

Public managers, drivers of ambidexterity in public service delivery. The perceived impact of red tape and PSM on ambidexterity

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Abstract

Purpose – To overcome external challenges and deliver high-quality public services, public organizations must balance efficiency and innovation, becoming ambidextrous. The main purpose of the paper is to gain more insight into the impact of red tape on ambidexterity and the moderating role of public service motivation (PSM) by examining the perceptions of public managers.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected through a survey among 278 public managers working for a general administration of a Federal Public Service in Belgium and analyzed by multiple linear regression.

Findings – Our findings show that red tape has a negative impact on ambidexterity. Although PSM does not moderate this relationship, it does show a direct positive effect on ambidexterity.

Originality/value – Although considered an important capability within public administration (PA), research on specific PA antecedents of ambidexterity is still limited. This paper makes two important contributions. First, by focusing on public managers, it explores what their role is regarding ambidexterity. Second, this paper empirically contributes to the understanding of how two specific PA phenomena, red tape and PSM, influence ambidexterity. This contributes to two debates: the debate on the influence and control of individual managers on the consequences of red tape within public organizations and the debate about the consequences of red tape and PSM for ambidexterity.

Keywords Ambidexterity, Red tape, PSM, Public managers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

One of the main responsibilities of public organizations is providing activities and services for the benefit of the public (Shittu, 2020). Public organizations must ensure the delivery of high-performance services while also incorporating very different and often diverging demands, following from competing government paradigms or public values (Røhnebak and Breit, 2022). It has been argued that this can be achieved by either following a defensive strategy aiming for efficiency, or a proactive one aiming for innovation (Jacobsen and Jakobsen, 2018). Following the framework of ambidexterity, a choice between efficiency and innovation is deemed unnecessary; it is their simultaneous pursuit that creates multiple benefits for public organizations, such as increased effectiveness and legitimacy (Barrutia and Echebarria, 2022; Boukamel and Emery, 2017). Public organizations pursuing ambidextrous strategies can integrate both efficiency and innovation, resulting in better ability to overcome external challenges, and consequently, enhance their performance (Barrutia and Echebarria, 2022; Cannaerts *et al.*, 2016, 2020; Salas Vallina *et al.*, 2019).

It is argued that managers are essential in facilitating ambidexterity at a more executive level because they carry out the ambidextrous vision, by making decisions on resource and task

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allocation (Jansen *et al.*, 2016; Priyanka *et al.*, 2022). For this reason, the role of managers must be further explored (Priyanka *et al.*, 2022; Salas Vallina *et al.*, 2019). We specifically focus on public managers because they can act as role models and set the tone for public employees in terms of ambidextrous behavior (Jansen *et al.*, 2016; Kobarg *et al.*, 2017; Luu *et al.*, 2018; Priyanka *et al.*, 2022).

Although, it has been argued that gaining further insight into the mechanisms of ambidexterity is crucial (Priyanka *et al.*, 2022; Salas Vallina *et al.*, 2019), research with a focus on specific contextual public sector mechanisms of ambidexterity is still rare. A recent bibliometric review states that “How these PA context issues impact the achievement of organizational ambidexterity remains largely unexplored” (Hamblin *et al.*, 2024, p. 3). Following their reference to red tape and public service motivation (PSM), we therefore investigate how these two specific public administration (PA) concepts affect ambidexterity.

Red tape captures the negative impact of rules and regulations (Bozeman, 1993; George *et al.*, 2021). By focusing on public managers, we concentrate on job-centered red tape, e.g. on rules that lack functionality and are burdensome for individuals doing their job (Van Loon, 2017). George *et al.* (2021) call for research on different dimensions of red tape and possible divergent impacts on specific outcomes. A study of Sharma *et al.* (2020) in Nepal showed a contrasting impact for lack of functionality and compliance burden on ambidexterity which we will build upon.

Next to red tape PSM, motivation engrained in the commitment and contribution to the public sector and the broader society (Perry *et al.*, 2010), is a key characteristic of public employees (Borst *et al.*, 2023; Steijn and Knies, 2021). We do not expect a direct effect of PSM on ambidexterity. Instead, following studies suggesting that PSM can act as an individual resource to help public employees cope with the demands of red tape (Bakker, 2015; Giauque *et al.*, 2012; Mussagulova, 2021), we take PSM into account as a moderator. In doing so, we follow a general agreement among PA scholars that PSM “provides a theory of motivation that links the pursuit of the public interest with administrative action” (Scott and Pandey, 2005, p. 157). Hence, it can potentially stimulate ambidexterity by bypassing red tape.

This paper, therefore, focuses on the following research question:

RQ1. What is the impact of red tape on ambidexterity and what is the moderating role of PSM in this respect?

To answer this question, we implement an empirical-analytical approach to test theoretical assumptions. We relied on a quantitative methodology and collected data within one Federal Public Service in Belgium and analyzed the responses of managers to our validated Likert scale survey. It must be stressed that by doing this, we study the managerial perception of ambidexterity.

Hereby this paper makes two important contributions to PA research. First, it contributes to the need to gain more theoretical and empirical knowledge on how public organizations and especially their managers manage tensions within a context of complexity and turbulence (Hamblin *et al.*, 2024). Although ambidexterity is well established within general management literature and upcoming in PA (Hamblin *et al.*, 2024), more insight is needed whether ambidexterity serves as a capability to succeed. With a particular focus on public managers this paper empirically explores their role regarding ambidexterity. Second, this paper empirically contributes to the understanding on how the PA context influences ambidexterity. By focusing on red tape and PSM, we contribute to the debate on the individual influence of managers and their control on the consequences of red tape (George *et al.*, 2021) as well as to the debate on the consequences of PSM within public organizations (Borst *et al.*, 2023; Steijn and Knies, 2021).

In what follows, we focus first on the conceptualization of ambidexterity, red tape and PSM and, second, on their expected relationships. Next, we explore the methodology and discuss the findings. We finalize with a discussion and conclusion.

Ambidexterity

March (1991, p. 71), the founder of ambidexterity theory, defined ambidexterity as “the ability of organizations to exploit and explore”. He defined exploitation as “refinement, implementation, efficiency, selection, and execution, which results from centralization, tight cultures, and focus by reducing variance and increasing control and formalization, which leads to short-term performance”; and exploration as “search, risk-taking, experimentation, innovation, variation, play, flexibility, discovery, which results from decentralization, loose cultures, less formalized processes, and divergent thinking and is associated with long-term performance” (1991, p. 71). Regarding the public sector, exploitation relates to standardizing administrative processes or by documenting and processing standard applications in an efficient manner for service delivery (Boukamel and Emery, 2017; Cannaerts *et al.*, 2016; Kobarg *et al.*, 2017). Exploration within the public sector can refer to the complete rethinking of processes to fit changed legislation or the development and introduction of new software for current or new services (Boukamel and Emery, 2017; Cannaerts *et al.*, 2016; Kobarg *et al.*, 2017).

While some emphasize the contradictory character of both exploitation and exploration, others argue that separating them is impossible, especially at executive levels within the organization (Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013; Jansen *et al.*, 2016; March, 1991). Following the latter logic, exploitation and exploration have to be integrated to avoid rigidity (with a one-sided focus on exploitation) or confusion (with a one-sided focus on exploration) (March, 1991). In pursuit of high-level performance, public organizations must balance exploitation and exploration and integrate both (Cannaerts *et al.*, 2016, 2020). This integration can be accomplished through five different designs. A first design is temporal ambidexterity, in which organizations do not balance exploitation and exploration simultaneously but sequentially (Gupta *et al.*, 2006). Second, structural ambidexterity, in which exploration and exploitation activities are delegated to different teams within the organization and then integrated at a higher level (Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996). A third design is contextual ambidexterity for which it is argued that individuals should be able to balance exploitation and exploration if they are surrounded by a supportive organizational context (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004). A fourth design is team ambidexterity, where the “task” to become ambidextrous is a task of teams (Jansen *et al.*, 2016). Finally, individual ambidexterity, addresses the responsibility of individuals themselves to balance exploitation and exploration (Rosing and Zacher, 2017). To summarize, the first design takes a sequential approach towards balancing exploitation and exploration whereas all other designs take a simultaneous approach but differ in the level in which this balance needs to be created: at the organizational, team or individual level.

Studies of ambidexterity (Jansen *et al.*, 2016; Kobarg *et al.*, 2017; Luu *et al.*, 2018; Priyanka *et al.*, 2022) stress the importance of managers to enhance ambidexterity. This requires conflicting organizational and personal skills, such as a focus on short-term goals to ensure exploitation, as well as a high degree of flexibility and the ability to develop adequate long-term goals to achieve exploration. Within this paper we do not focus on how public organizations manage the balance between exploitation and exploration through organizational design, but we focus on the influence of managers on ambidexterity itself.

Red tape and ambidexterity

In general, red tape is defined as “rules, regulations, and procedures that remain in force and entail a compliance burden for the organization but have no efficacy for the rules’ functional object” (Bozeman, 1993, p. 283). All definitions about red tape have an intrinsic negative connotation because they associate it with waste, distraction from organizational goals, and costs (Scott and Pandey, 2005). These negative consequences emerge when rules become more important than the goals themselves, when following rules becomes a goal itself, or when employees are not able to adapt them when contextual conditions change (Scott and Pandey, 2005). Indeed, a meta study by George *et al.* (2021) shows a negative impact of red tape on

employee outcomes and organizational performance because it hinders employees in doing their jobs and organizations in achieving their mission. At the same time, however, they conclude that red tape is not as harmful as sometimes assumed (George *et al.*, 2021).

Empirical research shows that red tape is not intrinsically dysfunctional, especially not for public managers because it is a subjective and individual as well as a multidimensional phenomenon (Jacobsen and Jakobsen, 2018; Sharma *et al.*, 2020). To some extent, it can be argued that there is objective red tape, stemming from restricting policies; however, there are always individual differences in dealing with red tape because whether it is considered a hindrance depends on individual judgment (Cooke *et al.*, 2019). To capture this individual perception of red tape, we focus on job-centered red tape, which is defined as “rules that employees perceive as burdensome and not helpful in achieving the rules’ functional objective in their respective job” (Van Loon *et al.*, 2016, p. 663). It can be difficult for managers to assess the level of red tape in their organization but easier to judge how red tape affects their own job (Van Loon *et al.*, 2016).

Red Tape is also a multidimensional concept. George *et al.* (2021) argue that different dimensions might have different degrees of impact on employee outcomes and organizational performance and call for theoretical inspired argumentation about why some dimensions may have stronger or weaker impacts on specific outcomes. In this respect we follow Van Loon *et al.* (2016) who have discerned two dimensions of red tape: (1) compliance burden and (2) lack of functionality. Whereas compliance burden refers to “the excessive or unnecessary amount of time, energy, or other resources spent in executing a rule”; lack of functionality refers to “a rule that is not achieving its functional objective—that is, not serving its intended purpose” (Van Loon *et al.*, 2016, p. 664).

Regarding the relationship of red tape with ambidexterity, the bibliometric review of Hamblin *et al.* (2024) shows there is only one PA study which empirically focuses on the relationship between red tape and ambidexterity. The study of Sharma *et al.* (2020) among 132 government secretaries working for diverse government units in Nepal reports contrasting results for the effect of compliance burden and lack of functionality on ambidexterity. This finding is based on the theoretical argumentation that public employees must comply and cope with all legal rules, regardless of whether they find them burdensome. When legal rules are tight, people are unable to engage in ambidexterity because their main concern and efforts are to comply with them. There is little opportunity or time to search for alternative solutions: exploration is thus not an option (Sharma *et al.*, 2020). This is different when rules are perceived as having a lack of functionality. Using the lens of the behavioral theory of the firm, Sharma *et al.* (2020) argue that lack of functionality triggers the search for innovative solutions for this perceived dysfunctionality. Especially decision-makers, such as managers, are expected to look for solutions if they perceive problems which could be solved internally. Thus, instead of considering rules as a hindrance, lack of functionality can be considered as a stimulus for ambidexterity.

We follow the argumentation of Sharma *et al.* (2020) and therefore hypothesize that:

H1. Compliance burden is negatively associated with ambidexterity.

H2. Lack of functionality is positively associated with ambidexterity.

The moderating role of public service motivation

PSM is defined as “a particular form of altruism or prosocial motivation that is animated by specific dispositions and values arising from public institutions and missions” (Perry *et al.*, 2010, p. 682). Put differently, PSM is the intrinsic motivation to be committed to serve the public good as well as the broader society, and to establish equity (Scott and Pandey, 2005). It is argued that individuals with high levels of PSM are beneficial for public organizations. Individuals with high levels of PSM identify themselves with their job and their tasks, which leads to higher motivation, putting extra efforts into their work (Perry *et al.*, 2010).

Empirical research has shown that PSM is related to many outcome variables, such as job satisfaction (Homburg *et al.*, 2015), organizational commitment (Bland *et al.*, 2023), organizational performance (Brewer, 2010). However, in research it is often used as a moderator as PSM can strengthen or weaken relationships. The job demand – resources (job demand-resources (JDR)) model can exemplify this (Bakker, 2015). Job demands (such as work pressure, role ambiguity) cost energy, whereas job resources (such as support by colleagues or job autonomy) help employees to deal with these demands. According to Bakker (2015, p. 723) PSM can act as a resource as employees with higher PSM “are better able to deal with organizational stressors because they know that dealing with those stressors serves the higher goal of helping others”.

Whereas PSM is identified as a resource within the literature, red tape is often described as a demand (Borst *et al.*, 2019; Steijn and van der Voet, 2019), e.g. circumstances that involve excessive or undesirable constraints. If within the JDR model red tape is a demand and PSM a resource, then how do they interact? Several authors have argued that PSM can help employees to cope with red tape. According to Scott and Pandey (2005) individuals with higher levels of PSM perceive rules as something they have some control over, compared to individuals with low levels of PSM who consider rules to be uncontrollable. Mussagulova (2021) found that a lower PSM makes the negative effect of some job demands, such as red tape, more pronounced. PSM can thus be seen as an individual resource that mitigates the negative consequences of red tape and act as a buffer against its potential adverse effects (Cooke *et al.*, 2019).

To our knowledge, the moderating effect of PSM on the red tape – ambidexterity relationship has not been directly tested. However, if red tape is directly related to ambidexterity (as hypothesized in H1 and H2) and if PSM indeed acts as a resource, one would expect that individuals with a higher PSM will be better able to deal with red tape. This leads to H3:

H3. PSM moderates the relationship between compliance burden and ambidexterity, such that the relationship is weaker when PSM is high rather than low.

Although we anticipate a positive relationship between lack of functionality and ambidexterity, we expect PSM to enhance this relationship even further. As explained above, lack of functionality triggers the search for innovative solutions. Individuals with higher PSM who want to add public value will be even more triggered to do so. This is in accordance with empirical findings suggesting that a high PSM motivates employees to perform their daily tasks efficiently and reliably, and to explore new elements in public service delivery (Luu *et al.*, 2018) and positively influence innovative behavior (Miao *et al.*, 2018). We expect public managers with a higher PSM to be more motivated to abandon dysfunctional rules.

H4. PSM moderates the relationship between lack of functionality and ambidexterity, such that the relationship is stronger when PSM is high rather than low.

The theoretical framework and hypotheses are summarized in Figure 1.

Methodology

Research strategy

To answer the research question, we relied on one of the most prominent perceptions of science within PA, the empirical-analytical approach, by focusing on testing hypothesis deductively formulated and based on our theoretical framework (Van Thiel, 2014). We implemented a quantitative methodology to enhance our understanding of ambidexterity as objective as possible. We specifically relied on data collection through a survey composed of validated measures. In what follows we provide more detailed information on the context of data collection as well as on the measures and the descriptive analysis of our dataset.

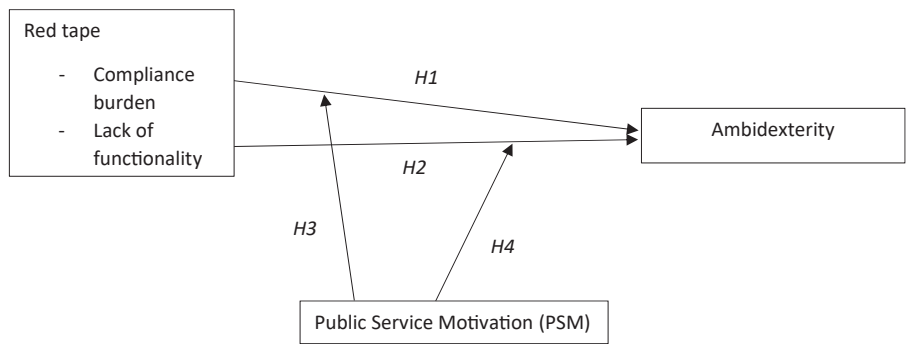


Figure 1. Conceptual framework. Source: Figure created by authors

Context and respondents

We chose to collect data within a single public organization, one of the twelve Federal Public Services in Belgium (Belgian Federal Government, 2024). This Federal Public Service made a specific request to stay anonymous. We chose this public service because their mission and vision recognize that they operate in a constantly changing environment and consequently must adhere to an ambidextrous strategy by focusing simultaneously on providing stability, transparency and stability and, on innovation to become future-oriented. The structure of this public service can be summarized as a three-layered organization consisting of three divisions: On top there is a chairman including chairman services but also some autonomous departments such as internal audit, the mid-level consists of staff departments such as information communication technology and Personnel and Organization and, on a more operational level, there are 7 general administrations like customs and strategic support who take up all operational tasks that form the core tasks of the organization (Belgian Federal Government, 2024).

We launched our online survey via Qualtrics in 2019 among all managers working for this Public Service. Our dataset originally contained responses from 405 managers. The missings and outliers were deleted, and since 90% of all respondents work for one of the general administrations departments, managers who work for the chairman as well as for one of the staff departments were excluded from any further analysis. We excluded them to safeguard the similarity in terms of context and tasks. Those included are in the general administrations, work more operational and are more similar in terms of the level of administrative rules, processes and regulations that must be followed compared to managers who work for the chairman or within a staff department.

Hence, our final dataset contains 278 managers, all working on a more operational level for one of the administration departments. A minority of the respondents ($n = 45$) work for this Federal Service for five years or less and the majority ($n = 233$) of the managers has a seniority of 6–11 years.

Measures and descriptive analysis

To measure **ambidexterity**, we followed a commonly used two-step approach. In the first step, exploitation and exploration were measured via the five-point validated Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) of Fernhaber and Patel (2012). Ambidexterity is measured as the perception held by managers on how they perceive their division, in our case the general administrations. The items were adapted to the public sector context of this study. An overview of the original items can be found in Table 1. The Factor analysis clearly extracted two factors for exploitation and exploration via Oblimin rotation. Furthermore, the reliability analysis gives a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.83 for exploitation and 0.88 for exploration. The reliability of exploitation and exploration is both above the 0.70 threshold (Gliem and

Gliem, 2003), and is supportive of previous research (Fernhaber and Patel, 2012). Finally, exploitation and exploration were calculated by averaging the scores of the items per respective factor.

In a second step, we calculated the value for ambidexterity. There is a vibrant discussion on the most appropriate manner to calculate ambidexterity. While some scholars calculate the difference between exploitation and exploration (He and Wong, 2004), others multiply both (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004), and a third group of scholars add up the values of both exploitation and exploration (Sharma *et al.*, 2020). Within this paper, we followed this third group of scholars. Adding the scores of exploitation and exploration implies a compensation logic. This means that high scores for both exploitation and exploration are necessary for high

Table 1. Overview of the measures

	Items
Ambidexterity Fernhaber and Patel (2012)	<i>During the past 3 years my division has focused on</i>
Exploitation	Improving quality Continuously improving the reliability of services Increasing the levels of automation in its operations Constantly surveying existing customer's satisfaction Fine-tuning what it offers to keep the current customers satisfied Penetrating more deeply into the existing customer base Improving lower cost
Exploration	Looking for novel ideas by thinking outside the box The ability to explore novel technologies Creating services that are innovative to the organization Looking for creative ways to satisfy the needs of customers Aggressively venturing into new market segments Actively targeting new customer groups
Red tape Van Loon (2016, 2017)	<i>The rules with which I must comply in my work</i>
Lack of functionality	Have a clear function for my job activities (rev) Contribute to the goal of my job activities (rev) Help me do my job well (rev) Serve a useful goal (rev)
Compliance burden	Cause much pressure at work Take a lot of time to comply with Cause much delay Cause a lot of frustration
PSM Perry and Hondeghem (2008)	I unselfishly contribute to my community Meaningful public service is very important to me I consider public service my civic duty I seldom think about the welfare of people whom I don't know personally (rev) I have little compassion for people in need who are unwilling to take the first step to help themselves (rev) Most social programs are too vital to do without It is difficult for me to contain my feelings when I see people in distress Much of what I do is for a cause bigger than myself I am one of those rare people who would risk personal loss to help someone else Making a difference in society means more to me than personal achievements I think people should give back to society more than they get from it

Note(s): All items were measured on a five-point validated Likert scale (1 = strongly/totally disagree; 5 = strongly/totally agree)

Source(s): Table created by authors

levels of ambidexterity, but that exploitation and exploration scores can compensate a lower score for one of them. This has the advantage that the balance is captured: low scores for both exploitation and exploration lead to low scores for ambidexterity, and high scores for both represent high levels of ambidexterity. Following this compensation logic holds the disadvantage that the degree of imbalance between exploitation and exploration is unknown because the ones with a rather medium score on ambidexterity can have a very high score on exploitation in combination with a very low score on exploration (or the other way round) (Rosing and Zacher, 2017). Although the compensation logic is not perfect, it allowed us to capture our proposed idea of ambidexterity.

Red tape was measured via the validated five-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree; to 5 = totally agree) of Van Loon (2016, 2017). The main argument to use this scale is because of its ability to capture the multidimensional meaning of red tape. The reliability analysis revealed a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88 for compliance burden and 0.92 for lack of functionality. Both were calculated by averaging the scores of the items (Table 1).

PSM was measured using the validated five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; to 5 = strongly agree) of Perry and Hondeghem (2008) (Table 1). This scale enabled us to capture how managers perceive their PSM. The reliability analysis gives a Cronbach's alpha of 0.69, which is just below the 0.70 threshold but still acceptable (Gliem and Gliem, 2003). PSM was calculated by averaging the scores of all items.

Finally, we added three individual and common control variables: age, gender, and education level. Age was measured as a ratio-variable; gender as a nominal variable (1 = "male"; 2 = "female"); and education as an ordinal variable with five categories (1 = "primary school", 2 = "secondary school"; 3 = "bachelor's degree", 4 = "master's degree", and 5 = "doctoral degree"). Respondents are at least 24 years old and maximum 66 years old; the mean age is approximately 50 years. Furthermore, our dataset contains 157 men (56.5%) and 121 women (43.5%) and most respondents (58.6%) have a master's degree.

Findings

The hypotheses were tested using a moderation analysis. Doing so provides the necessary information to discuss the relationship between red tape and ambidexterity and to what extent this relationship is strengthened or weakened by PSM. Table 2 provides a step-by-step overview of the results. Since this analysis tests the impact of PSM as a moderator, we mean-centered all independent variables and entered them into the regression. This approach allows "the (unstandardized) regression coefficients of the main effects to be interpreted directly in terms of the original variables" (Dawson, 2014, p. 12). First, a regression analysis is performed which explains ambidexterity with age, gender, and education degree (Model 1). This model explains solely four percent of the variation in ambidexterity (R^2 squared is 0.004); cannot be considered as significant and shows no significant effects. Next, it is investigated whether the two dimensions of red tape, lack of functionality and compliance burden, relate to ambidexterity (Model 2). This model, with red tape and the control variables, explains 15% of variation in ambidexterity. Lack of functionality ($b = -0.564$; $p < 0.001$) and compliance burden ($b = -0.210$; $p < 0.001$) both relate negatively and significantly to ambidexterity. The control variables show no significant relations with ambidexterity. The third model (Model 3) includes the control variables, both dimensions of red tape as well as the direct effect of PSM to explain ambidexterity. This model explains 17% of the variation in ambidexterity. Whereas, once more, the control variables show no significant results; red tape and PSM both show significant relations with ambidexterity. Lack of functionality and compliance burden both are negatively and significantly related ($b = -0.514$; $p < 0.001$ and $b = -0.228$; $p < 0.01$); PSM is positively and significantly ($b = 0.501$; $p < 0.01$) related to ambidexterity. The final models include all previous variables as well as the moderations of compliance burden (Model 4.) and lack of functionality (Model 5) to explain ambidexterity. Both models explain 18% of the variance in ambidexterity but, cannot be considered as significant. Looking at the direct and

Table 2. Results regression analysis ambidexterity

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5		
	<i>b</i>	β	<i>P</i>	<i>b</i>	β	<i>P</i>	<i>b</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	β	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	5.833		0.000	6.189		0.000	6.472		0.000	6.576		0.000	6.575		0.000
Age	0.008	0.055	0.403	0.003	0.022	0.727	−0.001	−0.004	0.947	−0.002	−0.015	0.815	−0.002	−0.015	0.813
Gender	−0.001	0.000	0.998	−0.050	−0.019	0.752	−0.071	−0.027	0.649	−0.091	−0.034	0.563	−0.096	−0.036	0.544
Education Degree	−0.032	−0.018	0.776	−0.044	−0.025	0.675	−0.062	−0.036	0.547	−0.061	−0.035	0.553	−0.060	−0.035	0.562
Lack of Functionality				−0.564	−0.301	0.000	−0.514	−0.274	0.000	−0.508	−0.271	0.000	−0.506	−0.270	0.000
Compliance Burden				−0.210	−0.141	0.024	−0.228	−0.153	0.014	−0.230	−0.155	0.013	−0.228	−0.154	0.014
PSM							0.501	0.162	0.005	0.529	0.171	0.003	0.516	0.167	0.005
Complianceburden_										−0.153	−0.049	0.392	−0.115	−0.037	0.561
PSM															
Lackoffunctionality_													−0.112	−0.028	0.660
PSM															

Note(s): Model 1: $R^2 = 0.004$ Adjusted $R^2 = -0.007$ Sig. $F(\text{Change}) = 0.770$; Model 2: $R^2 = 0.149$ Adjusted $R^2 = 0.133$ Sig. $F(\text{Change}) = <0.001$; Model 3: $R^2 = 0.174$ Adjusted $R^2 = 0.155$ Sig. $F(\text{Change}) = 0.005$; Model 4: $R^2 = 0.176$ Adjusted $R^2 = 0.154$ Sig. $F(\text{Change}) = 0.392$; Model 5: $R^2 = 0.176$ Adjusted $R^2 = 0.152$ Sig. $F(\text{Change}) = 0.660$; b = Unstandardized coefficients β = Standardized coefficients p = Significance $N = 278$

Source(s): Table created by authors

moderation effects of these models shows to what extent PSM moderates the relationship between both dimensions of red tape and ambidexterity. The results, however, show no significant results for both moderations (Model 4 and Model 5) but solely confirms the previous direct effects of both dimensions of red tape ($b = -0.506$; $p < 0.001$ and $b = -0.228$; $p < 0.01$) and PSM ($b = 0.516$; $p < 0.01$) on ambidexterity (Model 5).

To summarize, these outcomes provide support for H1 but, we must reject H2, as the effect is negative and not positive as expected. In addition, H3 and H4 are rejected because, in contrast to our expectations, none of the moderation effects are significant, and PSM only has a direct effect on ambidexterity.

Discussion

This paper empirically explored the impact of two PA contextual elements, red tape and PSM, on ambidexterity. The results, derived from a regression analysis based on survey data of 278 managers working for a Belgian Federal Public Service, provide two valuable contributions to the current literature on red tape and ambidexterity and the role of PSM of managers.

Theoretical implications

Regarding the first contribution, PA literature has rarely focused on mechanisms of ambidexterity (Priyanka *et al.*, 2022; Salas Vallina *et al.*, 2019). In addition, literature focusing on specific contextual public sector mechanisms in relation to ambidexterity is even more rare (Hamblin *et al.*, 2024). Following their reference to red tape and PSM we therefore examined how these two public sector concepts relate with ambidexterity. Regarding red tape, we followed recent theoretical developments showing that red tape consists of two separate dimensions, compliance burden and lack of functionality, both explaining a different side of red tape (Van Loon *et al.*, 2016). By doing so we adhered to the call of for example George *et al.* (2021) and Sharma *et al.* (2020) for more research examining the relationship between different dimensions of red tape and multidimensional outcomes such as ambidexterity. Previous research, for example Van Loon (2017) and Sharma *et al.* (2020), argues that compliance burden is negatively associated, and lack of functionality is positively associated with ambidexterity. However, our analysis indicates an overall negative direct impact of both dimensions of red tape. Moreover, lack of functionality had an even stronger negative effect than compliance burden. Hence, our analysis shows that in this specific public organization red tape hinders managers to achieve ambidexterity both when rules lack functionality and when compliance burden outweighs the purpose of the rules. Thus, although our starting point was to examine the diverse effects of different dimensions of red tape, our analysis contradicts the findings of Van Loon (2017) and Sharma *et al.* (2020). Hereby this study aligns with existing literature that considers red tape to be dysfunctional (DeHart-Davis and Pandey, 2005; Jacobsen and Jakobsen, 2018; Scott and Pandey, 2005). The latter might be explained by two arguments. Firstly, the context of research differs since Van Loon (2017) focused on red tape in healthcare work units and Sharma *et al.* (2020) on government units in Nepal whereas our study focused on managers working for one of the general administrations in a Belgian Federal Public service. Secondly, Van Loon *et al.* (2016, p. 670) argue that “red tape affecting an employee’s core task may have a larger and more negative impact on the organization given the centrality and importance of line tasks compared with staff tasks.” We particularly chose in this paper to exclude staff departments and to solely include public managers who focus on core public service delivery tasks.

Although we expected a moderating role of PSM, our analysis only reveals a strong direct positive effect of PSM on ambidexterity. This implies that having a high level of PSM supports managers in this public organization to overcome red tape, meaning that it cannot be considered as a personal resource as hypothesized (Cooke *et al.*, 2019; Mussagulova, 2021). However, we did find a direct effect, implying that PSM must be considered as a resource

(Bakker, 2015) to help accomplish ambidexterity. This finding aligns with and adds knowledge to limited available research on PSM's role in innovative behavior, suggesting a positive influence (Miao *et al.*, 2018).

Regarding the *second contribution*, PA literature focusing on ambidexterity mainly uses an organizational perspective (Hamblin *et al.*, 2024). This study focuses primarily on managers and by doing so contributes to the rather limited knowledge on the effect of the behavior of public managers on ambidexterity. Job-centered red tape enabled us to gain more insight into how managers experience the rules they encounter in their jobs (Van Loon *et al.*, 2016). The finding that both their interpretation of rules as well as their motivation impacts ambidexterity contributes to the literature (Hamblin *et al.*, 2024). It specifies more detailed, earlier findings of Priyanka *et al.* (2022) or Salas Vallina *et al.* (2019) who stressed the essential role of managers to facilitate ambidexterity. As our findings underscore, overcoming the demanding aspect of rules and using PSM as a resource can help managers to enhance ambidexterity.

Limitations and future research directions

Like any other research, this paper comes with limitations. One of the main theoretical limitations is that we chose to focus on two PA contextual elements. More contextual elements (for example, ownership, political context, and financial resources such as funding) or the interaction with the internal environment (more contextual information about the departments/teams they work for) as well as the external environment might also play a role. Therefore, although this paper contributes to the knowledge base of ambidexterity research in PA, more research taking diverse public sector contextual elements into account is necessary because simply transferring empirical results from the private to the public sector is problematic because of the differences between the two (Cao *et al.*, 2023; Chen *et al.*, 2020; Hamblin *et al.*, 2024; Kobarg *et al.*, 2017).

The methodological limitations of this study are threefold. Firstly, because this paper relies on an empirical-analytical approach, and not on an interpretative approach (Van Thiel, 2014), we could not gain insight into how managers for example perceive rules or to what extent administrative rules affect them in the pursuit of public service delivery. Future research could implement a more interpretative approach by using a qualitative methodology to gain more understanding on how managers perceive and deal with red tape regarding ambidexterity.

Secondly, all measures are based on self-perception of respondents in the same survey. This raises the risk of common method bias as well as social desirability bias (Van Thiel, 2014). To minimize this, we followed other researchers' approaches and solely used previously tested measures with high reliability and validity scores and strived for confidentiality towards the respondents to limit socially desirable answers as much as possible. Furthermore, the usage of self-reported instruments as well as measuring both independent and dependent variables in the same questionnaire is accepted and very common in PA research and, the Harman's one-factor test did not indicate any large issues (George and Pandey, 2017).

A final and third methodological limitation stems from the method of calculation for ambidexterity. Following a compensation logic has the disadvantage that we are unable to conclude on the imbalance between exploitation and exploration (Rosing and Zacher, 2017). We advocate for critically looking at different ambidexterity measures and for comparing different ambidexterity measures (the difference logic and the logic of multiplying or adding both) within its analysis.

Contributions for practice

Public organizations and especially their managers are advised to simultaneously focus on exploiting their current activities while exploring new ways of providing as well as developing public services (Barrutia and Echebarria, 2022; Jacobsen and Jakobsen, 2018). To support

managers in realizing ambidexterity, their opportunity, motivation and ability must be optimized (Kuntz *et al.*, 2023; Mom *et al.*, 2019). The outcomes of this study have three relevant managerial implications. Regarding red tape, the advice is twofold. On the one hand rules and regulations that are considered as red tape should be revised. This revision can benefit from answering questions such as “do all rules within our organization support managers or not?” If rules solely are a burden and lack functionality, a revision can support the opportunity to diminish red tape and thus to enhance ambidexterity. On the other hand, certain rules could be explained better so that managers understand their necessity, as precondition for public service delivery. Answering questions such as “How can we communicate the purpose of rules better?” can help to diminish red tape.

Furthermore, high levels of PSM are considered a positive source for ambidexterity. Regarding recruitment, asking questions related to the reasons to work for the public sector as well as to the intrinsic motivation of potential candidates can lead to the selection of managers with higher levels of PSM. Following this, hiring managers with high levels of PSM could be helpful promoting ambidexterity.

Finally, do managers have the necessary skills to deal with the dilemma of working towards, exploitation and exploration simultaneously, within their daily work? It can help to organize on-the-job training as well as more psychological training to support them in the development of their paradox mindset which is argued (Miron-Spektor *et al.*, 2018) to help managers dealing with the dilemma. Hence, providing the opportunity, supporting the motivation and developing the ability of managers to deal with paradoxical tasks might help organizations to successfully become ambidextrous.

Conclusion

Public organizations must ensure to deliver high-quality public services; however, they are challenged in this task. Overcoming these challenges is of vital importance and therefore ambidexterity is key. To enhance ambidexterity, this study shows that diminishing red tape as a demand and having managers with high levels of PSM as a resource is of crucial importance for ambidexterity.

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