

ORGANISATION CAPABILITY & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: FROM REFORM AND SUBJECTIVITY TO OBJECTIVE EVALUATION

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Received: July 2025 | Accepted: November 2025 | Published: December 2025

Please cite this paper as: Duffy, P. (2025) Organisation Capability & Public Administration: from reform and subjectivity to objective evaluation, *Holistica Journal of Business and Public Administration*, Vol. 16, Iss. 2, pp.128-154

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to propose a definition for 'organisation capability,' develop an empirical approach, and therefore to evaluate capability for one public administration entity. Through long-term public administration and management literature, the ontology of 'organisation' is often overlooked. This inhibits the development of an empirical definition for 'organisation capability,' in turn inhibiting methodologies and coherent assessment. The research question asks how to evaluate organisation capability. A comparative study review highlights gaps empirically, particularly in contexts of public sector reform and organisation development. Notable issues include tendencies for definitional varieties of 'organisation capability,' subjective methodologies, and resource maximisation. The methodology presents organisation capability (OC) as the dependent variable, with two independent variables for humanistic propensity-to-act (PTA) and structural latitude-to-act (LTA), the logical domains for capability antecedents expected through organisation design. A third variable – enacted capability (ENC) – provides selective impact observations, providing in theatre data and potential causal inferences. Through mixed-method factor analysis and a composite measure for capability profile, with a capability index, a gap analysis supports organisation development strategies. As expected from objective analyses across human, structural, and impact factors, results reveal deviations (deficits here) from organisation design intentions.

Keywords: organisation capability; organisation capacity; public administration

1. Introduction

This study first charts the long-standing ambiguity surrounding 'organisation capability' (OC) across public administration and organisation studies. Given the fundamental purpose of any organisation, an empirical approach requires revisiting what is meant, ontologically, by 'organisation' and, from that, identifying the knowledge needed to

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evaluate ‘capability.’ If an organisation is designed to activate human capital and structure to connect purpose with delivery, the logical extension is to determine how to observe these components operating in practice relative to that design. Secondly, a brief review of capability evaluations from another country is provided, notable in the context of public sector reform where improved administrative performance is the presumed outcome. It offers insight into contemporary approaches while highlighting gaps in public administration discourse: unclear definitions of ‘capability’ and assessment, high subjectivity, and methodological weaknesses; so significant that outcomes arguably evade actual capability knowledge. Thirdly, a methodology is proposed to evaluate capability with an emphasis on objectivity and data-driven insights, alongside an empirical definition of Organisation Capability, which to date appears variously and inconsistently applied. Finally, an evaluation with select findings for one administrative entity is presented, utilising the proposed definition and methodology.

The study recognises that public administration is idiosyncratic, shaped by a political–bureaucratic duality. Political proximity is a considerable factor in bureaucratic performance. Systemic influences moderating capability include: majority cycles in power, legislative–bureaucratic dominance, committee representation, interest groups, and locus of responsibility (Shepsle & Boncheck, 1997, pp. 316–344; Mueller, 2006, pp. 386–395). Behavioural dynamics also matter: agenda setters; budget- and slack-maximising bureaucrats; risk avoidance; and bureaucratic capture (Shepsle & Boncheck, 1997, pp. 346–392; Mueller, 2006, pp. 362–370). Other observations include “despotic” versus “infrastructural” tendencies, with the latter gaining dominance (Mann, 1984, p. 189); “institutional scepticism” about bureaucratic tempering of political will (Hugo Young cited in Plowden, 1994, p. 104); the ‘fatalistic’ organisation focused on attention and survival (Hood, 1998); and jurisdictional versus functional power (e.g., Burgess, 1975). In effect, government is a dynamic singular with an internally entwined duet.

Management sciences are familiar with these characteristics. Intra-organisational concepts—strategy, structure, culture—provide empirical scope for bounded organisational inquiry. The immediate purpose is to identify the organisation and its boundary sufficiently to support an objective capability assessment. Systems theory offers a perspective on the corporate whole, its environment, responsiveness, and adaptation (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Burns & Stalker, 1961, 1994; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), with observational primacy on the whole and an understanding of its parts (Mele et al., 2010). A question arises: is it ‘fair’ to assess a single administrative body’s capability given this duality? While a contextual capability could be considered, it risks overlooking single-entity factors and adds complexity; thus, a single-entity approach is adopted, following pragmatic advice (e.g., Polidano, 2000).

The study stems from a commissioned project to objectively evaluate a government entity in a Gulf state setting, aligning with the client’s logical view of capability—workforce capability and structural coherence—and a pre-existing programme of research by the author. A comparative case was reviewed for methodology benchmarking: a national programme of capability reviews for public sector entities in a European setting. Strikingly,

despite perpetual reform, capability assessments there rely on interpretive and subjective approaches, with little evidence of reformative or transformative impact. This suggests a discursive tendency to avoid systemic inquiry, contributing to bureaucratic resilience or survival (e.g., Briscoe, 2007; McEvily et al., 2014; Leavitt, 2005; Leavitt, 2003). In short, if assessment remains subjective, top-down reform agendas are likely to be inhibited and bureaucracies to prevail in form.

2. Literature Review for Organisation Capability

2.1 Public administration and capability-capacity ambiguity

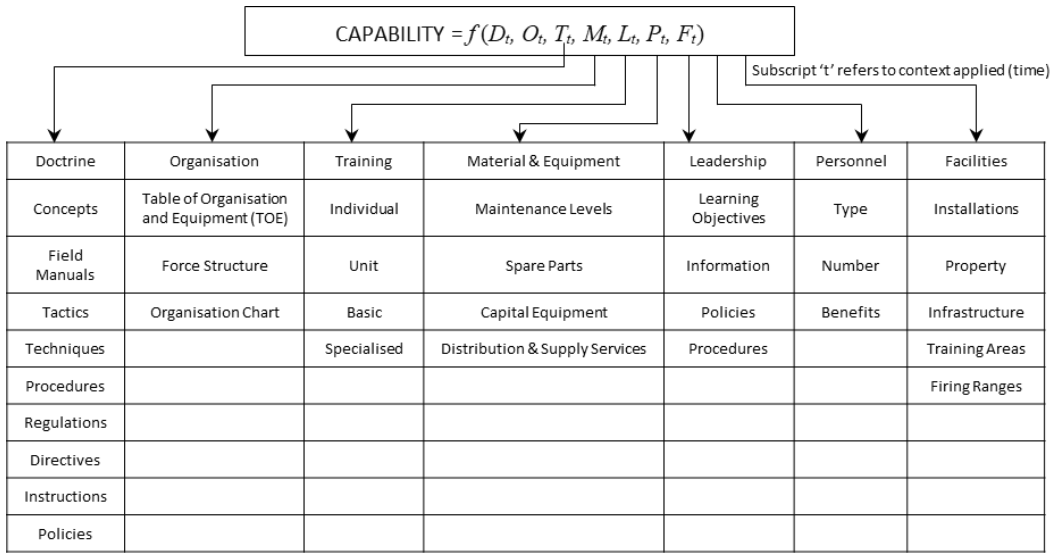
In public administration discourse, ‘capacity’ is more prevalent and often conflated with ‘capability.’ For instance, ‘capacity building’ is defined as the “continuous enhancement of capabilities...and the capacity to identify future development needs to achieve goals” (Jensen & Krogstrup, 2017); invoking capability as a precursor to capacity without defining it, and reflecting sustained ambiguity (Kaplan, 2000; Honadle, 1981). A further view is that capacity assessment should begin with evaluating the existing organisation (Milen, 2001), emphasising current strengths (Noya, et al., 2009) and employing ‘appreciative inquiry’ in change efforts (Willig, 2009; Cooperrider, et al., 2005). This implicitly flags design deficiencies.

Some argue capability is preferable to capacity because it avoids an exclusive resourcing connotation (Thomas, 2020, p. 74, UK), yet this approach foregrounds internalised learning and humanistic factors over systemic, technical, or structural ones, and is positioned as a precursor to ‘dynamic capabilities’ (Thomas, 2020, p. 75), which differs from foundational, designed capability (see 2.2). In contrast, Murray adopts a capacity lens—ability to deliver for citizens and legislature (2019, p. 49)—as does Polidano: an “ability to act effectively” toward objectives (2000, p. 808). None defines the ‘ability’ component to support the ‘capability’ definition.

In community development and NGO fields, capacity is the “attributes that enable an organisation to fulfil its mission,” yet its link to effectiveness is problematic (Eisinger, 2002, pp. 115–117); it is also the “ability of an agency to marshal its resources to accomplish organisation objectives” (Rowe, et al., 1999). While these discussions critique ‘capacity building,’ they often overlook capability as a foundation (Glickman & Servon, 1998, p. 501; Chaskin, 2001; Walker & Weinheimer, 1998).

The defence sector is more explicit. Taliaferro et al. define OC as the “wherewithal to complete a task or produce an effect within a set of specified performance standards and environmental conditions,” observed at a moment in time and tied to expected outcomes (2019, pp. 5–6). The US definition is “the ability to complete a task or execute a course of action under specified conditions and level of performance” (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2015), later refined to “the ability to achieve a desired effect under specified standards and conditions through combinations of means and ways to perform a set of tasks” (Department of Defense, 2024). Here, capability is defined, operationalised with observational variables and mission context, and linked to consequences.

Figure 1 US Department of Defense: Capability Factors



Source: (Taliaferro, et al., 2019, p. 7); modified by author

2.2 Organisation capability meanings in organisation studies

Enterprise Architecture (EA), with inherent mission criticality, applies OC to analyse and design structure and operations toward stated objectives and outcomes (Gillis, 2024). EA typically defines OC as “an ability that...requires a combination of organization, people, processes, and technology... Defining desired or target state capabilities is integral to an organization’s strategic planning process” (pubs.opengroup, 2024).

Dynamic capabilities shift attention from designed foundations to emergent, organisation-specific capacities for adaptation to environmental change (Teece, et al., 1997; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). The resource-based view (RBV) precedes this, rooting advantage in unique, inimitable resources (Barney, 2001; Priem & Butler, 2001). Core competencies emphasise pivotal, identifiable capabilities generated through strategy and activity (Hamel & Prahalad, 1990). Strategic management thus recognises movement between foundational (designed) and dynamic capabilities; organisations are not static (Tushman & Romanelli, 1985; Tushman & O'Reilly, 2005; Abell, 1993).

In all cases, these concepts concern enabling unique capabilities from humanistic and structural foundations into an activated capability suited to context (Figure 2). Such methods are not necessarily replicable or transferable; indeed, competitive advantage presumes limited or no transferability and visibility.

Figure 2 Foundational versus kinetic/dynamic capability in organisation design



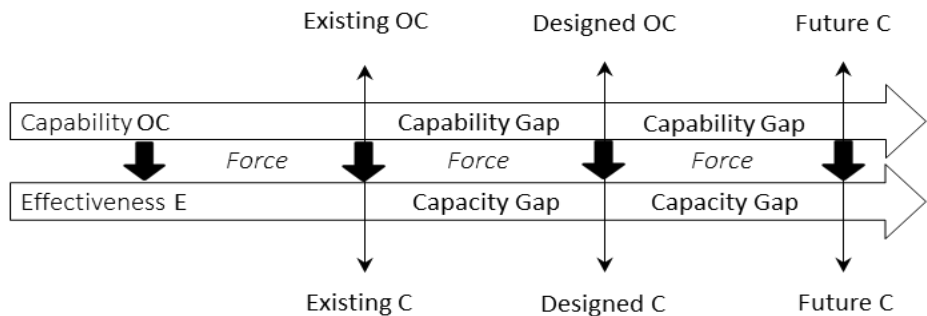
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2.3 Conceptual logic and semantics

Language helps distinguish terms: capacity is the maximum something can contain or produce; capability is the power to produce it². Capacity is a rate or output ceiling; capability is the force achieving it. In Figure 3, organisation capacity C can be seen as the maximum effectiveness³ E that capability OC can produce.

Technically, evaluating OC requires assessing organisational factors that give rise to capability (prior to E and C). To judge intended OC, one must observe design-stage factors (people, processes, etc.). Figure 3 illustrates OC as the force behind effectiveness E, which determines capacity C. The objective is to measure OC as the designed force to achieve corresponding E or C. Two gap analyses follow in Figure 3: between designed and actual OC/C, and between actual and future OC/C. Evaluations should therefore report OC status relative to intended design; otherwise, the value of organisation design, initially or continuously, is diminished.

Figure 3 Organisation capability as driver for organisation capacity and effectiveness



² Oxford Languages dictionary references for Capacity and Capability.

³ Effectiveness: tangible outcomes such as monetary, quality, productivity, or, favourable outcomes to organisation or others' e.g., reputation e.g., Cummings & Worley, 2009, p. 752.

Source: Created by author, 2024

3. Theoretical and empirical development for Organisation Capability OC

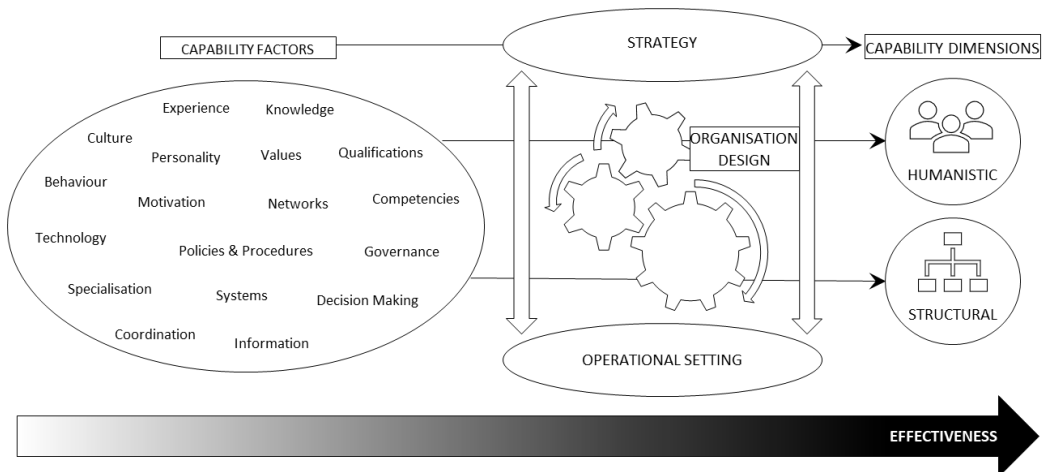
3.1 Organisation ontology: clarifying its nature for observation

Open systems theory views Organisation as the designed, transformational link between required inputs and desired outputs, situated within and conditioned by its environment (e.g., Cummings & Worley, 2009, p. 90). By design it is created; through existence it can be described. Whether design occurs at inception or via ongoing strategic renewal (Abell, 1980), it should yield descriptors as observable constants. Organisation design similarly concerns aligning external environment and strategy with the operational setting (CIPD, 2015; Silvestrelli & Bellagamba, 2017; Allen, 2012).

Organisation characteristics are also embedded in OD definitions, for example the “systemwide application and transfer of behavioural science to the planned development, improvement, and reinforcement of strategies, structures, and processes that lead to organization effectiveness” (Cummings & Worley, 2009, pp. 1-2). This emphasises diagnosis beyond human factors and causal links to effectiveness (Beer, 1980), rooted in behavioural science, systems theory, information dynamics, and techno-structure inquiry (French, 1969; Beckhard, 1969; Burke, 1982). Figure 4 sketches an extended constellation of such factors (not exhaustive), consolidated through organisation design into two primary dimensions: humanistic and structural.

All capability factors should reside in one of these two. The humanistic–structural dualism offers clear logic and a descriptive frame, aligning with extant paradigms: Formal–Informal, Rational–Political, and Economic–Behavioural. The priority is to establish the OC knowledge required for assessment and practice.

Figure 4 Organisation design factors for organisation capability dimensions



Source: Created by author, 2024

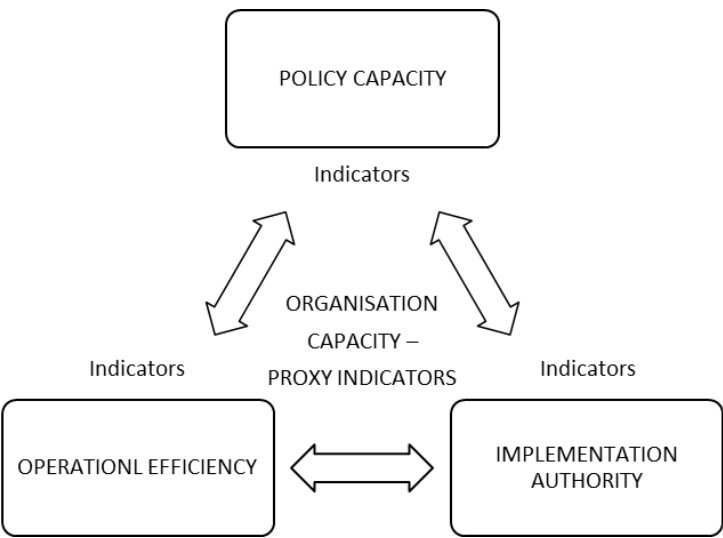
The Formal–Informal perspective spans structure, information, governance, and cultural factors such as values, mindsets, and social networks (e.g., (Neilson, et al., 2015). The ‘formal’ presumes rational design: structure as the enabler of behaviour via task–technology coordination, processes, and people (Duncan, 1979, p. 59); a charter to operate (Fox, 1966; Lorsch, 1977); control of information (Douma & Schreuder, 2008, p. 15); mechanisms shaping behaviour (Mintzberg, 2003, p. 212); and systems for control and specialisation (Child, 1984, p. 8). In practice, rationality is tempered by the political (Joseph, 1989). Concurrent schools co-evolve across economic and behavioural models (Perrow, 1986; Wood, 1995). Some argue primacy lies in the system, not people (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006, pp. 97-98). The organisation is a ‘social arrangement’ distinguished by collective purpose and need for control and explanation (Buchanan & Huczynski, 2010, pp. 8-20). Whatever its characterisations, it invariably blends social and systems features; yet the social requires people, with existing capabilities, before dynamics can unfold.

As with theoretical paradigms, emphasis varies in objects of scrutiny. Periods of structural dominance coexisted with culture (Pugh, et al., 1968; Galbraith, 1974; Lorsch, 1977); later humanistic dominance coexisted with structure (Miles & Snow, 1986; Whittington, 2002; McEvily, et al., 2014; Joseph, 1989; Pascale, 1985). Regardless of perspective, the key is establishing constants in capability factors. Pursuing capability analysis requires a composition of sustained, organisation-based variables.

3.2 Previous approaches to systematic organisation capability methodology

In light of calls to assess capability in public administrations, Polidano proposed an approach of assessment, pursuing independent variables across three domains (2000). This framework assumes that if organisation outputs, or proxies for OC, are favourable (e.g., impact in public services), then by extension, capability must be favourable (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Organization capability analysis framework



Source: Adapted from Polidano (2000, pp. 815-819)

*Policy capacity*⁴ refers to the internal capability for decision-making, cross-government coordination, and effective policy contribution. *Implementation authority* refers to operational capability through delivery and impacts in the public realm. Finally, *operational efficiency* relates to cost and quality (2000, pp. 806, 810). This approach is compelling insofar as it recognised the obligations of public administration and effectiveness, yet it did not evaluate the organisation directly such that potential causal factors are revealed to support organisation strategies. It relies on proxies and inference.

4. Comparative study: Organisation Capability Review, Ireland

4.1 Context and government climate

Ireland's Programme of Organisational Capability Reviews (2017) aimed to "embed a culture of regular and objective assessments of the capacity and capability of each Department... and take the necessary action to close any gaps" (DPER, 2017). It invoked both capacity and capability and implied quantifiable gap analysis. Earlier, Ireland had aligned with an international public management agenda (OECD, 2008), launching its Organisation Review Programme (ORP) (O'Riordan, 2011), where Capacity and Capability were used together (Ibid.: 25). Capacity was defined as the "ability of departments and organisations to get things done... and ultimately to achieve valued outcomes for the citizen" (Ibid.: 6), but without empirical guidance on 'ability' or 'capability.'

Irish reform history (e.g., (MacCarthaigh, 2017) broadly mirrors UK oscillations (Thomas, 2020, p. 80). The 2008 crisis catalysed change, notably the creation of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) in 2011 (MacCarthaigh, 2017, pp. 148-151). Governance of public administration then reached its strongest regulatory stance (Dommett, et al., 2016; MacCarthaigh, 2020). Public sector employment rose from 215,000 to 325,000 from the 1990s to 2008, fell to 292,000 by 2013, and rose again to 339,000 by 2019 (Roche & O'Riordan, 2020, p. 98). Despite a reform climate and a coordinating department, employment resumed strong growth, suggesting a predominantly resource-based view of capability, or an assumption that capability depends chiefly on resourcing.

4.2 Approach and methodology, Organisational Capability Reviews, Ireland

DPER's approach combined outcome and input factors to assess OC (Cribbin, 2017). For instance, "effectiveness of corporate functions" (an outcome of capability) was treated alongside the 'capability of the function' (an input) (Table 1). By mixing outputs (e.g., policy-making) with inputs (e.g., leadership), OC became both an independent and a dependent variable, weakening its analytical value.

⁴ Another example of the apparent obfuscation between 'capacity' and 'capability' in literature.

Table 1 Irish government capability review and assessment variables

Independent Variables	Factors: Antecedents for Capability
Leadership (5 Factors)	1) Direction by senior management 2) Internal cross-divisional collaboration 3) Cross-government working 4) EU engagement 5) Communications
Policy-making (4 Factors)	1) Capability and skills 2) Business planning 3) Synergies between related strategies 4) Available skills to undertake appraisals/evaluations
Delivery (1 Factor)	1) Efficacy of structures and processes to implement policies, strategies, programmes, and schemes
Organisational Capability (1 Factor)	1) Effectiveness of corporate functions such as HR, learning and development (L&D), ICT, and finance in supporting business units, and related activities (knowledge and data management).

Source: Cribbin, 2021, p. 139

Despite the stated aim of objectivity, the Programme relied predominantly on qualitative, interpretive methods. Across six entities, it reported 1,248 participants via 381 engagements, including 148 external participants within the assessed entities’ capability scope. Methods centred on staff workshops and semi-structured interviews or prompted sessions; there were 139 one-to-one interviews, mainly with senior managers. Participants also included nine ministers and six Courts Presidents, who are not administrative staff. Programme governance comprised a Steering Committee of four senior civil servants, a DPER programme team, and an External Review Panel of three (DPER, 2021, pp. 3-4).

4.3 Published findings and recommendations

The Programme adopted a reporting framework of “strengths and matters requiring attention” (Cribbin, 2021, p. 140). Individual and synthesis reports are rich in thematic analysis (Courts Service A, 2019; DBEI A, 2018; DHPLG A, 2020; DRCD A, 2020; DTTS A, 2017; DCHG A, 2019; DPER, 2021). An abbreviated example of a post-review Implementation Plan is shown in Table 2.

Programme-wide thematic mapping highlighted these consolidated “matters requiring attention,” including: management board self-reflection on strategy; appraisal/evaluation capacity for investments; research model—deciding how to conduct capability analysis and building analytical capability; workforce planning—linking business needs to resourcing; strategic ICT capability; and data management capability (DPER, 2021, p. 52). Detailed findings also emphasised competencies and processes (DPER, 2021):

policy-making competencies (pp. 14–19); business planning (pp. 14–19); pace of HR reform and professionalism (p. 36); workforce planning (pp. 36–37); manager’s perceived demands in managing staff (p. 39); mobilising staff through transferable skills (p. 39); and loss of corporate knowledge via retirement (pp. 36–38).

Despite record public sector employment in 2019 and a concurrent reform agenda, the Programme did not connect capability with resource utilisation or productivity. For instance, a more competent workforce should deliver higher-quality, higher-volume outputs with lower resource dependency, perceived workload, and stress. Yet most implementation plans sought additional resources, explicitly or implicitly (Courts Service B, 2019, pp. 2, 5; DCHG B, 2019, p. 11; DBEI B, 2019, pp. 19, 20, 24; DTTs B, 2018, p. 7).

HRM issues were prominent across reviews, with particular concerns for succession planning, knowledge retention, performance management, strategic HR/professionalism, career silos, and especially workforce planning. They are consistent with external assessments documenting long-term inertia in public-sector HRM capability (Roche & O’Riordan, 2020; O’Riordan, 2011; O’Riordan, 2004).

Table 2 Sample Organisation Capability Implementation Plan: abbr. findings and actions

Department of Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht Culture, Collaboration and Cohesion Organisational Capability Review – Implementation Plan (DCHG B, 2019, pp. 11-23)	
<u>Key points stated in Organisation Capability Review (DCHG A, 2019, p. 9)</u> ▪ The Dept. faces challenges in delivery of policies and programmes...particularly managing major capital investment. ▪ The continuation of the current impetus to address capacity constraints will also be a critical enabler. ▪ The Dept. can draw on the considerable talent and professional dedication of its staff.	
Findings & Recommendations (abbreviated)	Approaches & Actions (abbreviated)
Need to expand resources (pp. 11)	Initiatives set out carry resource requirements, which...need to be met
Enhance strategic reflection and evidence-based decision-making	Foster a culture of strategic planning and evidence-based decision-making Central Policy & Research Function Enhance business planning Streamlines capital appraisal processes Enhance data collection and analysis
Establishing departmental culture and identity and improving structures	Fostering shared identity and values (project) Internal communications (identity) Cross-functional collaboration Examine corporate services structures
Further enhance internal/external engagement	Team meetings Engagement Survey Action Plan (Supporting) Inclusion in policy and strategy Staff networks (establishing) Sharing experience and showcasing work

	Fostering engagement with agencies Communications strategy – internal awareness
Maximise use of Strategic HR for a better Dept.	HR strategy to ensure structure fit-for-purpose Increasing internal staff mobility Enhance HR analytics Communications and engagement Skills enhancement and training
Corporate enablers to support Dept. activity	Increased business unit support (e.g., ICT) Strategies: training, collaboration, process change Shared services structures Governance: risk, records mgt., data mgt. change Review ICT support for business units Access to legal services for business units

Source: DCHG B, 2019, pp. 11-23

4.4 Observations and commentary

The Programme is ambitious and yields rich, entity-specific data. As a reflexive process on organisation capability issues (rather than factors), it offers an extensive inventory to inform organisation development, and its implementation plans document actions and commitments. However, findings and plans indicate the Programme does not directly, quantitatively, or objectively measure organisational factors, or actual OC.

Key observations:

1. No empirical definition of Organisation Capability underpins the methodology.
2. No actual measurement, profiling, or metrics are provided for OC⁵.
3. Inquiry dimensions are issue- or effectiveness-led, with limited systematic scrutiny of organisational factors. If OC was the dependent variable, independent variables should have been organisational factors only, with issues/outcomes clearly separated as indicators of factor influence.
4. Despite its reflexive value, the Programme is not objective; data largely derive from subjective feedback.
5. The sample is management-heavy. Self-assessment by managers is problematic, and ministerial participation is more problematic still; ministers should be commissioners/clients of the data, not part of the assessed entity’s ‘capability.’
6. There is no context or metric for public administration performance or productivity. Claims of rising demand typically justify requests for additional resources.
7. Workforce capability is not treated exhaustively; personnel data are insufficient to support overall OC.

⁵ Not to be expected in the public domain e.g., competency scoring. Subject to public information policies, high-level data could be either revealed (as with findings in this project (Figure 8), or with a general report as an overview of, and reference to, data-driven insights in each case.

5. Organisation Capability Analysis: research strategy and approach

5.1 Project case: Gulf state regulator and public administration entity

The case concerns a Gulf state regulator and policy-making body with 290 active roles. The initial brief was to assess workforce competencies and resource utilisation (via workload analysis). Internal concerns centred on perceived under-resourcing (staff), high recruitment demand, and workforce planning challenges. Conversely, senior leadership believed productivity was chronically low, and requested an independent, comprehensive study.

Through the lead consulting partner (author), the client was advised to look beyond a competencies-only assessment, since competencies are just one component of human capability. A full competency framework was also absent, with only generic behavioural competencies in use. It was further recommended techno-structural factors were evaluated, as workload, workforce utilisation, and productivity reflect both human and non-human elements operating in tandem (e.g., experience levels and business process design). The client accepted a technical proposal therefrom to assess Organisation Capability overall; combining workforce capability and organisation design (structural capability). To evaluate claims of overload and its drivers, workload needed to be assessed objectively and in relation to both human and structural capability, which together shape actual and perceived workload.

5.2 Conceptual development and methodology

The empirical approach uses objective, data-rich, and repeatable methods to support continuous OC analytics. OC is derived solely from organisational factors: humanistic and structural (section 3.1). Figure 6 outlines a framework with two independent variables to establish OC via factor analysis (1–2); a third supports profiling and interpretation (3).

Figure 6 A Propensity-Latitude Model (Author ©) for Organisation Capability (OC)



Source: Created by author, 2024

1. Propensity-to-Act (PTA): assesses “what is” in human capital relative to design (e.g., competencies, education, training), including selected antecedents of workforce capability.
2. Latitude-to-Act (LTA): assesses “what is” in structure relative to design, including non-human antecedents.

3. Enacted Capability (ENC): assesses “what happens” in theatre, complementing PTA–LTA with outcomes and potential causal indicators for effectiveness.

At the model level, value lies in these three universally applicable variables. Factor analysis integrates multiple critical realities⁶ to yield a coherent organisational profile. Within each variable, antecedent factors can be curated by type and number, acknowledging limits to universality and validity; this drives method choice. For PTA, competencies are included as they should be embedded in job architecture. Specific analytical techniques may reflect industry context and proprietary methods.

Empirical definition of Organisation Capability:

A function of the composition of abilities through organisation design, manifested through people and structure, to achieve specified organisation effectiveness.

Definition of Ability (to support reference within the primary definition):

A subset of capability wherein organisation-design components demonstrate sufficient efficacy to contribute to design objectives.

5.3 Methods and techniques for assessment

5.3.1 Propensity-to-Act (PTA)

Five antecedent factors were curated: behavioural and technical competencies (e.g., policy-making); education and training; experience; critical knowledge (e.g., industry, corporate), and; psychometrics – tolerance of ambiguity (TOA) selected in this case as a partial gauge for culture and capacity for change. Methods: quantitative – structured questionnaires and interviews (typically 90 minutes per person), survey-based data, with pre-designed evaluation rubrics, data analysis and reporting architecture.

5.3.2 Latitude-to-Act (LTA)

Five antecedent factors were curated: mandate alignment e.g., vision, mission legislative; business drivers (e.g., KPIs); hierarchies and job architecture; technology, and; key business processes (e.g., business planning, workforce planning). Methods: evaluative – archival, observational, business logic assessments, demand drivers (e.g., sector activity). Pre-planned rubrics developed to support evaluation and scoring.

5.3.3 Enacted Capability (ENC)

The project used a proprietary diagnostic: Workload Analysis & Resource Utilisation (RU) (Task and Activity Analysis relative to Effective Working Time). This reveals the extent of over-/under-load, and by extension an indicator for workload capacity (+/-).

⁶ Jens Zimmerman’s Hermeneutics: A very short introduction provides for a good insight (2015).

5.3.4 Data collection and analytical approach

To support variables, component factors and factor analysis, all assessment data were either routed directly from data captured at source interval scale 1-5 (5 PTA factors), or via conversion from evaluative studies to a 1-5 interval scale (5 LTA factors).

The latter accepts another limitation: indexing across ontologically varied factors, with archival information and observations determining an evaluative measure. As the objective is a factor- and primary variable-level profiling output, the value is in the composite measures relatively more than the detailed indices.

A threshold of 'favourable' is set at 3.00/5.00 for human capital (PTA), structure (LTA), and enacted capability (ENC) variables, supported with a rubric for each factor as required (e.g., education, process efficacy). Where factors are not specified in human capital or structure (TOA in this case), the established proprietary method is converted to interval scale. 'Near favourable' is set at 2.50-3.00 and 'unfavourable' at < 2.50 for all measures.

For resource utilisation RU: a ratio of 90% activities(time)/working time is set as the favourable threshold. Underload is represented as < 90% RU, stable workload between 90-128% RU (deemed good resource utilisation), and overload at > 128% RU. This range has been developed as a guide to 'stable workload' and accommodates regular underload, varied personal performance and capability, and occasional overload (e.g., (Adianto & Karo, 2014).

90-128% RU is not used universally as a stable range for workload. This project is a first of its kind, as understood at the time. The 90-128% range is effectively an inaugural testing range. The range was agreed with client. RU is expressed as Full Time Equivalent (FTE), where Employee Total Task-Activities Time = Total Employee Effective Working Time (EFT) = 1.0 FTE. Therefore, 0.9-1.28 FTE is set as range for 'stable' workload.

77% of employees up to director level (20) were engaged through structured interviews (210/270). 23% of employees in scope were not available during the project timeline. The sample size is sufficiently representative to support statistical and data analysis – the patterns of total organisation-wide workload distribution were indicated from c. 25% of completed samples i.e. the average workload levels did not change significantly after 25%. Ideally, all employees should be included to establish data for the purposes of continued human resources management and subsequent workload monitoring.

Finally, based on methodology and project design, organisation capability is expressed as:

$$OC = \bar{x} (PTA_{1-5}, LTA_{1-5}, ENC_1).$$

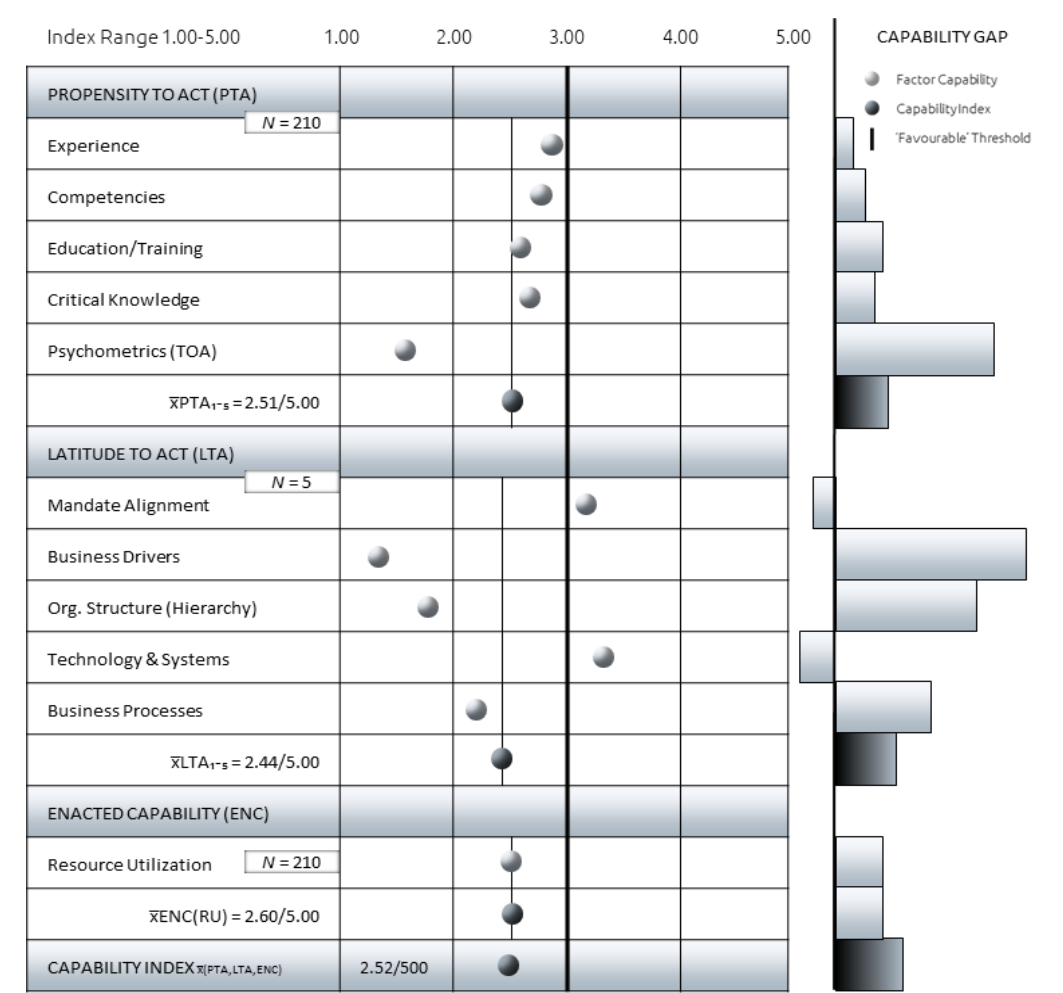
6. Selection of findings and Insights for Organisation Capability

6.1 Capability Profile, Capability Index, and Gap Analysis

Figure 7 illustrates the findings as a composite measure/profile and index rating for OC. The data exhibits a general deficit (gap analysis) for OC as it relates to what is

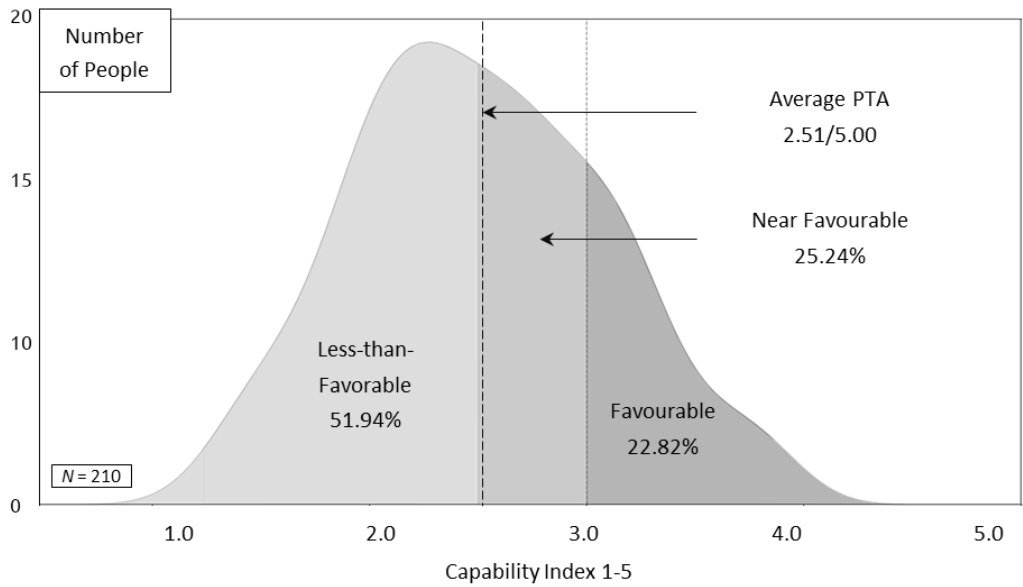
intended/expected through human capital (PTA) and structural (LTA) dimensions, and based on the agreed threshold levels for ‘favourable’ status.

Figure 7 Capability Profile and Index, and Gap Analysis for OC



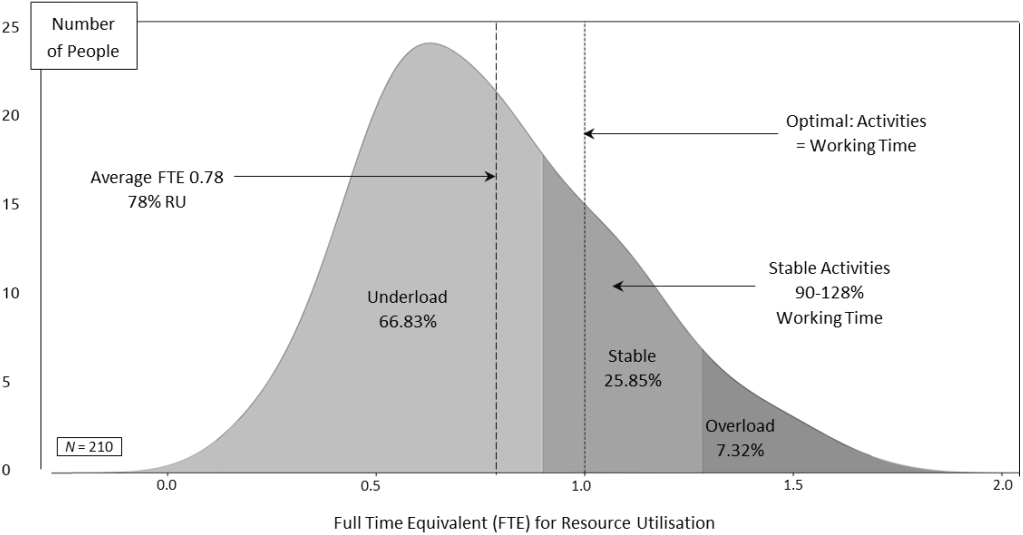
Source: Created by author, 2024

Figure 8 Capability (PTA)



Source: Created by author, 2024

Figure 9 Resource Utilisation (RU)



Source: Created by author, 2024

Figure 8 illustrates the distribution of workforce capability, with a relatively high proportion of staff beneath favourable (51.94%).

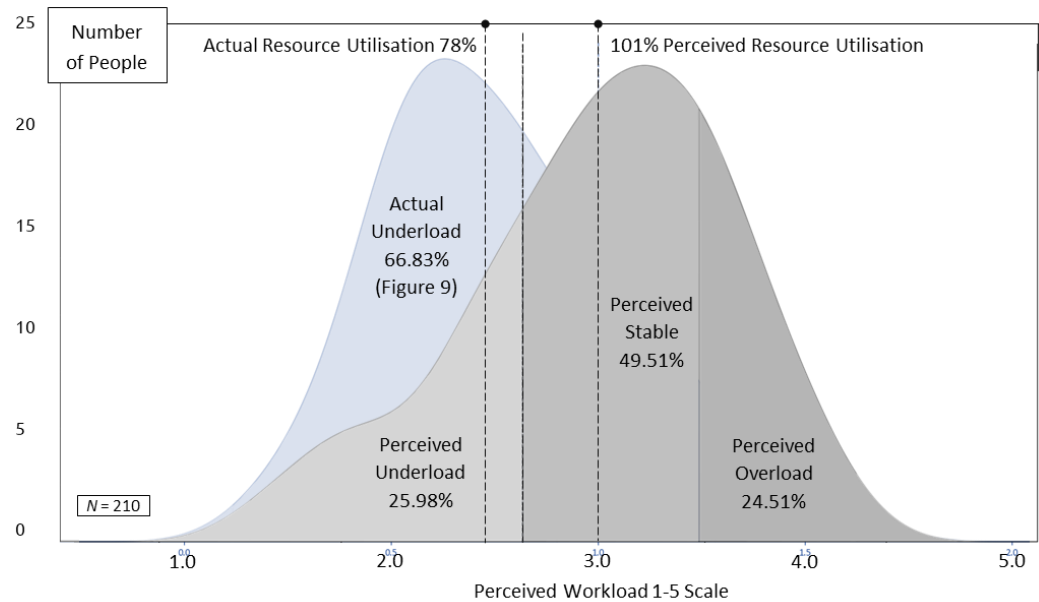
Figure 9 illustrates a resource utilisation RU level of 78% (based on activity and workload analysis), reflecting a high available capacity (22%).

A concurrent diagnostic – *perceived workload*⁷ – exhibits a stark contrast with actual workload, based on the same activities captured through RU (Figure 10). This is unsurprising given the relatively low OC score, and suggests a higher perceived workload arising from a deficiency in capabilities, not necessarily workload directly.

Detailed activity analyses show high levels of non-core activities contributing c. 40% to workload (not shown here), and a high degree of unplanned tasks. For example, business process observations revealed no business planning process, and regular instances of *ad hoc* activity contributing to *perceived workload* through intermittent activity spiking. This is further influenced by structure (Figure 11).

One of the findings in employee data was the high level of inexperienced entry-level or slightly above employees (not shown here) – an affirmative HR policy.

Figure 10 Resource Utilisation (Perceived RU)

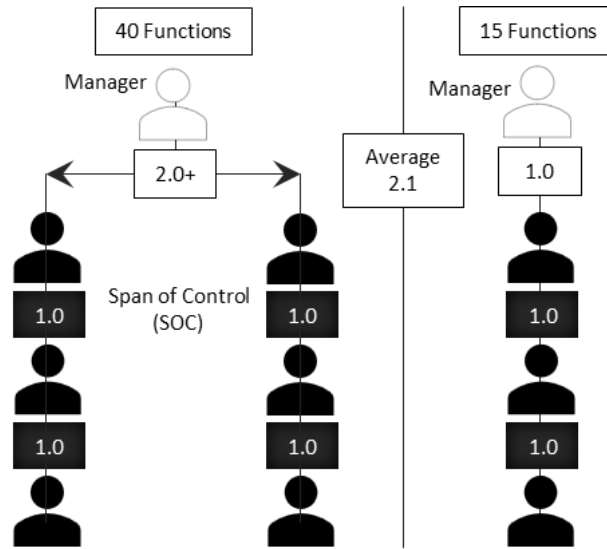


Source: Created by author, 2024
RU/0.9-1.28 FTE

Working Time Conversions Stable: 2.99-3.96 = 90-128%

⁷ Method Choice for Subjective Mental Workload Analysis taken from (Rubio, et al., 2004).

Figure 11 Functional hierarchy and spans of control (SOC)



Source: Created by author, 2024

The design of the core organisation exhibits high specialisation reflected through functional design (Figure 11): 55 horizontal 'silos' with below 5 average employees each.

Spans of control (SOC) are low – average 2.1 for managers and 1.0 for levels beneath. This is an indication that at least one layer of structure is surplus. It potentially restricts horizontal mobility, because experience and learning are confined. A narrower specialisation and higher SOC, with more content prescribed within functional mandates, likely facilitates mobility (greater exposure to functional knowledge/variety).

This hierarchy appears to restrict workload distribution because managers are only empowered (or willing) to delegate through 1-2 vertical lines of structure (Table 3).

Within detailed data, only 3-of-55 functions were overloaded, with 40 underloaded.

Overload is mainly through managers undertaking activities personally, with RU and capability reducing through lower grading levels in the hierarchy (Table 3).

Anecdotally (interviews), feedback is apparent regarding the lack of mobility and succession. The comparative study also suggested that over time, people tend to stay in their functions/roles, citing a lack of opportunity. In this case, data analysis examples include a negative correlation between PTA and TOA: a PTA factor for 'experience' (time in roles) indicates a drive for reducing tolerance for change or complexity (Figure 12)⁸.

⁸ Spearman correlation TOA-OC: - 0.1370223068162854 P-value: 0.04953632925788391; OC-RU: 0.04129891385732669 P-value: 7.5619509502412e-10 (Figure 12).

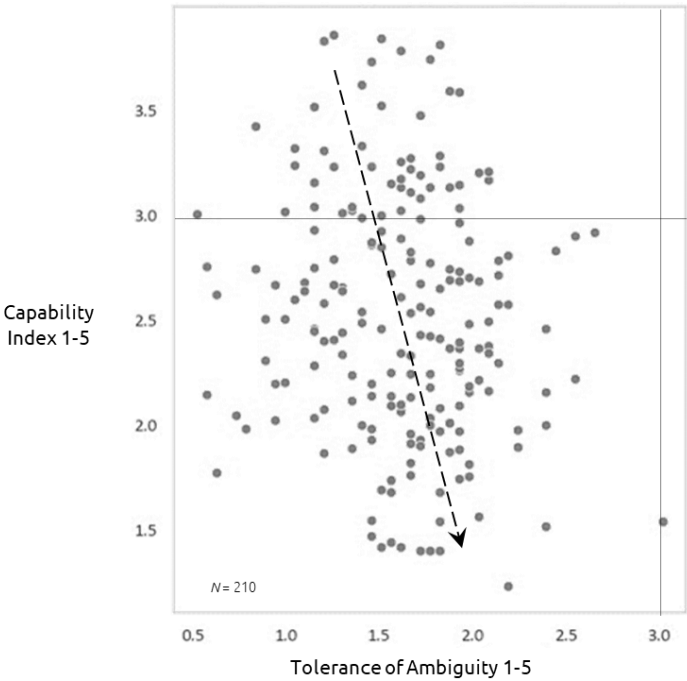
Table 3 Workload and Capability (Hierarchy)

Non-technical Functions & Corporate Services			Technical Functions & Subject Expertise		
	Resource Utilisation (RU)	Capability Index (1-5)		Resource Utilisation (RU)	Capability Index (1-5)
Manager*	94%	2.89	Manager	114%	2.52
Grade 1*	78%	2.73	Grade 1	71%	2.48
Grade 2*	78%	2.36	Grade 2	51%	2.15
Grade 3*	63%	2.03	Grade 3	61%	1.95
Stable RU	90-128%	Underload RU < 90%; Overload RU > 128%			
'Favourable' Capability Index		Unfavourable < 2.50; Near Favourable 2.50 – 3.00			

Source, Created by author, 2024.

Actual role titles converted to generic titles here.

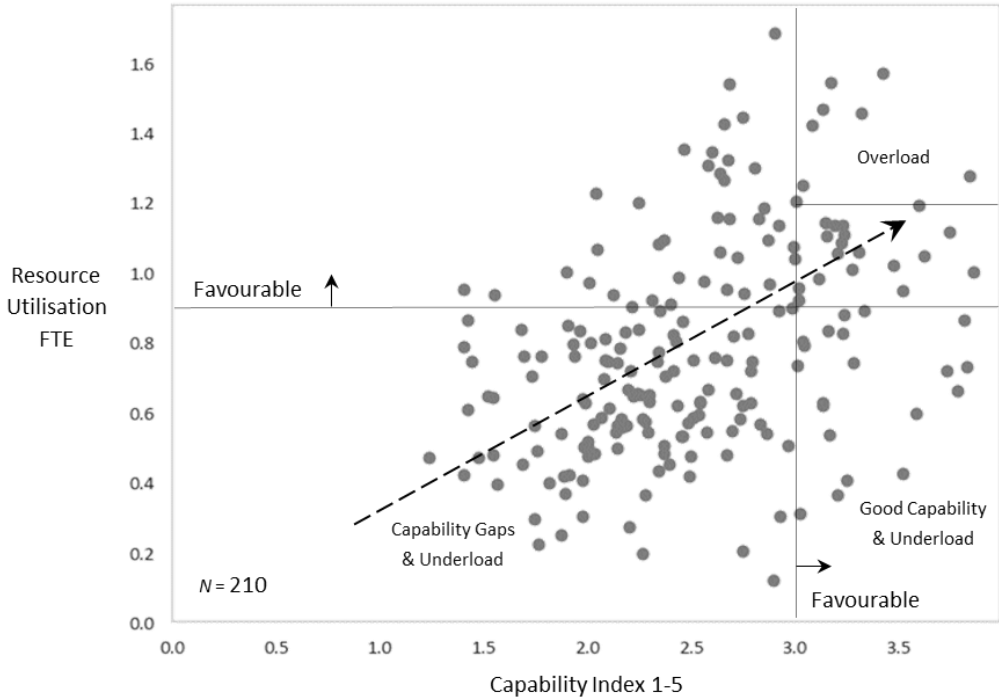
Figure 12 Tolerance-of-Ambiguity Ambiguity TOA & Capability PTA



Source: Created by author

Data analysis also reveals a positive correlation⁹ between workload and capability (Figure 13). This supports a key motivation to commission the project – hypothesising that actual workload was not indeed overloaded, and that a significant influence in the perceptions of overload arise from the capability e.g., lack of experience. It is the dominant finding, and fundamental to the case for empirically strong capability analysis.

Figure 13 Resource Utilisation & Workforce Capability



Source: Created by author

6.2 Limitations of Methodology & Methods

First, at the level of factors of inquiry *within* the three independent variables proposed for universal application (PTA, LTA, ENC), pragmatic and contextual choices are made. Replicability is limited at this level of analysis, although they could be upheld within sectors or organisation typologies.

Secondly, factor indexing across varied ontologies is challenging, requiring evaluative outputs to be converted to quantitative data. Highly trained consultants represent a key dependency e.g., interviewing competency, operational and archival investigation.

⁹ Spearman correlation WORKLOAD FTE and CAPABILITY SCORE: 0.4137129537088809 P-value: 5.257298765715707e-10

Thirdly, the methodology can be expensive, as data collection require expert resourcing and high staff participation. Nevertheless, subsequent evaluations are less inhibitive.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

Literature reviews show a long-standing lack of coherent, consistent approaches to evaluating public administration capability in practice. A similar deficit appears to general management studies. For public administration, discursive methods are often unsystematic, subjective, or rely on proxies rather than direct observation of OC. 'Capacity' is frequently conflated with 'capability,' yet they differ substantially: capacity is an output ceiling; capability is the force required to reach it; capability precedes capacity.

Strategic management offers established concepts such as dynamic capabilities and organisation capabilities (plural) (e.g., Ulrich & Smallwood, 2004), but these emphasise context-specific capabilities that emerge in operation (e.g., innovation), beyond those designed rationally via organisation design, and preceding any dynamic or in theatre capability. The focus in this study was to test the designed capabilities, without which there can be no subsequent activated or critical capability, or any causal foundation to subsequent organisation effectiveness. The strategic management concepts are also typically market-oriented and arguably ill-suited to public administration lacking competitive incentives. This study accepts that such dynamic or inimitable capabilities primarily target strategic advantage.

This paper proposes an objective, conceptually grounded empirical approach to OC evaluation and tests a model to generate new insight for public administration. Objectively observing organisational factors reveals tangible deviations from intended design and capability, enabling coherent development strategies that can underpin later dynamic capabilities.

The methodology derives OC as the dependent variable from two independent variables—humanistic propensity-to-act (PTA) and structural latitude-to-act (LTA)—the Propensity-Latitude Model ©. Where feasible, a third variable, enacted capability (ENC), enhances analysis by linking in-theatre outcomes with capability and potential causal factors. To support the research, the absence of any prior empirical definition for OC also needed to be addressed, which linked organisation design with its intended capabilities.

Empirical definition:

Organisation Capability is a function of the composition of abilities through organisation design, manifested through people and structure, in order to achieve specified organisation effectiveness.

OC is expressed as a composite via factor analysis with standardised indexing. Independent variables PTA, LTA, and optional ENC are universally applicable; capability antecedents within PTA₁₋₅ and LTA₁₋₅ are curated. In this project, recommended PTA₁₋₅ factors were Competencies, Education & Training, Experience, and Critical Knowledge (common to job architecture), plus a consultant-selected psychometric for Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA). LTA₁₋₅ factors reflected professional judgement and context in relation

to structure, technology, processes, mandate alignment and business drivers. ENC₁ focused on the presenting issue, workload. A culture assessment was considered but treated as a dynamic (social) capability and excluded to avoid excessive data; TOA served as a partial cultural indicator.

Thus, organisation capability is:

$$OC = \bar{x} (PTA_{1-i}, LTA_{1-i}, ENC_{1-i}).$$

For this project:

$$OC = \bar{x} (PTA_{1-5} = 2.51, LTA_{1-5} = 2.44, ENC_1 = 2.60) = 2.52/5.00,$$

with a 1–5 interval scale for all indices.

Findings indicate clear deficits in foundational workforce capability and structural rationale. PTA data show a failure to ensure required capability at entry, implicating workforce planning and selection; notable gaps appear in competencies, education, and psychometric profile. The extent—over 50% of employees—also points to weaknesses in development, engagement, and training. For LTA, business drivers were deficient, with high ad hoc demands (see workload analysis) symptomatic of weak business planning. Structural design was restrictive: substantial horizontal specialisation and low spans of control (SOC), with at least one unnecessary hierarchical layer and SOC of 1.0 in many functions. This likely inhibits cross-functional collaboration, learning, flexibility, mobility, and succession planning.

ENC via workload analysis showed chronic underutilisation (78% RU, i.e., 22% capacity). Combined with LTA, managers carried most workload—on average ‘stable,’ not overloaded—while poor planning, weak delegation, and narrow SOC limited workload distribution and mobility. Below managerial levels, average workload was significantly under-loaded (sometimes by ~50%), with lower capability indices and experience. Forty of fifty-five functions were underloaded; three were overloaded. This indicates over-resourcing and further implicates workforce and business planning.

Overall, the entity appears substantially over-resourced (78% RU), with capability deficits in more than half of employees—insufficient capability to work effectively/efficiently (e.g., experience, knowledge), high sensitivity to relatively low volumes, and structural constraints on capability development and workload distribution.

A key finding is the relationship between OC and workload: higher capability correlates with higher stable workload (productivity) and lower perceived workload. Perceived overload—prompting the initial concern—was not borne out by measured workload. Leadership contested staff perceptions and commissioned the assessment of both workload and OC.

The comparative study of Organisation Capability Reviews underscores recurring issues (Ireland). First, persistent obfuscation between ‘capability’ and ‘capacity’ mirrors the literature. Second, public sector employment grew substantially before and during the Reviews, amid a reform context. Third, while Reviews referenced ‘efficiencies,’ they

frequently cited 'increasing demands' to justify resource growth, with little emphasis on containing or reducing resources. The research approach was particularly subjective, with limited staff participation and high manager participation—amounting to self-assessment—and even included ministers, who are effectively clients of the reviews.

Conducted via interviews and group sessions, the Reviews produced extensive thematic mapping but no quantitative outputs on workforce capability, structure, activities, or outcomes. By contrast, this project provided objective measures of resource utilisation and capability and distinguished actual from perceived workload. Ignoring quantitative OC evaluation makes resource maximisation more likely when relying on subjective claims of workload, demand, and capability.

In sum, public administration often operates in a reform climate yet tends to avoid objective scrutiny. Public entities should demonstrate effective use of public funds by evaluating organisations objectively against stated requirements for public value. This paper demonstrates the value of objective, systematic, data-driven OC evaluation in public administration (and generally) to support capability, effectiveness, capacity, and accountability. Genuine organisation development requires more robust evidence, analytics, and the internal capabilities to sustain them.

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