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Implementation of Merit Systems in Border Regions: Anomalous Deconstruction and Spatial Meritocracy Model Formulation

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Abstract

The universal application of the merit system often clashes with spatial particularities in vertical organizational units in marginalized areas. This study aims to analyze the implementation of the four main components of the merit system (formation planning, 20 JP competency development, promotion-mutation, and e-Performance), identify 3T sociogeographic barriers and vertical bureaucratic challenges, and formulate a model for MSDM governance mitigation at the Papua Merauke River Area Center (BWS). Using a qualitative approach with an instance case study method, data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation studies. The results of the study show that the rigid national standardization that passes through the "Disruption Corridor" of the RI-PNG border gives birth to three empirical meritocratic anomalies: the illusion of training compliance due to the compulsion of online training in the midst of the electricity-internet crisis, leniency bias in the form of performance value inflation for administrative formalities, and administrative helplessness due to centralization of central authorities. This accumulation of dysfunction has direct implications for the failure to retain new technical ASN talent (high turnover intention) and the chronic appointment of Acting Officials (Plt). As a contribution to novelty, this study recommends the Spatial Meritocracy Model, an affirmative policy formulation that integrates the decentralization of local management discretion with equitable fiscal spatial compensation to lock in the sustainability of talent in extreme border areas.

INTRODUCTION

The modernization of public administration requires a fundamental transformation from traditional patronage- and clientelism-based bureaucratic structures toward governance systems grounded in performance, competence, and professional accountability (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Suzuki & Hur, 2022). The merit system has become a central principle of public sector human resource management, promoting objectivity, transparency, and fairness in the recruitment, development, promotion, and retention of civil servants (Brewer et al., 2022; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2021; Oliveira et al., 2024; Woodard, 2005). In Indonesia, this principle is institutionalized through Law Number 20 of 2023 concerning the State Civil Apparatus (Aparatur Sipil Negara, ASN) and its implementing regulations (Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 20 Tahun 2023, 2023). These regulatory frameworks emphasize

competency-based personnel management, accountability in performance evaluation, and the digitalization of administrative processes, including the use of the National Civil Service Agency's (Badan Kepegawaian Negara, BKN) electronic performance management system (e-Kinerja BKN). Competency development policies have also incorporated a benchmark of 20 learning hours (Jam Pelajaran, JP) annually, reflecting the government's commitment to strengthening civil servant professionalism and institutional capacity (Dwiputrianti et al., 2023; Malik & Prasojo, 2023).

Nevertheless, the standardized implementation of merit-based personnel management frequently encounters challenges arising from geographical disparities and differences in institutional capacity (Mahyudin et al., 2025). Uniform administrative requirements may not adequately accommodate the socioeconomic, infrastructural, and geographical characteristics of public organizations operating in remote and underserved regions (Halid et al., 2026). Neglecting these contextual differences in public sector human resource management policies may contribute to administrative incapacity, whereby organizational units are expected to comply with nationally standardized procedures without receiving sufficient institutional resources, technological infrastructure, or operational support (Sutrisno et al., 2024). This tension is particularly evident in regional technical implementation units of central government ministries operating in border and disadvantaged areas, where nationally prescribed administrative standards must be implemented under substantial local constraints.

The Papua Merauke River Basin Agency (Balai Wilayah Sungai Papua Merauke, BWS Papua Merauke), a regional technical unit responsible for water resources management, provides a relevant institutional setting for examining these challenges. Operating within the Einlanden–Digul–Bikuma cross-provincial river basin area near the Indonesia–Papua New Guinea border, the agency faces geographical and infrastructural conditions characteristic of disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost regions (Tertinggal, Terdepan, dan Terluar, 3T). Limited transportation infrastructure, unstable digital connectivity, and geographical isolation present significant challenges to the implementation of nationally standardized human resource management practices (Rumasukun et al., 2026; Sutrisno et al., 2024). In particular, disruptions in internet connectivity may hinder timely reporting through the e-Kinerja BKN system, while geographical distances and restricted access to professional development opportunities may limit the effectiveness of competency development programs. These conditions illustrate the potential mismatch between centrally designed administrative instruments and the operational realities of public institutions in geographically isolated regions.

These structural constraints may contribute to merit system implementation anomalies and challenges in retaining qualified technical personnel. Competency development requirements, including the annual benchmark of 20 learning hours, may be difficult to 6254efini when training opportunities depend heavily on digital platforms that require reliable internet connectivity. Similarly, standardized electronic performance evaluation procedures may encourage administrative compliance without adequately capturing the substantive contributions of employees working under demanding field conditions. Such circumstances can increase the risk of leniency bias in performance assessments and create discrepancies between documented performance and actual organizational contributions. Furthermore, challenging working environments, geographical isolation, and insufficient location-sensitive incentives may contribute to turnover intentions among younger technical civil servants

(Kurniati et al., 2024; Tambun & Bashabih, 2025; Twineamatsiko et al., 2023). If these conditions persist, they may increase the risk of prolonged staffing vacancies, disruptions in institutional knowledge continuity, and reliance on acting officials (Pelaksana Tugas, Plt.) to maintain essential administrative and technical functions.

Contingency theory, as developed by Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the limitations of uniformly applied administrative systems across heterogeneous organizational environments. This perspective emphasizes that organizational effectiveness depends on the alignment between internal management arrangements and external environmental conditions rather than adherence to a single universally applicable organizational structure. Accordingly, merit-based personnel management systems developed under assumptions of adequate infrastructure, accessible professional development opportunities, and stable administrative resources may encounter implementation difficulties when applied to geographically isolated border regions. These challenges highlight the need to reconsider standardized merit system practices through a context-sensitive approach that accommodates differences in geographical accessibility, technological capacity, workforce conditions, and institutional resources. Therefore, this study sought to examine the implementation anomalies of merit-based human resource management within BWS Papua Merauke and formulate a spatially adaptive meritocracy model (Spatial Meritocracy) that integrates national merit principles with the distinctive operational requirements of Indonesia's border regions. The study aimed to address the empirical and conceptual gap concerning how nationally standardized merit systems could be adapted to geographically constrained public organizations without compromising the principles of competence, fairness, transparency, and accountability.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive-analytical institutional case study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to examine bureaucratic behavior, administrative anomalies, and civil servants' experiences in implementing the merit system. The research focused on the Papua Merauke River Basin Agency (Balai Wilayah Sungai Papua Merauke, BWS Papua Merauke), a regional technical unit of the Ministry of Public Works responsible for water resources management in the Einlanden–Digul–Bikuma cross-provincial river basin area. The case study approach facilitated an in-depth examination of institutional practices, administrative challenges, and geographical constraints affecting merit system implementation.

Fieldwork was conducted at the BWS Papua Merauke Office over three months. Informants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to obtain perspectives from personnel directly involved in workforce management and merit system implementation. The informants included the Head of BWS Papua Merauke, the Head of the General Affairs and Personnel Subdivision, structural and functional officials serving in acting capacities, including work team leaders and commitment-making officials (Pejabat Pembuat Komitmen, PPK), and younger technical civil servants (Aparatur Sipil Negara, ASN).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct field observations, and document analysis. Interviews explored participants' experiences with merit-based personnel management, competency development, performance evaluation, and workforce retention. Field observations focused on geographical and technological constraints affecting

administrative processes, while document analysis examined staffing maps, electronic performance records (e-Kinerja), competency development reports, and personnel transfer proposals. Data trustworthiness was strengthened through source, methodological, and theoretical triangulation. The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), comprising data condensation through thematic coding, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The analysis emphasized recurring patterns related to spatial barriers, institutional capacity, administrative compliance, and workforce management challenges.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the merit system at BWS Papua Merauke was formally adopted to embody the mandate of Law No. 20 of 2023. However, its implementation in the field shows that there is a real discrepancy between the ministry's macro standardization and the micro-adoption capacity in the RI-PNG border area.

Needs and Employee Planning Aspects

Employee needs planning is prepared through Position Analysis (Anjab) and Workload Analysis (ABK) via the ministry's e-Formation system. However, there is a wide mismatch due to the bias in determining quotas by the central ministry. The real needs of the center for specific irrigation engineers are often cut or replaced by general formations that are not ready to face the extreme characteristics of Papuan terrain. This was confirmed by the Head of the General and Administrative Subdivision of BWS Papua Merauke:

"We annually propose specific technical formations based on workload analysis in this vast and challenging Einlanden-Digul-Bikuma River Region. However, when the formation taps are opened from the center, the allocated quota is often far from the proposal… As a result, there is a chronic deficit in core technical personnel."

Aspects of Employee Competency Development

Each ASN is required to 6256efini the rights and obligations of competency development of at least 20 Lesson Hours (JP) per year which is facilitated through online platforms (e-learning) after the digitization of the national bureaucracy. Administratively, this indicator records a high level of compliance because the digital system locks performance assessments if the JP quota has not been met. However, the online method creates a double burden for field employees. Virtual classes and web-based exams are carried out in the midst of limited supporting facilities, so that the 6256efinitive of competencies shifts from the substance of capacity building to simply dropping the administrative burden of formalities.

Aspects of Promotion and Position Mutation

The promotion and mutation mechanism is hierarchically tied to the decision of the ministry in Jakarta. Empirical reality shows the slowness of the vertical bureaucracy in appointing definitive officials for strategic positions (Head of Section, Head of Section, PPK). The impact is the widespread use of officials with the status of Acting Officers (Plt) for a very long duration. This condition was confirmed by the Head of BWS Papua Merauke:

"The bureaucratic chain of appointment of definitive officials in vertical agencies like ours is very long because all decisions are locked in Jakarta… we are forced to appoint Acting Officers many times to avoid operational paralysis. This protracted status of Acting Officers

makes the wheels of the organization run less than optimally because they do not have full authority."

Aspects of Employee Performance Assessment (e-Performance Application)

Performance appraisals are carried out on a daily basis using the BKN and Bravo PU e-Performance applications as the basis for disbursing performance allowances. The digital upload of supporting evidence assumes that digital infrastructure is evenly distributed throughout Indonesia. At BWS Papua Merauke, the implementation of this application has given birth to a new dynamic where employees spend their effective working time just looking for signals to abort the obligation to input daily data.

Empirical findings show that the universality of the national merit system falls into the "Corridor of Disruption" formed by the spatial characteristics of Merauke. Based on the Contingency Theory (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), the failure to align the internal structure of public organizations with the characteristics of their external environment triggers institutional dysfunction.

Factors Supporting Successful Implementation

The merit system at BWS Papua Merauke continues to have operational resilience supported by:

1. Skill-Based Output Commitment: The high professional dedication of the new technical civil servants serves as the organization's lifeline to ensure that physical projects at the border continue to run in the interests of national strategic interests.
2. Rigid Regulatory Standardization: Legal certainty of central technical guidelines minimizes the potential for local political intervention or traditional nepotism practices in the regions.

Inhibitory Factors and Spatial Gaps (Empirical Gap Research)

The main obstacles are sourced from large two-dimensional collisions:

1. Technological and Geographical Infrastructure Barriers (Norris, 2001): Internet network instability (low width) and electricity crisis make e-Performance reporting a source of administrative stress. The extreme geographical distance to the project site is not supported by adequate official house facilities. A Young Technical ASN revealed: "We often go to the field for days in the border area that is a blank spot. As soon as we return, we were immediately chased by the e-Performance deadline. Because the signal was lost and the power went out… We spent hours in front of our laptops just to click 'done' in the application."
2. Structural Challenges of Vertical Bureaucracy (Caiden, 1991; Lipsky, 2010): The phenomenon of Centralization Bias makes the center hold absolute control over the mutation and 6257efinitive of the budget. The central budget efficiency policy is felt to be suffocating at the site level of the Papua Papua Merauke BWS because the cost of logistics mobilization to the border terrain requires many times more than that of urban areas.

DECONSTRUCTION OF OPERATIONAL ANOMALIES AND MODEL FORMULATION

An in-depth exploration of the operational dynamics at BWS Papua Merauke proves that the imposition of national regulatory standardization that ignores environmental spatial variables leads to institutional dysfunction. The framework that links the management failure

node with the affirmative recovery instrument is mapped into the following Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Matrix of Operational Anomalies and Management Impact at BWS Papua Merauke

Fakta Empiris Lapangan	Koridor Disrupsi Spasial	Istilah Eksplisit Anomali & Implikasi Akhir
Krisis Internet & Listrik saat input harian Bravo PU/e-Kinerja.	Hambatan Infrastruktur Teknologi Wilayah 3T.	The illusion of Training Compliance (Formalitas administrasi semu).
Nilai SKP diwajibkan bernilai Baik/Sangat Baik tanpa pengukuran riil.	Standarisasi kaku 6258efinitiv kinerja 6258efinitive6258 PU.	Leniency Bias (Inflasi nilai kinerja di atas kertas).
Rantai Birokrasi 6258efiniti Jakarta lambat setujui pejabat 6258efinitive.	Centralization Bias (Sentralisasi otoritas mutlak).	Administrative Helplessness (Budaya pasif tata 6258efini/hilang diskresi).
ASN muda minta pindah karena biaya hidup mahal di Merauke.	Jarak geografis dan ekstrem & ketiadaan rumah dinas.	Kegagalan Retensi (Tingginya turnover intention pegawai baru).

Through the deconstruction of this series of anomalies, the conceptualization of the Spatial Meritocracy Model is present as a prescriptive antithesis designed in a linear manner to intervene and break the vicious circle of MSDM dysfunction in the border area:

Table 2. Matrix of Operational Anomalies and Management Impact at BWS Papua Merauke

Anomali (Masalah Akhir)	Pilar Solusi Makro Kebijakan	Aksi Taktis dan Rekomendasi Afirmasi Lokus
Illusion of Training Compliance.	Fleksibilitas Teknologi Spasial.	Penyediaan Fitur Offline input-Delayed Sync & Diklat Model Hybrid/Offline Clustering.
Leniency Bias	Reframing Indikator Kinerja	Penilaian kontekstual berbasis pencapaian keahlian 6258efin (skill-Based Output)
Administrative Helplessness	Desentralisasi Diskresi.	Pemotongan wewenang Kepala Balai dalam transisi jabatan 6258efinitive di tapak.
Kegagalan Retensi Talenta.	Kompensasi Spasial Fiskal	Alokasi Tunjangan Khusus 3T PU & penyediaan fasilitas rumah dinas dinamis bagi ASN baru.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicated that merit system implementation at the Papua Merauke River Basin Agency (Balai Wilayah Sungai Papua Merauke, BWS Papua Merauke) remained suboptimal because of a mismatch between nationally standardized personnel management policies and the socio-geographical characteristics of disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost (Tertinggal, Terdepan, dan Terluar, 3T) border regions. Workforce planning, competency development, promotion and personnel transfers, and performance appraisal were constrained by inadequate digital infrastructure, geographical isolation, and centralized administrative authority. These conditions contributed to three major implementation anomalies: superficial compliance with competency development requirements, leniency bias and excessive formalism in performance appraisals, and administrative incapacity resulting from limited institutional decision-making authority. The findings also suggested that these constraints contributed to difficulties in retaining qualified technical civil servants (Aparatur Sipil Negara, ASN), increased intentions to seek transfers, and greater reliance on acting officials (Pelaksana Tugas, Plt.) to maintain organizational functions. Consistent with contingency

theory, the findings highlighted the importance of aligning personnel management practices with institutional capacities and external environmental conditions. Accordingly, the study proposed a Spatial Meritocracy Model that integrated flexible technology-enabled administrative processes, competency- and achievement-based performance evaluation, context-sensitive delegation of personnel management authority, and geographically differentiated financial incentives. The proposed model offered a conceptual framework for strengthening workforce sustainability and promoting more adaptive, equitable, and accountable merit-based personnel management in Indonesia's border regions. However, its practical effectiveness and applicability across different institutional contexts remained subject to further empirical validation

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author states that there are no conflicts of interest, whether personal, commercial, or financial, that can affect the implementation and results of this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Melkior A. Lukas , MT contributes to research design, data collection and processing, system development, result analysis, and article manuscript preparation.

GENERATIVE AI STATEMENT

In the process of compiling this article, the author uses generative artificial intelligence (AI) as a tool in language refinement, writing structure, and grammar improvement. The use of AI is carried out on a limited basis and remains under the supervision of the author. All data, analysis, interpretation, and scientific substance in this article have been checked and verified by the author. The author is solely responsible for the accuracy, authenticity, and final content of the manuscript.

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