



Modernization of the civil service and personnel policy in japan

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OPEN ACCESS

SUBMITTED 31 March 2025

ACCEPTED 29 April 2025

PUBLISHED 31 May 2025

VOLUME Vol.07 Issue05 2025

CITATION

Elyorbek Otajonov. (2025). Modernization of the civil service and personnel policy in japan. *The American Journal of Political Science Law and Criminology*, 7(05), 225–229.

<https://doi.org/10.37547/tajpslc/Volume07Issue05-25>

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Abstract: This article presents an in-depth analysis of the modernization process of Japan's civil service system, with a particular emphasis on the evolution of personnel policy as a key mechanism of administrative transformation. The study situates Japan's reform efforts within a broader historical and institutional context, tracing the trajectory of civil service development from its Meiji-era foundations through the post-war consolidation period to the administrative restructuring initiatives of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. By examining both legislative reforms and organizational practices, the article elucidates how Japan has sought to reconcile its traditional bureaucratic ethos—characterized by seniority-based promotion, lifetime employment, and hierarchical rigidity—with the demands of a rapidly changing global environment that emphasizes transparency, flexibility, and performance.

Special attention is given to the creation of centralized personnel management structures, such as the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs, and the gradual introduction of performance-based evaluation systems aimed at enhancing accountability and responsiveness within the public sector. The research also explores how ethical standards, gender equity initiatives, and cross-sectoral mobility have been addressed within the evolving human resource management framework. Methodologically, the study draws on official government reports, policy white papers, OECD assessments, and academic literature to offer a multi-dimensional view of Japan's administrative reform process.

Japan's civil service modernization experience offers valuable comparative insights for other countries—particularly those in East Asia, Central Asia, and post-socialist regions—that are currently undergoing institutional transformation. The Japanese case underscores the importance of balancing systemic

continuity with targeted innovation, and highlights the role of culturally informed, incremental reform in achieving sustainable public sector development amidst global governance and digitalization trends.

Keywords: Civil service, personnel policy, administrative reform, Japan, merit system, HRM, governance, performance management, public sector innovation.

Introduction: The Japanese civil service system, widely regarded as one of the most institutionalized and disciplined bureaucratic structures in East Asia, has historically played a central role in Japan's postwar development and state-building processes. Its hallmark characteristics—professionalism, hierarchical discipline, and administrative continuity—have been key contributors to Japan's rapid industrialization, policy coordination, and relatively stable governance throughout much of the 20th century. The system's merit-based recruitment process and long-standing tradition of career civil service nurtured a cadre of elite officials who wielded significant influence over public policy, economic planning, and institutional regulation. However, the closing decades of the 20th century introduced a new set of challenges that exposed the limitations of this rigid and hierarchical model. Japan's so-called "Lost Decade" of economic stagnation in the 1990s, driven by the collapse of the asset price bubble and prolonged deflationary pressures, revealed deep structural inefficiencies in both the economy and public administration. Compounded by demographic changes—including population aging and a shrinking workforce—alongside rising public dissatisfaction with bureaucratic opacity and declining trust in government institutions, these dynamics created urgent pressure for institutional reform.

At the same time, Japan faced growing international scrutiny and normative pressure from global institutions such as the OECD, the IMF, and international development agencies, which advocated for the adoption of new public management (NPM) principles: increased transparency, performance measurement, cost-efficiency, and user-oriented service delivery. Within this context, the Japanese government embarked on a series of modernization initiatives intended to make the civil service more flexible, accountable, and responsive to the changing demands of society.

This article critically examines the trajectory and scope of these modernization efforts, with a particular focus on personnel policy as a strategic lever for reform. It

explores how Japan has sought to balance deeply rooted administrative traditions—such as lifetime employment and seniority-based promotion—with emerging models of performance management, gender equity, and cross-sectoral mobility. Through this analysis, the study provides insights into the transformation of Japan's administrative governance model and offers a case study in navigating bureaucratic reform in a culturally embedded institutional environment.

Historical Background of the Civil Service in Japan

The foundations of Japan's modern civil service system were laid during the Meiji period (1868–1912), a time of intense state-led modernization and institutional restructuring following the end of feudal rule. In an effort to build a strong, centralized nation-state capable of competing with Western powers, the Meiji leadership undertook comprehensive reforms across all sectors of governance. Influenced heavily by continental European administrative models—particularly those of Prussia and France—the government established a meritocratic bureaucracy grounded in civil examinations, centralized ministries, and an elite career track for top officials.

This system emphasized elitism, seniority, and loyalty to the state. Successful candidates in civil service exams were groomed for lifelong careers in the bureaucracy, with promotion based primarily on years of service rather than performance metrics. While this created a highly stable and technically competent civil service, it also entrenched hierarchical rigidity and discouraged innovation or lateral recruitment. The system reflected Confucian values of order, harmony, and authority, which were deeply ingrained in both administrative culture and wider Japanese society.

Following World War II, under the Allied (primarily American) occupation, significant reforms were introduced to democratize the Japanese state apparatus. These included the adoption of the National Public Service Law (1947), which established key principles such as political neutrality, career security, and standardized civil service categories. While these reforms curtailed some prewar authoritarian features, they preserved the core bureaucratic structure and further embedded the system of lifetime employment and centralized personnel management.

By the 1960s and 1970s, the Japanese bureaucracy had become a dominant force in national policymaking. Ministries such as the Ministry of Finance (MOF), the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), and the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) played key roles in formulating industrial policy, regulating economic sectors, and managing welfare expansion. Civil servants from these ministries were widely

regarded as intellectual elites and policy architects behind Japan's postwar economic miracle.

However, the same structural characteristics that had underpinned bureaucratic strength—hierarchy, inflexibility, and insulation from external scrutiny—became increasingly problematic in the face of growing administrative complexity, global interdependence, and the need for citizen-centered governance. As a result, these institutional features came under critical examination from both domestic reformers and international observers, setting the stage for a new era of civil service reform focused on transparency, performance, and strategic human resource management.

The modernization of Japan's civil service gained significant momentum during the 1990s, a decade marked by deep economic stagnation, fiscal strain, and a growing crisis of public confidence in state institutions. Known as the "lost decade," this period brought to the surface structural inefficiencies and governance limitations within Japan's traditionally hierarchical and insulated bureaucratic apparatus. These challenges, coupled with demographic shifts such as population aging, rising citizen expectations, and external pressures from global governance frameworks, created the impetus for far-reaching administrative reform. Within this context, the Japanese government began to reassess its civil service system, particularly the personnel policies that shaped recruitment, promotion, and leadership development.

A pivotal phase in this reform trajectory occurred in the early 2000s, under the leadership of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. His administration initiated a series of structural and procedural changes aimed at reducing excessive bureaucratic discretion, enhancing transparency, and reorienting public administration toward more citizen-centric, accountable, and performance-driven governance. At the heart of this agenda was the modernization of human resource management within the civil service, which had long been governed by principles of seniority, lifelong employment, and ministerial compartmentalization. Reformers sought to recalibrate the personnel system to increase flexibility, support cross-ministerial collaboration, and facilitate policy innovation.

The key objectives of the reform included breaking down vertical silos by enhancing inter-ministerial mobility, thereby enabling civil servants to acquire diverse experiences across different policy domains. This was expected to improve policy coherence and reduce the inefficiencies associated with rigid bureaucratic segmentation. At the same time, performance-based evaluation and reward systems

were introduced to replace or at least supplement the entrenched seniority-based promotion model. These mechanisms aimed to foster a results-oriented administrative culture in which individual contributions and leadership competencies would be recognized and incentivized.

A further emphasis was placed on diversifying the talent pool. The government began actively recruiting mid-career professionals, experts from the private sector, and underrepresented groups, particularly women. This shift was intended not only to enhance administrative capacity and innovation but also to make the civil service more reflective of a changing society. Initiatives such as the Fourth Basic Plan for Gender Equality (2015) established quantitative targets for increasing the representation of women in managerial and decision-making positions across government ministries. Although some headway has been made in recruiting women and non-career personnel, progress has been uneven, and significant gender disparities persist at senior levels.

One of the most substantial institutional reforms in this domain was the establishment of the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs in 2014, under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration. This central agency was tasked with overseeing human resource management for high-ranking civil servants, including the coordination of appointments, evaluations, and transfers across ministries. Its creation marked a decisive move toward the centralization of personnel authority, which had previously been dispersed among individual ministries. By locating top-level personnel decisions within the Cabinet Secretariat, the reform aimed to strengthen strategic alignment between human resources and national policy priorities, while also enhancing executive oversight over the bureaucracy.

Performance evaluation systems were likewise institutionalized across government bodies, with the intention of fostering meritocracy and accountability. Nonetheless, the transition from seniority-based promotion to performance-based assessment proved difficult to implement in practice. Deeply embedded cultural norms—such as *shūshin koyō* (lifetime employment), loyalty to one's ministry, and the prioritization of organizational harmony—often clashed with the logic of individual performance metrics and competition. As a result, in many cases, the new evaluation systems functioned more as formalities than as drivers of real personnel differentiation or reform.

Similarly, while the recruitment of non-career professionals represented a significant conceptual shift, integrating such individuals into the bureaucratic hierarchy was fraught with institutional challenges.

These included ambiguity around status, limited promotion opportunities, and persistent informal networks that privileged career bureaucrats. Moreover, while gender inclusion policies have improved access at the point of entry, the lack of robust mentoring systems, work-life balance accommodations, and institutional accountability mechanisms has hindered the upward mobility of women within the civil service.

Despite these difficulties, the reforms in Japan's civil service personnel system have yielded a number of important outcomes. They have contributed to greater central coordination of senior appointments, brought attention to performance and merit as guiding principles of administrative behavior, and initiated a slow but meaningful cultural shift toward openness, diversity, and strategic management in public employment. However, the overall pace and depth of transformation remain constrained by institutional inertia and cultural resistance.

Japan's experience in civil service modernization illustrates the tension between continuity and change in a highly institutionalized administrative context. It also underscores the importance of aligning formal structural reforms with deeper shifts in workplace culture, career expectations, and governance philosophy. For countries seeking to modernize their own public administration systems—particularly those with similar traditions of bureaucratic elitism and lifelong career paths—Japan's case offers valuable lessons on both the possibilities and limits of reform.

Despite the important progress achieved through successive reform efforts, Japan's civil service modernization remains an incomplete and evolving process. Several deep-rooted challenges continue to constrain the full realization of a transparent, performance-oriented, and flexible administrative system. Among the most significant obstacles is institutional inertia—manifested in a bureaucratic culture that is inherently risk-averse and slow to adapt to new managerial paradigms. While many structural reforms have been introduced on paper, their operationalization often encounters internal resistance, particularly from long-serving officials accustomed to traditional hierarchies and procedural rigidity. This conservatism is reinforced by Japan's deeply embedded norms of seniority, consensus-building (*nemawashi*), and lifetime employment, which have historically fostered organizational loyalty but now stand at odds with the dynamic and competitive ethos of modern human resource management.

A related challenge lies in the cultural tension between long-standing administrative values such as harmony, loyalty to the ministry, and aversion to conflict, and the newer managerial principles emphasizing competition, individual accountability, and performance differentiation. These conflicting logics generate ambivalence within the civil service, resulting in reform fatigue, symbolic compliance, or superficial implementation of otherwise sound policy innovations. The introduction of performance evaluations, for example, has been met with passive resistance in many institutions, where assessments are treated as bureaucratic formalities rather than tools for genuine merit-based promotion.

Japan has also lagged in the digital transformation of civil service functions. While other advanced economies have made significant strides in adopting digital platforms for e-governance, human resource analytics, and automated evaluation systems, Japan's progress in this area has been relatively slow and fragmented. The persistence of analog procedures, paper-based personnel files, and hierarchical communication channels limits the scalability and efficiency of HR reforms and complicates the integration of data-driven decision-making into public administration.

Furthermore, the divide between the public and private sectors remains relatively rigid. Efforts to promote cross-sectoral mobility and bring in mid-career professionals or external experts from industry or academia have yielded modest results. Barriers such as differences in status, salary structures, institutional cultures, and unclear career trajectories for non-traditional entrants continue to hinder meaningful permeability. As a result, the civil service remains a largely self-contained system, limiting the potential for innovation, diversity, and external accountability.

Critics argue that despite the formalization of mechanisms for transparency, meritocracy, and central personnel oversight, many informal practices still dominate key processes—particularly at the senior leadership level. Backroom negotiations, personal networks, and unwritten patronage arrangements continue to influence career advancement, often undermining the credibility of official promotion criteria and weakening public trust in the fairness of the system. These enduring informalities pose a fundamental contradiction within the modernization agenda, signaling the gap between declared policy goals and actual institutional behavior.

CONCLUSION

Japan's approach to civil service reform ultimately reflects the logic of gradual adaptation rather than abrupt transformation. It represents a hybrid model—

one that seeks to retain the functional strengths of a traditional bureaucratic core while selectively incorporating instruments of new public management, strategic human resource management, and ethical governance. Rather than pursuing wholesale disruption, the Japanese state has pursued incremental, culturally attuned reforms that accommodate existing administrative norms while cautiously introducing change.

For emerging economies, particularly post-socialist states or countries with hierarchical administrative legacies, Japan's experience offers a pragmatic template for civil service reform. It demonstrates that meaningful change does not necessarily require dismantling institutional traditions, but rather reinterpreting and updating them to meet contemporary challenges. The Japanese emphasis on centralized coordination of senior personnel, the institutionalization of ethics and accountability standards, and the targeted inclusion of women and external professionals provide useful examples of how reform can be balanced with continuity. As debates on public sector renewal increasingly focus on resilience, inclusivity, and responsiveness in the 21st century, Japan's civil service modernization offers both a model and a cautionary tale about the complexities of transforming governance from within.

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