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Managing in All the Right Directions? The Relationship Between Public Managers' Perceived Autonomy and Leading Upwards, Sideways, Outwards and Downwards

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Although researchers have discussed autonomy as important at the organizational level, the autonomy of the individual manager has not received similar attention. Knowledge about how managerial autonomy is used is, however, important for understanding the conditions under which management matters. We ask whether perceived managerial autonomy enables public managers to prioritize their efforts to support their individual career progression, organizational goal attainment, or both. Based on survey-data from 854 Danish public managers, we find perceived managerial autonomy is positively related to managers ability of aligning their time efforts towards as well their own career progression as towards obtaining organizational goals.

Keywords: Public management, autonomy, organizational goals, individual goals

Introduction

A central precondition for public managers to be able to matter for organizational performance (Belle 2014; Jacobsen and Andersen 2015; Jacobsen et al. 2022) is that they have some level of autonomy to influence how organizations operate and achieve results (Andersen

et al. 2021, 86). This is not surprising news considering the New Public Management (NPM) reforms included initiatives designed to ‘let managers manage’ (Kettl 1997; Bezes and Jeannot 2018). So far, research on autonomy in the public sector has primarily considered the role of autonomy at the organizational level focussing on the formal or perceived autonomy of the organization, such as legal or financial autonomy (e.g. Magetti and Verhoest 2014), which is sometimes framed as managerial autonomy (e.g. Wynen et al. 2014). This line of research has primarily investigated the relationship between organizational autonomy and organizational level outcomes such as organizational performance (e.g. Nielsen 2013; Yu 2021). Existing research that investigates autonomy at the individual level in public administration has primarily examined the autonomy or discretion of street-level bureaucrats (Karlsson 2019; Tummers and Bekkers 2014). However, recent research has taken a renewed interest in autonomy on the level of the individual public manager. In particular, scholars have argued that individual level autonomy is an important contextual condition for public managers to make a difference and determine their chances of realizing organizational goals (Andersen et al. 2021; Boye 2021). Studying Danish public schools, Bjørnholt, Boye and Mikkelsen (2022) found evidence of performance improvements when perceived managerial autonomy is accompanied by high use of performance goals. They also revealed that organizational performance may suffer when perceived managerial autonomy and performance goals are not aligned. In the context of an Indonesian central government agency, Sumadilaga et al. (2017) identified a negative relationship between project managers’ perceived managerial autonomy and risk-taking behaviours. More recently, based on a study of public managers in a Swedish central government agency, Karlsson demonstrated that public managers embraced the discourse of NPM and managerialism within the public sector in order to foster managerial discretion – or autonomy – at the individual level, which allowed them to view themselves as ‘brave’ public managers who were able to resist control and make a difference (2019).

The aim of this article is to move beyond the organizational level to deepen our understanding of the importance of the autonomy of the individual manager. One way to think about managerial autonomy is considering how managers devote their attention to different aspects of their work. When they have a sufficient amount of autonomy, managers can focus on the organizational areas that they believe need more attention. On the other hand, managers with limited autonomy face considerable constraints when it comes to where and how they devote their managerial attention. Regardless of their degree of autonomy, public managers must prioritize how they spend their time. Public managers often face multiple, ambiguous, and conflicting demands (Chun and Rainey 2005) and are expected to master a range of tasks ranging from personnel management and strategic policy advice to the facilitation of networks (Tummers and Knies 2016). These diverse tasks involve managing in different directions:

upwards towards political principals and higher organizational levels, downwards towards employees and lower organizational levels, and sideways and outwards towards other organizational units, stakeholders, external partners etc. (O'Toole, Meier and Nicholson-Crotty 2005; O'Toole and Meier 2015; van Dorp 2018).

In this article, we focus on whether perceived managerial autonomy affects how public managers distribute their efforts between activities in these different directions and with which consequences. Based on principal-agent theory (Eisenhardt 1989; Miller 2005), managerial autonomy can be expected to give rise to *agency problems*. As agents, public managers may 'drift' towards pursuing individual goals instead of organizational goals. On the other hand, stewardship theory (Davis, Schoorman and Donaldson 1997), formulated as a supplement to the principal-agent theory suggests that public managers may act as 'stewards' within their organization. As stewards, public managers are not expected to depart from the collective interest of the organization if given the choice between self-serving behaviour and pro-organizational behaviour. The distinction between pursuing self-serving motives and organizational goals has been a persistent topic in both political science and public administration (Peters and Pierre 2017:159). However, we view the two ways that managers can use their autonomy as being complimentary, arguing that autonomy may be used to work towards both organizational goals and one's own career progression.

Hence, we explore the relationship between perceived managerial autonomy and the degree to which there is a match between how public managers perceive to spend their time on different managerial tasks to the relative importance of these. We explore this in relation to managers' pursuit of 1) individual goals and 2) organizational goals.

The empirical analysis of these questions is based on a survey sent to all Danish public managers who have staff responsibilities and are represented by the most prominent trade union for their profession, DJØF (Dansk Jurist- og Økonomforbund¹). Our analyses indicate that Danish public managers spend most of their time tending to their employees, that is leading downwards. They report that prioritizing politicians is relatively more important in the pursuit of organizational goals and that prioritizing higher ranking managers is more important to their own career progression, that is leading upwards. We found that managers who perceive to have a higher degree of autonomy report behaving in a way where the reported time use is closer to

¹DJØF is a trade union, a professional organization representing members who study or work within the areas of law, economics, strategy, management, politics, administration, business, research, communication and more (<https://www.djoef.dk/english.aspx>, visited 21.11.21).

the relative importance of different management tasks, both in terms of promoting organizational goal attainment and career optimization. Our results suggest that these two managerial objectives appear to be similarly related to managerial autonomy. However, when it comes to managing upwards toward politicians, autonomy is more strongly related to the mismatch relating to promoting organizational goals than career progression.

This article contributes to scholarship on public management and managerial autonomy by exploring the relationship between perceived managerial autonomy and the way that managers spend their time (Boye 2021). We demonstrate why it is important that managers perceive themselves as having managerial autonomy if they are meant to play a key role in the achievement of organizational goals (Andersen et al. 2021).

We also contribute to literature that recognizes the multi-directional nature of public management by exploring how managers report spending their time leading in different directions (O'Toole and Meier 2015; van Dorp, 2018) and comparing these responses to their views about what is beneficial for their career progression and the attainment of organizational goals. In this way, the analysis sheds light on the relative importance public managers' place on different activities both for their own career and organizational goal attainment.

Autonomy and how managers allocate their time between different activities

Hambrick and Finkelstein understand autonomy as 'The latitude of managerial action' (Hambrick and Finkelstein 1987, 371). More recently, Andersen et al. (2021: 86) have defined autonomy as '...the extent to which a manager can decide independently from political and administrative principals on the choice and use of resources.'

The fact that autonomy may be relevant to different aspects of a manager's job is also clear if we consider how autonomy has been discussed in related studies on government agencies (Magetti and Verhoest 2014). This literature addresses managerial autonomy as one aspect of the organizational autonomy of public agencies alongside structural-, financial- and legal autonomy (Verhoest et al. 2004). Here, managerial autonomy is defined as autonomy to make managerial decisions (Verhoest et al.: 107), which echoes the definition provided by Hambrick and Finkelstein.

A further differentiation to make when conceptualizing managerial autonomy concerns whether autonomy is understood as what is formally prescribed or whether one investigates managerial autonomy as it is perceived by the individual manager (2021, 58-61). Whereas the former resides in objective aspects (e.g. formal regulations, authority structures, etc.), the latter resides

in the individual manager's perception of their autonomy and is therefore subjective.

Recent developments within the managerial discretion framework point to the importance of differentiating between latitude of managerial actions vis-à-vis latitude of objectives. Whereas 'latitude of actions' points to the degree of discretion that managers have to pursue and implement objectives and goals set by their principals and/or other stakeholders, 'latitude of objectives', points to the degree of discretion that managers have to pursue different goals (Shen and Cho 2005, 845-846), e.g. personal rather than organizational goals (the latter reflecting the goals set by the principal).

Given the research questions at hand, we investigate the degree of autonomy that public managers believe themselves to possess when it comes to pursuing different goals (that is, their perceived 'latitude of actions' in terms of how to pursue different goals). We argue that managerial autonomy allows public managers to allocate their time in directions that they believe can help them attain individual and/or organizational goals.

Which goals are public managers motivated to pursue?

As outlined in the introduction, we investigate how public managers' perception of their managerial autonomy is related to how they report spending their time to the relative importance of 1) individual goals and 2) organizational goals. We argue that managerial autonomy is related to the work of public managers in at least two important ways. Namely, autonomy enables managers to align the time they spend on managing in different directions to what they consider to be the best use of their time in order to promote their own career and/or attain organizational goals.

Principal-agency theory and individual interest

When given latitude of action, what types of goals are public managers motivated to pursue? Principal-agent theory (Eisenhardt 1989; Miller 2005) assumes that public managers (as agents) try to maximize their own utility. Seen from this perspective, managerial autonomy may give rise to *agency problems* where the self-interested behaviour of public managers might be at odds with organizational goals (as defined by the [political] principal). Agency theory focuses on the problems that might emerge when a principal delegates authority and autonomy to an agent (Eisenhardt 1989; Miller 2005). The theory assumes that all actors are opportunistic utility maximizers (Dixit 2002) and that agents, as principals, are self-interested. This self-serving interest may result in different types of agency problems or agent 'mis-behaviours' as seen from the perspective of the political principal. These issues can include 'moral hazards' (Moe 1995), 'shirking' (Pierre and Peters 2017) and 'bureaucratic drifting' (Schillemans and Busuioc 2015) if the agent's preferences differ from those of the principal, as the principal cannot fully monitor

the agent's actions (or it would at least be prohibitively expensive to do so). The problem arises due to the two core assumptions in the principal-agent model upon which agency theory builds, namely asymmetry in preferences and information asymmetry (see Miller 2005, 205-206). The agent is assumed to possess an informational advantage that they can exploit to pursue individual goals at the expense of the principal. In this line of thought, we must expect managers to use autonomy to increase their own utility maximization by spending their ideal amount of time on tasks that they believe are beneficial for attaining self-serving interests. From this perspective, public managers are expected to pursue goals that are related to their own career progression (Dunleavy 1991). However, the assumptions of agency theory have been critiqued in recent years (see Pierre and Peters 2017). A common criticism is that agency problems may not be as threatening as agency theory suggests. Instead of exclusively pursuing individual goals, public managers are found to be '...highly committed to the missions, growth and survival of their agencies...' (Howard 2019, 68) and motivated to meet the goals of their organization as set by their political principals (Bach 2016, 3).

Specifically, the two central assumptions that inform agency theory (i.e., that there is a goal conflict between principals and agents [asymmetry of preferences] and that agents hold an informational advantage vis-à-vis the principal [information asymmetry] are argued to not be constant but on a continuum (Waterman and Meier 1998). In numerous instances, the principal-agent relationship may involve goal congruence (Meier and Krause 2003, 10; Schillemans and Busuioac 2015, 196) and even be characterized by trust (van Thiel and Yesilkagit 2011), thus negating moral hazards and potential agency problems.

Stewardship theory and organizational interests

Stewardship theory fundamentally challenges the assumption of instrumental rationality that underlies agency theory. In stewardship theory, the model of man is based on a *steward* whose behaviour is ordered in such a way that pro-organizational, collectivistic behaviours have higher utility than individualistic, self-serving behaviours (Davis, Schoorman and Donaldson 1997, 24;). In the stewardship perspective, an agent's motives are expected to align with the goals of their principal (Davis, Schoorman and Donaldson 1997, 21). However, according to stewardship theory, even in situations where this is not the case, the agent will not resort to pursuing self-interests but will instead place "...higher value on cooperation than defection..." (Davis, Schoorman and Donaldson 1997, 24). In other words, the agent will do what is best for the collective being (i.e., the organization) and make efforts towards realizing organizational rather than individualistic goals. Consequently, rather than perceiving the agent as 'an opportunistic shirker', we should believe that public managers 'essentially want to do a good job' and act as good '[stewards] of the assets of the organization' (Donaldson and Davis 1991, 51). In this

perspective, public managers are thus "... driven by internal motivation to fulfil their mission." (Schillemans and Bjurström 2020, 653). Hence, the pro-organizational steward is motivated to maximize organizational performance (Davis, Schoorman and Donaldson 1997, 24-25). In this line of thought, we expect public managers to use their autonomy to increase organizational goal attainment by aligning the time that they actually and ideally would like to spend working towards the goals that are beneficial for their organization.

Hypotheses

These two perspectives lead to two different hypotheses about how managers use their managerial autonomy (i.e., their 'latitude of action'). However, while stewardship theory provides an alternative perspective on public managers and the type of goals that they are motivated to realize, this approach should be viewed as a supplemental perspective rather than a competing perspective (Meier and Krause 2003). Just like most people, public managers are driven by different motives and are thus expected to pursue goals that serve their own interests as well as the collective interest of their organizations, which are not always mutually exclusive (Perry and Wise 1990, 369). Consequently, although a central motivation of public managers is to attain the organizational goals by which they realize the mission of the organization and its contribution to society (Perry and Wise 1990), more individual and extrinsic motivations are also part of public managers motivational profile (Rainey 1982).

For these reasons, we believe that the two hypotheses are complementary rather than competitive. Public managers may be motivated to pursue both goals that serve their organization and those that serve themselves. They may also enjoy positive career benefits from securing organizational success, which means that organizational goals may be beneficial for realizing an individual goal of career progression. However, we argue that the outcomes are analytically separate and will treat them that way in the empirical study, investigating the following hypotheses:

H1: Autonomy diminishes the mismatch between how public managers report spending their time on different activities/dimensions and their perception of how important that activity/dimension is for individual goal of career progression.

H2: Autonomy diminishes the mismatch between how public managers report spending their time on different activities/dimensions and their perception of how important that activity/dimension is for increasing organizational goal attainment.

Management in different directions

To test the two hypotheses, we need to consider how we can think about the ways that managers use their time. Within the general management literature, researchers have discussed the question of how managers spend their time (Oshagbemi 1995, Mintzberg 1973), but this topic has received limited interest within the field of public administration (van Dorp 2018). However, as public managers face many competing demands when deciding how they should allot their time and attention, the question of how public managers spend their time is far from simple. Public organizations are characterized by multiple and often ambiguous or conflicting goals and demands (Rainey 2014). This multiplicity means that many stakeholders can and do hold public managers and their organizations accountable in formal and informal ways (Bovens, Schillemans and Goodin 2014). When public managers perform their jobs, they have to direct their attention in a number of different directions (O’Toole, Meier and Nicholson-Crotty 2005; O’Toole and Meier 2015; van Dorp 2018). Internally, they have to service their political principals and the hierarchy above them, and they also lead subordinate employees. These traditional demands on public managers have been supplemented in recent years by the advent of New Public Governance (NPG) (Torfing and Triantafillou 2013), which points to the importance of networks and the managers’ responsibility in managing horizontal relations (Hansen and Villadsen 2017). Knies and Tummers (2016) focus on this point when they describe public leadership roles and distinguish between accountability leadership, rule-following leadership, political loyalty leadership and network governance leadership, which are all related to more traditional leadership roles directed at operational management. In other words, must public managers lead downwards as well as sideways, outwards, and upwards. Though how managers spend their time is not the equivalent to the relative importance of their tasks, we know that time is often a scarce resource (van Dorp 2018), so we find their use of time to be an interesting indication of how they prioritize their efforts. We are also interested in learning about where they would put less or more of their attention if they hoped to enhance the objectives discussed above.

When investigating the different directions in which public managers must lead we include leading downwards, sideways and outwards. However, we divide “upwards” into two different categories, distinguishing between politicians and higher-ranking officials. We do this for two reasons. First, we found that the population that we study is characterized by individuals who work closely with politicians. We return to this argument below in the methods section. Second, we argue that the dynamics that govern relationships within the civil service are different from the ones that govern the relationship between politicians and civil servants. We thus pursue the use of time with a division of public managers’ work in five ways according to the typology illustrated below in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 here

Methodology

To understand how public managers spend their time and how autonomy may affect this, we explore how managers report spending their time as well as what is perceived most important for career progression (following the agency theory argument) or organizational goal attainment (following the arguments of stewardship theory).

To obtain this information, we sent a questionnaire to all the public managers in Denmark with staff responsibility who are represented by the most prominent union for these types of workers, DJØF (Dansk Jurist- og Økonomforbund). DJØF represents members holding a university degree who work within the areas of law, economics, strategy, management, politics, administration, business, research, communication, etc. Public managers organized in DJØF thus typically hold a degree in law, economics, or political science. They most often work in the state central administration or the administration of one of the 98 Danish municipalities or five regions. A minority are employed in public sector companies. Public managers with a professional background (e.g. a schoolteacher who has become headmaster of a school) will typically be organized elsewhere.

The questionnaires were sent out in August and September 2019 to all members of the trade union's subsection for public managers (Offentlige chefer) (N= 4111). In total, 854 managers (20.8 percent) responded to the survey, and 697 provided valid answers to all the questions included in our analysis (17.0 percent). It is well-established that it is difficult to achieve high response rates among managers and organizational executives (Solarino and Aguinis, 2021; Holtem et al., 2022). With this being said, we acknowledge that 17% survey completion is low. We believe that the low rate of completion is partly due to the fact that the survey was administered through a union. Some members may not have updated their emails when changing jobs or not recognized the scientific value of responding. An analysis of attrition and non-response indicates no significant differences between the public managers who answered the survey and the managers who did not answer in relation to gender, age, education, and region of residence (DJØF 2019: 17). The data collection was administered by DJØF, and data were made available to us in an anonymized form.

Survey responses are an indirect measure of how managers spend their time (Oshagbemi 1995), which may be biased due to social desirability and the tendency of respondents to overestimate their work hours (Robinson et al. 2011). To avoid these caveats, another approach could be to track public managers' calendars over a longer period (e.g. Porter and Nohria 2018). However, this would be extremely resource intensive for large-n studies as ours. Furthermore, given that our aim is not first and foremost to precisely evaluate the hours spent on a weekly basis but rather to evaluate the relative time use and the discrepancies

between perceptions of how time is spent and the relative importance of managing in different directions in the pursuit of organizational and individual goals, a survey instrument becomes an attractive approach since the latter cannot be deduced from the managers' calendars. Albeit in-depth interview could have been an alternative if we were to investigate a smaller sample of public managers. During a pilot among five public managers, we found that respondents could provide information both relative time use and the importance of different management directions relatively easily, which gave us confidence in the validity of the survey measures.

Finally, we want to identify common source bias as a potential concern for survey-based research where all variables are obtained from the same survey. For this study, we are not overly concerned given the complexity of how we design our analysis (Chang, Van Witteloostuijn and Eden, 2010). Our dependent variable is calculated as the difference between two perceptual measures. We do not find it likely that respondents foresaw this calculation and that it affected their response patterns. Even if respondents are biased when responding to the original questions about time use, it is not apparent how this would systematically affect our final measure and its relationship to the autonomy index.

Variables

Independent variable: Perceived autonomy

In this study, we are interested in exploring how autonomy affects the ways that managers distribute their time between different management tasks. We constructed a survey battery to capture autonomy related to the management tasks of interest inspired by the literature, pointing to autonomy as a dimensional concept. We asked the question, “*To what degree do you have autonomy to execute the following management activities?*” For each of the five activities in Figure 1, respondents could answer on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a very high degree). We constructed an overall measure (*Autonomy*) based on the five questions (alpha = .69), given that we are interested in the managers' ability to prioritize their time between the different management tasks (relative to how important they assess the task to be in relation to goal attainment or own career). Thus, spending more time managing upward towards politicians (if this is considered important to do for one of the two reasons) is not necessarily a function of autonomy on this dimension but will be likely to require autonomy on other dimensions in order to redistribute time from these dimensions towards e.g., the political level. However, we also estimate all models with the single-item measure for autonomy on the dimension in question.

Because the autonomy that manifests in these different dimensions is inherently connected (less [or more] autonomy in one dimension will affect how much time a manager can distribute to the

other dimensions), we constructed a single measure (*Autonomy*) based on the five questions (alpha = .69).

Dependent variables: Allocation of time between different management tasks

To measure how managers report the allocation of their time, we asked respondents to distribute 100% of their time between the five directions of management in our typology (Figure 1). In order to assess how different time distributions might enhance a manager's individual career progression and organizational objectives, we similarly ask respondents to distribution time following these questions:

How important do you consider each of the five management activities to be career-wise? As we did earlier, we ask you to distribute 100% between the five types of management activities.

How important do you consider each of the five management activities to be for our organization's overall goal attainment? As we did earlier, we ask you to distribute 100% between the five types of management activities.

To test our hypotheses, we constructed five variables, one for each type of management, reflect the degree to which a manager distributes their time based on their career interests. These variables (*Mismatch Career*) are the absolute difference between how the managers say they divide their time between the five management directions and their perceptions of how they should spend their time to maximize career outcomes:

$$\text{Mismatch career}_i = | \text{time allocated}_i - \text{optimal allocation for career}_i |$$

where I denotes the five directions for management.

We did the same for organizational goals and created five variables (*Mismatch Goal Attainment*) for each type of management:

$$\text{Mismatch Goal attainment}_i = | \text{time allocated}_i - \text{optimal allocation for goal attainment}_i |$$

For all variables, the scale ranges from 0 to 100. A value of zero indicates that a manager spends their time in a way that they believe is in the best interest of the organization or their career. A higher value means that a leader spends either too much or too little time compared to the perceived optimal situation.

Controls

We included control variables that may conflate the relation between perceived autonomy and how time is spent/relative importance of managing in different directions. We included the gender and age of the managers. We also included a measure of position in the hierarchy in the form of two dummy variables: *Manager of managers* and *Manager of employees* (top managers are used as reference category). Finally, we controlled for the sector of managers with dummies indicating employment in municipalities or regions (managers employed in the central administration are used as reference category).

Insert Table 1 here

Analysis

The statistical analyses posed a particular challenge as the dependent variables are based on our respondents' reporting of how their time, on a percentage scale, is spent on five different tasks. This means that when more time is devoted to one task, less time will be left for other tasks. If we estimate five separate OLS regressions, the dependence between the variables would mean that residuals from one equation are likely to be correlated with residuals from another. To address this issue, we estimate *seemingly unrelated regressions (SUR)*, which take the correlation between residuals into account. We estimate one SUR equation system for *Mismatch Performance* and one for *Mismatch Career*.

Results

First, we take a descriptive look at how the managers spend their time. Figure 2 shows how the managers responded to the three different questions:

Insert Figure 2 here

The figure shows that the managers in our sample spend most of their time on average managing their employees (42% of their time). The second most time-consuming activity is management directed towards higher ranking managers (19%). Other management activities are all given 13% or 14% of their time. Just as van Dorp (2018) did, we found that that the "classical directions" (up and down the chain of command) are still by far the most prominent when analysing how managers spend their time.

Compared to the way that managers report they spend their time, we see some interesting differences in the way that they prioritize the relative importance of tasks when considering organizational goal attainment. Most noticeably, they give a lower priority to their employees and a higher priority to politicians.

When looking at how managers assign importance to the different dimensions relating to improving their careers, this difference becomes even more pronounced. On average, the

managers in our sample said that 25% of their effort should be directed towards employees and that 29% should be directed towards higher ranking managers. Interestingly, they believe that effort directed towards higher ranking managers are considered less important when seeking to achieve organizational goal attainment compared to improving their own careers. The managers would also spend slightly more time with politicians given its perceived importance for career progression.

The descriptive analysis gives the impression that management of employees, which is the task that takes the most time for managers, is not perceived as important as other activities when it comes to their own career progression or organizational goal attainment. Similarly, Figure 2 gives the impression that managers who care about their career need to spend more time with their superiors, both political and administrative, than they currently do.

Finally, the managers in our sample reported that they would put more effort into managing outwards if they wanted to maximize career progression or ensure organizational goal attainment. As van Dorp (2018) has argued, the part of managerial work that is oriented outwards may not be the most important part of the job, despite recent calls in the literature for a stronger focus on these elements (Torfing, Sørensen and Røiseland 2019; Williams 2002). However, van Dorp reports that if given the opportunity, managers would actually prefer to prioritize this kind of behaviour. He argues, ‘they all agree that collaborative governance is important, but the demands of managing up and managing down can and often do take over’ (van Dorp 2018, 1240). Our study offers a slightly different impression. Managers would not really put more effort into outwards activities, even if they wanted to pursue career progression or organizational goal attainment. This distinction might be explained by the fact that our study sampled a different population than the one used in van Dorp’s research. It could be the case that boundary spanning is more important in the Netherlands than it is in Denmark, or it may indicate that managers have a tendency to pay lip service to certain ideas when asked if they think they are important. This difference could also indicate that the respondents do not seem to be biased when providing their answers in a certain way to demonstrate that they always prioritize the tasks that are the best for organizational goal attainment

We now turn to our two proposed hypotheses.

Insert Table 2 here

Table 2 reports the SUR results for career mismatch. We see negative coefficients for autonomy, which are significant for all but one of the dependent variables. Only when it comes to outward management, autonomy does not appear to contribute to a smaller mismatch ($p = 0.065$). For all other management tasks, the regressions indicate that a stronger sense of

autonomy is associated with lower mismatches between time spent and the perceptions of what would be optimal for career progression. Based on these results, we corroborate H1.

While the control variables are not of explicit interest here, it is interesting to note that on average, female managers experience less of a mismatch than male managers between the amount of time they spend with higher-level managers and what they perceive to be optimal for their career progression. On the other hand, the mismatch is larger the lower the manager is in the managerial hierarchy. Figure 3 illustrates the effects of autonomy on career mismatch in Figure 3.

Insert Figure 3 here

The figure illustrates the predicted mismatch between how managers report they spend their time and the importance assigned to career progression, keeping all other variables at their mean for increasing levels of perceived autonomy. The figure 3 illustrates what we already saw in the regressions: increased autonomy leads to decreased mismatch. However, the figure also illustrates that the decrease is largest for the mismatch towards managing downwards towards employees and upward towards higher level managers. Only when perceived autonomy is at its highest do the 95% confidence intervals overlap.

We now turn to the mismatch between how managers say they spend their time and how important they are considered for organizational goal attainment.

Insert Table 3 here

The results of SUR predicting the mismatch between how managers say they spend their time and how they think they should prioritize their efforts to benefit the organization the most are presented in Table 3. The autonomy variable is negative and significant in all models. This strongly indicates that a stronger sense of autonomy is related to leaders spending more of their time in the interest of organizational performance. Conversely, leaders with lower perceptions of autonomy tend to have a greater mismatch in relation to all management tasks. This corroborates H2.

We also illustrate the effects of autonomy on the mismatch in Figure 4.

Insert Figure 4 here

Figure 4 illustrates that the mismatch decreases as a manager's sense of autonomy becomes stronger. Just as we saw in the case of career progression, the decrease is largest when looking at management directed downwards towards employees.

Next, we seek to compare whether autonomy affects the two objectives differently. We

base this comparison on figures 3 and 4. Though the lines have different slopes, only for managing upward towards politicians there is no overlap in confidence intervals (-1.60 [-2.62;-0.59] versus -3.91 [-5.00;-2.82]). However, comparing the two figures, we observe that for three of the leadership dimensions perceived autonomy appear to be more strongly associated with a decreased mismatch between how the managers spend their time and what they find would be best to promote organizational goal attainment than for the mismatch between reported time use and what the managers would prioritize to maximize career progression. To explore this, we calculated predicted mismatches for different levels of autonomy. This analysis suggested that only for low levels of autonomy, the mismatch for goal attainment is significantly higher than for career progression when it comes to managing upwards towards politicians. This analysis also suggests that for medium and high levels of autonomy, predicted goal attainment mismatch is smaller than career mismatch when managing upwards towards higher-level managers. Finally, concerning management of employees for low, medium, and high levels of autonomy, goal attainment mismatch is smaller than career mismatch.

On the other hand, there are no significant difference in how perceived autonomy is associated with goal attainment mismatch and career mismatch when it comes to managing outwards or sideways.

A substantial interpretation of these findings could be that a lack of autonomy leads managers to focus too much on their employees, whereas more autonomy allows them to direct more of their attention towards their administrative superiors, which, they believe, is better for their careers. Similarly, we find that a greater degree of autonomy allows managers to spend more of their time with politicians, which, they believe, improves both their potential career progression and organizational goal attainment.

While higher perceived autonomy is associated with lower mismatch with regard to both personal career progression and organizational goal attainment on all five management dimensions (with the expectation of outward management and the perceptions of what would be best for their career progression), we found that higher perceived autonomy is most strongly associated with a smaller mismatch between time spent and optimal prioritization of effort when it comes to managing upwards towards higher levels of management and politicians and downwards towards employees. In addition, the fact that higher perceived autonomy leads to a lower mismatch when it comes to both career progression and organizational goal attainment also indicates that these two aims are complementary rather than conflicting. What a manager might prioritize in order to optimize organizational goal attainment can also be lucrative for their personal career and vice versa. Unsurprisingly, the managers' assessment of how important each of the five management activities are for their career and for organizational goal attainment

is also positively correlated in all cases (see table A1 in the appendix). To address this, we re-estimated all models while including the managers' assessment of the importance of a given management task for the "opposite" dimension (i.e. career progression when analysing the mismatch toward organizational goal attainment and vice versa). This does not substantially change our results aside from the fact that higher perceived autonomy is now also significantly associated with a smaller mismatch between the time spent on outward management and the perceptions of what is optimal for career progression (see table A2 and A3 in the appendix).

In our analysis, we apply a single measure for autonomy rather than the managers' perceived autonomy on the individual management dimensions. However, we re-estimated all models with the single-item measure for autonomy on the dimension in question. When doing this, we do not find the same significant relationships between autonomy and mismatch (see table A4 and A5 in the appendix). This indicates that the autonomy which manifests in the different dimensions is inherently connected (less [or more] autonomy in one dimension will affect how much time a manager can distribute to the other dimensions).

Finally, we use an absolute measures of mismatch and thus do not distinguish between whether the public managers spend more or less effort than what they believe is important for organizational goal attainment or their own career progression. To examine whether autonomy is related differently to mismatch depended on over- or under time use compared to what the managers believe would be best for their career progression or organizational goal attainment, we re-estimated all models split for over- and under time use (by including an interaction term between perceived autonomy and a dummy variable for over- and under time use (excluded cases with perfect match (mismatch = 0))). The results indicate that higher perceived autonomy related to lower mismatch for both over- and under-time use, but not in all cases significant at a 0.05 level. However, this may be attributed to the loss of analytical power due to a lower N in these analyses (see table A6 and A7 in the appendix).

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this article has been to investigate the relationship between perceived managerial autonomy and the degree to which public managers are able to match the time that they spend on managing in different directions to how important they believe these tasks to be for 1) individual goals (promoting own career), 2) organizational goals (organizational goal attainment) or 3) both. We presented two hypotheses based on existing literature that explores principal-agent relations and stewardship theory. We suggested that managers would use perceived managerial autonomy to advance their own career progression and/or organizational goal attainment. We explored these questions and hypotheses using a dataset of Danish public

managers represented by the most prominent union for such managers, DJØF (Dansk Jurist- og Økonomforbund).

On a descriptive level, the empirical analysis identified some interesting differences between how managers say they spend their time and how they think they should prioritize their efforts to promote career progression or organizational goal attainment. Managers reported that they spent too much time managing their employees. This is true for both the objectives of career progression and organizational goal attainment. However, the difference between reported time spent and what is best for career progression is much larger compared to the mismatch between reported time spent and what would be best for organizational goal attainment. This finding does not indicate that Danish public managers generally neglect the management of their employees in favour of attending to higher ranking officials. However, the data do suggest that optimizing career progression does not rely on how much effort a manager invests into managing their employees but rather their standing with superiors. This raises important questions about the relative importance of “managing downwards” and managing “upwards” and how perceptions among managers are influenced by that they believe will help them climb the organizational ladder.

We also find that managers reported they spent too little time directing their attention towards their superiors relative to the importance for career progression. However, for organizational goal attainment, respondents actually report spending too much effort on tending to their superiors. This finding may illustrate the need for some public organizations to reflect on the demand that the hierarchy places on managers.

Finally, we find that managers spend too little effort on politicians relative to the importance for organizational goal attainment. This could suggest that some lower ranking managers lack opportunities to hear about political priorities from the politicians themselves or that access to relevant politicians is restricted. At the local government level, most politicians also have day jobs and may be hard to access.

By asking managers how they spend their time leading in different directions, we compliment research on managerial work, which has primarily focused on more ethnographic approaches (e.g. Noordegraaf 2000; Rhodes 2011; van Dorp 2018). In particular, our study compliments van Dorp’s (2018) recent mixed-methods ethnographic study, which focused on the executive administrative level of Dutch local governments while considering how city managers prioritize and spend their time. Our study, which is based on survey data, pulls from a comparably larger sample of public managers, including those working on non-executive levels. Similar to van Dorp’s study (2018), our work points to the importance of the political element of the management tasks that public managers perform. The fact that similar conclusions are

reached using different methods in different contexts points to the external validity of the findings. Our article also points to the continued importance of the management performed within the traditional chain of command – up and down. While sideways and outwards relations are important (for instance, for inter-departmental coordination and network management with important stakeholders), they do not appear to be nearly as important for the respondents in our survey as one might think based on the public administration literature on networked governance (Torfing et al. 2012).

Turning to the empirical findings regarding the expected relationship between perceived managerial autonomy and the mismatch between how time is spent and what is perceived to be the best in terms of ensuring career progression and organizational goal attainment, we find that increased autonomy reduces both types of mismatches. This indicates that managers who have a greater sense of autonomy also believe that they spend more of their time on tasks that contribute towards the attainment of organizational goals and their career progression; most prominently when it comes to time spent on managing downwards and upwards towards political and administrative superiors.

Our research contributes to the literature on managerial autonomy by emphasizing that perceived managerial autonomy is also relevant to how managers are able to align their efforts pursuing different goals when managing in different directions. Furthermore, our findings suggest that research on public sector management and leadership should include autonomy measured at the individual managerial level as an important variable when analysing relationships between public management and different outcomes variables (e.g. performance) (Andersen et al, 2021). If managers do not have and/or perceive to have some degree of autonomy, they may not be able to prioritize their efforts in ways that ensure the best goal attainment of their organization.

This raises a question about whether managers would be able to perfectly optimize their efforts towards realizing organizational or personal goals if they were given full managerial autonomy? As a number of previous studies have shown, the daily lives of managers are fragmented and full of ‘impromptu activities and ad hoc meetings’ (van Dorp 2010, 1231; see also e.g. Mintzberg 1973). Public managers also face everchanging and complex environments (Rainey 2014, 358). Consequently, even if managers were given full autonomy, we cannot necessarily expect that this would enable them to organize their time in a way that they believe optimizes their career progression and/or organizational performance.

Our research also suggests that pursuing organizational goals and individual career progression may not be ad odds, at least not in the perception of individual managers. We find that a greater degree of autonomy leads managers to report a better alignment or closer match between time spent and what they believe is the best way to meet organizational goals,

following the arguments of stewardship theory. However, we also found that managers use autonomy to spend their time in ways that may be best for their own career progression, which aligns with an agency theory argument. This finding supports viewing the two perspectives as complementary rather than competing assumptions about individual motives. Theoretically, such an approach echoes recent advances within public administration but also the way March and Olsen (1989) originally discussed the relationship between logic of consequentiality and logic of appropriateness.

Beyond these theoretical implications, our study also illustrates the difficulties that researchers face while trying to disentangle different motives. Empirically identifying the differences between the logic of consequentiality and the logic of appropriateness may be difficult, as there may be observational equivalence.

Finally, moving into the policy realm and the practical implications of our empirical findings, organizations often strive to align organizational and individual goals. This type of alignment cannot be assumed, and the literature on performance management gives plenty of examples of situations where this is not the case (Nielsen and Grøn 2021). However, we cannot assume that organizations never succeed in creating such an alignment. Hence, arguing that organizational performance and individual career progression may be complimentary also involves recognizing that it is possible for some organizations to align individual and organizational incentives.

Because it is difficult to evaluate the motives of individuals by observing their behaviour and because of the observational equivalence, we asked our respondents how they spend their time managing in different directions and how important they believe each of these tasks to be for their own career progression and organizational goal attainment. This approach, of course, comes with both advantages and limitations.

The advantage relates to the observational equivalence that can come into play when disentangling motivations for different types of behaviour that might produce the same outcome. In practice, some behaviours may promote both individual and organizational goals, and managing a well-performing organization may be beneficial for the individual managers' future careers. This means that although self-reported motives can potentially be biased, they provide one method of disentangling the different motives behind managerial behaviour. As such, our study may be seen as a supplement to more ethnographic studies that focus on 'observed behavior' (van Dorp 2018).

With respect to limitations, we should take care to remember that we asked respondents for their perceptions of how they spend their time as well as what they think the best ways are to prioritize tasks. Such measures are subject to desirability bias. While other studies have shown that respondents generally over report how much they work (Bonke 2005), we avoided this

issue by asking respondents to distribute 100% of their time. However, we cannot avoid the risk of participants responding based on what they find desirable rather than how things actually are or simply not remembering correctly.

Furthermore, we have not investigated what actually leads to career progression or organizational goal attainment, but only what respondents think would be an optimal way to prioritize their efforts. Such perceptions may be deeply flawed and represent ‘urban legends’ or dominant narratives in the organizations that we surveyed. We thus tried to be loyal to the fact that what we explore are perceptions. However, as with many other constructs in organizational life (Wright and Nishii, 2007), perceptions are the first link in the causal chain, and when it comes to autonomy, it seems fair to argue that what really matters is how managers perceive their autonomy.

It is important to note that we use cross-sectional data from the same survey, which comes with the risk of common method bias. However, our dependent variables are calculated based on separate measures, and we consider the risk of strategic response behaviour to have a limited impact on our results. A related challenge is reverse causality as we have now time separation between the measurements of our variables. While we do not claim to have strong causal identification, we argue that in most situations constraints on managers’ time allocation can be attributed to their relative autonomy, thus in line with our theorization and analyses in this paper. We hope future studies relying on experimental techniques or rich case studies will further inform this question.

We should also mention that our sample consists of members of one particular union organizing civil servants, but typically not public sector employees working in frontline public organizations. Most civil servants in both national, regional and municipal governments are organized in this union, but of course they constitute a particular group of public managers. We should thus remember that the public managers included in this study are the ones ‘closest to politics’ and not typical street-level public managers, such as head nurses, doctors and school principals. Hence, how they believe they spend their time and their sense of autonomy may differ from the experiences of managers working in other parts of the public sector.

Despite these caveats, we still believe that our article is worthy of attention because it highlights the importance of managerial autonomy. Future research could further explore the relationship between management and autonomy by uncovering the mechanisms behind our quantitative findings. A more qualitative approach would also allow researchers to explore the question with a sensitivity towards how managers make sense of what they do and how they prioritize their time.

Future research should also consider the fact that managers also have other obligations

than the ones related to their work. Research has begun to explore the complex links between work and private life (e.g. Dahl, Dezsó and Ross, 2012; Lyness and Judiesch, 2008), and it would be relevant to work towards a fuller understanding of how managers spend their time and experience their autonomy. A better understanding of managers as ‘whole’ persons may prove useful in creating more attractive and diverse public organizations (Feeney and Stritch, 2019).

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Figure 1. Different directions of management attention.

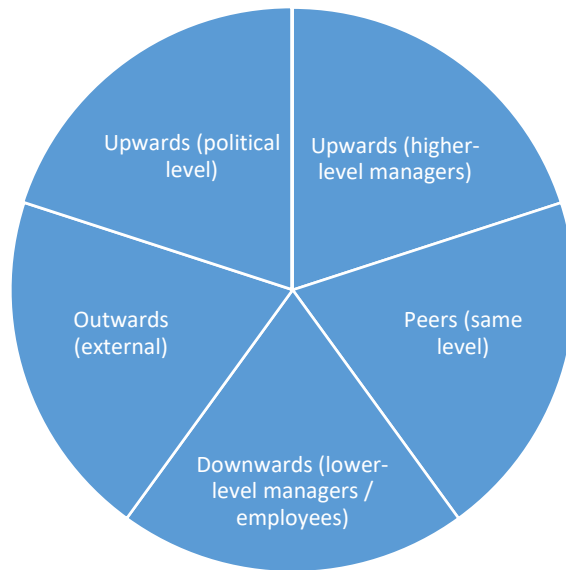


Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Perceived autonomy	3.78	0.67	1	5
Mismatch career – Political level	8.00	0.59	0	50
Mismatch career – Higher-level managers	12.73	11.69	0	75
Mismatch career – Same level	5.54	5.95	0	50
Mismatch career – Outward	8.04	7.93	0	40
Mismatch career – Lower-level managers/employees	19.28	15.57	0	90
Mismatch goal attainment – Political level	8.25	9.69	0	60
Mismatch goal attainment – Higher-level managers	6.83	7.51	0	40
Mismatch goal attainment – Same level	5.35	6.07	0	45
Mismatch goal attainment – Outward	6.73	7.04	0	45
Mismatch goal attainment – Lower-level managers/ employees	11.63	11.77	0	65
Female	0.55	0.50	0	1
Age				
≥40	0.13	0.33	0	1
41-45	0.17	0.38	0	1
46-50	0.23	0.42	0	1
51-55	0.24	0.43	0	1
56-60	0.15	0.36	0	1
61-65	0.07	0.25	0	1
≤66	0.01	0.11	0	1
Top manager	0.13	0.34	0	1
Manager of managers	0.33	0.47	0	1
Manager of employees	0.54	0.50	0	1
Central administration	0.48	0.50	0	1
Region	0.10	0.30	0	1
Municipality	0.42	0.49	0	1

N=697

Figure 2. How public managers spend their time and the relative importance for career progression and organizational performance.

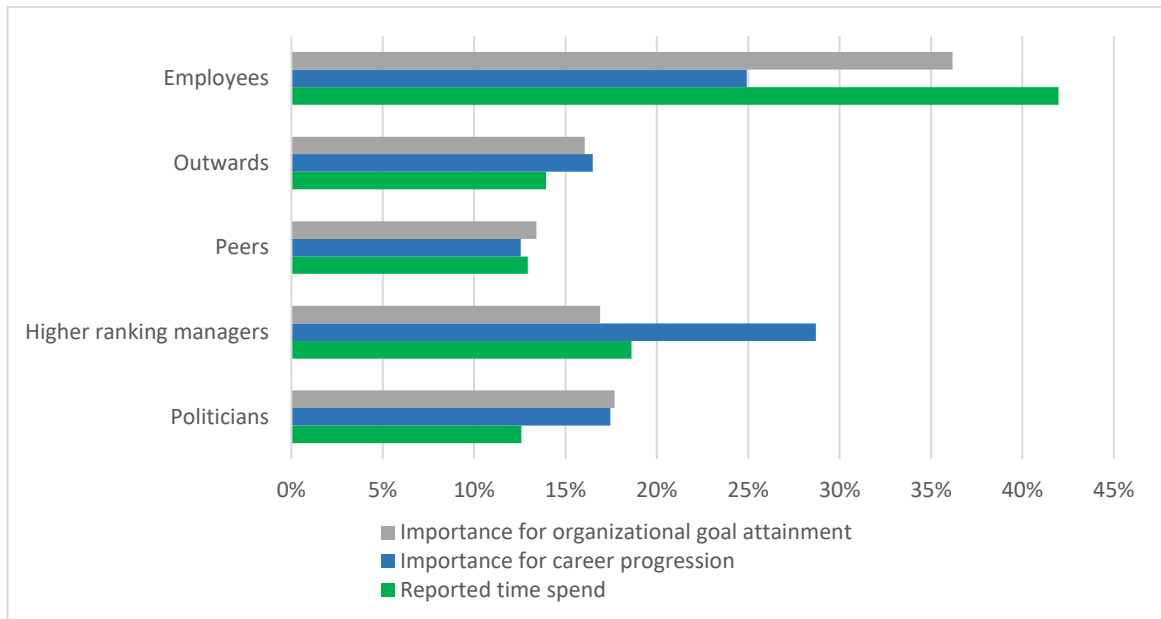


Table 2. Mismatch between spent time and importance career-wise. Seemingly unrelated regressions (SUR).

	Mismatch career Political level	Mismatch career Higher level	Mismatch career Same level	Mismatch career External	Mismatch career Lower level
Perceived autonomy	-1.603** (0.518)	-2.829*** (0.685)	-0.896* (0.359)	-0.882 (0.477)	-4.431*** (0.923)
Female	-0.645 (0.659)	-1.921* (0.870)	-0.441 (0.456)	1.104 (0.606)	-2.127 (1.174)
Age (five-year intervals)	0.0667 (0.226)	0.312 (0.298)	-0.0926 (0.156)	-0.210 (0.208)	-0.590 (0.402)
Manager of managers	1.304 (1.072)	3.290* (1.416)	0.946 (0.742)	0.741 (0.986)	2.617 (1.909)
Manager of employees	0.508 (1.073)	5.406*** (1.417)	1.131 (0.743)	-0.548 (0.987)	3.203 (1.912)
Region	-2.168 (1.111)	3.361* (1.467)	-0.245 (0.769)	-0.827 (1.022)	-4.816* (1.979)
Municipality	-0.0300 (0.711)	-0.298 (0.939)	-0.403 (0.493)	-1.837** (0.655)	-2.330 (1.267)
_cons	13.72*** (2.595)	19.22*** (3.428)	8.754*** (1.797)	12.37*** (2.388)	38.08*** (4.623)
N	697	697	697	697	697

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 4. Predicted mismatch between spent time and importance career-wise

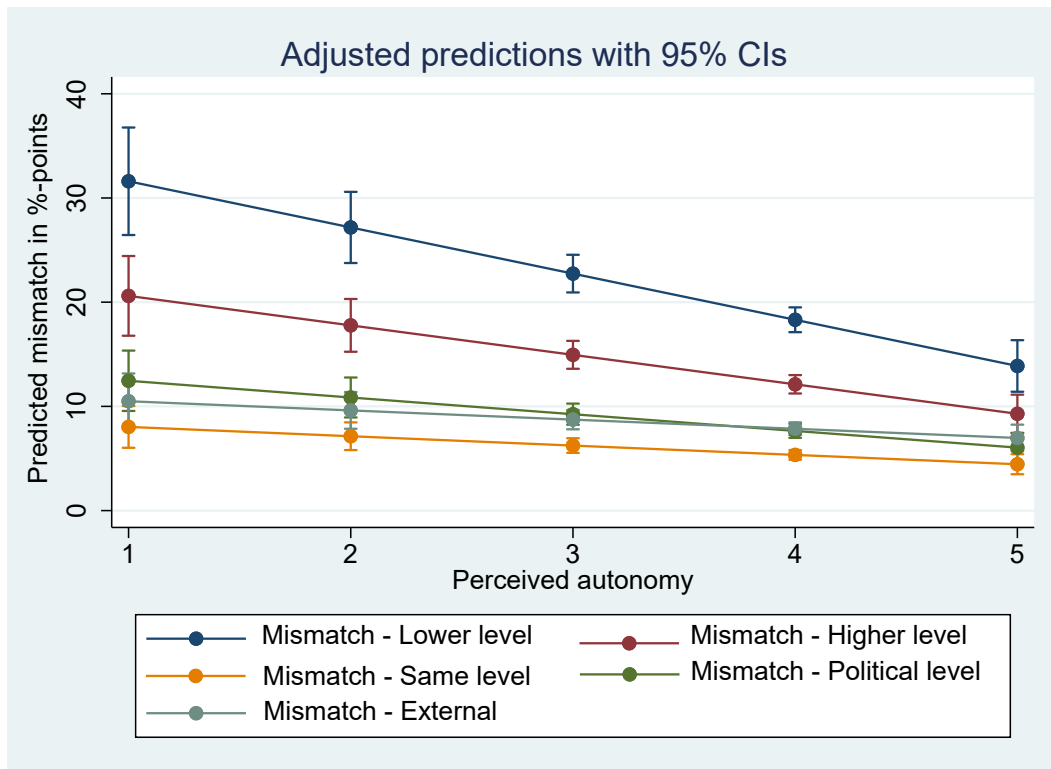


Table 3. Mismatch between spent time and importance for organizational goal attainment.
Seemingly unrelated regressions (SUR).

	Mismatch goal attain. Political level	Mismatch goal attain. Higher level	Mismatch goal attain. Same level	Mismatch goal attain. External	Mismatch goal attain. Lower level
Perceived autonomy	-3.913*** (0.557)	-2.693*** (0.439)	-1.323*** (0.364)	-0.950* (0.422)	-3.564*** (0.690)
Female	0.330 (0.708)	-0.948 (0.558)	-0.603 (0.463)	-0.753 (0.537)	-0.983 (0.877)
Age (five-year intervals)	0.633** (0.242)	-0.261 (0.191)	-0.0981 (0.159)	0.0320 (0.184)	0.0244 (0.300)
Manager of managers	0.597 (1.151)	2.380** (0.908)	1.637* (0.753)	1.589 (0.873)	2.407 (1.427)
Manager of employees	1.452 (1.152)	2.046* (0.909)	0.372 (0.754)	1.445 (0.874)	3.189* (1.429)
Region	-3.653** (1.193)	-0.0895 (0.941)	-0.690 (0.781)	-1.058 (0.905)	-2.680 (1.479)
Municipality	-1.413 (0.764)	-0.485 (0.602)	-0.654 (0.500)	-1.236* (0.579)	-2.371* (0.947)
_cons	20.72*** (2.787)	16.74*** (2.198)	10.62*** (1.823)	9.949*** (2.114)	24.32*** (3.455)
N	697	697	697	697	697

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 5. Predicted mismatch between spent time and importance for organizational goal attainment.

