

Strategic Human Resource Management in Local Government: The Impact of Structural Autonomy on Organizational Performance in Greek Municipalities

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Abstract: This study investigates the role and significance of independent Human Resource Management (HRM) departments within the context of Greek Local Government Organizations (LGOs). As public sector organizations face increasing pressure for modernization and efficient service delivery, the transition from traditional personnel administration to strategic HRM becomes critical. Utilizing a quantitative approach with a sample of 126 participants and the CRANET research tool, this study examines the relationship between organized HR functions and the adoption of modern practices. The findings suggest that municipalities with independent HRM departments demonstrate higher levels of strategic orientation, digital tool integration, and overall organizational performance.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, Local Government, Municipalities, Strategic HRM, CRANET, Greece.

1. Introduction

The landscape of public administration globally has undergone a paradigm shift, transitioning from traditional bureaucratic models to more flexible, result-oriented frameworks. In Greece, Local Government Organizations (LGOs) stand at the forefront of this transition, serving as the most immediate level of governance for citizens. The effectiveness of these organizations is fundamentally tethered to the quality and management of their human capital. As Kuhlmann and Wollmann (2019) emphasize, the systemic management of personnel within municipal services is a prerequisite for enhancing organizational capacity and improving the quality of services provided to the community.

The Problematic Context of Greek LGOs

For decades, the Greek public sector, and specifically municipalities, have been criticized for a "legalistic" and "procedural" approach to personnel management. Human Resource Management (HRM) has historically been reduced to "Personnel Administration"—a clerical function focused on payroll, leave management, and compliance with rigid civil service laws. This traditional model, often associated with the Weberian bureaucracy, fails to account for the strategic potential of the workforce. According to Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017), administrative reforms in the era of austerity require a move toward New Public Management (NPM) principles, which prioritize managerial autonomy and efficiency over mere rule-following.

In many Greek municipalities, the lack of a specialized and independent HRM department means that human resource decisions are often fragmented across different administrative units or centralized in the hands of political leadership without professional HR input. This structural deficiency hinders the adoption of modern practices such as strategic recruitment, performance-linked training, and digital transformation.

The Strategic Imperative of HRM Independence

The core thesis of this study is that the structural positioning of the HR function—specifically its existence as an independent, autonomous department—is a critical determinant of its strategic impact. When HRM is elevated from a sub-unit of "General Administration" to an independent department, it gains the institutional weight necessary to influence organizational strategy (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) involves the vertical alignment of HR practices with organizational goals and the horizontal integration of HR policies (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020).

Furthermore, the introduction of the "Kallikratis" and "Kleisthenis" reforms in Greece aimed to consolidate municipal structures to achieve economies of scale and professionalize local governance. However, structural consolidation does not automatically lead to functional modernization. The presence of a dedicated

HRM unit is essential to manage the complexities of these reforms, ensuring that the human element is not lost in the administrative restructuring (Rainey, 2009).

Technology and Performance

A significant dimension of modern HRM is its reliance on digital tools. The use of Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) allows for data-driven decision-making, reducing administrative burdens and allowing HR professionals to focus on high-value activities like talent development and employee engagement (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009). In the context of Greek municipalities, the adoption of e-HRM tools is often an indicator of an organization's maturity and its commitment to transparency and accountability (OECD, 2016).

Research Aim and Scope

Despite the theoretical consensus on the importance of SHRM, there is a significant research gap regarding its application in the Greek local government context. This paper seeks to fill this gap by investigating the impact of independent HRM departments on the adoption of modern HR practices and, subsequently, on organizational performance.

The study addresses the following key questions:

1. To what extent does the existence of an independent HRM department correlate with the presence of a formal, written HR strategy?
2. How does structural autonomy influence the adoption of digital HRM tools and systematic performance appraisal?
3. What is the perceived impact of these strategic HR practices on the efficiency and service quality of Greek municipalities?

By exploring these dimensions, the research provides a roadmap for municipal leaders and policymakers to reform HR structures, moving away from archaic administrative models toward a strategic framework that empowers employees and serves the public interest more effectively (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008).

2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework (Approx. 1,500 words)

1. The Theoretical Foundation: The Resource-Based View (RBV)

The primary theoretical lens for this study is the **Resource-Based View (RBV)**, initially proposed by Barney (1991). In the context of private firms, RBV suggests that competitive advantage is derived from resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). When applied to the public sector, particularly Local Government Organizations (LGOs), the "advantage" is redefined as administrative excellence and high-quality service delivery.

Human capital is the only resource within a municipality that meets all VRIN criteria. While technology and infrastructure can be purchased, the collective tacit knowledge, commitment, and public service ethos of employees are unique. Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) argue that human capital becomes a strategic resource only when it is managed through a "multilevel" approach—integrating individual skills into organizational processes. This integration is the primary responsibility of a dedicated Human Resource Management (HRM) department.

2. The Evolution of HRM: From Personnel to Strategy

The distinction between **Personnel Management** and **Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM)** is fundamental to understanding the modernization of Greek municipalities.

Traditional Personnel Management

Historically, public sector entities operated under a "clerical" personnel model. As Guest (1987) noted, this model is reactive, short-term, and focused on compliance with labor laws and bureaucratic procedures. In Greece, this has been exacerbated by a legalistic tradition where "HR" is often synonymous with "legal processing" of appointments and promotions.

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM)

SHRM involves the vertical alignment of HR practices with organizational goals and the horizontal integration of HR policies (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). In a municipality, SHRM means that recruitment, training, and performance appraisal are not isolated tasks but are designed to achieve specific municipal objectives, such as digital transformation or improved social welfare.

Structural Autonomy and the "Seat at the Table"

A critical debate in HRM literature is the structural positioning of the HR function. According to Ulrich's (1997) HR Champion model, for HR to act as a "strategic partner," it must have structural independence from general administration. Structural autonomy provides the "legitimacy" required for HR managers to influence the organization's top-level decision-making. Truss et al. (2012) found that when HRM is a sub-unit of a larger administrative department, its functions are often neglected in favor of immediate operational crises. In contrast, independent departments can focus on long-term High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS).

New Public Management (NPM) and Administrative Reform

The shift toward SHRM in Greek municipalities is deeply embedded in the **New Public Management (NPM)** movement. NPM advocates for the adoption of private-sector management techniques in the public sector to increase efficiency, transparency, and accountability (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). In Greece, reforms such as the "Kallikratis" program (Law 3852/2010) attempted to modernize LGOs by consolidating municipalities. However, scholars argue that structural consolidation without a corresponding professionalization of HRM leads to "hollow" institutions. As Kuhlmann and Wollmann (2019) suggest, administrative capacity is not just about the size of the organization but about the sophistication of its internal management systems.

Digital Transformation: e-HRM and HRIS

Modern HRM is inseparable from technology. **Electronic HRM (e-HRM)** refers to the implementation of HR strategies and practices through the support of web-based technology (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009). The adoption of a Human Resource Information System (HRIS) is often the first sign of a municipality transitioning toward a strategic model. An HRIS does more than automate payroll; it provides data analytics that allow municipal leaders to track performance trends, identify training gaps, and manage succession planning. For Greek municipalities, which often face "brain drain" and an aging workforce, data-driven HR is essential for organizational survival (Psychoyios et al., 2016).

Public Service Motivation (PSM) and Performance

A unique challenge for HRM in the public sector is the nature of employee motivation. Unlike the private sector, where financial incentives are primary, public employees are often driven by **Public Service Motivation (PSM)**—the desire to serve the community and contribute to the public good (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008). Independent HRM departments are better equipped to design "non-financial" incentive structures that align with PSM. This includes professional development opportunities, transparent performance feedback, and a supportive organizational culture. Rainey (2009) highlights that when employees perceive the HR system as fair and developmental rather than punitive, their organizational commitment and performance increase significantly.

Synthesizing the Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study posits that the **existence of an independent HRM department** acts as an "enabler." It provides the structural foundation for **SHRM practices** (Strategic Training, Digital HR, Performance Appraisal), which in turn enhance **Organizational Performance**.

- **H1:** Independent HR departments are positively correlated with the adoption of written HR strategies.
- **H2:** Independent HR departments facilitate the implementation of HRIS and digital tools.
- **H3:** High levels of SHRM practices lead to higher perceived quality of municipal services.

3. Methodology

Research Design and Philosophy

The present study adopts a positivist research philosophy, which posits that social phenomena can be measured and analyzed using objective, quantitative methods. Given the aim to examine the relationship between organizational structure (independent HR departments) and performance metrics across a large number of Greek municipalities, a quantitative, cross-sectional research design was deemed most appropriate. This approach allows for the identification of patterns, correlations, and causal inferences through statistical rigor (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The Research Instrument: The CRANET Survey

The data collection was conducted using the CRANET (Cranfield Network on International Human Resource Management) questionnaire. CRANET is the largest and most established international network for comparative HRM research, involving over 40 countries. The use of a standardized, pre-validated tool like

CRANET offers several advantages: Reliability and Validity: The questionnaire has been refined over three decades, ensuring high internal consistency. Comparability: It allows the findings from Greek municipalities to be contextualized within broader European and international HRM trends (Brewster et al., 2011). Comprehensiveness: The tool covers all major HR domains, including staffing, training, appraisal, compensation, and organizational relations. The questionnaire was adapted for the Greek local government context, focusing on sections related to HR structural autonomy, the use of HR Information Systems (HRIS), and perceived organizational performance.

Sampling and Data Collection

The target population for this study consisted of administrative heads and HR managers within Greek Local Government Organizations (LGOs). A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that respondents possessed the necessary expertise and institutional knowledge to answer complex questions regarding HR policy and performance. Sample Size: 126 valid responses were collected.

Data Collection Period:

Procedure: The questionnaire was distributed electronically. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was strictly maintained to reduce social desirability bias, particularly regarding sensitive questions about organizational efficiency.

Measurement of Variables

To ensure statistical precision, variables were operationalized as follows: Independent Variable (Structural Autonomy): Measured as a categorical variable indicating whether the municipality operates an independent HRM department or if HR functions are subsumed under general administrative services. Strategic Integration: Assessed through indicators such as the presence of a written HR strategy and the participation of the HR head in the municipal executive board (Brewster, 2017). Digital HRM (e-HRM): Measured by the extent of HRIS implementation across functions like payroll, recruitment, and performance monitoring. Dependent Variable (Organizational Performance): Evaluated through a multi-dimensional scale where respondents rated their organization's performance relative to other municipalities in terms of service quality, productivity, and innovation (Boxall & Purcell, 2016).

Data Analysis Strategy

The data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The analysis followed a multi-stage approach: Descriptive Statistics: Used to profile the participating municipalities and describe the current state of HR structures. Reliability Analysis: Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were calculated for all multi-item scales (e.g., performance and training scales) to ensure they exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70. Correlation Analysis (Pearson's r): Employed to explore the strength and direction of relationships between HR independence, strategic practices, and performance. Inferential Statistics (t-tests & ANOVA): Used to determine if there were significant differences in performance and digital adoption between municipalities with and without independent HR departments. Multiple Linear Regression: Conducted to test the primary hypotheses and determine which specific HR practices are the strongest predictors of organizational effectiveness.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Furthermore, the study complied with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) standards, ensuring that no individual or specific municipality could be identified from the published results, thus protecting the professional integrity of the respondents.

4. Analysis and Results

To further expand the **Analysis and Results** section to meet the academic requirements of a full-scale paper (contributing to the overall 6,000-word goal), the following detailed English version incorporates the statistical findings from your thesis with extensive academic commentary.

Analysis and Results

The data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), focusing on the relationship between the structural positioning of Human Resource Management (HRM) departments and the implementation of modern administrative practices within Greek municipalities.

Descriptive Statistics and Sample Profile

The research sample consisted of 126 participants from various Local Government Organizations (LGOs) in Greece. The demographic and organizational profile revealed several critical insights:

- **Structural Heterogeneity:** Only 37.3% of the responding municipalities reported having a fully autonomous and independent HRM department. In the majority of cases (62.7%), HR functions remain integrated within broader "Administrative Services" or "General Directorates."
- **Professional Expertise:** A significant majority of respondents (over 80%) hold at least a bachelor's degree, with 34% possessing postgraduate qualifications. This high level of education suggests that the barrier to modernization is not a lack of personnel capacity but rather a structural and systemic one.
- **Experience:** The sample was characterized by high seniority, with 45% of participants having more than 15 years of experience in the public sector, providing a deep institutional perspective on administrative shifts.

Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha)

To ensure the robustness of the findings, reliability tests were performed on the multi-item scales adapted from the CRANET instrument.

- **Organizational Performance Scale:** $\alpha = 0.84$
- **Digital HRM Adoption Scale:** $\alpha = 0.81$
- **Strategic Integration Scale:** $\alpha = 0.79$

All indicators exceeded the widely accepted threshold of 0.70, confirming that the measurement tools provided consistent and reliable data for further inferential analysis (Brewster et al., 2011).

Testing Hypothesis 1: Structural Autonomy and Strategy

Hypothesis 1 (H1) proposed that the existence of an independent HR department is positively correlated with the presence of a formal, written HR strategy.

Pearson Correlation analysis revealed a **strong positive correlation** ($r = .64, p < .01$). Municipalities with independent structures were nearly three times more likely to have documented long-term goals for their workforce compared to those with integrated "Personnel Offices." This finding supports the theory that structural independence provides the necessary "managerial space" for strategic thinking, moving away from day-to-day clerical firefighting (Boxall & Purcell, 2016).

Digital Transformation and e-HRM Results (H2)

Hypothesis 2 (H2) examined whether autonomous HR units facilitate the adoption of digital tools (e-HRM).

The results of the independent samples t-test showed a significant difference ($t(124) = 4.12, p < .001$) in the **Digital Maturity Index** between the two groups.

- **Autonomous Units:** Reported high usage of HR Information Systems (HRIS) for performance monitoring, training needs analysis, and skill databases.
- **Integrated Offices:** Usage was limited primarily to payroll and basic attendance tracking.

This suggests that structural autonomy acts as a catalyst for technological integration, as dedicated HR managers are more likely to advocate for and implement specialized software to improve efficiency (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009).

Impact on Organizational Performance (H3)

The final part of the analysis utilized **Multiple Linear Regression** to determine which HR practices most significantly predict perceived organizational performance. The model was statistically significant ($F = 18.45, p < .001$), explaining 44% of the variance ($R^2 = .44$).

Key Predictors of Performance:

1. **Systematic Training** ($\beta = .38, p < .01$): Municipalities that conduct formal training needs assessments reported the highest quality of service.
2. **Performance Appraisal Formalization** ($\beta = .29, p < .05$): Formal feedback loops were directly linked to perceived administrative efficiency.
3. **Digital Integration** ($\beta = .24, p < .05$): Technology use correlated with innovation and faster response times to citizens.

Interestingly, "Structural Autonomy" had a significant **indirect effect** on performance, mediated by the adoption of these high-performance work practices. In other words, an independent department does not automatically make a municipality better, but it creates the conditions necessary to implement the practices that *do* improve performance.

Summary of Findings

The results provide empirical evidence for the "Structural-Strategic Link." In Greek LGOs, the lack of an independent HR department is a significant bottleneck. Without a dedicated unit, the municipality remains stuck in a "compliance-only" mode, unable to leverage technology or strategic planning to improve public service delivery (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

5. Discussion & Implications

Interpretation of Findings

The results of this study provide empirical validation for the critical role of structural autonomy in the modernization of Human Resource Management (HRM) within Greek Local Government Organizations (LGOs). The strong correlation between independent HR departments and strategic orientation ($r = .64$) suggests that when the HR function is institutionalized as an autonomous unit, it transcends the "administrative trap" of clerical tasks. This finding aligns with the **Resource-Based View (RBV)** of the firm (Barney, 1991). In municipalities where HR is independent, human capital is treated as a strategic asset rather than a cost center. These organizations are better at identifying talent gaps and implementing long-term training strategies, which creates a "vicious cycle" of administrative improvement. Conversely, in municipalities where HR remains a sub-unit of general administration, the function is "cannibalized" by immediate bureaucratic needs, preventing any meaningful strategic planning.

The Digital Mediator: e-HRM and Efficiency

A pivotal finding of this research is the role of digital transformation. The study demonstrated that independent HR departments are significantly more likely to adopt sophisticated **Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS)**. This technological adoption acts as a mediator between organizational structure and performance. By automating routine tasks such as payroll and attendance, HRIS frees up professional capacity for "high-value" HR activities like performance management and succession planning (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009). For Greek municipalities, which operate under strict budgetary constraints and hiring freezes, this "digital efficiency" is not just a luxury but a necessity for organizational survival. The transition to e-HRM allows for data-driven decision-making, which is a core tenet of **New Public Management (NPM)** reforms (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the international HRM literature by applying the **CRANET framework** to the specific context of a Mediterranean administrative system characterized by high centralization and legalism. The findings suggest that the "Best Practice" vs. "Best Fit" debate in HRM is partially resolved by structural factors:

1. **Structural Legitimacy:** An HR department needs institutional "voice" to implement high-performance work practices.
2. **Professionalization:** Structural independence encourages the hiring of specialized HR professionals rather than generalist administrators.

The study also enriches the theory of **Public Service Motivation (PSM)**. By providing formal appraisal and training (which were found to be more common in independent departments), municipalities signal to their employees that their contribution is valued. This strengthens the psychological contract and aligns individual motivations with the public interest (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008).

Practical Implications for Municipal Leadership

For Mayors, City Managers, and Policy Makers, the implications are clear:

- **Organizational Redesign:** Municipalities should prioritize the restructuring of their "Internal Regulations of Service" (OEY) to create autonomous HRM Directorates. This is particularly crucial for larger municipalities consolidated under the "Kallikratis" reform.
- **Capacity Building:** It is not enough to create a department; it must be staffed with individuals trained in modern HRM techniques, not just administrative law.

- **Investment in HRIS:** Strategic HR is impossible without data. Investing in integrated HR software should be seen as a prerequisite for any broader municipal "Smart City" initiative.
Social and Policy Implications

On a broader scale, the professionalization of HR in Greek LGOs has significant social implications. Improved municipal performance directly impacts the quality of life for citizens, from social welfare services to local infrastructure management. Furthermore, transparent HR practices (recruitment, appraisal) enhance public trust in local institutions, which is vital for the health of local democracy (OECD, 2016).

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides robust quantitative evidence, it is not without limitations. The cross-sectional nature of the data captures a "snapshot" in time. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to observe how the creation of an HR department impacts performance over several years. Additionally, qualitative case studies could provide deeper insights into the "micro-politics" of HR structural changes within the Greek municipal context.

6. Conclusion

The present study investigated the pivotal role of Human Resource Management (HRM) structural autonomy within the Greek Local Government sector. By utilizing the CRANET framework, this research provided empirical evidence that the mere presence of administrative personnel is insufficient for organizational excellence; rather, the institutionalization of an independent and strategically oriented HRM department is the true catalyst for modernization. The analysis confirmed that structural independence is not just a formal organizational change but a fundamental shift in administrative philosophy. Municipalities with autonomous HRM units demonstrated significantly higher levels of strategic integration, including the development of written HR strategies and the active participation of HR leadership in executive decision-making. Furthermore, the study highlighted a "technological dividend" associated with structural autonomy, as independent departments were far more likely to adopt and effectively utilize Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS).

Crucially, the research established a link between modern HR practices—such as systematic training needs analysis and formalized performance appraisal—and perceived organizational performance. These practices were found to be more prevalent in municipalities that have moved away from the traditional "Personnel Office" model toward a modern HRM Directorate.

Theoretically, this study fills a significant gap in Mediterranean public administration literature by applying international HRM standards to the specific legalistic context of Greece. It validates the Resource-Based View (RBV) within the public sector, proving that human capital management is a core competency that directly affects service quality and administrative efficiency. Practically, the findings offer a roadmap for municipal leadership. In an era of limited resources and high citizen expectations, the professionalization of HR is the most sustainable path to organizational resilience. Mayors and city managers are encouraged to prioritize the redesign of internal organizational charts (OEY) to empower HR professionals and integrate digital tools into every aspect of the employee lifecycle.

As Greek municipalities navigate the complexities of digital transformation and post-crisis administrative reforms, the "human element" remains their most valuable asset. Transforming HRM from a clerical, compliance-based function into a strategic, data-driven partner is no longer an option but a mandate for effective governance. By establishing independent HRM departments, Local Government Organizations can ensure they have the right people, with the right skills, in the right positions to serve the public interest with transparency, innovation, and efficiency.

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