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Administrative efficiency in public service: work schedules, human resource management, and operational standardization in complex state structures.

Administrative efficiency in the public service: work schedules, people management, and operational standardization in complex state structures

Administrative efficiency in the public service: working hours, people management and operational standards in complex state structures

Priscilla Kelly de Sousa Machado Piretti

Summary

Administrative efficiency in complex public structures demands coherence between legality, human resource management, and operational design, capable of ensuring continuity and predictability in ongoing services. This qualitative, bibliographic, and documentary article analyzes how the organization of schedules and work hours, human resource management, and the standardization of routines and records contribute to formal, operational, and substantive efficiency. It argues that well-structured schedules function as a governance infrastructure, distributing workload, preserving competencies per shift, and reducing the risks of discontinuity. It also maintains that standardization, when guided by enabling bureaucracy, strengthens traceability and accountability without eliminating the discretion necessary for the public interest.

Keywords: administrative efficiency; state capacity; human resource management; work schedules; operational standardization; accountability.

Abstract

Administrative efficiency in complex public organizations depends on organizational capacities that go beyond cost reduction, requiring alignment among legality, workforce management, and operational design to ensure continuity and predictability in service delivery. This qualitative, bibliographic, and documentary study examines how shift scheduling, people management, and the standardization of routines and records contribute to formal, operational, and substantive efficiency.

It argues that well-designed schedules function as governance infrastructure by distributing workload, maintaining essential competencies across shifts, and reducing the risk of discontinuity.

It further contends that standardization, when conceived as enabling bureaucracy, strengthens traceability and accountability without suppressing the discretion required to protect the public interest.

Keywords: administrative efficiency; state capacity; people management; shift scheduling; operational standardization; accountability.

1. Introduction

Continuous and sensitive public services — those that operate on a permanent basis, with

High risks and high institutional exposure place the administration before a problem.

recurring: how to guarantee the regularity and quality of service without exceeding the limits of

Legality, nor producing debilitating rigidity. In these environments, administrative efficiency is not achieved.

It is confused with speed or streamlining; it emerges from coordination mechanisms that

They ensure the availability of the workforce, the integrity of records, and the stability of...

Essential routines and the ability to respond to variations in demand and unexpected occurrences.

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Public management literature has shown that performance- and results-oriented reforms
They expanded the repertoire of management tools (indicators, goals, monitoring), but
They also exacerbated tensions between distinct rationalities: legal rationality (legality, due process).
process, control) and managerial rationality (operational efficiency, productivity, management by
(results). The question is not about choosing a pole, but rather understanding how scales, processes and
Controls can be designed to produce **formal** efficiency (adherence to standards and integrity).
procedural), **operational** efficiency (appropriate use of resources to maintain flows and times of
response) and **substantive** efficiency (capacity to produce public value, with equity and protection)
(of collective interest).

In this context, the organization of schedules and work hours acts as a structuring device: it defines the
minimum coverage, the distribution of responsibilities per shift, rest schedules and rules of
replacement. Evidence from shift-intensive areas suggests that the inadequate design of
Schedules can compromise performance, safety, and service quality, especially in
night shifts and long work sessions.

In parallel, operational standardization — through routines, artifacts, manuals, checklists and
Recording is often seen as an antidote to improvisation and loss of control.

However, studies on bureaucracy and organizational routines indicate that formalization can be
“coercive” (when it only restricts) or “enabling” (when it provides tools for the
coordination and problem-solving), with distinct effects on performance, the
learning and discretion.

Given this, this article starts from the following problem: **the absence of operational organization** in
Organizations with continuous services tend to generate overload, discontinuity, and control failures.
Legal uncertainty and loss of efficiency. The overall objective is to analyze how people management, the
Organization of schedules and standardization contribute to administrative efficiency in structures.
complex state-owned enterprises. The aim is to answer four questions: (1) how scales and working hours impact the
efficiency; (2) how standardization reduces administrative risks; (3) what is the relationship between management
of people, institutional continuity and protection of the public interest; and (4) how the formalization of
Routine procedures contribute to accountability and legal certainty.

2. Methodology

The research is qualitative, bibliographic, and documentary. A selective literature review was conducted in
Areas of public administration, bureaucracy theory, strategic human resource management in the public sector.
The theory of organizational routines, performance management, and accountability. The focus was on...

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Works with conceptual relevance and applicability to the governance of continuous services, including studies on state capacity and its implementation, as well as references on formalization. and the use of organizational artifacts.

The documentary dimension focused on broadly normative and governance sources. Recognized in public administration and in the field of controls: guidelines and control standards. internal and governmental auditing, as well as quality management references and approaches. through processes such as standardization and improvement of language.

As an analytical strategy, thematic synthesis was employed: (i) systematization of concepts (efficiency, capacity, accountability, routines); (ii) identification of organizational mechanisms (scales, dimensioning, standardization, records); and (iii) discussion of tensions and trade-offs (Formalization versus adaptability; control versus discretion). No data was produced. primary empirical data nor specific causal inferences about an institution; examples, when Useful information is presented in a generic and analytical way.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Administrative efficiency and state capacity

A strictly instrumental conception of efficiency — understood as "doing more with less" — is insufficient to characterize state performance in highly complex services. The notion **Public sector capacity** building offers a more robust foundation by connecting efficiency to ability. to implement policies, deliver services, and provide technical advice, even under Institutional constraints. Polidano proposes operationalizing capacity as an attribute of the "machine." "Permanent administrative" approach, with dimensions associated with implementation, delivery, and advice, which allows one to separate efficiency from contingent political choices.

The literature on administrative reforms, especially that associated with New Public Management. (NPM) emphasized results-based control, competition, and industry-derived management practices. private. Hood describes NPM as a set of doctrines that includes a focus on performance, Organizational disaggregation and cost discipline, while also recording controversies. and paradoxes that arise when transferring such instruments to public contexts.

In contrast, more recent comparative approaches emphasize institutional combinations and national trajectories, recognizing that performance improvements depend on arrangements of governance, professional bureaucracies, and the compatibility between rules and management. In this sense, Reforms should not be evaluated solely by operational metrics, but also by their effects.

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Regarding interorganizational coordination, decisional integrity, and the creation of public value.
Efficiency, therefore, can be addressed in three analytical registers:

1. **Formal efficiency:** adherence to standards, procedural stability, traceability of decisions and controls.
2. **Operational efficiency:** the ability to maintain workflows, response times, and continuity. through the proper use of resources.
3. **Substantive efficiency:** the ability to generate socially relevant and legitimate results. with fairness and protection of the public interest.

This distinction prevents performance from being reduced to productivity and highlights the role structuring scales, processes, and controls in upholding administrative legitimacy.

3.2 Human resource management in the public sector and continuity of service

Administrative efficiency depends on people and, especially in ongoing services, on the way things are done.
How work is distributed over time. The literature on strategic human resource management in
The public sector argues that HR practices affect performance through mediations such as
Motivation, skills, and organizational climate; however, the public "context" (rules, values,
Accountability, multiple stakeholders) alters the mechanisms and effects. Knies, Boselie, Gould-
Williams and Vandenabeele synthesize evidence and argue that the SHRM–performance link
This requires attention to institutional conditions and the perceptions of employees, otherwise there is a risk of producing
Formally elegant systems that are empirically inert.
Institutional continuity also depends on dealing with pressures typical of public service:
Ambiguities in targets, budgetary constraints, and discretion at the point of delivery. Lipsky describes
How street-level bureaucrats operate under high demands and with limited resources, converting
discretion in everyday implementation practice. This implies that scales and
Standardization cannot ignore the micro level, where routines materialize and failures occur.
Coordination becomes visible to the citizen.
Specifically regarding shifts and work schedules, there is consistent evidence that night work and...
Long working hours are associated with risks to safety and well-being, as well as falls.
Performance is relevant when the organization relies on shifts to maintain service.
continuous. Folkard and Tucker synthesize results that indicate compromised safety and security.
Productivity at night, with deterioration over successive nights and an increase in hours at night.
service; Caruso reviews the broad impacts of long work hours on risks for workers and
organizations, providing a basis for addressing the issue as a dimension of operational efficiency and not

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merely as a management "preference".

Therefore, managing people in complex structures is not limited to allocating individuals, but involves: Staffing levels, skills breakdown by shift, absence management, replacement mechanisms, development of middle management, and job design that preserves responsiveness without exhausting the teams.

3.3 Standardization, routines and accountability

Standardization is often associated with "bureaucracy," understood as an excess of rules and the loss of flexibility. However, organizational literature differentiates the effects of formalization. according to design and use. Adler and Borys distinguish between “coercive” bureaucracy (centered on (monitoring, punishment and restriction) and “enabling” (focused on supporting work, reducing ambiguities and facilitate coordination), showing that rules can improve performance. when they function as support and learning technology.

Furthermore, routine theory offers a complementary analytical framework. Feldman and Pentland They propose separating the **ostensible** aspect (the general idea of routine, rules, scripts) from the aspect **performative** (the concrete execution by people in specific situations), arguing that Routines can generate both stability and change simultaneously. This is crucial for the public sector: Standardization does not mean eliminating discretion, but guiding execution to reduce it. to eliminate arbitrary actions and enable accountability.

Turner and Rindova make progress by showing that organizations can maintain consistency in their functioning in the face of continuous change through "target consistency" combined with Coordination flexibility, relying on artifacts and connections. In public services, artifacts (protocols, forms, systems) and connections (decision-making flows, escalation of authority) are The means by which the essential is stabilized without blocking adaptation.

The dimension of accountability also requires precise language. Bovens defines accountability. such as the relationship between actor and forum, in which there is an obligation to explain and justify conduct that is subject to change. questioning and consequences. In complex structures, routines and records are means operational steps to make this relationship practicable: without documentary traces and explicit criteria, the Accountability tends to degenerate into a narrative dispute.

In the field of internal control, international government audit guidelines indicate that Consistent controls depend on units and practices that support continuous improvement. Information integrity and functional independence. Governance references associated with The INTOSAI universe emphasizes internal control standards in public administration, connecting

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compliance, risk management and institutional capacity.

4. Development

4.1 Scales and work schedules as operational governance infrastructure

The scale is not a peripheral administrative document: it acts as a governance mechanism.
which defines the actual delivery capacity. When this arrangement fails, the institution tends to resort to
improvisations — folds, ad hoc rearrangements, accumulation of functions — that reduce the
Predictability increases the risk of operational error and simultaneously strains legality and...
Labor rights. In this dynamic, the problem ceases to be merely "shift management" and begins to reveal...
a structural point: the administrative capacity to maintain the service at a minimum standard of
functioning, which is precisely the core of the debate about state capacity.
The centrality of scales for efficiency is evident because they organize, at the same time, the
Coverage and continuity. Coverage is not just about maintaining a minimum quantity per
period; continuity requires preserving critical skills in each shift, ensuring redundancy.
minimum resources needed to handle absences and critical events and to stabilize transition mechanisms —
Shift handover, briefing, record keeping — without which operational knowledge is pushed aside.
for individual memory. When the transition is not structured, the organization loses consistency.
It weakens the "administrative machine" and becomes dependent on specific individuals for its maintenance.
routines that should be institutionalized.
Furthermore, operational efficiency deteriorates when long workdays and night shifts are implemented.
Treated as a permanent contingency solution. The literature on occupational health and safety.
points out that night work and prolonged working hours tend to compromise the
productivity and safety, especially over successive nights and prolonged periods.
work. In organizations with significant operational risk, this translates into an increase in errors,
reactive decisions and simultaneous degradation of formal dimensions — such as procedural errors and
incomplete records — and of substantial dimensions, with worsening service and increased
Institutional exhibition.
There is also an often underestimated organizational component: scales are instruments.
distributive. They allocate burdens and benefits — more arduous shifts, additional days off, and
Training opportunities—and, when perceived as arbitrary, they erode the work environment.
Organizational and adherence to routines. How does the literature on strategic human resource management in the sector work?
As the public suggests, the link between HR practices and performance lies in trust and perception.

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of justice and institutional coherence; formally neutral policies can produce effects
Asymmetrical when applied without transparent criteria.
Therefore, an efficiency-oriented scale can be analyzed based on minimum requirements.
Integrated: staffing sufficiency per period, considering variations in demand; composition of
Skills assigned per shift, ensuring key profiles; explicit rules for replacement and contingency.
for absences, leaves of absence, and periods of high workload; formal transition rituals that ensure...
informational continuity; and work schedule limits with adequate recovery to reduce fatigue and
These parameters do not eliminate budgetary dilemmas or legal constraints, but they make...
Explicitly stating the trade-offs reduces ad hoc decision-making. From the perspective of formal efficiency,
The schedule ceases to be a mere "arrangement of people" and begins to function as an "arrangement of
"Responsibility," defining who is responsible, why, when, and with what resources.

4.2 People management: from sizing to implementation capacity

Managing people in complex structures produces efficiency when it connects to the ability to...
To implement: to transform a norm into an executable and predictable routine. This requires more than
Training requires an organizational design that allows for coordination and learning.
Polidano suggests that the capability lies in ongoing management; therefore, HR practices that
They reduce unwanted turnover, stabilize skills, and create transfer mechanisms.
Knowledge acquisition strengthens efficiency in the medium term, even if it doesn't generate "quick wins".
For ongoing services, four HR issues are particularly critical:

(i) Absenteeism and staffing volatility.

Predictable absences (vacations, leaves) and unpredictable absences (illness, absences) require
buffers and replacement policies. Without this design, the institution operates at a "deficit."
"Chronic" and compensates with double shifts, which feeds back into fatigue and new absences.
Literature on long working hours and shifts provides a basis for addressing this dynamic as
It's a systemic risk, not an individual failure.

(ii) Competencies distributed unequally.

When critical skills are concentrated in a few employees, the scale becomes...
Vulnerable: any absence causes a collapse in quality. The answer is not just...
"to allocate better," but to develop competent redundancy (substitution capacity).
with training and supervision tracks per shift. The SHRM logic in the public sector.
It reinforces that performance depends on the combination of selection practices,
development and design of the work and the institutional conditions.

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(iii) Middle management as a mechanism for continuity.

In complex state structures, operational continuity often depends on middle management who translate guidelines into routine, manage schedules, and resolve issues. Conflicts. Insufficient intermediate managerial authority tends to shift decisions. To the top or to the bottom, which amplifies noise and inconsistency. Studies on Performance management indicates that measuring and managing performance have purposes. distinct (control, budget, learning), which requires governance so that Indicators should not become an unproductive formality.

(iv) Discretion on the front line.

Street-level bureaucracies need to make decisions under uncertainty, scarcity, and time pressure. This means that administrative efficiency depends on combining protocols with legitimate spaces for professional judgment, preventing the rule from being applied as Blind automatism or, at the opposite extreme, authorization for arbitrariness.

Therefore, people management proves to be inseparable from staffing levels: both sizing and qualification. directly influence the ability to maintain essential routines, produce accurate records, and To support institutional continuity.

4.3 Operational standardization as a means of reducing risk and increasing predictability

Standardizing in complex services doesn't mean "rigidifying"; it means defining what needs to remain constant so that... the rest can vary in a controlled manner. The literature on routines helps to formulate this idea: the The overt aspect (scripts, protocols) stabilizes expectations and coordination, while the aspect Performative norms allow for situated adaptation. When standardization ignores this duality, it tends to be... perceived as coercive and leading to superficial compliance.

For the purposes of administrative efficiency, standardization contributes in at least four ways.

(a) Control and traceability (formal efficiency).

Standardized procedures define minimum evidence: what should be recorded, and where. format and with what validations. This reduces documentary gaps that, in audits and Accountability processes translate into legal uncertainty and institutional risk. Bovens' approach reinforces that accountability requires the possibility of Questioning based on verifiable justifications; consistent records transform Explanations in auditable material.

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(b) Coordination between sectors and shifts (operational efficiency).

In continuous services, many errors stem less from "technical inability" and more from...
Interface failures: information not transmitted, incomplete shift handover, criteria.
Distinct between teams. Standardized artifacts (checklists, forms, flows) work.
acting as "bridges" between shifts and areas, maintaining target consistency without requiring physical presence.
The permanent hierarchy. Turner and Rindova's evidence regarding artifacts and connections is
particularly useful for understanding this role.

(c) Learning and continuous improvement.

Standardization allows for the comparison of variations: when there is a "standard," deviations can be...
Analyzed, not just narrated. Without this, each critical event becomes an isolated episode.
and the organization loses the capacity for cumulative learning. The distinction between bureaucracy
Coercive and enabling provides a criterion: standards must be designed to reveal
Problems need to be addressed and addressed through support and correction, not just punishment.

(d) Risk and quality management.

Quality management languages and the process approach are frequently used.
to formalize flows, responsibilities, and controls, incorporating improvement cycles and the
Risk-based thinking. ISO documents on the process approach.
They explicitly show the integration between processes, measures, and PDCA, offering a reference for
Treat standardization as a management architecture, and not as a mere "manual".

In summary, standardization reduces administrative risk by decreasing uncontrolled variability.
by stabilizing the evidence and organizing the coordination. The decisive point is its design: standards.
Those that don't engage with the actual work tend to generate "ritualism" (filling out information without purpose) and low performance.
adhesion.

4.4 Administrative records, internal control and legal security

The continuity of public service is also the continuity of information. Record-keeping systems are
The way in which the organization "remembers" and can be held accountable. In complex structures, losses
Information discrepancies between shifts, sectors, and hierarchical levels produce decisional inconsistency.
Duplication of actions and weakening of controls.
Guidelines associated with the field of government auditing and internal control highlight that
Effective controls depend on structures capable of continuously improving operations and...
To produce reliable information for decision-making and accountability. In the universe

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INTOSAI publications related to internal control standards reinforce the centrality of
Auditing and controls within the governance system, especially to reduce risks of
compliance and integrity.

In this context, administrative records fulfill simultaneous functions:

1. **Instrumental:** guiding the continuity of work (shift handover, work history)
   decisions).
2. **Evidentiary:** to allow for auditing, accountability, and institutional defense.
3. **Managerial:** to enable monitoring and improvement (indicators, bottleneck analysis).
4. **Democratic:** to uphold transparency and accountability in internal and external forums.

When these functions are not recognized, records become a cost; when they are integrated into
The design of routines becomes the infrastructure for formal and operational efficiency.

5. Discussion: Structural stresses and design criteria

5.1 Legality, discretion, and managerial response

Public administration operates under legality and control, but daily implementation requires...
Situated discretion. Excessively prescriptive standardization can produce "blindness."
"procedural," shifting the focus of public interest to mechanical compliance. On the other hand
On the one hand, the absence of standards and records widens the space for arbitrariness and inequality.
treatment and the difficulty of accountability. This is the core of the dilemma: how to stabilize the
essential without destroying the capacity for judgment.

The distinction between enabling and coercive bureaucracy suggests a practical criterion: standards must be
designed as coordination and diagnostic tools, with room for justified exceptions.
and duly registered. The exception, when documented according to criteria, can strengthen the
Formal and substantive efficiency — since it preserves legality and allows for subsequent review — instead
to be treated as a hidden deviation.

5.2 Target consistency and coordinated flexibility

Turner and Rindova show that consistency in the face of continuous change is achieved through
from the combination of patterns and the flexibility of coordination, supported by artifacts and connections. In
public services, this implies: defining strict standards for critical items (security, evidence)
minimums, working hours limits, chain of command) and allow controlled variation in tactical aspects.

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(sequence of activities, intra-shift allocation, prioritization).

In this model, scales function as a connection between resources and routine: by establishing

Shift scheduling and substitution rules reduce the need for improvisation and make it feasible.

Adaptation without collapse. The discussion about shifts and productivity reinforces that flexibility is not...

It can be confused with the indefinite extension of the workday; there are physiological and organizational limits.

which, when ignored, generate inefficiency and risk.

5.3 Indicators, performance and the risk of formalism

Measuring performance is useful, but there is no universal metric. Behn argues that the purposes of

Measurement differs (control, budget, learning, motivation) and that confuses these purposes.

It tends to generate indicators that do not guide decision-making. In the public sector, the risk of

Formalism is amplified by multiple control forums and pressure for "numbers".

politically communicative, even when operationally weak.

Consequently, standardization tools must be accompanied by governance of their use.

Who reads, when, to decide what and with what consequences. Without this, checklists and reports are useless.

They become ends in themselves and do not sustain substantial efficiency.

Final considerations

Administrative efficiency in complex public structures cannot be sustained by isolated measures alone.

It is not simply a matter of incremental productivity gains. Above all, it is a **result.**

organizational structure resulting from the interaction between institutional design and daily operations:

how work is distributed over time, how skills are mobilized, and how decisions are made.

recorded and controlled. Throughout the article, it was argued that efficiency should be analyzed in

three complementary plans — **formal, operational ,** and **substantive** — because continuous services and

Sensitive operations simultaneously require procedural compliance, operational continuity, and...

Delivery of public value under regulatory and budgetary constraints.

With regard to **schedules and work hours,** the analysis allows us to answer that their impact on the

Efficiency is not peripheral: it is a "temporal architecture" that structures capacity itself.

state delivery. Well-designed scales reduce variability in coverage and stabilize the

Transitions between shifts allow for a minimum composition of skills and limit the production of

risk due to fatigue and overload. In contrast, scales built as a mere solution

Reactive responses tend to shift the system towards informal compensation regimes (folding, improvisation,

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(unprincipled reallocations), with predictable effects: decreased predictability, degradation of Records and greater institutional exposure. In short, managing work schedules is not just a matter of... Personnel management; it is a direct component of operational efficiency and safety. decisional.

Regarding **operational standardization,** the article demonstrates that it reduces administrative risks. when conceived as a technology for coordination and learning — and not as a mechanism Punitive control. Effective formalization does not eliminate the discretion inherent in the service. public, but it **qualifies it:** it defines what needs to be invariable (minimum evidence, chain of command). decision-making, registration requirements, exception criteria) and preserves room for situated adaptation, provided it **is justified and traceable.** In this context, the question is how formalization contributes For accountability and legal certainty, the answer is straightforward: routines, forms, and records are not... They are not "accessory bureaucracy," but rather **governance infrastructure,** as they translate decisions into action. Verifiable reasons make scrutiny possible through different control forums.

Human resource management, in turn, appears as a constitutive dimension of state capacity, because Institutional continuity depends on mechanisms that stabilize competence over time. Realistic sizing, minimal redundancy of critical profiles, intermediate leadership, and arrangements. replacements that do not collapse the service with each absence. In complex structures, the Performance fails not only due to a lack of "goodwill," but also because of a design that focuses... Having knowledge concentrated in a few creates skills gaps per shift and disrupts workflows. information. Thus, the relationship between people management, institutional continuity and protection of The public interest becomes clear: by ensuring competent coverage and consistent transitions, the Organization reduces arbitrariness, prevents disruptions in service, and strengthens the legitimacy of actions. administrative.

From a critical point of view, the main tension identified is not "to standardize or not to standardize," but Yes, **how to standardize without compromising responsiveness** and **how to manage flexibly without to produce informality.** Efficiency, in this context, is not the victory of managerialism over... legality, nor the triumph of formalism over performance; it is the construction of arrangements in which the rules serve as support for the work and where discretion is exercised within intelligible, revisable, and documented parameters. The expected institutional gain is twofold: greater Operational reliability and greater legal defensibility of decisions.

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