TOWARDS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION: THE ROLE OF HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF SERBIA'S PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Associate professor Snežana MAKSIMOVIĆ, Ph.D
University MB, Faculty of Business and Law, Belgrade, Serbia
galena.mcl@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-9928-1292

Gorica JEROTIJEVIĆ, Ph.D
University MB, Faculty of Business and Law, Belgrade, Serbia
goricavidic.ts@gmail.com

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Abstract:
This paper explores the role of human resources development and knowledge management in the transformation process of the public administration of the Republic of Serbia towards a learning organization model. The focus of the research is the analysis of the implementation and evaluation results of training programs conducted by the National Academy for Public Administration (NAPA) during the period January-December 2024 and February 2025. Based on theoretical frameworks of the learning organization concept, human resources development, and knowledge management, the paper analyzes the extent to which the implemented trainings contributed to strengthening employee competencies, improving organizational culture, and enhancing the capacity for adaptation, innovation, and knowledge-based decision-making. By combining quantitative and qualitative analysis of evaluation indicators, the research identifies key challenges and barriers in applying acquired knowledge, as well as factors that contribute to the successful integration of trainings into organizational learning processes. Particular attention is given to the need for establishing a sustainable knowledge management system in public administration, which would enable systematic collection, sharing, and application of knowledge as a foundation for further professionalization and modernization of the state administration. The research results may serve as a basis for improving training programs and defining human resources development policies aimed at building a more efficient, transparent, and adaptive public administration.
Keywords: *human resources development, knowledge management, learning organization, public administration, training programs, organizational culture*

Introduction

Contemporary trends in public administration management are increasingly characterized by the need for constant adaptation to changes in both external and internal environments, rapid digitalization, and the growing expectations of citizens and service users. In such a dynamic context, traditional management models are no longer sufficient,

and there is a growing emphasis on developing institutional capacities for learning, innovation, and agility. Consequently, human resources development and knowledge management have become strategic priorities, especially for public administrations undergoing comprehensive reform processes, such as the case of the Republic of Serbia.

The concept of the "learning organization," which emphasizes an institution's ability to continuously acquire, share, and apply knowledge to improve its performance, stands out as a relevant framework for modern public administration [32]. Within this model, human resources development is not limited to the acquisition of individual skills, but rather entails the systematic shaping of an organizational culture based on learning, collaboration, knowledge sharing, and continuous improvement.

Public administration reform in the Republic of Serbia, guided by strategic documents and aligned with the principles of the European Administrative Space, has identified the professionalization and capacity building of civil servants as key goals. The National Academy for Public Administration (NAPA) plays a central role in achieving these goals, being responsible for planning, organizing, and implementing training and professional development programs for public administration employees. The evaluation of previous training programs indicates a strong potential for improving organizational practices and empowering employees in public administration, particularly through topics related to leadership, change management, teamwork, and professional development [23]. However, several challenges continue to hinder the full realization of these benefits. These include issues related to the long-term sustainability of training systems, limited integration of acquired knowledge into daily work routines, and underdeveloped mechanisms for institutional knowledge management. The absence of formal tools for knowledge transfer, along with insufficient institutional support for continuous learning and innovation, highlights the need for deeper analysis to identify the factors that facilitate or hinder the implementation of the learning organization model. This research addresses precisely these issues by examining the broader institutional, organizational, and individual dimensions of learning processes in public administration.

In light of these challenges, a key research question emerges: how and to what extent do professional training programs contribute to the transformation of the public administration of the Republic of Serbia toward a learning organization, and how can

these processes be further improved to enhance efficiency, professionalization, and institutional resilience? This paper aims to examine the role of human resources development and knowledge management in the modernization of public administration, with particular emphasis on the institutional mechanisms that facilitate or hinder the integration of knowledge into everyday practice. Through the analysis of training evaluations and the identification of key challenges and good practices, the study seeks to offer recommendations for improving human resources and knowledge management systems as a foundation for building a modern, agile, and professional public administration operating according to the principles of a learning organization.

Theoretical backround

Effective and efficient functioning of public administration requires a civil service system based on skilled, knowledgeable, and competent personnel. This system relies on proper workforce planning, continuous professional development, and mechanisms for monitoring employee performance and supporting evidence-based decision-making in the field of human resource policy. Employee development and improvement is viewed as a continuous process that includes formal education, work experience, additional training, interpersonal interactions, and systematic assessment of skills and competencies [5]. Strategic human resources management is essential not only for the success of individual organizations but also for the advancement of society as a whole. In the context of globalization and rapid technological changes, competitive advantage is increasingly based on human capital knowledge, skills, and creativity of employees [12].

Training and education are no longer seen merely as costs but as strategic investments in organizational capacity [6]. Jackson and Schuler [15] emphasize the distinction between training (focused on current organizational needs) and development (oriented toward future job requirements). Luoma [17] outlines three approaches to HR development: the open (needs-based) approach, aimed at closing competency gaps through training; the closed (opportunity-based) approach, focused on changing organizational culture through workshops and teamwork; and the organizational structure change approach, which assigns a strategic role to HR development. In this context, HR managers are expected to align training strategies with organizational goals and change

management processes. A system for evaluating the effectiveness of training is essential, with a clear link between learning outcomes and operational performance.

Knowledge management has become a vital function of modern organizations. Differentiating knowledge from data and information is the first step toward its strategic use [37] [16], McDermott [22] and Mårtensson [20] highlight several characteristics of knowledge: it is the result of human action, context-specific, difficult to store and transfer, and cannot be separated from the human mind. Nonaka [25] distinguishes between two types of knowledge: tacit and explicit. Explicit knowledge is documented, structured, and easily shared, while tacit knowledge is embedded in experience, informal, and difficult to articulate [31]. Effective knowledge management includes the identification, development, exchange, and use of knowledge to achieve organizational goals [13]. Armistead [2] identifies three key processes: knowledge creation, knowledge transfer, and knowledge embedding. These processes must be harmonized and coordinated for successful strategy implementation.

Studies show that organizations that successfully integrate knowledge management strategies into their HR practices achieve better outcomes in knowledge transfer, retention, and creation [36] [28]. Denford and Chan [9] define several key dimensions of knowledge strategy: sources of knowledge (internal/external), key processes (creation/sharing), knowledge focus (exploration vs. exploitation), learning radicalness, learning speed, and knowledge breadth. A holistic approach to HR management, as suggested by [33], links business strategy and knowledge strategy through four phases: analysis of the internal and external environment, goal setting, strategic initiative development, and institutionalization of the strategy.

One of the central goals of public administration reform in Serbia is the establishment of a professional, competent, and merit-based civil service system. The Law on Civil Servants [17] along with related bylaws, introduced modern principles of recruitment and career advancement based on merit, performance, and continuous professional development. A career system was established to allow for promotion, transfers, and structured evaluation based on clearly defined criteria, as specified in the Regulation on Civil Servant Evaluation [11] and the Law on Salaries of Civil Servants and State Employees [24].

These mechanisms form an institutional framework for strategic HR management, creating conditions for the development of an organizational culture that encourages learning, evaluation, and knowledge application in the public sector.

Contemporary approaches to public administration reform increasingly emphasize the integration of multiple internal development processes as a foundation for achieving institutional effectiveness and responsiveness. In this regard, the transformation of public administration requires coordinated action between two key strategic functions: **human resources development** and **knowledge management.** Their interaction enables the creation of internal capacities, promotes competence development, and fosters the establishment of systems that support learning and innovation. This dynamic is conceptualized in the integrative model shown in Figure 1.

Model of Integration of Human Resources Development, Knowledge Management and Learning Organization in the Context of Public Administration Transformation

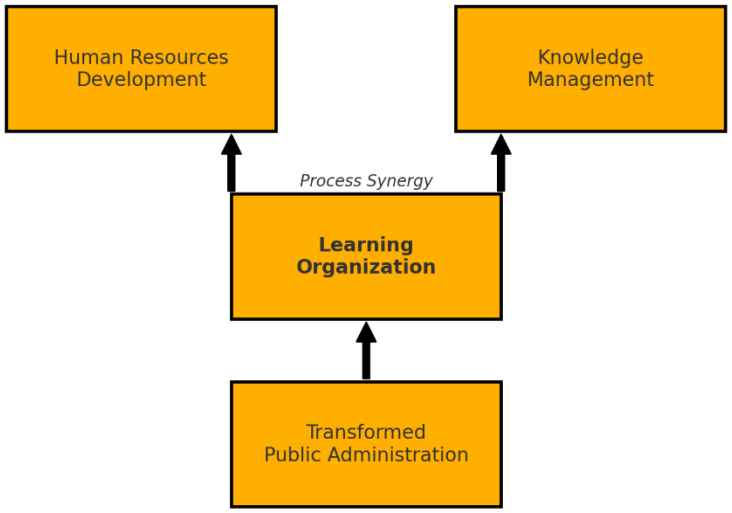

Figure 1. Model of Integration of Human Resources Development, Knowledge Management, and Learning Organization in the Context of Public Administration Transformation.

Source: *Author, based on own conceptualization*

The presented model illustrates the integrative relationship between human resources development, knowledge management, and the concept of a learning organization, with the ultimate goal of transforming public administration into an adaptive,

efficient, and knowledge-based system. At the foundation of the model are two key pillars: Human Resources Development and Knowledge Management. These processes represent the essential drivers of organizational change, enabling capacity building, the enhancement of individual and collective competencies, and the systematic acquisition, sharing, and application of knowledge within the organization. The interaction and synergy of these two processes lead to the establishment of a Learning Organization, characterized by continuous learning, organizational adaptability, openness to change, and the fostering of an innovation-driven culture. This stage is central to the model, as it creates the structural and cultural conditions necessary for sustainable transformation.

Finally, the learning organization serves as the catalyst for the transformation of public administration, supporting the development of a professional, transparent, and citizen-oriented administration that is capable of responding to the challenges of a dynamic environment and contributing to the creation of public value. The arrows in the model emphasize both the sequential and interactive nature of the processes, while the central positioning of Process Synergy underlines the importance of harmonized and integrated approaches to managing knowledge and human resources in order to achieve organizational excellence and long-term transformation in the public sector.

The concept of the learning organization implies a constant connection between individual development and organizational growth, shifting employee roles toward greater responsibility and participation, as well as a transition from hierarchical to horizontal structures. Knowledge management, within this framework, encompasses the processes of identifying, generating, sharing, and applying knowledge, thereby contributing to increased organizational flexibility and innovation [7] [34] [21]. Successful implementation of both concepts requires the synergy of several factors: organizational culture, human resource management, information and communication technologies, and performance-based reward systems. Organizational culture is identified as the key driver of transformation, as it enables the integration of knowledge into both strategic and operational flows [29][35]. The primary purpose of organizational learning and knowledge management systems is to enable both adaptive and generative learning - that is, learning that not only optimizes existing processes but also questions the fundamental assumptions behind organizational action [4]. Organizations that successfully implement

these processes demonstrate an increased capacity for innovation, anticipation of change, competitive advantage, and sustainable development.

Research context

The focus of this research is the analysis of the impact of training programs implemented by the National Academy for Public Administration [23] on enhancing employee competencies and transforming public administration towards the model of a learning organization. Special attention is devoted to examining the extent to which these trainings contribute to human resources development and the strengthening of professional capacities among civil servants, as well as how the outcomes of the implemented programs influence the development of organizational learning processes and knowledge management in public institutions.

In this context, the research addresses the key factors that facilitate or hinder the integration of acquired knowledge into the daily functioning of the administration. It also analyzes the potential of training programs to stimulate institutional changes leading to the establishment of sustainable mechanisms for knowledge sharing, innovation, and learning through practice. Based on the collected data, the study aims to determine how professional development programs can be strategically utilized as a tool for the modernization of public administration and its transformation into a more flexible, efficient, and knowledge-based system. A particular aim is to formulate recommendations for improving existing human resources development policies and knowledge management systems, in line with contemporary challenges and ongoing reform processes in the public administration of the Republic of Serbia.

The research was designed as an applied case study, focusing on the activities of the National Academy for Public Administration during the period from January to December 2024 and February 2025. The primary subject of the research is the evaluation of the effects of the conducted training programs on the development of public administration employees' competencies, as well as their contribution to shaping an organizational culture that fosters learning and knowledge management [23].

A mixed-methods approach was applied, combining quantitative analysis of data from training evaluation reports with qualitative interpretation of findings in light of relevant

theoretical models: the learning organization, knowledge management, and human resources development. Data were collected from post-training evaluation forms, which included assessments of training quality, the applicability of acquired knowledge, and participants' self-assessment of their competencies before and after the training.During the analyzed period, the National Academy for Public Administration organized a total of 712 training sessions, with 22,056 participants, representing a notable increase compared to previous years [23]. The programs covered a broad range of topics relevant to strengthening the capacities of public administration, with particular emphasis on the development of management and leadership skills, the promotion of ethics and integrity, as well as communication, teamwork, and change management competencies.

A distinctive feature of the training programs is the diversity of delivery formats, which reflects the application of modern educational models aligned with the principles of a learning organization. The distribution of formats clearly demonstrates a strategic shift toward blended learning methodologies. As illustrated in **Figure 2 below**, 49% of the trainings were conducted in traditional classroom settings, 22% through virtual classrooms, 11% as online courses, and 7% in the form of consultations [23].This combination of approaches enhances accessibility, flexibility, and responsiveness to the diverse learning needs of public administration employees.

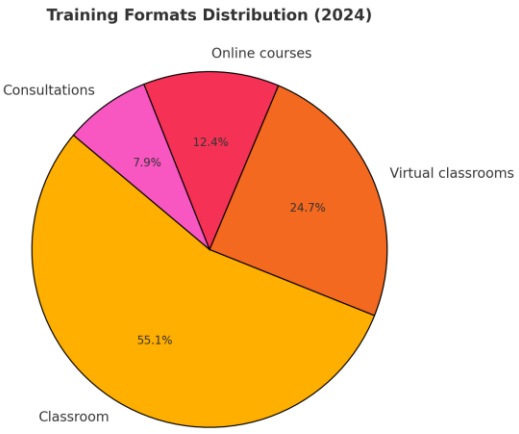

Figure 2. Distribution of Training Formats (2024), *Source:* Author's calculation based on the data of the NAPA [23]

The evaluation results demonstrate a high level of participant satisfaction. On a scale from 1 to 4, the average overall training quality score was **3.79.** Regarding the

applicability of the acquired knowledge, the scores ranged from **3.69 to 3.78**, indicating that participants not only rated the quality of the training highly but also perceived the content as directly relevant to their professional responsibilities [23]. One of the most significant indicators of training effectiveness is the difference in participants' self-assessed knowledge levels before and after the training. As shown in **Figure 3**, the average self-assessment score increased from **2.13 before** the training to **3.36 after,** reflecting a positive change of **+1.23** [23].

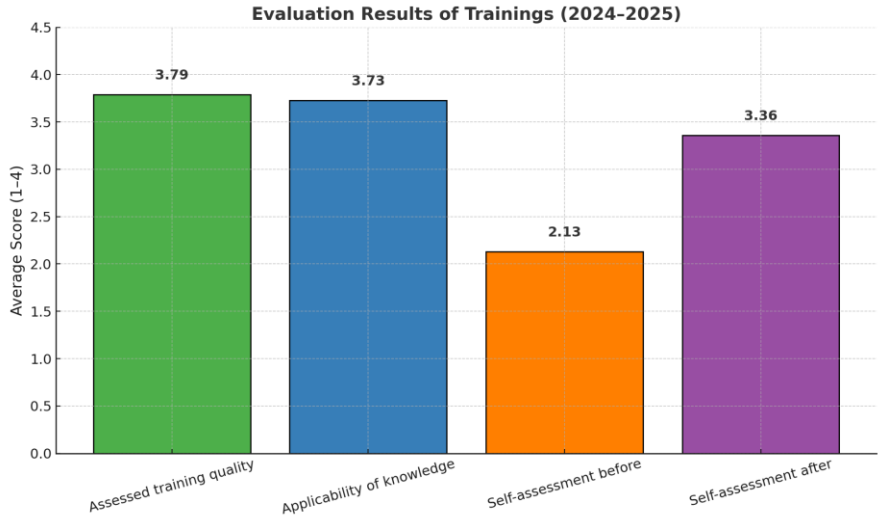

Figure 3. Evaluation of Trainings Conducted by NAPA (January–December 2024 and February 2025, *Source:* Author's calculation based on the data of the NAPA [23]

This outcome highlights the substantial contribution of the training programs to the development of individual competencies and reinforces the view that structured professional development plays a crucial role in the transformation of public administration. By integrating these quantitative indicators with qualitative insights, this research provides a comprehensive foundation for assessing the strategic role of NAPA's training programs in fostering a culture of continuous learning, improving administrative effectiveness, and supporting the evolution of Serbia's public administration into a modern, knowledge-based system.

Discussion: Challenges and Perspectives for Transformation towards a Learning Organization

Although the evaluation results of the training programs conducted by the National Academy for Public Administration point to high levels of participant satisfaction and measurable improvements in individual competencies, several persistent challenges continue to limit the full realization of the learning organization model within Serbia's public administration. One of the key barriers is the **insufficient integration of acquired knowledge into the practical, day-to-day functioning** of institutions. Despite the participants' improved self-assessed competencies, the transfer of learning outcomes into organizational routines and processes remains inconsistent. This gap highlights the need for a stronger linkage between training content and institutional priorities [26]. The key findings of the evaluation confirm that the training programs delivered by NAPA have had a significant positive impact on the individual level most notably in terms of participant satisfaction, the perception of knowledge gained, and the applicability of acquired skills to everyday work [23]. The high ratings for soft skills training such as communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, and leadership underscore a growing recognition within the public sector of the need to develop interpersonal and managerial competencies. These skills are especially vital for effective change management and the promotion of a service-oriented, adaptable administration.

Furthermore, the successful implementation of blended learning models, combining traditional classroom training with virtual and online formats, demonstrates the system's capacity to adapt to different learning needs and operational conditions. This flexibility not only expands access to training across diverse administrative levels and geographic locations but also supports the broader objective of fostering a culture of continuous learning. However, despite these achievements, the identified challenges reveal **structural and cultural limitations** that hinder the translation of individual learning into broader organizational transformation.

First, the **limited integration of knowledge into decision-making and operational processes** indicates a disconnect between training efforts and institutional functioning. Knowledge gained through training often remains at the individual level, without being embedded in procedures, workflows, or team-based practices. This is partly

due to the **lack of structured mechanisms to follow up and evaluate the long-term effects of training** especially in terms of its influence on organizational culture, employee behavior, and institutional performance indicators.

Second, **resistance to changes in work practices**, including skepticism toward new learning approaches and digital tools, remains prevalent among a portion of employees. This resistance often stems from deeply rooted organizational norms, fear of increased workload, or uncertainty regarding expectations [30]. Addressing this challenge requires **strong leadership**, clear communication of reform objectives, and the active inclusion of employees in the change process [3].

Third, the **absence of institutionalized knowledge management practices** limits the potential for knowledge diffusion and collective learning. In many public institutions, knowledge remains person-dependent and informal, without adequate systems for documentation, sharing, or reuse [8]. As a result, the transformative effect of individual trainings is weakened, and the possibility of cumulative organizational learning is significantly reduced.

To move forward, Serbia's public administration must **bridge the gap between learning and practice** by ensuring that professional development is not viewed as an isolated intervention, but as an integral part of organizational strategy and performance management [10]. This includes aligning training content with institutional priorities, promoting accountability for knowledge application, and embedding learning into organizational routines.

Finally, **developing a supportive environment** for organizational learning through leadership commitment, incentives for knowledge sharing, and recognition of learning achievements, will be essential for building sustainable capacities and advancing the transformation toward a responsive, innovative, and knowledge-driven public administration

Another major obstacle is the **absence of systemic knowledge management mechanisms**. In many public administration bodies, knowledge remains fragmented and dependent on individual initiative, rather than being supported by structured, organization-wide systems for capturing, storing, and disseminating institutional knowledge [1]. This results in inefficiencies, repetition of efforts, and limited institutional memory, especially

in the context of staff turnover or restructuring [14]. In order to address these challenges and accelerate the transformation process, it is necessary to implement a set of coordinated strategic measures aimed at embedding learning and knowledge management into the core of administrative practice.

Improving the training and knowledge management system within Serbia's public administration requires a comprehensive approach that bridges theoretical knowledge with its practical application in real work environments [19]. In this regard, it is essential to develop integrated and practice-oriented professional development programs that go beyond traditional instructional formats, incorporating mentoring, coaching, experiential learning, and communities of practice. These approaches foster continuous professional growth and encourage the application of acquired knowledge in day-to-day responsibilities.

A key challenge remains the need to ensure long-term monitoring of the impact of training on participants' job performance. It is necessary to establish mechanisms for systematically evaluating the effects of training over time, including peer feedback, post-training follow-ups, and the use of performance indicators directly linked to learning outcomes [27].

Furthermore, the development of functional internal knowledge management systems across public administration institutions is a priority. This involves institutionalizing knowledge-sharing practices through the creation of knowledge repositories, digital collaboration platforms, and the organization of workshops for experience exchange. Such systems facilitate access to best practices, identified challenges, and expert insights, thereby promoting organizational learning and inter-institutional cooperation.

An important aspect of this process is the enhancement of leadership capacities in the domain of change management. Targeted investments in leadership development programs equip managers and supervisors with the critical competencies needed to drive organizational change, model desired behaviors, encourage innovation, and integrate learning objectives into team and institutional strategies.

Finally, aligning human resources development and knowledge management with the broader public administration reform agenda is fundamental for achieving sustainable

transformation. It is necessary to ensure coherence between training initiatives and strategic priorities through clearly defined success indicators, integration of learning outcomes into performance management systems, and the promotion of lifelong learning principles within human resources policies.

Conclusion

The transformation of the public administration of the Republic of Serbia towards a learning organization represents a complex and multidimensional process that requires a strategic approach to human resources development, knowledge management, and institutional learning. The findings of the research confirm that the training programs organized by the National Academy for Public Administration (NAPA) during the period January-December 2024 and February 2025 [23] contribute to the development of employee competencies and the strengthening of their professional orientation, with particular emphasis on training in leadership, change management, and teamwork.

However, despite high participant satisfaction and positive assessments of the applicability of acquired knowledge, the research identified key challenges that hinder the full realization of the learning organization concept. A notable lack of systematic procedures for transferring knowledge from the individual to the organizational level was observed, as well as the absence of formal mechanisms for knowledge management in most institutions. Knowledge remains predominantly personalized and confined to individuals, which limits its broader use for organizational change and innovation.

Therefore, it is crucial that training programs are not perceived as isolated educational events but rather as integrated elements of a broader institutional system that promotes continuous learning, reflection, collaboration, and innovation. In this regard, NAPA has the potential to become a central actor in organizational learning by introducing mentoring programs, communities of practice, digital platforms for knowledge exchange, and change management initiatives.

In addition to institutional mechanisms, transformation towards a learning organization requires a redefinition of the concept of competencies and performance management. Human resources management should focus on creating an organizational culture in which individual contribution, professional development, and teamwork are

valued. The introduction of a competency-based approach enables the establishment of performance-based reward systems and supports the professionalization of public administration. Although the research largely relied on secondary data sources and subjective self-assessments by training participants, the findings provide important insights into institutional capacities and challenges in the process of building an efficient, modern, and citizen-oriented administration. NAPA positions itself as a key institution that not only implements training programs but also has the potential to initiate deeper organizational changes through the synergy of human resources development and knowledge management. Finally, building a learning public administration cannot rely solely on formal strategies. It is necessary to develop managerial practices based on clear strategic maps and aligned goals, where human capital is integrated into the organizational vision and becomes the key driver of change. Only through such a holistic approach can a sustainable transformation of public administration be achieved towards a more efficient, transparent, and resilient system of public services.

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