

Capability (Double) Standards

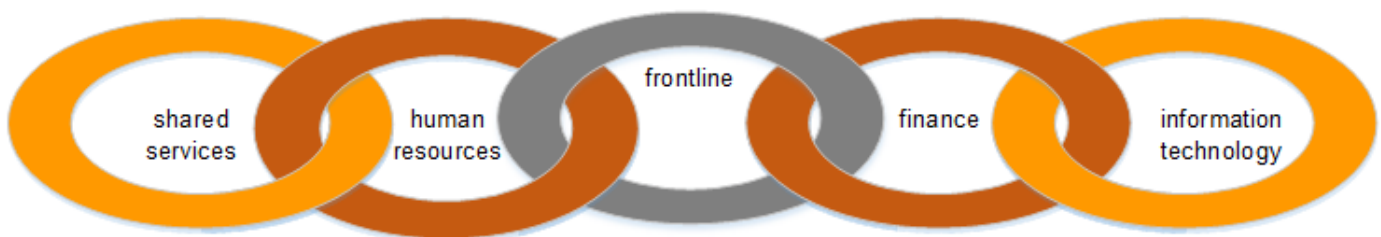
Publicly funded organisations often focus workforce development efforts on frontline staff such as social workers, nurses, and teachers. The priority of ensuring that these staff are highly skilled and certified often leads to less investment in the capability of staff in supporting functions. Prolonged neglect of supporting staff and functions means many highly trained frontline workers lack the platform they need to deliver consistent, quality services.

Frontline staff make up the largest proportion of workers in many publicly funded organisations. They are the public face of public services and are usually the only workers present at the point where services touch the public. These workers also tend to have higher rates of union membership than their back-office colleagues. The skills of these workers therefore tend to attract significant focus and investment to improve service quality and consistency, however comparable investments in the capability of non-frontline workers are much less common.

Frontline services are not delivered in a vacuum. A range of specialised skills such as finance, human resources, and information technology are essential to support efficient and effective services. Workforce development targeting these staff, however, is often regarded as unnecessary or even wasteful.

Although less visible than frontline workers, the functions and staff behind the scenes are links in the organisational chain that supports direct services to the public. Even the most skilled frontline staff cannot use their skills to best effect if inadequate or inefficient support services weaken that chain.

The number of staff in supporting functions is typically not large, but their work affects many processes, frontline staff, and people receiving services. The effects of a weak link in a supporting function can be amplified so that many frontline staff waste time and effort on cumbersome administration, inefficient workarounds, or scrambling to address service or resource gaps created by shortcomings in the back office. Poor frontline service delivery affects some customers. Poor back-office service delivery can affect all customers.



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Publicly funded organisations should be made up of integrated workforces of specialist and generalist teams from a range of disciplines. These teams all provide services, either to each other or directly to the public. Those services combine to create public value.

Organisations in which back-office staff are viewed as specialist contributors to supporting service delivery will ensure that all links in the organisational chain are well maintained. They will hire qualified specialists for back-office roles and resist the temptation to fill these roles with redeployed frontline workers. They will also make sure that back-office, as well as frontline, staff have access to the appropriate tools and training to deliver consistent, quality work that minimises waste and maximises public value.

The performance and efficiency of the frontline and, therefore, the organisation, can be improved by investing in the other links in the chain, as well as by investing in staff who deliver services directly.

High capability and performance standards in the back office support better and more efficient frontline services. This enables properly supported frontline staff to make better use of their skills to create more public value.

Ending the capability double standard requires a shift in mindset, to recognise the contribution of staff based on value rather than visibility. It requires setting high standards for all staff and providing the training, tools, and support for all staff to meet those standards.