

A LOOK BEHIND THE CURTAIN: EXAMINING MERITOCRACY WITHIN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES FIRMS IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Meritocracy, a corner stone of modern organizational ethos, ostensibly promises equal opportunities and advancement based solely on individual capabilities and achievements, regardless of background or affiliation. Meritocracy raises the returns on human capital management by ensuring that individuals are free to contribute and succeed, whatever their social rank or personal connections. However, its application within the context of Pakistani's professional services sector remains largely unexplored. Therefore, by presenting a qualitative conceptual framework, this research delves into the intricate dynamics of meritocracy within professional services firms in Pakistan, offering an empirical analysis of the extent to which merit-based principles guide organizational practices. Employing a qualitative approach in terms of face to face interviews, this study investigates the perceptions and realities of meritocracy among employees and leaders within professional services firms. Through qualitative interviews, it seeks to identify the factors influencing meritocratic practices, including cultural norms, institutional frameworks, and organizational policies. Additionally, the research examines the impact of nepotism, favoritism, and other forms of bias on meritocratic ideals, shedding light on the challenges to their implementation in Pakistan's socio-cultural landscape.

Keywords: Meritocracy, professional service firms, career advancement, competence, recruitment and political landscapes.

*I can't get a car 'Cause I ain't got a job I can't get a job 'Cause I ain't got a car
Alice Cooper—Lost in America.*

INTRODUCTION

The conventional notion of workplaces operating as meritocracies has come under scrutiny in light of extensive research revealing persistent disparities in treatment based on employees' social identities such as gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Acker, 2006; Hirsh, 2009; Merluzzi & Sterling, 2017; Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019; Rubery & Grimshaw, 2015). These investigations illustrate that job applicants with influential connections and commendable references often receive preferential treatment over those with exemplary educational backgrounds and innate talent (Sawert, 2019). Moreover, studies have demonstrated the imposition

of more stringent performance standards on women compared to equally proficient men (Foschi, 1996), while seasoned workers frequently receive inferior performance evaluations relative to equally competent younger counterparts (Bal et al., 2011). Collectively, these findings challenge the meritocratic ideal by suggesting that workplaces, rather than being bastions of equal opportunity for advancement and development, often reflect societal biases and inequities. Within a meritocratic framework, in the perspectives of human capital management, criteria for selecting and advancing individuals within organizations encompass

dedication, expertise, competencies, proficiency, experience, and empathy. Prioritizing excellence, credibility, reliability, and effective utilization of resources in strategic planning, decision-making, and implementation endeavors are all directed towards fulfilling organizational objectives. In practice, meritocracy entails fostering a culture where diligence, initiative, and the acquisition of knowledge and skills are esteemed organizational values, with all employees striving to embody them. When meritocracy is embraced within an organization, it fosters heightened accountability and transparency in performance, thereby enhancing organizational trust (Gholipour, 2012).

The paradigm shift from traditional management to strategic management of human resource has long served as a strong basis for gaining a competitive advantage. Hence, the idea of having skilled human resource always drew widespread attention in the strategic human resource management (HRM) literature (Obeidatetal.,2016;Rehmanetal.,2020). In the perspectives of human capital management, meritocracy is invariably important in terms of hiring, nurturing, and retaining a smart workforce forms a basis of competitive advantage within the organization (Rehman et al., 2021).

Significantly speaking human ingenuity is still among the most abundant but frequently underutilized corporate resource (Zhuo et al., 2021; Kong, 2010; O'Driscoll, 1998). A critical analysis of the global service firms suggests an increasingly knowledge-intensive services sector landscape. In the contemporary business landscape, modern firms strive to harness the potential of their workforce, streamline their processes, leverage technology, and optimize their performance and effectiveness (Kong, 2010; Pomerantz, 2003). Professional service firms (PSFs) are particularly focused on delivering high-quality services by maximizing their knowledge resources, ultimately aiming for self-reliance and long-term viability, aligning with their core organizational goals (Kong, 2009). The strategic management of PSFs becomes paramount in meeting client expectations, which increasingly demand innovative, knowledge-driven services. Therefore, prioritizing the meritocratic allocation of talent within PSFs is crucial. This entails ensuring that staff members' knowledge-based capabilities are effectively utilized to enhance efficiency, while also encouraging continuous innovation and the

development of creative solutions to complex client challenges (Kong, 2009).

Understanding Meritocracy: Definition and Framework

The term "meritocracy" was first coined by Michael Young in his 1958 novel "The Rise of the Meritocracy." While Young intended it as a satirical critique of a society solely focused on measurable merit, the term has also been used more optimistically to describe a fairer and more just system (Young, 1958). However, defining "merit" itself remains a central debate point. Is it solely based on factors like intelligence and talent, or should it encompass broader qualities like work ethic, social skills, and contribution to society? Authors like Amartya Sen argue that defining merit solely based on individual qualities ignores the impact of factors beyond one's control, such as social background and access to resources (Sen, 1999). Despite its potential to incentivize hard work and create a more efficient society (Lipsey, 2014), the practical implementation of meritocracy faces challenges. Accurately measuring merit is complex and subjective, with traditional metrics potentially disadvantaging individuals from underprivileged backgrounds (Bellows, 2009). Furthermore, unequal access to resources and opportunities creates an uneven playing field from the outset (Castilla & Benard, 2010). Even with formal equality of opportunity, existing social networks and power structures can favor those from privileged backgrounds, hindering true meritocratic advancement (Poocharoen & Brillantes, 2013). These complexities necessitate a nuanced understanding of meritocracy and its limitations in achieving a truly just and equitable society.

Few would dispute the ethical or practical advantages of meritocracy today. Instead, the conversation revolves around enhancing the meritocratic nature of our societies further. Despite strides made, prejudice and poverty continue to hinder millions from realizing their full potential. However, unlike our ancestors from before the Enlightenment, we view this as a regrettable shortcoming rather than predetermined fate. While we strive for equal opportunities, we recognize the invaluable role of meritocracy. We appreciate that the licensure of doctors relies on exams rather than the wealth of medical students. We applaud athletic achievements knowing they were earned through

skill, not financial privilege. We trust scientific findings because they undergo rigorous peer review. We celebrate the fact that success, such as gaining millions of views on YouTube, is accessible beyond elite circles. Meritocracy amplifies the rewards of talent by enabling individuals to contribute and excel regardless of their social status or personal connections. However, it's disconcerting that bureaucracy, the prevalent social structure worldwide, consistently undermines meritocracy. According to our survey with the Harvard Business Review, 76 percent of respondents from large companies stated that political maneuvering significantly influences advancement within their organizations. This divergence from the intended purpose is concerning. Bureaucracy was originally devised to counter nepotism, age bias, and class prejudice prevalent in pre-industrial societies. A notable advancement in organizational design occurred in the early 19th century when the Prussian army, post-Napoleonic defeat, adopted a competitive selection process for officer positions. Previously, military leadership was predominantly drawn from the nobility, but this proved an inadequate measure of military prowess. In theory, a bureaucracy prioritizes merit, promoting individuals with exceptional abilities over those less accomplished. However, in practice, organizations rarely come close to realizing this ideal (Hamel & Zanini, 2019). No matter how hard we try to be impartial about our own abilities, our evaluations of others often reflect more about ourselves than about the individuals being assessed. This tendency, known as idiosyncratic rater bias, undermines the reliability of our judgments. Several factors contribute to this bias. Firstly, individuals vary greatly in their grading styles, with some being harsher critics while others tend to be more lenient. Studies conducted between 1998 and 2010 revealed that over 60 percent of the differences in performance ratings could be attributed to the evaluators' rating tendencies. This disparity makes individual assessments highly inconsistent. Furthermore, we tend to favor those who resemble us, a phenomenon known as in-group bias. Despite efforts to embrace diversity, we still categorize people into "us" versus "them" based on various criteria such as nationality, political beliefs, religious affiliation, or physical appearance. In-group biases are deeply ingrained and even observed in young children. For instance, in a study, eleven-month-old infants showed a preference for playing

with a puppet that shared their food preference by a significant margin. As socially aware individuals, we may strive to recognize our biases, yet it remains challenging to separate the assessment of competence from personal comfort levels. Emily Chang's book "Brotopia" highlights a stark gender disparity in the tech industry, where despite comparable employment numbers, women hold only 25 percent of positions and receive a mere 2 percent of venture funding. Despite claims of meritocracy from tech leaders, evidence suggests that success often hinges on passing a "bro-hood" test, perpetuating an insidious in-group bias and creating what software pioneer Mitch Kapor calls a "mirror-tocracy." Another cognitive tendency leading to misjudgments is the halo or horns effect, where initial impressions heavily influence subsequent evaluations. Research by David Schoorman revealed that an employee's performance review was significantly influenced by whether they were hired by the evaluator. This halo bias can lead to favored individuals underperforming for extended periods before facing consequences. These biases are exacerbated by the fact that judgments of an individual's competence often rest on the assessment of a single authority figure—their boss (Hamel & Zanini, 2019).

Navigating the terrain of meritocracy within professional services firms demands a vigilant awareness of inherent biases that can distort perceptions of competence and hinder equitable opportunities for all employees. Despite efforts to foster meritocratic environments, the persistence of in-group biases and the halo effect underscore the need for ongoing introspection and structural reforms to ensure that talent and contributions are truly recognized and rewarded based on merit. By addressing these biases head-on and promoting transparency and accountability in evaluation processes, professional services firms can strive towards cultivating a truly inclusive and merit-based culture where every individual has the opportunity to thrive and contribute meaningfully to organizational success.

Professional Services Firms:

In recent decades, professional service firms (PSFs) have garnered increasing attention from scholars in management and organizational science. This interest is often attributed to the vital role such firms play in the modern knowledge economy and their

distinctive operational characteristics (Kaiser et al., 2015). Today, the professional service sector has emerged as one of the fastest-growing, most profitable, and influential sectors globally, rivaling the commercial banking sector in terms of revenue generation (Empson et al., 2015). Moreover, the theoretical importance of studying PSFs as organizations becomes increasingly apparent. For researchers in human resource management (HRM), PSFs hold particular significance as they derive their competitive edge from the knowledge and expertise of their employees. Consequently, HRM practices serve as crucial mechanisms for enhancing organizational performance. Positioned at the forefront of workplace evolution, PSFs are at the forefront of implementing innovative HRM strategies to excel in the competitive "war for talent". In the evolving landscape of globalized professional service firms (PSFs), where the 'war for talent' intensifies, there is a pressing need for systematic research to address HR challenges. A recent report published in the Australian Financial Review underscores the fierce competition for talent within law firms amidst an ever-changing and increasingly competitive market (Walsh & Tadros, 2015). In this context, the knowledge embodied in the human capital of PSFs emerges as a pivotal source of competitive advantage. These firms strategically employ highly qualified individuals to differentiate their service offerings, leveraging knowledge-driven, value-driven, and relationship-based strategies to attract and retain clients (Lowendahl, 2005). While previous studies have highlighted the influence of human capital on the strategy and performance of PSFs (e.g., Hitt et al., 2001; Pennings, Lee, & van Witteloostuijn, 1998), there remains a dearth of empirical evidence concerning the specific talent management challenges faced by PSFs amid the increasing uncertainty of global markets. Meritocracy, as a principle guiding talent management practices, likely plays a significant role in shaping how PSFs navigate these challenges, yet its precise impact remains an area warranting further exploration. Understanding the interplay between meritocratic principles and talent management strategies within PSFs is crucial for enhancing their competitiveness and sustaining long-term success in the dynamic global market landscape.

While literature specifically addressing meritocracy within professional service firms in Pakistan is currently lacking, the concept of meritocracy within

such firms is likely influenced by broader cultural and organizational factors. In Pakistan, professional service firms may grapple with balancing traditional hierarchies with the merit-based advancement of employees. Given the diverse socio-cultural landscape of Pakistan, the extent to which meritocracy is practiced within professional service firms may vary. While no research has been undertaken to investigate meritocracy within professional service firms in Pakistan, it remains an area ripe for exploration. Understanding how meritocratic principles are implemented and their impact on employee motivation and organizational performance in the Pakistani context would provide valuable insights for talent management practices within the professional service sector.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design via face to face interviews to delve into the intricacies of meritocratic practices within professional services firms operating in Pakistan. The qualitative approach offers a nuanced understanding of the subject matter by allowing for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, experiences, and behaviors in their natural contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Sample population and data collection

For this study, qualitative data were gathered between November 2023 - February 2024. A total of 12 face-to-face interviews were conducted with professionals from 4 Pakistani professional service firms (PSFs). Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Prior consent was obtained from participants, and all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis using MAXQDA. To maintain confidentiality, unique identifier codes were assigned to each participant and their respective firms. The participants consisted of managers, service delivery specialist, team leads service delivery, analysts, associates, graduate trainees, and junior consultants engaged in different departments. The Interview Guide/Protocol questions were developed after a comprehensive review of relevant studies. Furthermore, in case of conducting interviews, additional company details such as organizational structure, firm size, and other information were accessed through company website coupled with relevant industry insights from the government regulatory and independent reporting institutions. The additional data is significantly

important in terms of investigating the specific types of professional services firms within Pakistan sampled for this research.

Research Instrument

The study aims to examine the meritocracy within PSFs in Pakistan, for this purpose a meritocracy instrument was adapted from (Polastri & Truisi, 2017), who adopted seven questions in order to investigate the extent that the profession or business has the characteristics of a merit based environment or not. In fact, we also used couple of questions from BMI (Bureaucracy Mass Index) developed by (Hamel & Zanini, 2019). Significantly, we employed qualitative research methodology in terms of semi structured interviews from the respondents.

Data Analysis Approach

In our analysis of qualitative data derived from face-to-face interviews, we employed the thematic analysis approach. Following Ferlie et al.'s (2005) recommendations, we ensured external validation of the research by incorporating additional analysis from contributing researchers on the qualitative data. Initially, the lead researcher coded and analyzed thematic codes, which were then reviewed and enhanced with insights from the other researchers. Conceptualized themes underwent further evaluation to establish empirical associations among key themes. This process facilitated the identification and analysis of common thematic issues across a diverse range of Professional Service Firms (PSFs), leading to the extraction of insightful observations regarding organizational culture, work practices, and meritocratic principles from the extensive dataset. The specific results and findings derived from the data are outlined in the subsequent section.

Table 1 Participation profile and industry information

Gender	Age Group	Type of Firm	Education	Work Experience	Firm identifier code
Male	36-45	International	Master Degree	5 to 7 years	Firm A
Male	21-30	National	Master Degree	5 to 7 years	Firm A
Male	21-30	National	Master Degree	5 to 7 years	Firm A
Female	26-35	National	Master Degree	5 to 7 years	Firm A
Male	26-35	National	Master Degree	5 to 7 years	Firm A
Female	21-30	National	Master Degree	5 to 7 years	Firm A
Male	26-35	National	Master Degree	5 to 7 years	Firm B
Male	26-35	National	Master Degree	5 to 7 years	Firm B
Male	Above 45	National	Master Degree	Over 15 years	Firm B
Female	36-45	National	Master Degree	5 to 7 years	Firm C
Male	26-35	National	Master Degree	5 to 7 years	Firm C
Male	26-35	National	Master Degree	5 to 7 years	Firm C

S. No	Industry/ Sector	Type of PSF	Interviewee position/ designation	Firm Size
1.	Human Resource Services	Management Consulting	Management Lead	Large
2.	Human Resource Services	Management Consulting	Graduate Trainee	Large
3.	Human Resource Services	Management Consulting	Graduate Trainee	Large
4.	Human Resource Services	Management Consulting	Team Lead HR Service	Small to Medium
5.	Human Resource Services	Management Consulting	Team Lead HR Service	Medium
6.	Human Resource Services	Management Consulting	Graduate Trainee	Medium
7.	Accounting and Audit	Accounting and Audit Services	Audit Manager	Medium
8.	Accounting and Audit	Accounting and Audit Services	Audit Manager	Medium
9.	Accounting and Audit	Accounting and Audit Services	IT Manager	Medium
10.	Investment Firms	Investment Consulting	Investment Analyst	Medium
11.	Investment Firms	Investment Consulting	Portfolio managers	Medium
12.	Investment Firms	Investment Consulting	Data Scientist	Small to Medium

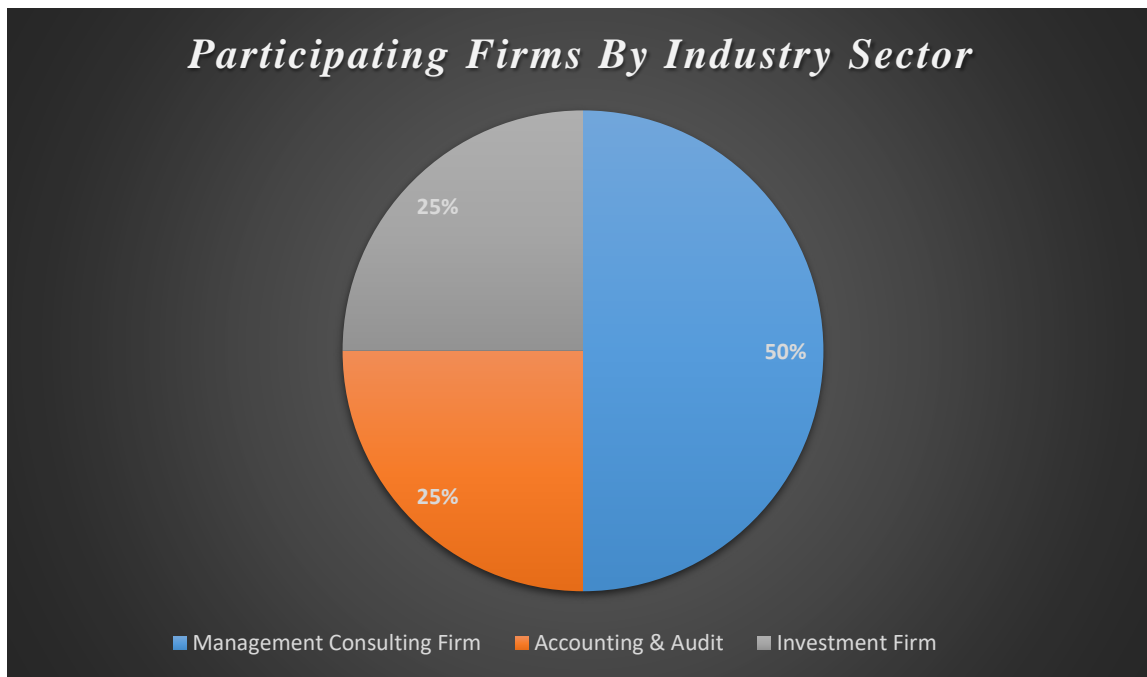


Figure.1 Participating Firms By Industry/sector

ANALYSES & RESULTS

PERCEIVED EFFORT VS AUTHORITY

Perceived effort and corresponding authority within professional services firms reveal a notable discrepancy, with (n=8 mentions) indicating dissatisfaction with the alignment between the time and effort they invest in their work and the level of authority or status they hold within the organization. Despite dedicating significant resources to their professional responsibilities, these individuals feel that their efforts are not adequately recognized or rewarded in terms of their position or influence within the firm. This finding accentuates a pervasive sentiment of undervaluation and suggests a need for closer examination of the mechanisms by which authority and status are conferred within these contexts.

In their reflections, the respondents articulated a common sentiment of frustration and disillusionment with the current system of recognition and advancement within their professional services firms. Some respondent expressed, we've poured countless hours into my work,



striving for excellence in every task, yet we continually find ourselves overlooked when it comes to opportunities for advancement or decision-making authority. It's disheartening to see colleagues with seemingly less dedication or skill being promoted ahead of me." This sentiment echoed throughout the group, with many expressing feelings of being undervalued and marginalized despite their efforts to contribute meaningfully to the firm's success. These firsthand accounts underscore the urgent need for a reevaluation of the criteria and processes through which authority and status are conferred, with a focus on fostering a more equitable and merit-based approach to recognition and advancement.

CAREER ADVANCEMENT PRACTICE

"Creating an environment where people with very different backgrounds and skills feel that they can have a successful career is essential."

--- Dennis Nally, Global Chairman, PwC

It is investigated that (n=8 mentions) employees indicating that the level of education does not positively affect career advancement within their position suggests several potential insights. Firstly, it implies that within their specific field or organization, educational credentials may not be valued as highly as other factors such as experience, skills, or performance. This could indicate a culture or environment where practical expertise and demonstrated abilities hold more weight than academic qualifications. Secondly, it might point towards a perception of limited upward mobility or advancement opportunities based solely on educational attainment. Employees may feel that despite investing in higher education, their career progression is not significantly influenced or accelerated by their academic qualifications. This sentiment could reflect broader systemic issues within the organization regarding career development pathways and criteria for advancement. Furthermore, it raises questions about the effectiveness and relevance of educational requirements within the context of the specific position or industry.

“One participant in the professional services firm (PSF) reflected on a recurring observation within the organization, stating, “It’s evident that individuals are often promoted to their level of incompetence here.” This sentiment echoed a widely discussed phenomenon known as the Peter Principle, where employees ascend the organizational hierarchy until they reach a position where they are no longer competent. Within the PSF context, this participant highlighted instances where individuals who lacked the necessary skills or competence for senior-level roles were nonetheless promoted. This observation underscores the prevalence of a systemic issue where promotion decisions may be influenced by factors other than merit or capability, leading to inefficiencies and mismatches between job roles and individual competencies. Addressing this phenomenon within the firm necessitates a critical examination of promotion criteria and processes to ensure that advancements are based on merit and competency rather than arbitrary factors.”

Employers may need to reassess their criteria for career advancement to ensure they accurately reflect the skills and capabilities necessary for success in the role. Overall, the finding underscores the need for organizations to adopt a more comprehensive and merit-based approach to career advancement, one that considers a diverse range of factors beyond just educational background. It highlights the importance of recognizing and rewarding employees based on their performance, contributions, and potential rather than solely on their academic qualifications.

Turn to any segment of the professional service industry and you’ll find one constant: the relentless search for outstanding talent. It’s axiomatic that without highly skilled and motivated performers, service firms have nothing to sell. The best PSFs achieve and maintain their competitive edge by attracting and retaining the most gifted people, who then attract and retain good clients with interesting work, which, in a virtuous circle, attracts the most qualified candidates (Broderick, 2010).

“Do people drive the business to success, or does the business drive satisfied, high-performing people? I have yet to determine which comes first – and it doesn’t really matter.”

---- Ray Kotcher, Senior Partner and CEO, Ketchum

POLITICAL LANDSCAPES & RECRUITMENT DYNAMICS

Political behaviors emerge as a dominant force, with an overwhelming (n=9) of respondents acknowledging the existence of political landscapes and maneuvering within the firm. This finding indicates that internal dynamics are heavily influenced by factors beyond merit or performance, suggesting a culture where individuals may engage in strategic actions to gain advantage or influence outcomes within the organization. Furthermore, the prevalence of self-aggrandizement suggests a culture where individuals actively seek to promote their own interests or accomplishments, potentially at the expense of others or the overall objectives of the organization. This behavior can lead to increased competition, lack of collaboration, and decreased trust among colleagues, ultimately hindering productivity and organizational effectiveness.

Additionally, the revelation that recruitment is primarily based on recommendations and personal references rather than merit raises concerns about the fairness and transparency of the hiring process. Such

practices can perpetuate nepotism, favoritism, and the perpetuation of existing power structures, potentially excluding qualified candidates who do not have personal connections within the organization. This not only undermines the principles of meritocracy but also risks limiting diversity and innovation within the workforce.

“One biggest impediment to growth is finding the right talent.”

EXAGGERATED COMPETENCE

As human beings, we tend to overestimate our abilities and underestimate our faults. During the interview, (N=9 respondents) said that 75% percent of executives claimed to be among the top 10 percent of performers within PSFs. One so common is the habit of overrating one’s abilities while the inclination to self-aggrandizement is universal, it’s particularly pronounced at the top. Here’s why.

“First, highly confident executives tend to have an advantage in competing for power. Respondents asserted that in judging the competence of others, some senior executives heavily influenced by bluster within the company. The more confident executive appears, the more likely we are to believe they’re genuinely capable, whether or not that’s true. Genuine competence is often hard to assess, so instead we gauge an individual’s self-confidence. The respondents strongly confirmed the proposition that overconfident individuals are perceived as more competent by others. The implication: it’s often the most confident people, not the most competent, who get to the top. Stated more bluntly, the gap between self-perception and reality is likely to be greatest where the air is thinnest. In case you had any doubt, it really is possible to bullshit your way to the top. Second, in a formal hierarchy, power relationships are highly asymmetric. Managers have a lot more control over their subordinates than the reverse. This makes it risky to question a superior’s competence. Stick a pin in your boss’s overinflated ego and it’s your career that will go “pop!” Power differentials encourage acquiescence, which leaders often mistake for agreement. It’s more gratifying to believe that a sea of nodding heads betokens assent than to entertain the

hypothesis that one’s subordinates are merely buying career insurance. In the presence of the powerful, discomforting facts get ignored, contrary opinions go unexpressed, and doubts about executive competence are raised only in hallway whispers.”

Ultimately it sheds light on the pervasive phenomenon of overconfidence among executives and its impact on organizational dynamics. Despite the emphasis on meritocracy, the study reveals a concerning trend where self-perception often diverges from reality, leading to the elevation of confident individuals over truly competent ones. In hierarchical structures, power differentials exacerbate this issue, fostering an environment where questioning authority is discouraged, and dissenting voices are silenced. These findings underscore the importance of fostering a culture that values honest assessment and critical feedback, rather than perpetuating a system where confidence trumps competence. Only by addressing these inherent biases can organizations truly achieve meritocracy and unlock the full potential of their talent pool.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Embarking on a journey through the labyrinthine corridors of professional services firms (PSFs), we confront a myriad of nuances that shape the elusive concept of meritocracy. Like a ship navigating treacherous waters, individuals within these firms often find themselves grappling with the ebbs and flows of perceived effort versus authority. Picture the diligent worker toiling away, striving for recognition akin to a lone wolf howling for acknowledgment in the wilderness of corporate hierarchy. Yet, despite their efforts, they find themselves tethered to the lower rungs of the ladder while others seemingly leapfrog ahead, leaving them in their wake.

Peering deeper into the heart of PSFs, we encounter the tangled web of career advancement practices. It’s a delicate dance, akin to navigating a labyrinth where each turn presents a new challenge, and success is often a matter of mastering the intricate steps of corporate choreography. For some, the path to promotion resembles a marathon, a grueling test of endurance where only the fittest survive. Meanwhile, others seem to ascend effortlessly, propelled by unseen forces or perhaps a stroke of luck akin to finding a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.

But the terrain grows even more treacherous as we confront the shadowy realms of political landscapes and recruitment dynamics. Here, whispers of favoritism and backroom deals echo like ghosts haunting the halls of power. It's a world where influence and connections hold sway, and the road to success is often paved with compromise. Imagine a game of chess where every move is strategic, and the stakes are nothing less than the keys to the kingdom. In this arena, the line between merit and manipulation blurs, leaving many wondering if true fairness can ever be achieved.

Yet, perhaps the most sobering revelation comes when we peer behind the curtain to examine the exaggerated competence of senior executives. Here, the emperor's new clothes reveal themselves, and we are forced to confront the uncomfortable truth that not all who wield power are worthy of it. Like a grand illusion, the facade of expertise crumbles under scrutiny, revealing a hollow core where arrogance masquerades as competence and hubris leads to downfall.

In the wake of these revelations, it becomes clear that meritocracy within PSFs is a lofty ideal, often obscured by the fog of corporate politics and personal agendas. Yet, amidst the chaos, there is hope. By shining a light on these hidden truths and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability, we can begin to dismantle the barriers that stand in the way of true meritocracy. It's a journey fraught with challenges, but one worth undertaking if we are to unlock the full potential of our organizations and ensure that talent, not tenure, reigns supreme.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

M.H. has performed the analyses, drafting the initial manuscript, including writing sections, making revisions, and editing for clarity and accuracy. M.Z.K. has designed the research approach, interview guides, participant selection, data collection methods, and coding. Both the authors contributed equally to this research.

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