcomes. Several studies have identified unproductive work behaviors, such as tardiness, high absenteeism, and low compliance with organizational rules. These conditions indicate that work discipline is closely linked to the achievement of organizational goals (Sari & Nugroho, 2022; Hidayat et al., 2024).

Additionally, employee absenteeism rates are often used as an indicator of work discipline and responsibility. High rates of employee absenteeism indicate a lack of commitment to work and can lead to a decline in the quality of public services (Pratama & Yusuf, 2021). From a human resource management perspective, work discipline reflects employees' awareness of adhering to regulations and performing duties in accordance with the responsibilities assigned by the organization (Rahman, 2023).

On the other hand, providing incentives is one of the strategies organizations use to enhance employee motivation and productivity. Recent research indicates that a fair, performance-based incentive system can boost work enthusiasm, loyalty, and the quality of employee service to the public (Kurniawan & Saputri, 2022; Wijaya et al., 2025). Incentives have also been shown to influence improved work discipline, as employees feel they receive appropriate recognition for their contributions to the organization.

However, the effectiveness of incentive programs heavily depends on the performance evaluation system implemented by the organization. Objective and transparent performance evaluations can enhance employees' motivation in achieving established work targets (Fadillah & Utami, 2023). Conversely, a mismatch between the reward system and workloads can lead to dissatisfaction and reduce employee motivation.

In addition to incentives, professionalism is also a key factor in improving employee performance. Professionalism reflects an employee's competence, technical skills, work ethic, and sense of responsibility in performing their duties. Professional employees tend to demonstrate better adaptability, innovation, and work commitment when facing organizational changes (Maulana et al., 2024).

Several studies also indicate that there remains a mismatch between employees' educational backgrounds and their job fields. This situation prevents employees' capabilities from being fully utilized, thereby affecting the organization's work effectiveness and quality (Saputra & Hadi, 2021). Based on these findings, it can be concluded that incentives, professionalism, and work discipline are interrelated factors that influence employee performance. Work discipline plays a strategic role as a mediating variable that strengthens the relationship between incentives and professionalism in improving employee performance (Rahmawati et al., 2025).

2. Method

2.1. Research Approach

In previous studies, research on employee performance has generally been conducted quantitatively, using data collected via questionnaires. However, as the field has evolved, this quantitative approach has been supplemented or replaced by the systematic literature review (SLR) method used in this study. The SLR method allows researchers to conduct a comprehensive analysis of various findings from previous studies without the need to collect primary data directly. Thus, this literature review is expected to provide a more comprehensive and in-depth picture of the phenomenon of employee performance under study.

2.2. Systematic Literature Review (SLR)

This study employs the systematic literature review (SLR) method because it can address various research questions by systematically utilizing the results of previous studies. The SLR method was chosen due to several key advantages:

Comprehensive identification and synthesis of literature. The SLR method identifies, evaluates, and interprets all research findings relevant to the study topic. Thus, existing literature can be classified and analyzed systematically in accordance with the research questions.

Minimization of selection bias. By objectively analyzing all relevant empirical evidence, SLR helps minimize bias in study selection. Standardized procedures (e.g., following the PRISMA protocol) ensure that the literature selection and synthesis processes are conducted transparently and in a controlled manner.

A broader understanding of the phenomenon. The presentation of a structured synthesis of findings from previous studies allows researchers to gain a broader and deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. In the context of HRM in the public sector, for example, SLR can reveal patterns of relationships between variables that are difficult to capture in a single quantitative study alone.

Thus, the SLR method enables this study to integrate various results from previous studies on employee performance and HRM, thereby producing a more solid and comprehensive framework of understanding.

Reference: A systematic literature review (SLR) was used as the primary research method in this study. This literature-based approach has proven effective in examining patterns of relationships between variables and deepening the understanding of HRM phenomena in the public sector.

3. Results and Discussion

The Role of Incentives in Work Discipline

Various studies indicate that incentives have a positive relationship with improved employee work discipline. The provision of performance-based additional income is considered capable of encouraging employees to better comply with organizational rules, particularly regarding attendance, punctuality, and adherence to established working hours.

In human resource management studies, incentives are viewed as a form of organizational recognition for employee contributions, thereby enhancing work motivation and discipline (Kurniawan & Saputri, 2022). Employees who receive fair financial rewards tend to have a higher sense of responsibility and strive to maintain their performance.

These findings align with the research by Nurkhasanah (2017), Amalia (2017), and Sejati et al. (2018), which states that incentives have a positive effect on work discipline. Recent research also indicates that performance-based incentive systems can enhance employees' compliance with organizational rules and strengthen a productive work culture (Wijaya et al., 2025).

The Role of Professionalism in Work Discipline

Employee professionalism plays a crucial role in shaping work discipline. Professional employees generally demonstrate a high commitment to job responsibilities, work ethics, and compliance with organizational rules.

Enhancing competencies, technical skills, and professional attitudes encourages employees to work in accordance with the standards set by the organization. This indicates that professionalism is not merely about individual capabilities but is also reflected in daily disciplined behavior.

These findings are supported by Maradona's (2016) research, which indicates that professionalism influences work discipline. Recent studies also state that employees with high professionalism tend to demonstrate better levels of compliance and work responsibility compared to employees with low professionalism (Maulana et al., 2024).

The Role of Incentives in Employee Performance

Incentives have proven to be one of the factors influencing improvements in employee performance. Providing performance-based incentives can boost employee motivation to complete tasks in line with organizational goals.

Employees generally strive to improve work quality and productivity when the organization provides rewards commensurate with their contributions. From a motivational theory perspective, incentives serve as an external motivator that can enhance employee work ethic.

These findings align with the research by Djuwanto (2017) and Nurkhasanah (2017), which demonstrated that incentives have a positive impact on employee performance. Recent studies have also found that transparent, performance-based reward systems can enhance employee effectiveness in the public sector (Fadillah & Utami, 2023; Wijaya et al., 2025).

However, the effectiveness of incentives is heavily influenced by fairness in the distribution system. A mismatch between workload and rewards can lead to dissatisfaction, which in turn impacts a decline in employee work motivation.

The Role of Professionalism in Employee Performance

Professionalism has a significant influence on improving employee performance. Employees who possess the necessary skills, knowledge, sense of responsibility, and strong work ethic tend to be able to complete tasks effectively and in accordance with organizational standards.

Professionalism is also linked to an employee's ability to adapt to organizational changes and complete tasks on time. Professional employees are better equipped to enhance service quality and work productivity.

These findings are supported by Rumimpunu's (2018) research, which states that professionalism influences employee performance. Recent studies also indicate that professionalism is a key factor in enhancing the effectiveness of public sector organizations (Maulana et al., 2024).

However, some studies show different results, indicating that professionalism does not always have a positive impact on performance if it is not supported by a conducive work environment and a sound organizational system.

The Role of Work Discipline in Employee Performance

Work discipline is one of the key factors determining employee performance levels. Employees with high discipline tend to be able to work according to targets, adhere to organizational rules, and complete tasks on time.

Work discipline reflects an employee's sense of responsibility toward organizational tasks and obligations. Therefore, improving work discipline will directly impact increased productivity and the quality of employees' work.

These findings are supported by research by Anisa (2019), Rumimpunu (2018), Saputra (2017), and Oktavia (2014), which demonstrates that work discipline influences employee performance. Recent studies also reveal that work discipline significantly contributes to the effectiveness of public sector organizations and the quality of public services (Rahman, 2023; Hidayat et al., 2024).

The Role of Incentives on Performance through Work Discipline

Work discipline has been proven to act as a mediating variable in the relationship between incentives and employee performance. The provision of appropriate incentives can enhance employee discipline, which in turn leads to improved performance.

Well-managed incentives can motivate employees to be more disciplined in their work, such as adhering to work hours, completing tasks on time, and increasing work responsibility.

These findings align with the research by Nurkhasanah (2017) and Saputra (2017), which states that work discipline mediates the influence of incentives on employee performance. Recent studies also indicate that a combination of financial rewards and work discipline can optimize employee productivity more effectively (Rahmawati et al., 2025).

The Role of Professionalism in Performance through Work Discipline

Professionalism also has an indirect influence on performance through work discipline. Professional employees tend to have a high awareness of adhering to organizational rules and carrying out tasks responsibly.

In this context, work discipline serves as a link between professionalism and improved employee performance. Employees who possess professional skills but lack strong work discipline will struggle to achieve optimal work results.

This finding is supported by Maradona's (2016) research, which demonstrates that work discipline mediates the relationship between professionalism and performance. Recent studies also confirm that organizational success is significantly influenced by the combination of professionalism, discipline, and employee work commitment (Rahmawati et al., 2025).

Work discipline itself is a form of employee awareness in adhering to organizational regulations without coercion. A disciplined attitude reflects an employee's responsibility and commitment to the tasks assigned by the organization.

Table 1. Summary of Previous Research Findings

No	Researcher	Variables Studied	Research Findings
1	Amalia (2017)	Incentives → Work Discipline	Incentives have a positive effect on employee work discipline.
2	Nurkhasanah (2017)	Incentives → Discipline and Performance	Incentives improve work discipline and lead to enhanced employee performance.
3	Sejati et al. (2018)	Incentives → Work Discipline	The provision of incentives can increase employees' compliance with work regulations.
4	Maradona (2016)	Professionalism → Work Discipline	Professionalism has a positive effect on employees' work discipline.
5	Rumimpunu (2018)	Professionalism → Performance	Professionalism improves the effectiveness and quality of employee work.
6	Anisa (2019)	Work Discipline → Performance	Work discipline has a significant influence on improving employee performance.
7	Saputra (2017)	Work Discipline → Performance	Employees with high discipline have better work productivity.
8	Oktavia (2014)	Discipline → Performance	Work discipline has a positive impact on achieving organizational targets.
9	Kurniawan & Saputri (2022)	Incentives → Motivation and Discipline	A performance-based incentive system enhances employee motivation and discipline.
10	Fadillah & Utami (2023)	Incentives → Performance	A transparent reward system improves employee work effectiveness.
11	Putra et al. (2023)	Professionalism → Organizational Performance	Professionalism is a key factor in the effectiveness of public sector organizations.
12	Rahman (2023)	Work Discipline → Organizational Effectiveness	Work discipline significantly contributes to the quality of public services.
13	Maulana et al. (2024)	Professionalism → Discipline and Performance	Professional employees demonstrate greater responsibility and better performance.
14	Hidayat et al. (2024)	Work Discipline → Performance	Low discipline leads to a decline in organizational productivity.
15	Rahmawati et al. (2025)	Incentives & Professionalism → Performance via Discipline	Work discipline mediates the relationship between incentives, professionalism, and employee performance.
16	Wijaya et al. (2025)	Performance-Based Incentives	Performance-based incentive systems strengthen productive work culture and improve public service

No	Researcher	Variables Studied	Research Findings
			quality.

Source: Compiled and synthesized by the author from various previous studies (2026).

The study findings indicate that incentives are a dominant factor in enhancing employee motivation, discipline, and work ethic. Employees who receive rewards commensurate with their work achievements tend to exhibit higher levels of compliance and responsibility toward the organization.

Furthermore, professionalism has also been shown to influence improvements in employee discipline and performance. Employees with strong competencies, work ethics, and professional skills will adapt more easily to organizational demands and work effectively.

On the other hand, work discipline is a key factor determining an organization's success in achieving its work targets. The level of employee discipline is reflected in compliance with organizational rules, punctuality, work responsibility, and consistency in completing tasks.

Based on these various research findings, it can be understood that work discipline holds a strategic position as a mediating variable. This means that incentives and professionalism not only directly influence performance but also through the enhancement of employee work discipline. The better the incentive system and employee professionalism, the higher the level of work discipline, which ultimately impacts the improvement of organizational performance.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of the literature review, it can be concluded that incentives, professionalism, and work discipline are interrelated in improving employee performance. Incentives have been shown to increase employee motivation and work discipline, while professionalism contributes to improved work quality and effectiveness.

Furthermore, work discipline plays a strategic role as a mediating variable that strengthens the relationship between incentives and professionalism on employee performance. Therefore, improving employee performance in the public sector requires support from a fair incentive system, the development of professionalism, and the strengthening of a culture of work discipline.

Based on the results of a review and analysis of various previous journals, it was found that incentives, professionalism, and work discipline have a significant relationship with the improvement of employee performance, both directly and indirectly. The study results also indicate that work discipline acts as a mediating variable that strengthens the relationship between incentives and professionalism regarding employee performance.

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Declarations

Author contribution. Sitria Amalia Khumaira contributed to the conceptualization of the study, research design, literature search, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript writing. Sintia Devi contributed to literature screening, data extraction, manuscript drafting, and editing. Natasha Ratu Hafizah contributed to data validation, critical review of the manuscript, and final approval of the published version. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data and Software Availability Statements

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available scientific literature retrieved from academic databases, including Google Scholar and Scopus. These databases cover publications from 2015 to 2025. All sources analyzed during the systematic literature review are cited in the References section of this article. No new datasets were generated during this study.

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