

Original Article

Organizational, cultural, and social factors affecting employees' lived experience of meritocracy

Masoud Rashidifard ¹ , Mokhtar Ranjbar ^{2*} , Alireza Sanatkah ³ ,
Alireza Peyvand ⁴ , Hojat Babaei ⁵ 

1 Department of Management, Ke.C., Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran.

2 Department of Management, Lam.C., Islamic Azad University, Lamerd, Iran.

3 Department of sociology, Ke.C., Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran.

4 Department of Psychology, Ke.C., Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran.

5 Department of Mathematics, Ke.C., Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran.

* **Corresponding author and reprints: Mokhtar Ranjbar**, Associate professor, Department of Management, Lam.C., Islamic Azad University, Lamerd, Iran.

Email: ranjbarmokhtar@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Background: Employees are the driving force behind economic growth and development. Creativity, innovation, and enhancing employee competencies in various fields require the presence of human capital. Given this, the main objective of the study was to examine the lived experiences of Bank Melli employees regarding meritocracy and the factors influencing it.

Methodology: This study was qualitative in nature and was based on the grounded theory method. The target population included all employees of Bank Melli in Kerman (2024). Using purposive sampling, 17 participants were selected based on: (1) ≥ 3 years of experience, (2) direct roles in customer service/digital banking, and (3) willingness to participate. Selection ensured diversity in roles (tellers, managers, IT) and gender. Semi-structured interviews were employed as the data collection tool. To ensure reliability, three methods were applied: member checking, analytical comparisons, and the audit technique.

Results: The results identified several influencing factors. Causal conditions included participatory management, skill enhancement, and administrative system integrity. Contextual conditions included a culture of competency, scientific and technological education, and a culture of accountability. Intervening conditions encompassed adherence to job regulations, motivation, and the desire for career advancement. Organizational talent development was identified as a key strategy, while job alienation emerged as a significant consequence.

Conclusion: Organizational competency requires appropriate social and cultural infrastructures. Without the establishment of a meritocracy and talent development culture at the socio-cultural level, discussions of organizational competency remain ineffective.

Keywords: Cultural Competency; Grounded Theory; Meritocracy; Organizational Culture.

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Introduction

In contemporary society, organizations serve as vital engines for socioeconomic progress, with human capital emerging as the most critical

determinant of organizational effectiveness (1). Research consistently demonstrates that competent and committed human resources constitute the foundation of

organizational success, while their absence renders other resources substantially less effective (1,2). This understanding has led growing attention to workplace spirituality and corporate social responsibility as dual drivers of both employee performance and societal welfare (2,3).

The principle of meritocracy occupies central importance in this context. Grounded in Islamic values of justice and tawhid (3), properly implemented merit-based systems that evaluate technical, human and conceptual skills have been shown to simultaneously enhance productivity, reduce corruption, and promote organizational justice (4). However, studies reveal significant gaps between meritocratic ideals and practice, particularly in understanding how employees themselves perceive and experience organizational competence (5).

While existing competency models emphasize measurable dimensions like strategic thinking and decision-making (6), few studies have examined: (a) how frontline employees conceptualize competence in their daily work contexts, (b) the institutional and cultural factors shaping these interpretations, and (c) practical strategies for implementing meritocratic systems in culturally-grounded ways. This qualitative study addresses these gaps through an in-depth examination of Bank Melli employees' experiences in Kerman.

Our findings contribute to both theory and practice by: (a) bridging abstract competency models with ground-level organizational realities, (b) contextualizing meritocracy within Iran's distinctive banking culture, and (c) identifying actionable pathways for human capital development that harmonize organizational objectives with Islamic values. The study ultimately presents a holistic framework for understanding and enhancing organizational competence that accounts for both institutional requirements and employee perspectives.

Methodology

Research Setting and Participant Selection

This study utilized purposeful sampling to select 17 employees from Bank Melli in Kerman, aligned with grounded theory's emphasis on theoretical saturation. Purposeful sampling was chosen to intentionally select information-rich cases, ensuring a range of experiences and perspectives. The selection criteria included:

1. **Job Diversity:** Participants represented different roles (e.g., tellers, managers, IT staff) to capture a variety of perspectives on digital transformation.
2. **Tenure:** Participants had at least 3 years of experience in their roles to ensure a deep understanding of organizational dynamics and digital transformation.
3. **Willingness to Share Experiences:** Voluntary participation was a key criterion to ensure openness and in-depth responses during interviews.

The sample size of 17 was sufficient to reach theoretical saturation, as saturation was confirmed by the 15th interview. Two additional interviews were conducted to ensure no new themes emerged and to further validate the findings.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews (30–45 minutes each) were conducted onsite, guided by a flexible interview protocol that allowed for:

- **Probing:** Questions were designed to prompt elaboration, such as: “Can you elaborate on how you define competence in your role?”
- **Adaptation:** The interview guide allowed for follow-up questions based on participants' responses, such as probing on contradictions that emerged during the interviews.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Informed written consent was obtained from all participants,

with assurances of confidentiality and permission for audio recordings.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

To address potential researcher bias and enhance reflexivity:

- Pre-Interview Bracketing: The researcher documented preconceptions and assumptions, particularly about meritocracy, to ensure these did not influence data collection or interpretation.
- Reflexive Journaling: Field notes were taken after each interview to reflect on how the researcher's background (e.g., previous banking experience) might have shaped data interpretation and analysis.
- Peer Debriefing: Regular consultations with supervisors and colleagues helped to challenge the researcher's assumptions and reduce bias during data analysis.

These steps were taken to ensure that the researcher's background and personal views did not unduly shape the findings, thereby enhancing the credibility and validity of the research.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-stage coding process:

1. Open Coding: Line-by-line analysis was conducted to identify initial concepts (e.g., "promotion fairness").
2. Axial Coding: Concepts identified in open coding were linked to subcategories, and these subcategories were then connected to primary categories (e.g., linking "social skills" to "career advancement").
3. Selective Coding: The core category, "subjective competence," was identified and linked systematically to other categories, forming a cohesive theory.

Validation Strategies

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were employed:

1. Member Checking: Participants reviewed the transcripts and preliminary findings, with a 92% agreement rate on key themes and interpretations.
2. Analytical Comparisons: Data were re-examined through constant comparison to ensure theoretical consistency across interviews.
3. Expert Audit: Five independent scholars reviewed the coding process and category development, achieving an inter-coder reliability rate of 0.87.

Through these strategies, the study ensured that the findings accurately represented the participants' experiences and perspectives, thus reinforcing the validity and robustness of the analysis.

Results

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the study population. It included 17 employees of Bank Melli in Kerman city. Among the participants, 12 were male and 5 were female. Their age range varied between 36 and 56 years. Regarding education, most of the people had a bachelor's or master's degree and were working in positions such as employee, banker, deputy, and department manager. Their employment experience varied between 10 months and 29 years. The marital status of the participants also showed that most of them were married.

By performing open coding during data collection, 15 primary categories were obtained. By performing axial coding, the subcategories were linked to each other and also to the primary categories, and the type of categories was determined in terms of causality, process, and consequence. The primary categories and subcategories obtained from the study process are as follows Table 2.

According to Participant No. 1, meritocracy means "the ability to do work well". According to Participant No. 3, "meritocracy means employing employees based on their competencies and skills and

Table 1. presents the characteristics of the participants.

No	Gender	Age	Education	Marital status	Position	Work Experience
1	Male	48	Bachelor	Married	Employee	29 years
2	Female	-	Bachelor	Married	Banker	10 years
3	Female	42	Master	Single	Banker	10 months
4	Male	46	Master	Married	Deputy	25 years
5	Male	48	Associate	Married	Deputy	25 years
6	Male	51	Master	Married	Responsible	29 years
7	Male	46	Bachelor	Married	Employee	22 years
8	Male	39	Master	Married	Banker	16 years
9	Female	49	Master	Married	Credit Deputy	25 years
10	Male	40	Bachelor	Married	Department Deputy	22 years
11	Male	53	Master	Married	Banker	27 years
12	Female	36	Master	Married	Department Deputy	15 years
13	Male	48	Master	Married	Banker	28 years
14	Female	42	Bachelor	Single	Banker	12 years
15	Male	56	Associate	Married	Employee	29 years
16	Male	53	Master	Married	Banker	28 years
17	Male	48	Diploma	Married	Employee	27 years

promoting individuals based on their performance and capabilities." According to Participant No. 5, meritocracy in an organization means the selection and appointment of individuals to various positions and positions and their immediate employment in that position to achieve the high goals of that organization based on the determined qualifications.

According to Participant No. 6, meritocracy means the advancement of individuals based on their capabilities. According to Participant No. 8, it means capability and purposefulness in work or all related work, so a person, apart from having the necessary information, has sufficient ability and talent to improve the work process of that organization to advance the goals considerably as organizational competence.

Table 2: Semantic understanding and interpretation of the concept of organizational competence by Bank Melli employees

Initial code	Concepts
Quality of performing organizational activities	Ability to perform the job well/ Be skilled and knowledgeable/ Ability to perform organizational responsibilities optimally/ Ability to perform the job properly in the organization/ Having expertise in the job he does/ performing organizational responsibilities properly/ Be capable and purposeful in the job or all related tasks
Proportionality of job and field of study	Education related to the work he does/meaning employment based on the qualifications and skills of the organization's employees/appointment based on the qualifications desired by the organization
Appointment based on scientific-specialized meritocracy	Promotion of individuals based on their performance and capabilities/ is a method of government or management in which those involved are selected based on ability and performance and not on financial power or social status and kinship.
Promotion based on meritocracy and creativity	Meritocracy means the progress of individuals based on their capabilities/work-related talent/creativity in the relevant work/commitment/sufficient knowledge and experience in the organizational position assigned to the individual/commitment and conscientiousness necessary to perform the relevant tasks as well as possible.

Participants No. 11, 12, and 13 also introduce meritocracy as "work-related talent", "creativity in the relevant work" and "being committed." Participant No. 17 says: "The organization should use its structure and teams to help guide the work process of the institution towards success, through people who have the necessary knowledge, skills, and capabilities, and have the power to use these characteristics." Based on the categories collected from the study, it can

be stated that the semantic understanding and interpretation of the employees of Bank Melli in Kerman City of competence is based on the primary categories of quality of organizational activities, suitability of job, and field of study, appointment based on scientific-specialized competence, and promotion based on competence, and creativity.

The causative conditions

Table 3. Causative factors that affect the creation of meritocracy in the Bank Melli

Primary category	Subcategory	Concepts
Participatory Management	Feedback Systems	Feedback systems/Awareness of performance/Sufficient and continuous monitoring of the work process in the organization (including how employees work, commuting, and interactions)/Listening to and implementing suggestions and criticisms from people working in that organization/Evaluating fair reward and incentive systems
	Participation in Organizational Decision-Making	Employee participation in the decision-making process/Employee participation in various organizational affairs and decision-making/Teamwork and cooperation/Interactions, and collaboration among employees
Promoting Skills and Expertise	Skills and knowledge	Personal development: improving employee skills and knowledge/planning for career development and promotion/creating opportunities for employee promotion/having the necessary skills and information in the field of work/appropriate training and specialization/training and skills development
	Creativity, talent, and capabilities	Identifying talented and capable individuals/Adherence of employees and managers and relationships to mutual obligations/Avoiding flattery and praise/Equality before the rule and enforcing regulations/Identifying motivated, literate, and capable individuals, and placing them in the appropriate departments based on the employee's capabilities/Employing individuals based on their capabilities, including skills, experience, knowledge and personality, and ignoring irrelevant relationships
Administrative System Health	Avoiding favoritism	Using highly capable personnel and preventing the hiring of people on a relationship basis and on demand / Managers' health, rules appropriate to respect individuals, / Implementing appropriate rules and regulations, Appropriate appointments / Discipline and order in employee career promotion based on the criteria set in the organizational chart/
	Appropriate rules and regulations	Managers' awareness of employee welfare problems, follow-up on resolving employee problems, paying attention to employee skills/motivations and skills
Organization's Social Responsibility	Sympathy	Sympathy and understanding of the person's conditions, good medical and health rates/ Motivation/Understanding the concerns of the employee's life/Attention to the challenges of the employee's life/Feeling sympathy and cooperation
	appropriateness of salary and benefits	Appropriate salaries and benefits based on the employee's competence, expertise, specific knowledge, and skills through processes such as holding meetings and involving employees in advancing the organization's goals, creating active cooperatives/Explaining the organization's goals effectively to meet the employees' livelihood needs

Causal conditions are mostly those events and incidents that affect phenomena (2). In the present study, causal conditions are factors that lead to the creation of meritocracy in the organization. According to the results, the primary categories of participatory management, characterized by the subcategories of feedback systems and participation in organizational decision-making, are one of the most important exploratory categories. Additionally, the promotion of skills and specialized knowledge, characterized by subcategories such as skills and knowledge, creativity, talent, and abilities, and the category of administrative system health, characterized by subcategories such as avoiding favoritism, appropriate rules and regulations, and social responsibility, characterized by subcategories such as organizational sympathy and proportionality of rights and benefits, are other exploratory categories Table 3.

According to Participant No. 5, "Creating incentives for employee participation in the decision-making process and improving performance can improve meritocracy." According to Participant No. 7, "There are several factors for developing meritocracy in the organization, such as creating an organizational culture focused on individual development, improving the skills and knowledge of employees, planning for career development and promotion, and creating opportunities for employee promotion can improve meritocracy." According to Participant No. 14, "Sufficient and continuous monitoring of the work process in the organization, including the way employees work, commuting, and interactions) and listening to and implementing suggestions and criticisms from people working in that organization can be effective in meritocracy." According to Participants No. 4 and 6, "The ability of managers, training, identifying motivated, literate, and capable people and appointing them in the appropriate departments with the employee's capabilities," and "Changing

the ability of specialized people in producing and providing goods and services can be effective in meritocracy." According to Participant No. 17, "Cultural factors and the health of managers, rules appropriate to individuals, avoiding political factions, appropriate training and specialization, incentives, and skills can be effective in meritocracy." According to Participant No. 5, "implementing appropriate rules and regulations, managers' awareness of employee welfare problems, pursuing solutions to employee problems, and paying attention to employee skills, appropriate and competent appointments" can be effective in this regard. According to Participant No. 12, "creating motivation, explaining the organization's goals effectively to provide for employees' livelihoods through processes such as holding meetings and involving employees in advancing the organization's goals, creating active cooperatives" can be also effective. According to Participant No. 9, "the competence of managers, the capability of managers to deal with employees, pursuing employee problems by the organization, creating motivation with appropriate appointments, and resolving employees' financial problems" are among other factors that can be influential in this regard.

Contextual conditions

Contextual conditions are a specific set of conditions at a specific time and place creating a set of issues that individuals respond to their actions/interactions (2). A set of factors in the form of contextual conditions affect the semantic system of Bank Melli employees regarding organizational competence. The most important of them is the culture of competence, characterized by the subcategories of organizational social responsibility, the culture of meritocracy, and appointment based on meritocracy. The primary category of scientific and technological education, characterized by the subcategories of scientific support and

Table 4. Contextual conditions affecting meritocracy in Bank Melli

Primary category	Subcategory	Concepts
Culture of competence	Corporate Social Responsibility	Concerns about life/Paying attention to the livelihood needs of employees/Adjusting the benefits to inflation/Harmonizing salaries with economic needs/Support for employee housing/Minimum living wage for employees/General economic situation/Unemployment rate
	Culture of meritocracy	Society and culture's attitude toward work, cultural issues in organizational competence/The need for a culture of meritocracy in society/Support for elites and innovators/Emergence of creativity in society/Social support for talents/identifying and employing employee talent/Support for creative individuals
	Appointment Based on Meritocracy	Not involving some political issues of society in the work/No factionalism/Avoiding unprincipled appointments/Prioritizing meritocracy in career advancement/Supporting competent individuals/Creating equal promotion opportunities/Coordinated career opportunities/
Scientific and Technological Education	Academic Support	Support for continuing education/allocation of leave for academic improvement/encouragement of increased scientific learning/giving importance to the results of scientific and research findings
	Training Courses	Career courses/Training employees on career advancement requirements/New specialized scientific courses/Working with computers and new programs/Using artificial intelligence and teaching how to use it in the banking system/Banking services going online like Resalat Bank/Virtual banking counter
Culture of accountability	Handling complaints	/Proper handling of employee complaints/Fair handling of complaints/Proper handling of complaints/Support for inspections/Reporting cases to inspections and supporting inspectors
	Criticism	/Considering criticism/Supporting job groups/Employee opinions and suggestions/The organization's criticism/Ability to criticize the organization's managers/Tolerance of criticism by the organization/Paying attention to suggestions and opinions about the organization

training courses, and the culture of accountability, characterized by the subcategories of handling complaints and accepting criticism, determine the contextual conditions Table 4.

According to Participant No. 10, "Life concerns and livelihood problems play a critical role in job performance, reduce the bank's workforce, and prevent competence." According to Participant No. 7, "In society, competent and creative individuals should be respected first and we cannot rely on competence until there is no culture of meritocracy in society." According to Participant No. 9,

"Encouraging the organization to optimally fulfill responsibilities, support creative individuals, and discover talents should be a priority."

Intervening conditions

Intervening conditions refer to conditions that facilitate or limit interactions. They can also mitigate or change the causative conditions (6). Paying attention to job criteria, characterized by subcategories such as relationships instead of criteria and avoiding flattery, is one of the most important intervening conditions in the present study. Moreover, willingness and creating motivation, characterized by

Table 5. Intervening factors affecting meritocracy in Bank Melli

Primary category	Subcategory	Concepts
Paying attention to job requirements	Relationships instead of rules	Promotion based on relationships/Lack of attention to employee capabilities/Avoiding political factions and baseless prejudices/Ethnicity and regionalism in appointments /Ethnicity and nepotism / External orders and favoritism/
	Avoiding the spirit of flattery	Flattery/ Failure to support people who backbiting colleagues/Avoiding flattery /Need to punish flatterers/
Desire and motivation	spiritual needs of the employee	Considering self-esteem/Paying attention to the psychological and spiritual issues of employees/Paying attention to the psychological and spiritual pressures of the employee in society/The impact of life conditions and concerns on morale and psyche
	Encouraging creativity	Encouraging talent development/Paying attention to creativity in the organization/Encouraging innovation in the organization/Encouraging competent employees with financial and psychological support/considering competent people/Distinguishing between talented and creative people from others/Monitoring competent people/Scientific competence criteria

subcategories such as employee spiritual needs and encouraging creativity, are considered among the most important intervening factors Table 5.

According to Participant No. 10, "The promotion system should not leave room for play, otherwise everything is over." According to Participant No. 6, "Encouraging employees to be creative and fostering it is crucial." Participant No. 3 focuses on financial and psychological support for employees and states that the bank should pay attention to mental and psychological needs, including encouraging employees who perform well in addition to providing livelihood needs. According to Participant No. 11, "The promotion criteria should be more scientific to encourage innovation."

Strategies (action-interactions)

Strategies or action-interactions are intentional actions taken to solve a problem and when they are taken, a phenomenon is formed. Strategies also refer to what an individual says and does within himself (6). One of the most crucial strategies or actions-interactions toward meritocracy in

the organization is the strategy of organizational meritocracy. It is characterized by the subcategories such as changing the management perspective, paying attention to new scientific methods, paying attention to the welfare status, paying attention to cooperation and participation, and commitment to the rule Table 6.

According to Participant No. 2, "A good brand in the development and implementation of meritocracy can help promote a culture of meritocracy by creating a positive image in the public mind and strengthening public trust." Participant No. 12 stated that those who have the necessary competence based on external factors, have sufficient information about the conditions (economic, political, technological, etc.), and can analyze the conditions and transfer information are influential. Participant No. 9 stated that external factors including the economy, culture, and politics of society play an effective role in the competence of employees. The role of relationships and tastes fades and is replaced by rules,

Table 6. Organizational strategies regarding meritocracy in Bank Melli

Primary category	Subcategory	Concepts
Organizational meritocracy	Changing the management perspective	Changing the management perspective/ Common organizational vision and goals/ Competent appointments/ Adherence of all structures to a new approach, Changing the managers' perspective/ Support of senior managers and expectation of meeting mutual needs/ Positive vision without personal bias / Desirable behavior and correct conduct of managers
	Paying attention to new scientific methods	Scientific solutions – interested in study, research, and create order, rule, and regulations / method and measurability, strategically appropriate based on complementary ability / brainstorming/ drawing a path for the long-term future / evaluating programs and scientific surveys
	Attention to welfare	Encouraging and improving the livelihood of employees / physical factors (such as providing appropriate welfare and job facilities and to the employee/ considering joint rewards / improving the quality of life of employees
	Attention to cooperation and participation	An organization that seeks to create and strengthen participation and cooperation among human resources and also encourage leadership//Progress and promotion based on the capabilities of individuals
	Commitment to the rule and rule	Not involving political relations in the conditions of the organization/adherence to rule and rule and being committed to oneself and the organization in all conditions

criteria, specialization, and competence when the culture and politics of society are based on the meritocracy of individuals.

Outcomes

Outcomes are created wherever a person or people choose to perform or not perform a certain action-interaction in response to an issue or to manage or maintain a situation (6). The strategies or actions-interactions of Bank Melli employees in the current situation have led to outcomes. Job alienation, characterized by subcategories such as organizational distrust, insecurity, and stress, inability to overcome problems, and job burnout, is the most important of them Table 7.

According to Participant No.7, socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors affect the competence of employees. For example, they can cause intellectual conflicts and discomfort among employees and make people involved with themselves,

and people cannot achieve the necessary competence due to the conflicts. According to Participant No. 16, a society that has a healthy and dynamic economy with a rich and productive culture and a political system based on national interests will undoubtedly train competent people in all areas." Participant No. 10 stated that the negative impact of inflation on employee performance is obvious. When an employee's salary runs out every month, he will have no motivation to work." According to Participant No. 15, the bank should have the necessary money to provide facilities, not wait for the customer to deposit money into the account, so it can provide facilities to the next customer. If the customer withdraws his money due to inflation, the bank will face problems. The current practice of the bank is like a shopkeeper who borrows all the items in his shop, and if the lender takes his items, the shop will close." Participant No. 4 stated

that lack of attention to meritocracy in appointments is one of the factors that play a decisive role in reducing citizens' trust in governments and government institutions

since this indicates that some people are thinking about the interests of specific ethnic, regional, and partisan groups Figure 1.

Table 7. Outcomes of lack of paying attention to meritocracy in Bank Melli

Primary category	Subcategory	Concepts
	Organizational distrust	Distrust of colleagues/Distrust of the organization/Distrust of rules and regulations/Avoidance of the rules/Distrust of words and actions/Feeling of hostility toward others/Feeling of job futility
	Insecurity and stress	Lack of motivation of the organization's employees in creating a suitable environment for themselves and their colleagues to promote the organization/lack of motivation/lack of desire and willingness to perform the job/feeling depressed upon entering the organization's environment/feeling of job insecurity/job stress/fear of losing the job/unpredictability of the job future /dissatisfaction, frustration, depression, and lack of motivation to perform the assigned tasks
Self-alienation	Inability to overcome problems	Lack of competition with competitors, loss of organizational position, failure to achieve goals / inability to compete with other banks (similar organizations) / 4- failure to use facilities (financial and human resources, etc.) Reduced creativity in organizations / failure to overcome problems / inefficiency
	Job burnout	Reduced employee motivation, unwieldiness to provide customer service, job burnout, and organizational dissatisfaction

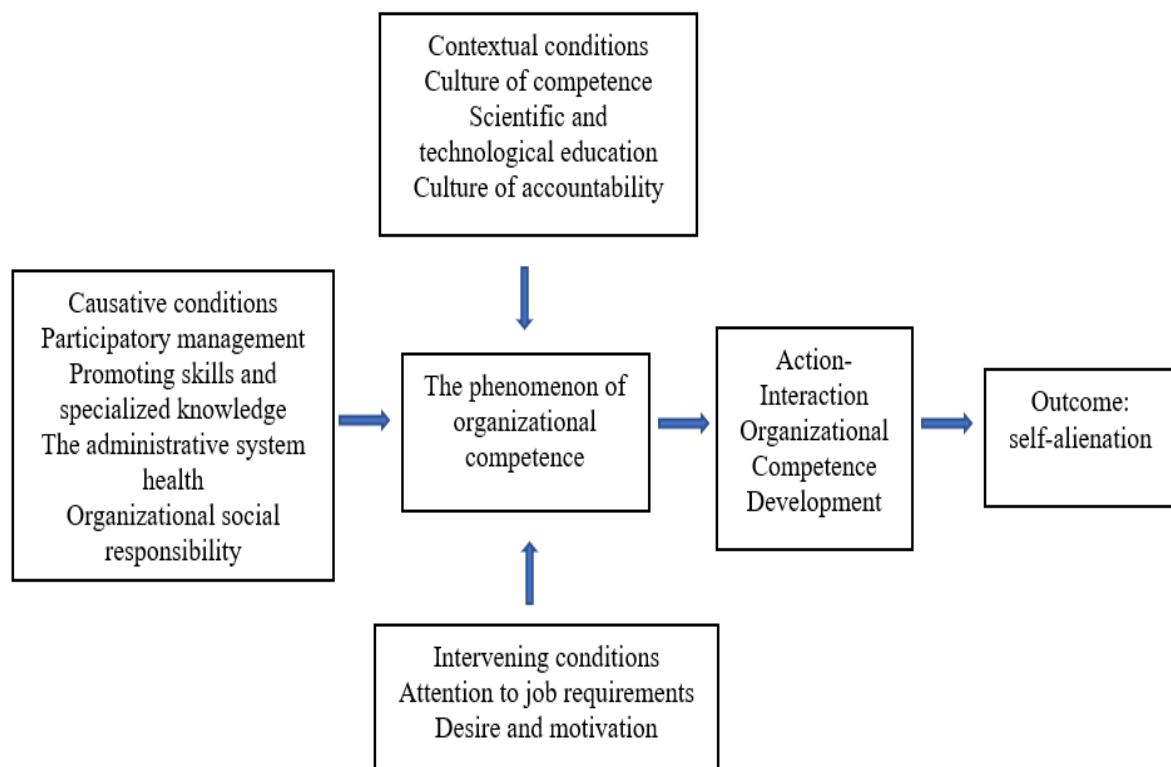


Figure 1. Paradigmatic model of social contexts affecting organizational competence in the Bank Melli

Discussion

Meritocracy holds significant importance in both developed and developing organisations. Experts believe that when the true needs of employees are not understood or valued, and when managers fail to genuinely address these needs, employee empowerment and competence may diminish (7). Organisations thus strive to identify, attract, and retain the most competent individuals. Organisational logic and structure demand that each person and resource be utilised effectively and appropriately. This goal is best achieved by appointing the most qualified individual to the most suitable position—embodying the principle of meritocracy (8, 9).

This qualitative study aimed to explore the semantic system of employees at Bank Melli in Kerman with respect to organisational competence and the factors influencing it. Specific objectives included:

- Investigating employees' understanding and interpretation of organisational competence;
- Exploring the causal, contextual, and intervening conditions that shape this semantic system;
- Examining the strategies or actions taken by employees to promote meritocratic principles in career advancement.

Participants generally defined meritocracy as the ability to perform work effectively, employment based on individual competencies and skills, and career advancement based on performance. They viewed meritocracy as the process of selecting and appointing individuals to roles in alignment with the organisation's strategic goals and based on clearly defined qualifications.

The study found that the employees' conceptualisation of competence encompassed four core elements: the quality of organisational activities, the alignment between educational background and job role, selection based on scientific and technical qualifications, and promotion grounded in merit and creativity. Causal factors leading to meritocracy included

participatory management—encompassing feedback mechanisms and employee involvement in decision-making.

Other critical factors included skill and knowledge development (with emphasis on creativity, talent, and capability), administrative integrity (i.e., avoiding favouritism and implementing clear rules), and social responsibility (focusing on empathy, fair compensation, and alignment of benefits with qualifications).

From a theoretical standpoint, human resources are considered the cornerstone of any organisation's success. Achieving organisational goals requires not only well-defined strategies and efficient structures but also creative, competent, and committed personnel exhibiting strong organisational citizenship behaviours (9).

The notion of competence is closely intertwined with that of social responsibility. Social responsibility requires organisations to avoid negatively impacting societal well-being, which includes avoiding environmental damage, discrimination, unethical practices, and ensuring transparency with consumers (10, 11). These ethical practices—such as fairness in appointments and promotions—also reinforce meritocracy (12).

According to study participants, a participatory management system has high potential for fostering meritocracy. Organisations that provide regular feedback, evaluate performance rigorously, and support career development are more likely to promote merit-based advancement (13). Additionally, continuous upskilling, personal development, talent identification, and respect for professional qualifications were emphasised as key strategies (14).

Furthermore, organisational meritocracy is enhanced by promoting creativity, mutual responsibility between staff and management, and ensuring equality in implementing regulations. Social responsibility towards employees, including recognising their challenges, offering emotional and financial support,

and aligning salaries with competencies, was also considered essential.

Contextual conditions influencing the semantic system included the broader culture of competence—reflected in merit-based appointments and the value placed on talent—as well as the culture of accountability. The latter was notably weak in participants' views, who stressed the need for constructive criticism, fair complaint handling, and leadership transparency (15).

Intervening conditions that either facilitate or hinder progress toward meritocracy included the replacement of criteria with personal relationships and a culture of flattery. Employee motivation—linked to spiritual and psychological needs, creativity, and life circumstances—also emerged as a decisive factor. Addressing these dimensions is critical for developing an engaged and competent workforce (16, 17).

Strategies refer to the deliberate actions taken to address challenges. In this study, key strategies included altering managerial mindsets, embracing scientific approaches, enhancing employee welfare, and promoting collaboration. These were supported by actions such as transparent appointments, managerial fairness, and encouraging evidence-based decision-making.

The outcomes of these strategic actions—or lack thereof—included job alienation. This was characterised by organisational distrust, insecurity, stress, reduced problem-solving ability, and burnout.

According to Yang's theory, alienation occurs when work lacks meaning. Spiritual intelligence enables individuals to question life's purpose and find meaningful connections in their work. Through this lens, meritocracy becomes more than a functional tool—it is a value-driven concept. Integrating spirituality with competence can shape a "meaning-based meritocracy," resonating with the ethical and cultural foundations of Iranian society (15).

Recommendations

It is essential to create participatory management by utilizing the creative ideas of employees who are directly in contact with the clients to improve the performance of banks. It is also vital to improve specialized skills through in-service training, especially in working with up-to-date banking software, and artificial intelligence. Supporting feedback systems, strengthening the spirit of criticism of managers and employees, and inspecting and submitting performance reports by employees and customers are other requirements. Promotion based on meritocracy, paying attention to the mental and livelihood health of employees, and developing specific strategies for improving the bank are other recommendations in this regard. The bank's organizational goals should be determined through scientific planning, and employees should be aware and resourceful in their advancement. They should also assert their reasonable demands, accept constructive criticism, apologize for mistakes, and resist unprofessional requests. Promoting professional and ethical responsibility, enhancing management and leadership skills, and the ability to work in a team is also emphasized through training.

Conclusion

Meritocracy in organizations is considered a fundamental principle in improving performance and achieving organizational goals. This study revealed that employees' perception of organizational competence is based on the capability to do the job in the best way, appointing people based on skills and performance, and promoting their careers based on their actual capabilities. The results indicate that participatory management, improving specialized skills, the administrative system health, and social responsibility are the most important factors involved in creating meritocracy. A culture of competence, scientific and technological education, and a culture of

accountability are considered to be the contextual conditions affecting meritocracy. In contrast, factors such as informal relationships, a spirit of flattery, and a lack of transparency in appointments can be a barrier to achieving this. The results emphasize the importance of organizational competence development, changing management attitudes, strengthening scientific skills, and creating a fair and transparent system for promoting employees. Lack of implementing meritocracy leads to outcomes such as job alienation, organizational distrust, stress, and burnout. Thus, organizations must pave the way for meritocracy promotion by developing a culture of meritocracy, implementing transparent and fair systems, and paying attention to the needs of employees to achieve desired efficiency.

Authors' contribution

Masoud Rashidifard and Mokhtar Ranjbar developed the study concept and design. Alireza Sanatkhan and Alireza Peyvand acquired the data. Hojat Babaei and Masoud Rashidifard analyzed and interpreted the data, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the intellectual content, manuscript editing and read and approved the final manuscript.

Informed consent

Questionnaires were filled with the participants' satisfaction and written consent was obtained from the participants in this study.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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