Abstract: The concepts of merit and motivation are central to recruiting and retaining high-quality public servants. The meaning of merit has evolved to the more flexible interpretation contained in the 2003 federal Public Service Employment Act (PSEA), and the concept of motivation has become much more central to public management. The PSEA enshrines merit and non-partisanship as the main values to be protected in public-service appointments. It also provides a new definition of merit. Employees with a high level of public-service motivation (PSM) are predisposed to having greater job satisfaction and organizational commitment and, therefore, to performing at a higher level. The challenge is to recruit and retain employees with a high PSM level and to maintain this level while fostering high performance by other employees. This challenge is being pursued in part by fostering employee engagement in the sense of job/organization satisfaction and organizational commitment. Among the major drivers of employee engagement is fair staffing practices, including merit-based hiring. The successful pursuit of a high level of employee engagement can improve public-sector management in general and human resource management in particular.

Sommaire : Les concepts de mérite et de motivation sont essentiels au recrutement et au maintien d’excellents fonctionnaires. La signification du mérite a évolué pour aboutir à une interprétation plus souple contenue dans la Loi de 2003 sur l’emploi dans la fonction publique (LEFP) du gouvernement fédéral, et le concept de motivation est devenu beaucoup plus essentiel à la gestion publique. La LEFP inscrit le mérite et l’impartialité politique comme les principales valeurs à protéger dans les nominations de fonctionnaires. Elle prévoit également une nouvelle définition du mérite. Les employés qui ont un niveau élevé de motivation pour la fonction publique (MFP) sont prédisposés à tirer une plus grande satisfaction professionnelle, à faire preuve d’un plus fort engagement envers l’organisation et, par conséquent, à être plus performants. Le défi consiste à recruter et retenir des employés ayant un niveau élevé de MFP et à faire en sorte qu’ils maintiennent ce niveau tout en encourageant une forte performance de la part des autres employés. Ce défi peut être en partie relevé en encourageant l’engagement des employés sur le plan de la satisfaction professionnelle et du degré d’attachement à l’organisation. Parmi les principaux catalyseurs de l’engagement des employés, on note les méthodes de dotation équitables, y compris l’embauche fondée sur le mérite. L’obtention d’un haut niveau d’engagement de la
In governments around the world, calls for a competent and committed public service are a commonplace occurrence. Both theorists and practitioners of public administration are acutely aware that designing and operating human resource management (HRM) systems that respond effectively to these calls pose difficult and enduring challenges. This article examines recent theoretical and practical developments that affect two major concepts in HRM – namely, merit and motivation. Brief reference is made also to the relationship between these two concepts.

Taken together, merit and motivation are central considerations in recruiting and retaining high-quality public servants. While “engaging” public servants can refer both to hiring them and motivating them, the focus of engagement in this article is on the latter sense of instilling in public servants a high level of job/work satisfaction and organizational commitment. The first part of the article discusses changes in the meaning of merit, and the second part examines the concepts of employee motivation and employee engagement. The data reported here are current as of the article’s revision in early 2010.

The subjects of merit and motivation were last examined in Canadian Public Administration in its twenty-fifth anniversary issue, in 1982 (Kernaghan and Kuruvilla). That was a time when use of the term personnel management had not yet given way to the term human resource management and long before the recent increased use of the term people management.

The 1982 essay set an examination of HRM within a values framework that is even more relevant today because of the greatly increased emphasis on public-service values, including the values-based approach to HRM contained in the 2003 federal Public Service Employment Act (PSEA) (S.C. 2003, c. 22, ss. 12, 13). In 2007, the Prime Minister’s Advisory Committee on the Public Service, which focused on improving HRM, argued that “a well-functioning and values-based public service is critical to the success of every country” (see the full report at http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/ren/cpmc/cpmc1-eng.asp).

The values that framed the 1982 discussion of HRM – integrity, economy, efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, representativeness, responsiveness and political neutrality – are still important today. However, other values, including “people” values, have become relatively more prominent. For example, the “Respect for people” section of the July 2010 draft federal Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector includes values that are central to employee motivation – namely, respect, fairness and honesty. Similarly, the preamble to the PSEA notes the government’s commitment to a public service that is “characterized by fair, transparent employment practices, respect for employees, effective dialogue, and recourse aimed at resolving appointment issues.”
Modifying merit
The meaning of merit

The 1982 essay mentioned above relied on R.H. Dowdell’s widely cited formulation of the traditional distinction between the merit principle and the merit system. The merit principle was explained as two interrelated principles: “1) that Canadian citizens should have a reasonable opportunity to be considered for employment in the public service”; and “2) that selections must be based exclusively on merit, or fitness to do the job.” The merit system was defined as “an administrative device which can and should be adapted to changing circumstances” (1971: 282–83). The federal Public Service Commission recently defined the merit system as “the collection of processes, practices, rules and procedures governing particular appointment actions” (Canada, Public Service Commission 2005). A central challenge in implementing the merit system has been determining what constitutes “a reasonable opportunity” and “fitness to do the job.”

Despite the centrality of merit to the practice of public administration in Canada, writings dealing with the concept in a substantial way are quite limited. Since a literature review on merit is available elsewhere (Kernaghan 2008), only brief reference to relevant writings is made here.

The volume entitled The Biography of an Institution: The Civil Service Commission of Canada, 1908–1967 contains a detailed history of merit in the federal public service. The authors conclude that, in 1967, the merit principle still served “as a basis for discussion of the rightness or wrongness of employment practices” (Hodgetts et al. 1972: 493). Most of the essays in Evert Lindquist’s edited volume, Government Restructuring and Career Public Services (2000), touch on merit considerations. Especially notable is his inclusion of merit-based appointments in his formulation of the major components of the concept of career public service.

The examination of merit in relation to other values has been a pervasive feature of its evolution. A Special Calling: Values, Ethics and Professional Public Service examines the concept of merit in the federal public service in relation to enduring, changing and new public-service values, including such values as political neutrality, representativeness and service (Kernaghan 2007). Values are also a constant theme in Defending a Contested Ideal: Merit and the PSC of Canada 1908–2008. Luc Juillet and Ken Rasmussen note that merit system debates go beyond technical and administrative considerations: “They are also debates about which fundamental values a public service should espouse in a democracy and about how to design a system that can reasonably uphold competing values” (2008: 7). These competing values require a tough balancing act that leads to continuing and less-than-ideal compromises – hence use of the term “contested ideal.”

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The primary player in striking this balance over the past century has been the Public (formerly the Civil) Service Commission (PSC). In 1978, the PSC asserted that “the policies and practices devised to ensure the application of merit . . . should continue to provide for appointment to, and career advancement in, the Public Service to be based on the merit of each individual but taking into account the requirements of other principles” (Canada, Public Service Commission 1978: 12). These other principles were the public-service values of efficiency and effectiveness, sensitivity and responsiveness, equality of opportunity and equity. The 1990 report of Public Service 2000, an inquiry into the state of the federal public service, included non-partisanship and impartiality among the values that have suffused the public service since the early 1900s. It also lauded the prohibition against political involvement in public-service appointments as essential to the concept of merit and to the professionalism of the public service. The PSC made the same point in its recent assertion that “the merit system reflects a commitment to fundamental public service values and is comprised of more than just the merit principle alone” (Canada, Public Service Commission 2005: 1).

A 1992 amendment to the federal Public Service Employment Act authorized the PSC to permit deployments and promotions to be based on an assessment of individual merit, that is, the measurement of a candidate’s qualifications against standards. This was a departure from the previous approach of only assessing candidates according to their relative merit – according to their qualifications in relation to those of other candidates. In 1995, the PSC set this new approach to merit within the context of several public-service values when it noted that basing public-service appointments and advancement on merit means

that the knowledge, experience, abilities and personal suitabilities of candidates are evaluated against the requirements of the position. It also means that the best qualified person (relative merit) or a qualified person based on a standard of competence (individual merit) is selected, and that treatment of Public Service employees and those seeking employment in the Public Service is fair and equitable. The Public Service must be highly competent, totally professional and politically neutral [i.e., non-partisan] . . . . It also must be representative of the population it serves. Its staffing system must be easy to manage, economical to operate and sufficiently flexible to meet changing operational needs and driven by . . . values (fairness, equity and transparency)’’(cited in Canada, Treasury Board 1995: 3.1–1).

The report of the federal Deputy Ministers’ Task Force on Public Service Values and Ethics also considered merit in relation to other public-service values (1996: 26). The report recommended that political neutrality be reasserted as a basic value in view of its strong ties to other key values such as merit, fairness, equity, impartiality and professionalism. Merit and neutrality were singled out as values that continue to be “fundamental to maintaining confidence in the public service as a great Canadian institution serving the common good” (1996: 27).
By the end of the decade, the PSC was pursuing the strategic goal of implementing and promoting a values-based staffing framework. This framework aimed in part to help managers understand better “that their staffing decisions determine whether appointments are based on merit so that the public service is professional, non-partisan and reflective of our society” (Canada, Public Service Commission 2000: 4). The framework was made up of three results values (non-partisanship, responsiveness and competence); three process values (fairness, equity and transparency); and two management principles (flexibility and affordability/efficiency) (20).

Understanding and assessing the new act

A watershed event in the evolution of merit was the adoption in 2003 of a new Public Service Employment Act, which was a central component of the Public Service Modernization Act (S.C. 2003, c. 22) and which came into full force on 31 December 2005. A central feature of the PSEA is its definition of merit. The PSEA’s preamble enshrines merit and non-partisanship as the values to be protected in public-service appointments. The PSC describes these as the “core appointment values” and identifies four additional “guiding values” – fairness, transparency, access and representativeness – to assist organizations in the appointment process. While merit is not the only concern of the PSEA, it is a pervasive concern. Indeed, it is difficult to separate merit considerations from most of the other areas of human resource management covered by the act. This article does not examine the large issue of the relationships between merit, non-partisanship, and political and bureaucratic patronage.

The history of merit in Canada has demonstrated that getting all of the major players to agree on the concept’s proper meaning and application is a formidable task

Under Section 30 of the PSEA, an appointment is deemed to be based on merit when the PSC is satisfied that the appointment meets the merit criteria determined by the deputy minister or his or her delegate. These criteria require that the appointee be able to meet the essential qualifications for the work to be performed and that consideration be given to any additional qualifications deemed to be an asset for the work or for the organization currently or in the future, any current or future operational requirements, and any current or future needs of the organization or of the public service. While the authority for staffing and, in particular, for establishing merit criteria is delegated to deputy ministers, they are encouraged to sub-delegate this authority down the line to hiring managers. Candidates for appointment can be assessed in relation to the merit criteria established for the position.
rather than in relation to other candidates: “The Commission is not required to consider more than one person in order for an appointment to be made on the basis of merit” (Section 30.4).

The new PSEA is still in its infancy and it will be several years before a confident judgment can be made as to whether the act has brought about the desired cultural change in merit-based staffing by federal departments and agencies

The PSEA requires that a review of the act and its administration and operation be conducted five years after it comes into force – that is, by 31 December 2010. The PSC plans to conduct a general assessment of the act that will culminate in a special report to Parliament in the winter of 2010–11. This report will provide the foundation for the PSC’s contribution to an integrated legislative review of the Public Service Modernization Act, including the PSEA. The president of the Treasury Board will lead this review.

A key part of the PSEA’s assessment should be an examination of whether the federal government has “got merit right” or whether some adjustments to the act are desirable. The history of merit in Canada has demonstrated that getting all of the major players to agree on the concept’s proper meaning and application is a formidable task. Those affected by the merit provisions of the PSEA are likely to have different views on what adjustments to those provisions are needed. Among the broad questions on merit-based staffing that the assessment should answer is the extent to which

1. deputy ministers have established for each position the four merit criteria noted above – essential qualifications, asset qualifications, operational requirements, and organizational needs;
2. candidates for selection are being assessed according to the requirements of the position rather than in relation to other candidates;
3. the appointment values of the Public Service Commission – fairness, transparency, access and representativeness – are being effectively implemented;
4. deputy heads are ensuring that a non-advertised process for positions meets the established criteria and the appointment values; and
5. appointments are free from political influence and personal favouritism.

The five-year assessment may not have sufficient data to examine all of the more specific questions that need to be answered, with complete confidence in the validity and reliability of the results. The PSC will doubtless employ multiple data collection methods to examine the several factors bearing on merit-based staffing, but a large volume of data will be required

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and data must be constant through time so that the pre- and post-act periods can be compared. On some questions, there will be limited data for the short period between the time the act comes into force and the conduct of the evaluation. However, the review should be able to illuminate any significant changes in merit-based staffing during the post-act period and provide valuable baseline data for subsequent evaluations.

The new PSEA is still in its infancy and it will be several years before a confident judgment can be made as to whether the act has brought about the desired cultural change in merit-based staffing by federal departments and agencies. The many other jurisdictions in Canada and around the world that have more traditional definitions and applications of the concept of merit may benefit from monitoring Canada’s new federal regime on merit.

**Motivation and engagement**

**Public-service motivation**

The 1982 anniversary essay called on the Canadian public service to adopt a less rigid interpretation of merit and a heightened focus on motivation (Kernaghan and Kuruvilla 1982: 698). Since that time, the meaning of merit has evolved to the more flexible interpretation enshrined in the 2003 PSEA that was discussed above, and the concept of motivation has become much more central to public-service dialogue.

Research findings suggest that persons with a high level of public-service motivation are likely to perform better than those with lower PSM and that the former group should, therefore, be recruited, selected and retained.

Another 1982 essay called attention to the special features of motivation in public-sector, as opposed to private-sector, organizations and outlined a research agenda to enhance the comparatively limited body of knowledge about motivation in the public sector (Perry and Porter 1982). James Perry has subsequently taken the lead in developing and researching the concept of “public-service motivation” that captures the particular meaning of motivation associated with public service (Hondeghem and Perry 2009: 6) and that is based on extensive previous writings on motivation and related concepts. The PSM construct was put forward as an alternative to the rational choice approach to motivation that, according to John Dilulio, helps explain why public servants “shirk, subvert and steal on the job” but that does not explain why they “strive . . . support . . . and sacrifice on the job” (1994: 281).

The concept of a PSM that attracts certain people to the public sector is sometimes described as a public-service ethic (Houston 2006; Mann 2006;
Perry 1996). In 1990, James Perry and Lois Wise defined PSM as “an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations” (368). More recently, Perry and Annie Hondeghem (2008: 6) defined PSM as “an individual’s orientation to delivering service to people with the purpose of doing good for others and society.” Perry (1996: 20) identified four elements of the PSM construct – commitment to the public interest, compassion, self-sacrifice, and attraction to policy-making. However, Gene Brewer, Sally Coleman Selden, and Rex Facer (2000) found only the first three to be elements of PSM.

A steadily growing volume of research on PSM has provided substantial empirical evidence on relationships between PSM and such related concepts as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and individual performance. There are, however, contradictory research findings on some of these relationships. Thus, there is considerable debate about how PSM can best be measured and utilized. Research studies do support the hypothesis that the higher the level of an individual’s PSM, the more likely he or she is to be attracted to a public organization (Alonso and Lewis 2001; Brewer and Selden 1998; Crewson 1997; Hondeghem and Perry 2009; Perry 1997). Moreover, most studies show a positive relationship between PSM and individual performance (Hondeghem and Perry 2009: 7; Vandenabeele 2009: 13, 27).

A positive relationship has also been found between organizational commitment and individual performance (Balfour and Weschler 1996; Park and Rainey 2007) and between job satisfaction and individual performance (Vandenabeele 2009: 15). With specific reference to the public sector, several studies have shown a positive relationship between PSM and organizational commitment (Crewson 1997; Naff and Crum 1999; Park and Rainey 2007; Taylor 2008) and between PSM and job satisfaction (Naff and Crum 1999; Park and Rainey 2007; Steijn 2008; Taylor 2008). Note, however, that Leonard Bright (2008) found, on the basis of a study of public employees in three U.S. states, that PSM had no significant relationship to the job satisfaction and turnover intentions of employees when person–organization fit was considered. From a review of the literature on PSM, Wouter Vandenabeele concluded that “[t]he presence of PSM leads to higher levels of commitment and satisfaction for employees working in a public sector environment, thus rendering higher levels of performance” (2009: 15).

These research findings suggest that persons with a high level of public-service motivation are likely to perform better than those with lower PSM and that the former group should, therefore, be recruited, selected and retained. However, PSM is difficult to identify, measure and implement (Houston 2000; Rainey 1997). Perry (2000: 484) suggests that persons with high PSM are more likely to “self-select” by seeking public-service employment. Moreover, some researchers question whether employers can influence the internal satisfaction of their employees and suggest that
extrinsic rewards can actually have a negative impact on the performance of employees with high PSM (Condrey 1998: 576; Houston 2006: 3).

Public-service motivation has been a focus of much more academic than applied research. To help remedy the lack of attention to PSM’s impact on management practices, Laurie Paarlberg, James Perry, and Annie Hondegheem (2008: 268) propose that the relationship between motives and behaviour be strengthened by integrating public-service values into all of the organization’s management systems. Among the tactics recommended are using PSM as a selection consideration for public-service appointments, helping new employees to learn and respect public-service values, adopting employee appraisal systems that foster PSM, and developing leaders who model values-based types of behaviour. These recommendations are in line with Canadian studies urging the integration of public-service values into the structures, processes and systems of government (Canada, Public Service Commission 2000; Heintzman 2007; Kernaghan 2003).

Employee engagement

Despite research on PSM’s relevance for several other countries, notably the United States (Vandenabeele and Van de Walle 2008), very little Canadian research has focused specifically on PSM. In Canada, the related concept of employee engagement has received much more attention (Schmidt and Marson 2007). The report on the 2008 federal employee survey went so far as to assert that “[a]s a higher-level outcome, engagement can be used as a synonym or proxy for overall people management” because “it is the cumulative effect of leadership, workforce, and workplace efforts that drives engagement” (Canada, Treasury Board Secretariat 2009).

Increasingly, employee engagement is being viewed as an effective means of achieving higher employee performance in the public sector

The concept of employee engagement seems to have originated in 1990 with the work of W.A. Kahn, who explained it as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (1990: 694). Since that time, but especially since 2000, employee engagement has become a prominent theme in human resource management (Scotland, Executive Social Research, Office of the Chief Researcher 2007: 6). The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (2008:10) explains employee engagement as an enhanced connection between employees and their work, their organization and their colleagues. Engaged employees have more pride in their work and their organization, they are happier with the
organization’s leadership, they receive adequate recognition for their work, they have reasonable prospects for personal and professional growth, and their work environment is positive and team-oriented.

Academics are inclined to end their studies by calling for further studies. However, employee engagement is such a multifaceted concept and its study and application in the public sector is so recent that it is appropriate to call at the outset for more scholarly attention to its meaning and usage. This article provides an overview, rather than a detailed treatment, of the many aspects and implications of employee engagement.

Unlike PSM, employee engagement has been the subject of substantial applied research conducted by public servants and management consultants. Academic research on this concept has been quite limited to date but has picked up its pace in the past few years. Much of this research deals with the psychological dimension (e.g., Macey and Schneider 2008; Masson et al. 2008; Saks 2006) rather than with the managerial or organizational dimensions of engagement. In general, employee engagement has received more attention in the private (e.g., Towers Perrin 2008) than in the public sector. The 2007 literature review on employee engagement for Scotland’s Executive Social Research concluded that “the overriding sentiment throughout the leading texts is very positive with regard to the impact employee engagement has on organizational performance” (36; see also Gibbons 2006: 10). Increasingly, employee engagement is being viewed as an effective means of achieving higher employee performance in the public sector and, in the Canadian context in particular, has attracted considerable attention from practitioners (Heintzman and Marson 2005, 2006; Herrin 2008; Illington and Barber 2009).

Like PSM, employee engagement builds on several related concepts, including pride, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. By 2001, the abundant empirical data and scholarly analyses from research studies in Canada and elsewhere suggested that increased public-service pride, as manifested by high levels of motivation, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction, would lead to improved performance by public servants (e.g., better service) (Kernaghan 2001). It was also suggested that this improved performance would lead to greater public approval of public servants (e.g., in the form of increased citizen satisfaction) and that this would in turn result in increased organizational commitment, job satisfaction and motivation. Penna, the international human resources services group, notes that employers who foster “meaning at work” can expect increased pride, motivation and productivity: “Pride taken in working for an employer, and willingness of employees to recommend their employer as a place to work to friends, are excellent barometers of engagement” (2005: 18).

There are slight variations in the definitions of employee engagement used in different Canadian jurisdictions. Faye Schmidt draws in part on
employee satisfaction studies for the Regional Municipality of Peel, Ontario, to conclude that employee engagement is composed of the two distinct but related elements of employee satisfaction (defined more broadly than job satisfaction) and employee commitment (2004: 37), both of which are essential to effective engagement. As noted above, PSM research studies have found a positive relationship between each of these elements and individual performance. Schmidt notes that “satisfaction addresses more of an emotional or attitudinal level while commitment appears to be linked more to motivation and to specific workplace behaviours” (2004: 36).

The Province of Ontario’s employee engagement model consists of the two components of job satisfaction and organizational commitment, with the latter including public servants feeling pride for their organization, intending to remain with their organization, desiring to serve or perform at high levels, recommending positively their organization to others, and improving their organization’s results (Ontario, Ministry of Government Services, Modernization Division, Service Excellence Office 2009: 3). Canada’s federal government defines employee engagement as “the level of satisfaction and commitment that employees feel for their job and their organization. The more employees are engaged in their organization and the work it does, the more likely they are to remain with the organization, to recommend the organization to others, and to perform at higher levels” (see the summary of the survey results at the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat web site at http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pses-saff/2008/report-rapport-eng.asp). For the federal government, the three components of employee engagement are

- **job satisfaction**: the level of contentment or happiness people assign to their jobs;
- **commitment to the organization**: the level of pride people feel for their organization and the degree to which they intend to remain with the organization, perform at high levels, positively recommend the organization to others, and improve the organization’s performance (Note the similarity to the Ontario definition provided above.); and
- **satisfaction with the organization**: the level of contentment or happiness people feel with regard to the organization and their employment. (For further results, see “Public servants on the public service’’ at http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pses-saff/2008/1d-report-rapport-eng.asp#jobsatis.)

This definition of employee engagement is the same as that developed by the Province of British Columbia (see BC Stats 2008a: 3). In this article, employee engagement is discussed in terms of job/organization satisfaction and organizational commitment.

The importance of employee engagement for individual and organizational performance is suggested by Michael Meere’s classification: those
employees who are engaged – they “work with passion and feel a profound connection to their organization”; those who are not engaged – they “attend and participate at work but are timeserving and put no passion or energy into their work”; and those who are disengaged – they “are unhappy at work and . . . act out their unhappiness at work” (2005: 3). Towers Perrin surveyed 40,000 employees working full time for medium-sized and large organizations (with at least 500 workers) across the United States and Canada on their level of agreement with several core engagement factors: only seventeen per cent were found to be highly engaged; nineteen per cent were disengaged; and sixty-four per cent fell into “the massive middle” (2003: 8).

The pursuit of heightened employee engagement takes on added importance as one of the three building blocks in the “public-sector service value chain,” developed by Ralph Heintzman and Brian Marson (2005, 2006) as an adaptation from the idea of a service “profit” chain in the private sector (Heskett, Sasser, and Schlesinger 1997; Heskett et al. 1994). The public-sector value chain depicts employee engagement as leading to citizen/client service satisfaction, which leads to citizen trust and confidence in public institutions. The relationship between employee engagement and citizen satisfaction is depicted as a two-way interaction, whereas citizen satisfaction is conceptualized as leading to trust and confidence but not vice-versa. The Ontario public service adds a performance link to the value chain by conceptualizing it as increased employee engagement that leads to strengthened organizational performance, which leads to increased customer satisfaction, which in turn promotes public trust and confidence. Heintzman and Marson, in their 2010 update on what has been learned about the service value chain since their original articles, report that several public-sector organizations (e.g., the public services of British Columbia and Ontario, the regional municipalities of Peel, Hamilton, and Waterloo, and the New Zealand Police) have started to use the service value chain “as a management tool for improving organizational performance.”

For service-delivery work units in both the B.C. public service and the Region of Peel, BC Stats (2008b: 1) found that there is a moderately strong relationship between employee engagement and customer satisfaction. A two-point change in employee engagement scores was found to be associated with a one-point change in service satisfaction scores. Work units with high employee engagement scored higher in customer satisfaction than low-engagement work units.

A related but little-examined question is whether the public-sector service value chain applies in the context of internal, as opposed to external, service delivery. A study for the Ontario public service (Ipsos 2009) examined this question by comparing, for the Information and Information Technology Group, the 2007 OPS Employee Survey and the 2007 Customer Satisfaction Survey of the Office of the Corporate Chief Information Officer to investigate
the link between employee engagement and customer satisfaction. The study found that employee engagement moderately drove customer satisfaction, thereby supporting the view that the service value chain does apply to internal service delivery.

An especially notable development in the evolution of Canada’s employee engagement activities is the Employee Engagement Interjurisdictional Initiative, first discussed and endorsed at the 2004 Annual Public Service Commissioners Conference (Employment Engagement Interjurisdictional Team 2006). The purpose of this collaborative initiative is to improve results for citizens by fostering a more engaged workforce. Information about engagement levels and best practices was shared — and benchmarked — among the participating governments, which by 2009 included nine provinces and two territories.

The Employee Engagement Interjurisdictional Team (EEIT) reconciled their separate engagement measurement tools to create a common list of questions to be used by all members in their employee surveys. The nineteen questions are contained in the Initiative’s Employee Engagement Framework, which comprises thirteen employee engagement factors (e.g., coworker relationships, job fit, recognition) and six characteristics of engaged employees (e.g., satisfied with organization, feel pride for their organization). The EEIT has also developed an “interjurisdictional engagement index” that provides the average of “interjurisdictional agreement” scores for six questions:

– I am satisfied with my ministry/department.
– Overall, I am satisfied in my work as an xxx employee.
– I am proud to tell people I work for the xxx.
– I would prefer to stay with the xxx, even if offered a similar job elsewhere.
– I am inspired to give my very best.
– I would recommend xxx as a great place to work.

All members adhere to a detailed “usage and data-sharing protocol” that outlines eligibility requirements for using the common questions and specifies the principles and operational procedures for the collection, storing and reporting of data and for the confidential sharing of results that enables the benchmarking of results.

Driving employee engagement

A considerable variety of workplace attributes and characteristics can drive employee engagement in the public sector. British Columbia, Ontario and the Regional Municipality of Peel have notable experience in identifying and applying employee engagement drivers. BC Stats (2008a, 2008b) found for both B.C.’s public sector and for its employed labour force that the three characteristics of engagement (i.e., job satisfaction, organization commitment and
organization satisfaction) are mutually reinforcing. The strongest drivers for each of the three characteristics tend to be the other two characteristics (BC Stats 2008a: 7).

The challenge is to recruit and retain employees who have a high level of public-service motivation and to maintain this level while fostering high performance in other employees.

As shown in Table 1, Peel’s model of employee engagement identifies nine drivers (Szwarc 2006: 21) and the Ontario model identifies twelve (Ontario, Ministry of Government Services, Modernization Division, Service Excellence Office 2009: 3). The B.C. model divides its drivers into two foundational drivers and ten building blocks (workplace functions). The four main drivers for B.C., in order of influence, are the two foundational drivers, followed by vision, mission and goal, and staffing practices (Herrin 2008: 19; Illington and Barber 2009: 4). For B.C.’s employed labour force and for Peel, each of the main engagement characteristics was shown to have a different set of workplace drivers (BC Stats 2008a: 8; Szwarc 2006: 21). Both governments have found that applying the drivers has helped to foster higher levels of employee engagement, as well as improvements in such areas as pay and

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benefits and communication (Illington and Barber 2009: 6; Szwarc 2006: 21). The B.C. government’s 2008 Work Environment Survey found that, between 2006 and 2008, its corporate employee engagement score rose from 58.00 to 66.00 (British Columbia, BC Public Service 2008: 33). Note also that B.C. holds its senior executives accountable for improvement based on knowledge of the drivers. Employee engagement scores are a factor in B.C.’s annual performance management program and in the calculation of performance pay for senior executives (Marson and Heintzman 2009: 28).

Employee surveys of the Ontario public service show that the level of engagement increased by ten per cent between 2007 and 2009, with fifty-one per cent of employees being highly engaged in 2009 compared to thirty-seven per cent in 2007 (Ipsos Loyalty 2009: 10). Other noteworthy findings are that senior management employees are more highly engaged (employee index of 79.00) than bargaining-unit employees (71.38); relatively new employees have higher engagement scores (one year = 79.94, and one to four years = 75.30) than longer-serving employees (sixteen to twenty years = 69.93, and more than twenty years = 70.92); and that female employees are slightly more highly engaged (73.75) than male employees (71.74). These findings are generally consistent with those of a limited number of studies reported in a 2007 literature review (Scotland, Executive Social Research, Office of the Chief Researcher 2007: 31–33), but inconsistencies in studies to date argue for additional research on the importance of demographic variables for employee engagement.

The research findings noted above indicate that employees with a high level of public-service motivation will be predisposed to having greater job/organization satisfaction and organizational commitment and will, therefore, perform at a higher level. They are also likely to be motivated more by intrinsic than extrinsic incentives, both in comparison to private-sector employees and to their public-service colleagues (Crewson 1997; Houston 2000, 2006). The challenge is to recruit and retain employees who have a high level of public-service motivation and to maintain this level while fostering high performance in other employees. This challenge is being pursued in part by fostering employee engagement. Public organizations are following the lead of the private sector by acting on the premises that engaged employees are made rather than born and that governments can narrow the gap between employees who are highly engaged and the rest.

### Merit, motivation and engagement

Astute observers are bound to wonder whether employee engagement is just another addition to the long series of fads or purported panaceas in public management reform (Herrin 2008: 21; Scotland, Executive Social Research, Office of the Chief Researcher 2007: 59). Compared to PSM, there has been little academic research on employee engagement. However, both concepts...
are based on a large volume of research that predated their emergence. Much of the research on PSM informs understanding of employee engagement, notably in respect of the relationship of job/organization satisfaction and organizational commitment to high-quality individual performance. J. Gibbons contends that employee engagement is “a natural extension of discussions on motivation, satisfaction, commitment, empowerment, etc. – all concepts that have been thoroughly explored for decades” (2007: 2). D. Robinson, S. Perryman and S. Hayday argue that engagement overlaps with the well-researched concepts of commitment and organizational citizenship behaviour, “but there are also differences. In particular, engagement is two-way: organisations must work to engage the employee, who in turn has a choice about the level of engagement to offer the employer” (2004: 1).

Leadership, frequently expressed as senior management, executive-level management or quality of management/supervision, is consistently one of the most highly ranked drivers in employee engagement surveys. It is also the one that most often receives a low performance score (e.g., on “setting clear goals”). This finding signals the central importance of leadership training and development for improving employee engagement. The large volume of literature on the influence of leader behaviour on the two engagement dimensions of job/organization satisfaction and organizational commitment cannot be reviewed here, but these types of behaviour need to be examined in separate studies for the light they can shed on the kind of leadership most likely to foster employee engagement. For example, Chris Perryer and Catherine Jordan (2005) conclude, on the basis of a study of the influence of leadership on organizational commitment in the Australian public sector, that public-sector managers must not only be supportive (e.g., providing positive feedback) but must also eradicate “extinction” behaviour (e.g., ignoring poor performers). Others (e.g., Rowden 2000) suggest that charismatic leaders are more likely to foster higher levels of organizational commitment.

While research studies have identified a substantial number of employee engagement drivers, B.C.’s identification of staffing practices as a leading driver (Herrin 2008: 21; Illington and Barber 2009) is especially notable for this article. Indeed, Joy Illington and Dodie Barber argue that “without the key driver of merit-based hiring, employee engagement in the public sector cannot be sustained” (2009: 4). Research by the British Columbia Merit Commissioner’s Office (cited in Illington and Barber 2009: 5) found that employees who believed that hiring was merit-based tended to be the most engaged in terms of satisfaction with their job and their organization. The United States Merit Systems Protection Board provides a list of methods to increase employee engagement that supports its merit system values of efficiency, effectiveness, fairness and equity (2008: 6, 39–44).

The utility of employee surveys for identifying barriers to engagement is manifest in surveys conducted by B.C. (Illington and Barber 2009), Ontario
(Ipsos Loyalty 2009), and the federal government (Canada, Treasury Board Secretariat 2009) that have shown, for example, the negative impact on engagement of a perceived lack of fairness and of effective communication in staffing processes. According to Ontario’s 2009 employee survey, the areas where action for improvement is most needed are, in order of priority, leadership practices, opportunities for growth and advancement, organizational communication, fair HR practices, and learning and development opportunities (Ipsos Loyalty 2009: 20). The survey items related to fair HR practices include the statements “The OPS hires and promotes people based on their skills, abilities and experience” and “Hiring, promotion and other staffing processes in my ministry are fair and free from favouritism.”

The identification of such barriers to successful engagement as deficiencies in the merit system enables governments to focus their remedial strategies where they are most likely to result in heightened engagement. This approach is in keeping with the action research method that has been successful in the sphere of service-delivery improvement in Canada where empirical research has identified the drivers of citizen satisfaction, priority areas for action have been pinpointed, and performance improvement strategies have focused on the priority areas (Marson and Heintzman 2009: 27–28, 31–32). The efforts in several Canadian jurisdictions to foster employee engagement are also in keeping with the priorities for management improvement identified by Canada’s senior public-sector executives (Marson and Ross 2004) – namely, employee recruitment and retention, results-based accountability, and service delivery. The groundbreaking Interjurisdictional Initiative is in tune with the call of the Prime Minister’s Advisory Committee on the Public Service (2007) for benchmarking the federal public service with external counterparts.

Notes
1 Values are defined here as enduring beliefs that influence the choices we make from among available means and ends.
2 The term “professionalism” is variously interpreted. A succinct summary of its meaning in relation to the federal public service is contained in the January 2009 consultation draft of the Federal Public Sector Code of Conduct, where the term is defined as “[s]erving with competence, excellence, efficiency, objectivity and impartiality.”
3 Political neutrality is a broad concept that includes not only non-partisanship but also such dimensions as public-service anonymity, public comment, and security of tenure.
4 The Ontario Public Service employee engagement index is a single benchmark measure of the engagement of employees that is a composite of nine questions in the 2009 OPS Employee Survey.

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