

Implementation Challenges of Civil Servants' Competency Development in Indonesian Local Government

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Received July 21, 2026; **Revised** August 30, 2026; **Accepted** September 2, 2026

Abstract

This research aimed to: 1) explore the implementation challenges of the competency development approach for civil servants within the Surabaya City Government; and 2) identify the structural and organizational factors affecting the implementation of competency development programs. This study adopted a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with officials from the Regional Civil Service and Human Resource Development Agency (BKPSDM) of Surabaya City and supplemented with documentary analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of competency development. The findings show that although the Surabaya City Government has established competency development programs supported by national regulations and local budget allocations, limited financial resources constrain the extent to which training needs identified through Training Needs Analysis (TNA) can be accommodated. These constraints encourage selective implementation through talent management, particularly the use of a nine-box matrix to prioritize employees based on performance, competency gaps, and development potential. However, selective implementation also raises concerns about equitable access to competency development. The study further identifies structural gaps among training content, job requirements, and career advancement. Although training contributes to employees' knowledge and capabilities, its impact on career progression remains limited because promotions are influenced by formal educational requirements. Institutional capacity constraints, such as limited availability of facilitators and learning facilities, further limit the scale of competency development and encourage the adoption of digital and technology-enabled learning. The study suggests that local governments should integrate TNA into budget planning, strengthen the design of position-based training, establish clearer links between demonstrated competencies and career pathways, and balance strategic talent prioritization with equitable access to continuous learning.

Keywords: Implementation; competency development; civil servants; local government

Introduction

Competency development is a key component of public-sector reform, aimed at strengthening institutional capacity and improving organizational performance in local government. In many administrative systems, competency-based development frameworks have been adopted to ensure that civil servants have the skills and knowledge necessary to perform their duties well. In addition, these frameworks can increase opportunities to identify and develop the competencies civil servants need in the workplace, including individual competencies, teamwork, flexibility, communication, and ethical behavior, thereby improving organizational effectiveness. However, the success of competency development initiatives depends not only on policy planning and design but also on implementation. The implementation process determines the extent to which competency development programs are delivered, accessed, and used by civil servants within the organization. From a public administration perspective, competency development is part of organizational capacity building. Its effectiveness is shaped by organizational and institutional conditions, including adequate resources, organizational support, alignment between competency needs and development programs, and opportunities to apply acquired competencies in the workplace. Consequently, gaps may arise between policy design and practice when organizational capacity and institutional support are insufficient. This is especially relevant at the local government level, where national competency development policies must be adapted to specific organizational and administrative conditions.

This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of Surabaya City. As the capital of East Java Province, Surabaya requires civil servants who excel in their respective roles. The presence of competent civil servants is vital to the proper functioning of the government system, as they play a key role in the bureaucracy. As of 2024, the total number of civil servants in Surabaya is 16,034. According to 2024 data, the majority hold a bachelor's degree (10,144), while the rest have a high school diploma (1,764). The fewest civil servants hold a doctorate (9) and a diploma (10), respectively (BPS-Statistics Surabaya Municipality, 2025). In terms of the Human Development Index (HDI), Surabaya's HDI score increased from 82.76 in 2020 to 83.99 in 2023, an average annual increase of 0.49%. Although HDI cannot be attributed solely to civil servants' competencies, its improvement

offers a broader context for assessing local government's capacity to deliver effective public services. Competent civil servants are essential for translating policies and development programs into effective services and outcomes. Therefore, competency development is not only an internal human resource management function but also an institutional factor that supports local government performance. Within this national framework, the Surabaya municipal administration stands out for winning several national awards for good governance, performance-based systems, innovation, and budgetary responsibility. However, implementing competency development in Surabaya still faces challenges. Studies suggest that implementation problems often reduce the effectiveness of competency development programs, especially at the local government level. Insufficient resources, training that doesn't meet the needs of certain jobs, and reliance on traditional training methods are common obstacles to implementing competency development plans (Kusuma et al., 2023; Latief, 2022). However, limited empirical research has examined how organizational and institutional conditions shape the implementation of competency development in municipal government settings. This gap is especially relevant in Surabaya, where strong local government performance coexists with challenges in translating competency development policies into organizational practice. Therefore, this study examines the primary challenges to implementing civil servant competency development programs in Surabaya City, Indonesia.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the challenges to implementing competency development initiatives within the Surabaya City Government.
2. To examine the structural and organizational factors that influence the implementation of competency development programs.

Scope of Research

Content of the study: This study employed a qualitative case study approach. This approach provided a framework for understanding the competency training and development process among civil servants and for formulating organizational improvement strategies. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key informants who had relevant knowledge and experience implementing competency development programs. The interview data were analyzed and categorized in line with

the research objectives. Secondary data were used to provide additional context and support the interpretation of the findings. This approach aimed to address the empirical research questions and generate findings with practical implications for improving competency development practices.

Population and Sample: The data sources in this qualitative study were diverse and purposively selected, encompassing individuals, documents, and activities directly or indirectly involved in or affected by the ASN competency development system within the Surabaya City Government. These units of analysis were classified by their roles within the study framework. This study involved 15 participants representing three organizational levels, namely senior officials, middle-level managers, and staff members. This research was conducted at the Regional Personnel Agency and Human Resources Development Agency of Surabaya City (BKPSDM Surabaya), the institution formally responsible for planning, managing, and implementing competency development programs for civil servants in the Surabaya City Government. The selection of BKPSDM Surabaya as the research site was based on both institutional and strategic considerations. Institutionally, BKPSDM Surabaya played a central role in managing human resources, developing competencies, and managing talent within the local government system. Strategically, the Surabaya City Government has been widely recognized for its achievements in bureaucratic reform, merit system implementation, public service innovation, and human resource management within Indonesia's public sector.

Area: This research was conducted at the Regional Personnel Agency and Human Resources Development Agency of Surabaya City (BKPSDM Surabaya), the institution formally responsible for planning, managing, and implementing competency development programs for civil servants in the Surabaya City Government.

Time: This study examines the implementation of civil servant competency development programs for 2022–2025, managed by the Regional Civil Service and Human Resource Development Agency (Badan Kepegawaian dan Pengembangan Sumber Daya Manusia/BKPSDM) of the Surabaya City Government. The initiative aims to strengthen civil servants' skills and professionalism, thereby enhancing their effectiveness in fulfilling organizational responsibilities.

Literature Review

In an organization, human resources development encompasses the company's policies and practices that develop employees' knowledge, skills, and attitudes. It offers resources, guidance, and opportunities to support employee growth and development (Piwowar–Sulej et al., 2024). Observing employee performance can help identify competencies and prepare employees for other roles through promotion or transfer. The model can also be helpful for skills gap analysis, which compares available competencies with those required by an individual or organization. Individual development plans can be developed to close these gaps. Building on this conceptualization, we propose that individuals' participation in competency development initiatives, together with an organizational climate that fosters competency development, will positively influence their perceptions of employability. Consequently, the Human Resource Development model encompasses three fundamental elements: education, training, and development (Tien et al., 2020). Training and development provide direct, personal benefits by enhancing specific knowledge and skills. This affects the process of assigning responsibilities to improve organizational performance and post-training success through the development of competent human resources (Vyas, 2019). The interaction between training and development creates strong synergy that enhances employee performance. Together, these efforts cultivate a learning culture within the organization, supporting continuous improvement and information sharing. The competency development approach must align with organizational goals because it focuses on developing individual skills and improving overall performance. Using this approach in human resource development enables the organization to gain a sustainable competitive edge by developing strong, well-defined competencies across basic and advanced areas. When a competency framework is carefully designed and implemented, it enables the organization to identify, manage, and develop key employee skills that are crucial to HR growth and organizational success. Therefore, understanding the full scope of the competency concept is essential for its correct application across research, theory, and practical management and HR practices (Salman et al., 2020).

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study design to examine the implementation of civil servant competency development within the Surabaya City Government. The study was conducted at the Regional Personnel Agency and Human Resources Development Agency (BKPSDM) of

Surabaya City, focusing on the unit directly responsible for planning, coordinating, and implementing civil servant training and competency development programs. The study deliberately focused on the implementation dimension rather than the broader policy formulation or outcomes of competency development. Therefore, the research setting and informants were bounded to the organizational unit directly involved in implementing training programs. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select informants with direct knowledge and practical experience of civil servant competency development. Fifteen key informants were selected across three organizational levels: senior officials, middle-level managers, and operational staff. This distribution was intended to capture balanced perspectives across the strategic, managerial, and operational dimensions of competency development implementation. Senior officials provided perspectives on policy direction, resource allocation, and organizational priorities; middle-level managers addressed program planning, coordination, and implementation; while operational staff provided insights into the practical experience and relevance of competency development programs. The adequacy of the sample was assessed through thematic saturation, with interviews conducted and reviewed iteratively until no substantially new themes or dimensions emerged from the data. The convergence of perspectives across the three organizational levels further strengthened the credibility and completeness of the findings. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and documentary analysis of relevant regulations, government reports, and supporting documents. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes related to budget constraints, training prioritization, institutional capacity, training relevance, career development, and delivery mechanisms. Triangulating interview and documentary evidence enhanced the credibility of the findings. The study focused on implementation challenges and did not establish causal relationships between training and individual or organizational outcomes; competency and talent management records were examined descriptively to contextualize the implementation process.

Research Results

Budget Allocation and Financial Constraints in Competency Development

The development of competence among civil servants is a vital element in managing their careers within the Indonesian civil service system. Competency development in Indonesia is addressed in several national policies, including Law No. 20 of 2023 on State Civil Apparatus, Government Regulation No. 11 of 2017 on Civil Servant Management, Ministry of Administrative and

Bureaucratic Reform Regulation No. 38 of 2017 on Civil Servant Competency Standards, and National Institute of Public Administration Regulations No. 5 of 2018 and No. 10 of 2018 on competency development for civil servants. These national policies on competency development for civil servants in Indonesia have required government agencies, including local governments, to implement competency development programs to support the professional management of civil servants. In the local government context, the Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD) therefore serves not only as a financial instrument but also as a policy mechanism that translates competency development priorities into implementable programs. The empirical findings indicate that the Surabaya City Government has allocated dedicated resources for civil servant competency development through BKPSDM, including technical and functional training, competency certification, and institutional and managerial development. However, the findings also reveal a persistent gap between the competency needs identified through Training Needs Analysis (TNA) and the financial resources available to address them (see Table 1).

Table 1 Budgeting Competency Development

Programme	2023	2024	2025
Certification, Institutional Development, Managerial and Functional Competency Development	IDR 775,077,000	IDR 2,064,656,040	IDR 2,629,849,487
Technical Competency Development	IDR 2,736,092,895	IDR 6,101,090,521	IDR 2,164,299,452

Source: Human Resources Personnel and Training Agency (2025)

Budget allocations fluctuated from 2023 to 2025, reflecting shifts in policy priorities and fiscal capacity. Although TNA provides a basis for identifying competency gaps, implementing the identified training needs remains contingent on the availability of financial resources. This constraint directly affects the inclusiveness of competency development, as available funding cannot accommodate all identified needs. Consequently, BKPSDM adopts a selective approach to training participation, considering employee potential, the urgency of competency needs, and organizational relevance. The findings further indicate that these implementation constraints extend beyond

financial resources to institutional capacity, particularly the availability of trainers and learning facilities. Given the size of the civil service workforce, the current capacity is insufficient to meet competency development needs comprehensively and continuously. To address these constraints, BKPSDM has adopted adaptive strategies, including online learning and learning management systems, to expand access and reduce reliance on conventional training resources. However, these approaches also pose challenges related to employee participation, digital readiness, and learning effectiveness. Overall, the findings suggest that effective competency development requires stronger integration of TNA with budget planning, transparent talent identification and prioritization, strengthened institutional capacity, and strategic use of technology-enabled learning. These mechanisms enable local governments to adapt competency development strategies to resource constraints while remaining aligned with organizational competency requirements.

Selective Implementation through Talent Management

Given these budgetary constraints, Surabaya City BKPSDM has adopted a selective approach to implementing competency development programs for civil servants. One strategy is to use a talent management system to identify employees with high development potential and those with urgent competency needs. Rather than providing uniform interventions, BKPSDM tailors competency development to employees' performance, competency gaps, and development potential. The nine-box talent management matrix serves as a framework for translating assessment results into targeted development, career advancement, and talent placement decisions. Through this approach, available resources can be directed toward employees whose development is deemed strategically important to organizational performance. Civil servants with high performance and potential, particularly those in Boxes 7–9, are prioritized for leadership development and career advancement, while employees with identified competency gaps receive targeted development. This selective approach enables the local government to allocate limited resources more efficiently while aligning competency development with organizational priorities. However, selective implementation also raises concerns about equity. Not all civil servants have equal opportunities to participate in competency development programs within a given period, as interventions may be concentrated on specific employee groups based on organizational priorities and assessed needs. Moreover, the effectiveness of this approach depends on the reliability and objectivity of performance and competency assessments. Inaccurate classification may lead to inappropriate development or career decisions, while excessive focus on high-potential employees may create competency

development gaps among other groups. Therefore, selective implementation requires an evidence-based, sufficiently inclusive talent management system that differentiates development interventions while ensuring continuous competency development across the workforce.

Limitations in Institutional Capacity for Conducting Training

In addition to budgetary constraints, this study identified other challenges related to the institutions' capacity to implement programs to develop civil servants' competencies. The Surabaya City Government employs a relatively large number of civil servants. As a consequence, the demand for training programs is high. Despite the high demand for training programs, the institutions' capacity to organize training still faces several challenges. These challenges include the number of facilitators, the availability of training facilities, and the organizational capacity needed to conduct training programs at scale. Due to these challenges, the implementation of competency development programs for all civil servants in the Surabaya City Government is being carried out gradually. As one measure to overcome these challenges, the Surabaya City BKPSDM is now developing a technology-based learning approach using online learning and a learning management system. Using this technology-based learning approach, civil servants can access various training programs more flexibly and cost-effectively.

Relevance of Training Content and Career Development Discussion

The findings reveal a structural gap among training content, job requirements, and career development. Although most participants reported improvements in knowledge and analytical capabilities, some indicated that the training content did not fully align with their duties and responsibilities. This suggests that training design is not consistently aligned with position-specific competency requirements, potentially limiting the transfer of learning to workplace performance. The findings also indicate a weak link between competency development and career advancement. Although training was generally perceived as relevant to current work, its contribution to career progression was not directly evident, partly because promotion remains influenced by requirements for formal educational qualifications. Thus, competencies acquired through training may improve job performance without receiving equivalent recognition in career advancement. This reflects a structural separation between competency development and career management within the traditional bureaucratic system. These challenges are further shaped by the selective development of competencies through talent management amid budgetary constraints. Prioritizing employees based on performance, competency gaps, and development potential can improve resource

efficiency, but excessive focus on high-potential employees may create unequal access to development opportunities. Therefore, competency development requires stronger alignment among job-based competency needs, training design, talent management, and career pathways, supported by transparent selection and broader access to cost-effective learning opportunities. Such integration can strengthen competency development's contribution to both individual career progression and organizational performance.

Discussion

Research has shown that the development of competency among civil servants (ASN) in the Surabaya City Government has been supported by a comprehensive national policy framework and budget allocations from the Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD). The organization has consistently implemented various competency development programs for civil servants. Moreover, the organization has developed adaptive strategies, including implementing a talent management system to prioritize training needs and a learning management system to develop ASN competencies. From a theoretical perspective, these results indicate that the development of civil servant competency within the Surabaya City Government has followed the basic principles of Human Resource Development (HRD) theory. According to HRD theory, competency development is a systematic process of improving individual capacity by applying various planned learning systems continuously to attain organizational goals. According to Rodriguez & Walters (2017), HRD is not merely the provision of training; rather, it plays a more significant role in developing an organization's learning system to continuously improve the capacity of its human resources. The presence of a training planning system, a competency development program, and a learning technology system within the city government bureaucracy indicates a significant effort to develop a human resource development system.

Nevertheless, this study also reveals various constraints to implementing a civil servant competency development program, particularly regarding local governments' financial capabilities. Budget constraints mean that not all competency development needs identified through the Training Needs Analysis (TNA) process can be fully addressed. This implies that not all civil servants can participate in competency development programs simultaneously, necessitating the prioritization of specific groups within local governments. Salman et al., (2020) argues that, in addition to the quality of training programs, the success of a human resource development system is significantly influenced

by organizational support, including financial capabilities, management support, and the integration of human resource development policies with organizational strategies. The budget constraints revealed in this study, therefore, imply that developing civil servants' competence is not only a technical matter but also that the organization's fiscal capabilities are strongly related to the support it provides for long-term investment in human resources in the civil service sector. Research findings also show that resource constraints force the organization to adopt selective implementation strategies within the talent management approach. The talent management approach prioritizes the development of competencies for civil servants with high development potential or whose competency development needs are most relevant to the organization. From the human resource management discipline, talent management is viewed as the strategic management process used to identify, develop, and retain high potentials to achieve organizational goals. The application of the talent management approach reflects the organization's strategic effort to allocate competency development resources amid resource constraints.

However, the application of the talent management approach in public-sector organizations is also subject to challenges related to the principle of equality in civil service management. In the context of the meritocratic ideal in public sector management, a selective approach to developing competencies requires transparent methods for identifying talent to avoid perceptions of unfairness among civil servants. In addition, this study identified challenges in ensuring that the training materials aligned with job requirements and were relevant to civil servants' career development (Khairani et al., 2023). Some training program participants reported that the provided training materials were not fully aligned with the duties and functions of their positions. This finding suggests that the training program planning process still requires further integration with the competency needs of civil servants' positions. From a strategic HRD perspective, the competency development process must be integrated with the performance management system and the employee's career development process. In fact, as Garavan et al. (2016) note, an effective talent development system must ensure integration among the competency development process, the performance management system, and the career planning process within the organization. If the training process is not fully aligned with the career planning process, the competency development process will not have the optimal impact on performance improvement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the development of civil servant competencies at the local government level is a systemic process shaped by financial capacity, training implementation, talent management, and career management. The findings show that selective implementation through talent management can help align limited resources with strategic competency needs. However, its effectiveness depends on meaningful links between competency development and career advancement, as well as equitable access to development opportunities. A critical issue is the weak linkage between training outcomes and promotion. Although training can improve employees' knowledge and skills, completing training does not necessarily lead to career advancement when promotion is constrained by formal degree requirements and other regulations. Therefore, competency development should be more closely integrated with career pathways, including opportunities for formal education and recognition of relevant competencies under the applicable regulatory framework. Selective talent management also presents an equity challenge. Prioritizing high-potential employees may improve resource efficiency but can create perceptions of unequal access and widen competency gaps among other employees. Transparent selection criteria, periodic reassessment, and cost-effective learning mechanisms, such as mentoring, peer learning, and digital learning, are therefore needed to maintain both strategic prioritization and broader access to development. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its focus on the Surabaya City Government and its specific institutional, fiscal, and regulatory context. The findings also do not establish a direct causal link between training interventions and career or organizational outcomes. Future research should examine multiple local governments using longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches to further investigate the relationships among competency development, talent management, career advancement, and equitable access.

Suggestions

To enhance the competency development system for Civil Servants (ASN) in the Surabaya City Government, several strategic and policy measures can be implemented. First, competency development planning should be more closely integrated with municipal budget planning. Training Needs Analysis (TNA) results should be translated into prioritized annual competency development plans and linked to budget allocations. Given fiscal constraints, priority should be given to competency needs critical to service delivery and organizational performance, while lower-priority needs can be

addressed through cost-efficient alternatives such as internal learning, peer learning, mentoring, and digital learning.

Second, the capacity to deliver competency development programs should be strengthened by improving facilitator quality and the systematic use of Learning Management System (LMS) technology. Facilitator selection and development should be based on relevant expertise and demonstrated teaching competencies, while LMS-based learning can expand access, reduce delivery costs, and support continuous learning. These measures offer a feasible alternative for maintaining competency development when face-to-face training resources are limited.

Third, talent management should be strengthened as a transparent, merit-based mechanism for prioritizing training participants. The nine-box matrix can be used to align competency development priorities with employees' performance, competency gaps, and development potential. However, selection criteria and assessment procedures should be clearly defined, evidence-based, and consistently applied to minimize subjectivity and ensure fairness. This approach would allow the organization to balance strategic workforce needs with equitable access to competency development opportunities.

Finally, competency development should be more systematically integrated with civil servant career development and organizational performance planning. Training outcomes should be incorporated into individual development plans, career pathways, job placement, and subsequent performance assessments. Periodic evaluations should also be conducted to determine whether competency development contributes to improved employee performance and organizational outcomes. Such integration would enable competency development to function not merely as a training activity but as a strategic human resource management instrument.

Overall, these recommendations emphasize a feasible and adaptive approach to competency development under fiscal and institutional constraints. Rather than expanding training provision indiscriminately, the Surabaya City Government can improve effectiveness by prioritizing critical competency needs, diversifying cost-effective learning modalities, applying transparent, talent-based selection, and strengthening the link among competency development, career management, and organizational performance.

New Knowledge

This study contributes new insights by showing that competency development in local government is a complex organizational process shaped by financial capacity, institutional capability, and HR governance systems. Unlike the conventional view that emphasizes training provision as the primary driver of competency development, this study reveals that local governments must balance resource efficiency through talent management with equity considerations for civil servants. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of integrating competency development with career management and organizational governance systems to maximize its contribution to improving bureaucratic capacity.

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