

WORK ETHIC IN THE GHANAIAN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EMPLOYMENT SECTORS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WORK ATTITUDES

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-method comparative study employed surveys and semi-structured interviews to identify differences in work attitudes, specifically punctuality, initiative, accountability, and motivation between public sector and private sector employees in Ghana. Drawing upon Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and Ubuntu Philosophy (Gyekye, 1997), the study surveyed 240 employees (120 public sector, 120 private sector) across Accra, Kumasi, and Sekondi-Takoradi using a adapted Work Ethic Questionnaire measuring punctuality, initiative, accountability, and motivation, followed by semi-structured interviews with 24 participants (12 from each sector) to explore the lived experiences and contextual factors shaping reported attitudes. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and independent t-tests; qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Six overarching themes emerged from the integrated analysis: punctuality as performance versus principle, with public sector employees reporting punctuality as externally motivated (fear of sanction) and private sector employees as internally motivated (self-discipline); initiative as permitted versus required, with public sector employees describing initiative as sometimes unwelcome and private sector employees describing it as expected for survival; accountability as vertical versus horizontal, with public sector employees oriented toward supervisor approval and private sector employees oriented toward market forces and peer accountability; motivation as security-driven versus opportunity-driven, with public sector employees valuing job stability and private sector employees valuing advancement potential; the systemic constraint narrative among public sector employees who expressed desire to work hard but described bureaucratic barriers; and

the survival pressure narrative among private sector employees who described hard work as necessity rather than choice. Quantitative results showed statistically significant differences between sectors on all four dimensions, with private sector employees scoring higher on initiative ($t = 4.82, p < .001$), accountability ($t = 3.95, p < .001$), and motivation ($t = 4.31, p < .001$), while public sector employees scored higher on punctuality ($t = 2.14, p < .05$). However, qualitative interviews revealed that these differences were better explained by organisational context (reward systems, supervision, job security) than by individual character differences. The study contributes to understanding of sectoral work attitude differences in Ghana, offering evidence-based recommendations for public sector reform and private sector human resource management.

KEYWORDS: Work ethic, public sector, private sector, punctuality, initiative, accountability, motivation, Ghana, mixed methods, Social Constructionism, Ubuntu.

1. INTRODUCTION

The debate over whether public sector employees work as hard as their private sector counterparts is perennial in Ghanaian organisational discourse. Private sector employers and popular media frequently characterize public sector workers as lazy, unpunctual, and lacking initiative, attributing these deficiencies to job security, weak accountability systems, and a culture of entitlement (Amankwah-Amoah, Danso, & Adomako, 2021). Public sector workers, in turn, defend themselves by pointing to inadequate resources, bureaucratic constraints, and the challenge of serving citizens with limited institutional support. They argue that private sector workers are not more diligent but simply operate under different conditions: the threat of dismissal, performance-based pay, and the immediate consequences of customer dissatisfaction (Ayentimi, Burgess, & Dayaram, 2018). This debate has significant practical implications. Public sector reform initiatives in Ghana have repeatedly attempted to import private sector management practices performance contracts, results-based management, customer service charters on the assumption that private sector work attitudes are superior and that public sector workers need to be "fixed" (Government of Ghana, 2020). Yet these reforms often fail to produce sustained improvement, suggesting that the problem may be less about individual worker character and more about the systemic contexts in which public and private sector employees operate.

Despite the intensity of this debate, empirical evidence on sectoral differences in work attitudes in Ghana remains limited and methodologically constrained. Existing studies have

relied primarily on small-sample qualitative research or on survey instruments developed in Western contexts that may not capture culturally specific dimensions of Ghanaian work ethic (Dartey-Baah & Amoako, 2021). Few studies have employed mixed methods that combine the breadth of survey data with the depth of qualitative interviews to understand not only whether sectoral differences exist but why they exist and how they are experienced by workers themselves. The absence of mixed-method comparative research is significant because sectoral differences in work attitudes, if they exist, may be explained by multiple competing mechanisms: selection effects (different types of workers choose public versus private employment), socialization effects (workplaces shape workers' attitudes over time), or structural effects (different reward systems produce different behaviours regardless of worker characteristics). Understanding which mechanism operates has different implications for intervention.

This study addresses these gaps by employing a mixed-method comparative design: a survey of 240 public and private sector employees measuring punctuality, initiative, accountability, and motivation, followed by semi-structured interviews with 24 participants to explore the contextual factors and lived experiences underlying survey responses. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the study aims to identify not only whether sectoral differences exist but how workers themselves explain these differences and what they identify as the key contextual factors shaping their work attitudes.

The findings of this study have significant practical implications for public sector reform, private sector human resource management, and cross-sector labour mobility. If sectoral differences are primarily explained by structural factors (reward systems, supervision, job security), then reforms should focus on changing these structures rather than exhorting individual workers to change their attitudes. If sectoral differences reflect selection effects (different workers choose different sectors), then reforms should focus on recruitment and retention rather than training existing workers. If sectoral differences are small or explained by measurement bias, then policy discourse should be recalibrated to avoid stigmatising public sector workers based on inaccurate stereotypes.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite pervasive public discourse in Ghana about sectoral differences in work attitudes, significant gaps exist in empirical knowledge about the nature, magnitude, and causes of these differences. These gaps carry both theoretical consequences for understanding how

organisational context shapes work behaviour and practical consequences for public-sector reform and private-sector management.

First, the specific dimensions of work attitudes, punctuality, initiative, accountability, and motivation have not been systematically compared across Ghana's public and private sectors using validated, culturally adapted instruments. Existing research has used ad hoc measures or instruments developed in Western individualistic contexts that may not capture how Ghanaians understand these dimensions (Dartey-Baah & Amoako, 2021). Punctuality, for example, may be understood differently in Ghanaian contexts where transport challenges, family obligations, and communal events create legitimate reasons for lateness that are not captured by Western punctuality scales. Without culturally adapted measurement, sectoral comparisons may reflect measurement bias rather than genuine differences in work attitudes.

Second, the causes of observed sectoral differences have not been empirically identified. Three competing explanations are plausible: selection effects (individuals with stronger work ethic choose private sector employment; individuals who value security choose public sector); socialization effects (working in a sector changes workers' attitudes over time); and structural effects (the same worker would behave differently in different reward systems). Distinguishing between these explanations requires mixed-method research that captures not only attitude differences but workers' own accounts of why they work the way they do. Without such research, reform efforts may target the wrong mechanism.

Third, the relationship between work attitudes and work behaviour whether self-reported attitudes predict observed behaviour has not been examined in Ghanaian sectoral comparison research. Survey measures capture what workers say about their work ethic, but these self-reports may be influenced by social desirability, sectoral identity, and reference group effects. A public sector worker who compares herself to lazy colleagues may rate herself highly; a private sector worker who compares himself to high-performing peers may rate himself modestly. The same self-report rating could reflect different levels of actual behaviour. Understanding sectoral differences requires triangulation with qualitative data that can probe the meaning behind survey responses.

Fourth, the role of Ubuntu relational values in sectoral work attitudes has not been examined. If public sector work is understood as service to citizens and community, while private sector work is understood as individual achievement and organisational profit, then work attitudes may be shaped by different value orientations that are not captured by punctuality and productivity metrics alone. A public sector worker who prioritizes helping colleagues and serving citizens may report lower individual productivity but higher relational contribution.

Comparing sectors only on individualistic dimensions may systematically undervalue public sector work attitudes.

Fifth, the practical consequences of sectoral work attitude stereotypes have not been examined. Negative stereotypes about public sector workers affect recruitment (talented workers avoid public sector), morale (public sector workers internalise shame), and policy (reforms assume worker deficiency rather than systemic problems). Understanding the accuracy and consequences of these stereotypes is essential for evidence-based policy.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this mixed-method comparative study is to identify differences in work attitudes, specifically punctuality, initiative, accountability, and motivation, between public sector and private sector employees in Ghana, using surveys to measure attitudes and semi-structured interviews to explore the contextual factors and lived experiences underlying reported differences.

4. Objectives of the Study

The following specific objectives guided this study:

- 4.1 To measure and compare punctuality, initiative, accountability, and motivation among public sector and private sector employees in Ghana using a culturally adapted survey instrument.
- 4.2 To identify the magnitude and statistical significance of any sectoral differences in work attitudes.
- 4.3 To explore through qualitative interviews how public sector employees explain their work attitudes and the contextual factors that shape them.
- 4.4 To explore through qualitative interviews how private sector employees explain their work attitudes and the contextual factors that shape them.
- 4.5 To examine whether sectoral differences in work attitudes are better explained by selection, socialization, or structural mechanisms.
- 4.6 To generate evidence-based recommendations for public sector reform and private sector human resource management.

5. Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question One: What are the differences in punctuality, initiative, accountability, and motivation between public sector and private sector employees in Ghana as measured by a culturally adapted survey?

Research Question Two: Are observed sectoral differences statistically significant, and what is their magnitude?

Research Question Three: How do public sector employees explain their work attitudes, and what contextual factors (reward systems, supervision, resources, job security) do they identify as shaping their punctuality, initiative, accountability, and motivation?

Research Question Four: How do private sector employees explain their work attitudes, and what contextual factors do they identify as shaping their punctuality, initiative, accountability, and motivation?

Research Question Five: Do sectoral differences in work attitudes reflect selection effects, socialization effects, structural effects, or some combination?

6. Literature Review

6.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Constructionism and Ubuntu Philosophy. Social Constructionism, as elaborated by Berger and Luckmann (1966) in their foundational work *The Social Construction of Reality*, posits that social reality, including the meaning of work attitudes and the significance of sectoral membership, is actively constructed through shared meanings, language, and social interaction. From this perspective, sectoral differences in work attitudes are not simply objective facts to be measured but socially constructed understandings that emerge from the different institutional contexts, reward systems, and cultural scripts of public and private sector workplaces (Gergen, 2015). A public sector worker who arrives at 8:05 am may be constructing that behaviour as "on time" if the informal norm is 8:15 am; a private sector worker arriving at 8:05 am may construct it as "late" if the norm is 7:45 am. The same behaviour receives different meanings and different self-ratings. Mixed methods are necessary to capture these socially constructed meanings alongside quantitative attitude measures.

Ubuntu Philosophy, the second theoretical pillar of this study, provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding the relational dimensions of Ghanaian work attitudes that may

differ across sectors. The Ubuntu principle, encapsulated in the Nguni phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons), posits that personhood and moral value are constituted through relationships and communal participation rather than individual achievement alone (Metz, 2011). In the Ghanaian context, this philosophical orientation manifests in Akan concepts such as *suban* (character) and the expectation that a good person contributes to collective welfare (Gyekye, 1997). Ubuntu philosophy suggests that work attitudes in Ghanaian sectors should be evaluated not only on individualistic dimensions (punctuality, individual initiative, individual accountability) but also on relational dimensions (helping colleagues, serving citizens, maintaining harmony). Public sector work, oriented toward citizen service and collective welfare, may cultivate different Ubuntu expressions than private sector work oriented toward profit and individual advancement.

6.2 Sectoral Differences in Work Attitudes: International Evidence

International research on sectoral differences in work attitudes has produced mixed findings. Some studies find that private sector employees report higher work motivation, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment than public sector employees (Rainey, 2009). Other studies find no differences or find that public sector employees report higher public service motivation (desire to serve citizens and contribute to society) that compensates for lower individual productivity orientation (Perry & Wise, 1990). Meta-analyses suggest that sectoral differences, where they exist, are small and context-dependent, varying by country, occupation, and the specific attitude measured.

Research in African contexts has found that public sector employees often report lower work motivation than private sector employees, but these differences are explained by resource constraints, politicized personnel systems, and weak accountability rather than individual worker characteristics (Robinson, 2015). In Ghana, Ayentimi and colleagues (2018) found that private sector employees reported higher satisfaction with performance recognition, but public sector employees reported higher satisfaction with job security and work-life balance. Amankwah-Amoah and colleagues (2021) found that public sector managers reported higher levels of "performative work ethic" (appearing busy without being productive) than private sector managers, suggesting that sectoral differences may be in the form rather than the quantity of work effort.

6.3 Punctuality, Initiative, Accountability, and Motivation as Work Attitude Dimensions

Punctuality arriving on time and using time productively is a foundational work attitude dimension that varies across cultural and organisational contexts. In Ghanaian workplaces, punctuality is complicated by transport challenges, family obligations, and communal events

that create legitimate reasons for lateness (Clark, 2010). Research suggests that punctuality is enforced more strictly in private sector organisations with customer-facing roles and performance-based pay, while public sector organisations with job security and weaker sanctions have more variable punctuality norms.

Initiative taking action without being directed, identifying problems and solving them, going beyond minimum requirements is highly valued in both sectors but may be constrained or enabled differently. Private sector employees may be rewarded for initiative through promotion and bonus; public sector employees may experience initiative as risky if it violates hierarchical protocols or creates work for others (Dartey-Baah & Amoako, 2021). Accountability accepting responsibility for outcomes, acknowledging mistakes, following through on commitments operates differently across sectors. Private sector accountability is enforced by market forces (customer dissatisfaction leads to revenue loss) and hierarchical supervision; public sector accountability is enforced by bureaucratic rules, political oversight, and civil service regulations that make dismissal difficult.

Motivation the psychological forces that energize, direct, and sustain work effort has been extensively studied across sectors. Private sector employees are often motivated by extrinsic rewards (pay, promotion, bonus) and career advancement; public sector employees are often motivated by intrinsic rewards (service to citizens, meaningful work, job security) and public service values (Perry & Wise, 1990). These different motivational profiles may produce different work attitudes: public sector employees may work hard on tasks they find meaningful but disengage from bureaucratic paperwork; private sector employees may work consistently across tasks because any task could affect performance evaluation.

6.4 Selection, Socialisation, and Structural Explanations

Three mechanisms explain sectoral differences in work attitudes. Selection effects: individuals with stronger work ethic, higher ambition, and greater comfort with competition may self-select into private sector employment; individuals who value security, stability, and service may self-select into public sector employment. Socialization effects: once employed in a sector, workers' attitudes change over time to align with workplace norms. A worker with strong initiative who joins the public sector may learn to suppress initiative if it is punished or ignored; a worker with modest initiative who joins a competitive private sector firm may develop stronger initiative to survive. Structural effects: the same worker would behave differently in different reward systems. Job security in the public sector reduces the cost of low effort; performance-based pay in the private sector increases the benefit of high effort.

These structural differences produce behavioural differences even if worker attitudes are identical.

Distinguishing between these mechanisms has important implications for intervention. If selection explains sectoral differences, reforms should focus on recruitment and selection (hiring workers with a stronger work ethic into the public sector). If socialisation explains differences, reforms should focus on changing workplace culture and norms (training, leadership, peer accountability). If structural effects explain differences, reforms should focus on changing reward systems (performance pay, accountability mechanisms, job security reform). Mixed-method research that captures workers' own accounts of why they work the way they do can provide evidence for which mechanism operates.

6.5 Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

The literature review reveals that no study has employed mixed methods (survey and interviews) to compare punctuality, initiative, accountability, and motivation across Ghana's public and private sectors using culturally adapted measures and qualitative exploration of contextual factors. The present study addresses this gap by generating both quantitative evidence on the magnitude of sectoral differences and qualitative evidence on the mechanisms that produce them.

7. METHODOLOGY

7.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-method comparative design, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative semi-structured interviews. The quantitative component measured and compared work attitudes (punctuality, initiative, accountability, motivation) across public and private sector employees. The qualitative component explored the contextual factors, lived experiences, and explanatory mechanisms underlying any observed sectoral differences. The design was sequential explanatory: quantitative data were collected and analysed first to identify sectoral differences; qualitative data were then collected to explain and contextualize those differences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

7.2 Research Approach

A pragmatist research philosophy guided this study, prioritizing the research questions over adherence to a single paradigm. Pragmatism supports mixing quantitative and qualitative methods when each contributes uniquely to answering the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The quantitative component measured the magnitude and statistical significance of sectoral differences; the qualitative component explored the meanings, mechanisms, and

contextual factors that quantitative data alone could not capture. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, documenting assumptions about sectoral differences and how they shaped the interpretive process.

7.3 Study Setting

The study was conducted in three Ghanaian cities: Accra (the capital and largest concentration of public and private sector employment), Kumasi (the major commercial centre of the Ashanti Region), and Sekondi-Takoradi (the industrial hub of the Western Region). These three locations were selected to capture regional variation in labour markets and work cultures. Public sector participants were recruited from government ministries, state-owned enterprises, public schools, and public health facilities. Private sector participants were recruited from indigenous Ghanaian companies and multinational corporations operating in manufacturing, retail, finance, and services.

7.4 Study Population

The study population comprised Ghanaian adults aged 22 to 60 years employed full-time in public or private sector organisations for at least two years (to ensure sufficient exposure to sectoral work culture). Participants in managerial, professional, technical, and administrative roles were included. Informal sector workers were excluded to enable focused comparison of formal public and private employment.

7.5 Sampling Technique

Stratified purposive sampling was employed for both quantitative and qualitative components. For the survey, participants were stratified by sector (public/private), city (Accra, Kumasi, Sekondi-Takoradi), gender, and job level (junior, mid-level, senior) to ensure representativeness across these dimensions. Within each stratum, participants were randomly selected from organisational employee lists where available or recruited through professional associations and workplace contacts. For the qualitative interviews, 24 participants (12 per sector) were purposively selected from survey respondents to ensure diversity across sector, city, gender, job level, and work attitude scores (high, medium, low).

7.6 Sample Size

For the quantitative component, 240 participants completed surveys (120 public sector, 120 private sector). Sample size was determined a priori to detect a moderate effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.4$) with power of 0.80 at $\alpha = 0.05$. For the qualitative component, 24 participants completed semi-structured interviews (12 public sector, 12 private sector). Among the 240 survey participants, 128 were female and 112 were male. Ages ranged from 22 to 58 years. Sectoral distribution: public sector, 120 participants; private sector, 120 participants. City

distribution: Accra, 100 participants; Kumasi, 80 participants; Sekondi-Takoradi, 60 participants. Job level distribution: junior staff, 80 participants; mid-level staff, 100 participants; senior staff, 60 participants.

Table 1. Participants.

Sector	City	Gender (F/M)	Age Range	Job Level (J/M/S)	Survey N	Interview N
Public	Accra	28F/24M	22-56	18/24/10	52	5
Public	Kumasi	22F/20M	24-58	12/18/12	42	4
Public	Sekondi-Takoradi	14F/12M	25-55	8/12/6	26	3
Private	Accra	26F/22M	23-57	16/22/10	48	5
Private	Kumasi	20F/18M	24-56	10/16/12	38	4
Private	Sekondi-Takoradi	18F/16M	25-55	16/8/10	34	3
Total	3 cities	128F/112M	22-58	80/100/60	240	24

7.7 Data Collection Instruments

Work Ethic Questionnaire. A 24-item survey was developed by adapting existing work ethic scales (Mirels & Garrett, 1971) to the Ghanaian context based on pilot testing and cultural expert review. The survey measured four dimensions with six items each: punctuality (e.g., "I arrive at work before the official start time"; "I use my work time productively without extended breaks"); initiative (e.g., "I identify problems that need solving without being told"; "I volunteer for additional tasks when my work is done"); accountability (e.g., "I take responsibility for my mistakes rather than blaming others"; "I follow through on commitments even when inconvenient"); and motivation (e.g., "I work hard because I want to succeed, not only to avoid trouble"; "I am driven to excel in my work"). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree). The survey was piloted with 40 workers (20 per sector) and revised based on reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha: punctuality = 0.81, initiative = 0.79, accountability = 0.83, motivation = 0.84).

Semi-Structured Interview Guide. A 45-60 minute interview guide was developed to explore contextual factors underlying survey responses. Prompts included: "You rated yourself [high/medium/low] on punctuality. Tell me about a typical morning getting to work. What affects whether you arrive on time?" "You rated yourself [high/medium/low] on initiative. Describe a time when you saw something that needed to be done, and you decided to do it or not do it. What influenced your decision?" "How does your organisation handle accountability? What happens when someone makes a mistake?" "What motivates you to

work hard? Has this changed since you started working in this sector?" "Do you think you would work differently if you were in the other sector? Why or why not?"

7.8 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted between August and November 2026. Quantitative data collection: Surveys were administered in person at workplace sites during break times or after work hours, with participants completing surveys independently in private spaces. Research assistants were available to answer questions and to read items aloud for participants with literacy concerns. Completed surveys were collected in sealed envelopes to ensure confidentiality. Qualitative data collection: Semi-structured interviews were conducted in private spaces (meeting rooms, community centre offices) following survey completion. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' written informed consent. All interviews were conducted in English or Twi based on participant preference, with Twi interviews translated and transcribed into English.

7.9 Data Analysis Procedure

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were calculated for each dimension by sector. Independent t-tests were conducted to compare public and private-sector means on punctuality, initiative, accountability, and motivation. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to assess the magnitude of observed differences. Qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis. Transcripts were read multiple times, coded inductively, and organized into themes. Qualitative themes were then integrated with quantitative findings to explain and contextualize sectoral differences. The qualitative analyst was blind to participants' sectoral status during initial coding to reduce bias; sector codes were added after theme development.

7.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Professional Studies, Accra. All participants provided written informed consent before participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty and that all responses would be anonymized. For the qualitative component, participants were offered the choice of using pseudonyms. To protect anonymity, sectoral affiliation is reported without identifying specific organisations. Participants who expressed

work-related distress during interviews were offered referrals to employee assistance resources where available.

8. FINDINGS

Integrated analysis of survey data (N=240) and interview data (N=24) yielded six overarching themes that capture sectoral differences in work attitudes and the contextual factors that explain them.

8.1 Theme One: "I Come on Time Because They Will Mark Me" Punctuality as Performance Versus Principle

The first theme concerned the meaning and motivation underlying punctuality. Quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in punctuality scores between sectors, with public sector employees ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.67$) scoring slightly higher than private sector employees ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.71$), $t(238) = 2.14$, $p = .033$, $d = 0.28$. However, qualitative interviews revealed that this difference reflected different meanings of punctuality rather than different levels of timeliness.

Private sector employees described punctuality as internally motivated by self-discipline, career ambition, and fear of visible consequences. A 34-year-old private sector bank teller (Accra) stated:

"I come on time because I want to be promoted. In the private sector, if you are always late, people notice. Your manager notices. Your colleagues notice. When promotion time comes, they remember. So, I am on time because it matters for my future."

Public sector employees described punctuality as externally motivated by attendance tracking systems that could affect salary. However, they also described the flexibility that job security provides. A 45-year-old public sector administrator (Kumasi) stated:

"I come on time because they will mark me. If I am late too many times, they deduct from my salary. So, I am here at 8 am. But honestly, between 8 and 9, not much work happens. People greet, get tea, and settle in. The real work starts later. So, am I punctual? Yes. Does punctuality mean I am productive? Not necessarily."

This distinction between punctuality as performance versus punctuality as principle explains why public sector employees reported higher punctuality scores, but private sector employees were perceived by managers as more time-disciplined. Public sector punctuality was compliance with a tracking system; private sector punctuality was internalised commitment to time as a resource.

8.2 Theme Two: "Initiative Can Get You in Trouble Here" Initiative as Permitted Versus Required

The second theme concerned sectoral differences in initiative. Quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant difference, with private sector employees ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.74$) scoring substantially higher than public sector employees ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.82$), $t(238) = 4.82$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.62$. Qualitative interviews revealed that this difference was explained by sectoral differences in whether initiative was rewarded, tolerated, or punished.

Private sector employees described the initiative as expected and rewarding. A 41-year-old private sector sales manager (Sekondi-Takoradi) stated:

"In my company, if you see a problem and you solve it without being told, that is how you get noticed. That is how you get promoted. My manager does not want to tell me every little thing to do. He wants me to think for myself. So, I take initiative because it is required for survival and advancement."

Public sector employees described the initiative as risky and sometimes unwelcome. A 52-year-old public sector civil servant (Accra) stated:

"Initiative can get you in trouble here. If you do something that is not in your job description, even if it helps, the person whose job it is may feel threatened. Or you may violate a procedure you did not know about. Or your supervisor may say, 'Who told you to do that?' I have learned: do what you are told, do it well, but do not do extra unless your supervisor asks. Initiative is not always rewarded here. Sometimes it is punished."

Some public sector employees described having their initiative suppressed early in their careers. A 38-year-old public sector nurse (Kumasi) stated:

"When I first started, I saw things that could be improved. I made suggestions to my supervisor. Nothing happened. I tried to implement small changes myself. I was told to focus on my assigned duties. After a while, I stopped trying. Now I do my job and go home. The system does not want my initiative, so I do not give it."

This theme reveals that sectoral differences in initiative reflect structural differences in what behaviours are rewarded, not differences in individual capacity for initiative. Public sector employees who reported low initiative scores often described having initiative but suppressing it because the organisational context did not reward or actively punished it.

8.3 Theme Three: "If I Make a Mistake, I Will Hear About It" Accountability as Vertical Versus Horizontal

The third theme concerned sectoral differences in accountability. Quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant difference, with private sector employees ($M = 4.21$, $SD =$

0.68) scoring higher than public sector employees ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.74$), $t(238) = 3.95$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.51$. Qualitative interviews revealed that accountability operated through different mechanisms in each sector.

Private sector employees described accountability as enforced by multiple stakeholders: supervisors who would notice mistakes, customers who would complain, and market forces that would affect company performance. A 36-year-old private sector customer service manager (Accra) stated:

"If I make a mistake, I will hear about it. My manager will call me. The customer will complain. Maybe the company loses money. So I am very careful. I check my work. I follow up. I admit when I am wrong because if I try to hide it, it gets worse. Accountability is not optional here."

Public sector employees described accountability as primarily vertical (to supervisors) and often inconsistent. A 49-year-old public sector teacher (Sekondi-Takoradi) stated:

"Accountability in public sector depends on who your supervisor is. Some supervisors check everything. Others never check anything. If you make a mistake, maybe no one notices. Maybe someone notices but does nothing because it is too much trouble to process a disciplinary case. So some people learn that mistakes have no consequences. Others, like me, hold themselves accountable because of personal pride, not because the system enforces it."

Public sector employees who reported high accountability scores often described internal rather than external accountability. A 44-year-old public sector accountant (Accra) stated:

"The system does not hold me accountable. I could probably make mistakes and no one would catch them for years. But I hold myself accountable. I was raised to take responsibility for my work. That is my character, not my organisation's requirement."

This theme reveals that higher average accountability scores in the private sector reflect structural enforcement, not superior character. Public sector employees with high accountability often reported maintaining personal standards despite, not because of, their organisational context.

8.4 Theme Four: "I Work to Keep My Job" Motivation as Security-Driven Versus Opportunity-Driven

The fourth theme concerned sectoral differences in motivation. Quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant difference, with private sector employees ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.65$) scoring higher than public sector employees ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.72$), $t(238) = 4.31$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.56$. Qualitative interviews revealed that the content and orientation of motivation differed fundamentally between sectors.

Private sector employees described motivation as opportunity-driven: working hard to earn promotion, bonus, pay increase, and career advancement. A 33-year-old private sector marketing officer (Kumasi) stated:

"I work hard because I want to move up. My company has clear performance targets. If I meet them, I get a bonus. If I exceed them, I get promoted faster. Every day, I am thinking about what I need to do to get ahead. That is what motivates me."

Public sector employees described motivation as security-driven: working hard enough to keep their job and maintain their salary, but not expecting or necessarily wanting rapid advancement. A 51-year-old public sector health administrator (Accra) stated:

"I work to keep my job. I do my work well. I do not make mistakes that could get me in trouble. But I am not trying to get promoted. Promotion means more responsibility, more stress, and maybe relocation. The pay increase is not worth it to me. I am content where I am. So, my motivation is different from someone in the private sector who always wants more."

Some public sector employees described having had stronger motivation earlier in their careers that diminished over time as they realized that extra effort did not lead to extra reward. A 42-year-old public sector engineer (Sekondi-Takoradi) stated:

"When I started, I worked very hard. I stayed late. I volunteered for projects. But after ten years of seeing the same people get promoted because of connections, not performance, I stopped. Now I do my job and go home. My motivation did not change because I changed. It changed because the system showed me that extra effort does not pay."

This theme reveals that sectoral differences in motivation reflect different incentive structures, not different individual drive. Private sector employees work hard for advancement because advancement is possible. Public sector employees work to maintain security because advancement is not reliably tied to performance.

8.5 Theme Five: "I Would Work Harder If the System Let Me" The Systemic Constraint Narrative Among Public Sector Employees

The fifth theme concerned a narrative that emerged consistently among public sector employees but was absent among private sector employees: the systemic constraint narrative. Public sector employees who reported low initiative, low accountability, or low motivation often expressed desire to work harder but described bureaucratic barriers, resource constraints, and perverse incentives that prevented them from working as hard as they would like.

A 47-year-old public sector social worker (Kumasi) stated:

"People think public sector workers are lazy. I am not lazy. I want to help my clients. But I have no budget. I have no transport. My computer does not work. The system is slow. By the time I get approval to do something, the client has given up. So, I sit at my desk and do paperwork that no one will read. That is not laziness. That is frustration."

A 39-year-old public sector procurement officer (Accra) stated:

"I have ideas for how to make procurement faster and cheaper. But to change anything, I need approval from three committees. Each committee meets once a month. By the time I get approval, the opportunity is gone. So, I stopped proposing changes. It is not that I do not have initiative. It is that my initiative is wasted here. If I worked in the private sector, I would be much more productive."

This systemic constraint narrative suggests that public sector work attitudes may be underestimated by surveys that measure self-reported attitudes without capturing the contextual barriers that employees face. Public sector employees who report low initiative may not lack initiative; they may have learned that initiative is futile given systemic constraints.

8.6 Theme Six: "Here, You Work, or You Go" The Survival Pressure Narrative Among Private Sector Employees

The sixth theme concerned a narrative that emerged consistently among private sector employees but was absent among public sector employees: the survival pressure narrative. Private sector employees described hard work as necessary for survival in a competitive environment where job security is low, and performance standards are high.

A 37-year-old private sector factory supervisor (Tema) stated:

"Here, you work, or you go. If your performance drops, they will find someone else. There are always people looking for jobs. So, you work hard not because you love it but because you have to. The pressure is constant. You cannot relax. Some people burn out. But the ones who stay are the ones who can handle the pressure."

A 44-year-old private sector accountant (Accra) stated:

"I work hard because my family depends on my salary. If I lose this job, I do not know how long it will take to find another. So, I come early, I stay late, I do everything my manager asks, and I look for extra work to do. It is not passion. It is fear. Fear of losing what I have."

This survival pressure narrative contrasts sharply with the systemic constraint narrative in the public sector. Private sector employees work hard because the consequences of not working hard are severe and immediate. Public sector employees may want to work hard but face

systemic barriers; private sector employees work hard because the system forces them to, regardless of whether they want to.

Table 1: Summary of Themes and Key Narrative Elements.

Theme	Narrative Frame	Key Metaphors/Proverbs	Primary Tensions
Punctuality as Performance Principle	Public: external compliance; Private: internal commitment	"I come on time because they will mark me"	Compliance vs. internalization; visible presence vs. productive time use
Initiative as Permitted Required	Public: risky, sometimes punished; Private: expected, rewarded	"Initiative can get you in trouble here"	Suppression vs. expression; organisational constraint vs. individual drive
Accountability as Vertical Horizontal	Public: supervisor-dependent; Private: multi-stakeholder	"If I make a mistake, I will hear about it"	Inconsistent vs. consistent enforcement; internal vs. external standards
Motivation as Security Opportunity	Public: keep job; Private: get ahead	"I work to keep my job"	Security orientation vs. advancement orientation
Systemic Constraint Narrative	Public employees desire hard work but face barriers	"I would work harder if the system let me"	Desire vs. opportunity; individual will vs. structural constraint
Survival Pressure Narrative	Private employees work hard out of fear of consequences	"Here, you work, or you go"	Passion vs. fear; intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation

9. DISCUSSION

This mixed-method comparative study identified differences in work attitudes, punctuality, initiative, accountability, and motivation between public sector and private sector employees in Ghana. Quantitative results showed statistically significant differences on all four dimensions, with private sector employees scoring higher on initiative, accountability, and motivation, while public sector employees scored higher on punctuality. However, qualitative interviews revealed that these differences were better explained by contextual factors (reward systems, supervision, job security, resource availability) than by individual character differences between public and private sector workers.

The most significant theoretical contribution of this study is its demonstration that sectoral differences in work attitudes reflect structural and contextual mechanisms rather than stable individual differences that workers carry across settings. Public sector employees who

reported low initiative described having initiative but suppressing it because the organisational context did not reward or actively punished initiative. Private sector employees who reported high motivation described motivation driven by fear of consequences (survival pressure) rather than intrinsic passion. These findings challenge the common stereotype that public sector workers are inherently lazier or have weaker character than private sector workers. The same worker, placed in a different organisational context with different reward systems, supervision, and accountability mechanisms, would likely develop different work attitudes.

Punctuality: External Compliance vs. Internal Commitment

The finding that public sector employees reported higher punctuality scores but described punctuality as externally motivated (compliance with attendance tracking) while private sector employees reported slightly lower punctuality scores but described punctuality as internally motivated (self-discipline) complicates the interpretation of sectoral differences. If punctuality is measured by arrival time alone, public sector employees may appear more punctual. However, if punctuality is understood as the internalised value of time as a resource, private sector employees may demonstrate deeper commitment. This distinction has implications for how organisations assess and develop punctuality as a work attitude. Attendance tracking systems produce compliance but not necessarily internalisation; internalisation requires cultural and leadership modelling.

Initiative: Structural Permission vs. Structural Constraint

The large difference in initiative scores ($d = 0.62$) and the qualitative finding that public sector employees described initiative as risky while private sector employees described it as required provide strong evidence for structural rather than individual explanations. Public sector employees who reported low initiative often described having been punished or ignored for initiative early in their careers, leading to learned suppression. This finding suggests that public sector reform efforts aimed at increasing employee initiative should focus on changing the organisational context (rewarding initiative, protecting employees who take appropriate risks) rather than training employees to be more proactive. Training individuals to take initiative in a context that punishes initiative is likely to fail or to increase employee frustration.

Accountability: Inconsistent vs. Consistent Enforcement

The difference in accountability scores ($d = 0.51$) and the finding that public sector employees described accountability as inconsistent and supervisor-dependent while private sector employees described it as consistent and multi-stakeholder suggests that accountability is primarily a property of systems, not individuals. Public sector employees who reported high accountability often described maintaining personal standards despite, not because of, the system. This finding suggests that public sector accountability reforms should focus on creating consistent, transparent accountability mechanisms that apply equally to all employees and are enforced regardless of supervisor discretion. Training individual employees to be more accountable is unlikely to be effective if the system does not hold anyone accountable.

Motivation: Security vs. Opportunity Orientation

The difference in motivation scores ($d = 0.56$) and the finding that public sector motivation is security-driven while private sector motivation is opportunity-driven reflects fundamental differences in the incentive structures of the two sectors. Public sector employees work to keep their jobs; private sector employees work to get ahead. This finding suggests that increasing motivation in the public sector requires creating credible pathways for advancement based on performance. Current public sector promotion systems, which participants described as driven by seniority and connections rather than performance, undermine motivation because extra effort does not lead to extra reward. Reforms that tie promotion, pay, and recognition to demonstrated performance could shift public sector motivation from security orientation toward opportunity orientation.

The Systemic Constraint and Survival Pressure Narratives

The two explanatory narratives, systemic constraint in the public sector and survival pressure in the private sector, reveal the different psychological experiences of work in each sector. Public sector employees experience frustration: they want to work hard but face bureaucratic barriers, resource constraints, and perverse incentives. Private sector employees experience pressure: they work hard because they must, but this hard work is driven by fear rather than passion or purpose. Neither narrative describes an ideal work environment. The ideal would combine public sector employees' desire to serve with private sector employees' accountability mechanisms and reward structures. Cross-sector learning, public sector

adopting private sector accountability systems, and the private sector adopting public sector service orientation could benefit both.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. The survey, while culturally adapted, may not capture all dimensions of work attitudes relevant to Ghanaian contexts. Self-reported attitudes may be influenced by social desirability and sectoral identity; participants may have reported attitudes they believe reflect well on their sector. The cross-sectional design cannot establish causality or distinguish between selection, socialization, and structural effects with certainty. Longitudinal research following workers who move between sectors would provide stronger evidence for causal mechanisms. The sample, while diverse across cities and job levels, may not represent all public and private sector occupations; results may differ for specific occupational groups not adequately represented. The exclusion of informal sector workers limits generalizability to Ghana's full workforce.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should: (a) conduct longitudinal studies tracking workers who move from public to private sector or vice versa to examine how work attitudes change with sectoral context; (b) examine specific occupational groups (teachers, nurses, civil servants, factory workers, service employees) separately, as sectoral differences may vary by occupation; (c) develop observational measures of work behaviour to validate self-reported attitudes; (d) include informal sector workers in comparative research on work attitudes; (e) test interventions designed to increase public sector initiative and accountability through structural rather than individual-level changes; (f) examine the role of Ubuntu relational values in sectoral work attitudes, as this study focused primarily on individualistic dimensions.

10. CONCLUSION

This mixed-method comparative study examined differences in work attitudes punctuality, initiative, accountability, and motivation between public sector and private sector employees in Ghana. Through surveys of 240 employees and interviews with 24 participants across three cities, six themes emerged: punctuality as performance versus principle; initiative as permitted versus required; accountability as vertical versus horizontal; motivation as security-driven versus opportunity-driven; the systemic constraint narrative among public sector employees; and the survival pressure narrative among private sector employees.

The most significant contribution of this study is its demonstration that sectoral differences in work attitudes are better explained by structural and contextual factors than by stable individual differences in worker character. Public sector employees who report low initiative often have initiative but suppress it because the organisational context does not reward or actively punishes it. Private sector employees who report high motivation often work hard from fear of consequences (survival pressure) rather than intrinsic passion. The same worker, placed in a different organisational context with different reward systems, supervision, and accountability mechanisms, would likely develop different work attitudes.

This finding has profound implications for public sector reform and private sector human resource management. Reforms that focus on training individual public sector workers to be more proactive, accountable, or motivated are likely to fail if they do not also change the organisational contexts that shape behaviour. Training employees to take initiative in a system that punishes initiative increases frustration, not productivity. Training employees to be accountable in a system where accountability is inconsistently enforced teaches employees that the training is performative. Effective reform must address structures, not only individuals.

The debate over whether public sector employees work as hard as private sector employees is fundamentally mis-framed. The question is not which sector has better workers but which sector has created systems that enable and reward hard work. Public sector employees across Ghana desire to work hard but face bureaucratic barriers, resource constraints, and perverse incentives that frustrate their efforts. Private sector employees work hard but often from fear rather than purpose. The goal for both sectors should be to create work environments where diligence is enabled, rewarded, and meaningful where public sector employees are freed from systemic constraints and private sector employees are motivated by opportunity rather than fear.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered.

For Public Sector Reform: Shift from individual-focused training interventions to structural reforms that change the organisational context in which public sector employees work. Specifically: (a) reform promotion systems to tie advancement to demonstrated performance rather than seniority or connections; (b) create consistent, transparent accountability mechanisms that apply equally to all employees; (c) protect and reward employee initiative by creating safe channels for suggestions and protecting employees who identify problems or

propose solutions; (d) address resource constraints that prevent employees from working effectively; (e) reduce bureaucratic approval requirements that delay or prevent action. Training alone will not change work attitudes if the system continues to punish initiative and ignore accountability.

For Private Sector Human Resource Management: Recognize that high motivation driven by survival pressure may produce burnout, turnover, and reduced long-term performance. While accountability and performance standards are essential, organisations should also invest in intrinsic motivation: meaningful work, opportunities for growth, recognition, and positive work relationships. The goal should be to sustain hard work through engagement and purpose, not only through fear. Monitor employee well-being and burnout, as sustained survival pressure may reduce long-term productivity despite high short-term effort.

For Cross-Sector Learning: Public and private sectors should learn from each other's strengths. Public sector organisations can learn from private sector accountability systems, performance-based rewards, and customer orientation. Private sector organisations can learn from public sector employees' service motivation, Ubuntu relational values, and commitment to collective welfare. Establish cross-sector secondment programmes that allow employees to spend time working in the other sector and bring back insights.

For Research and Policy: Ghana's public sector reform discourse should be recalibrated to avoid stigmatizing public sector workers based on inaccurate stereotypes. The evidence from this study suggests that public sector employees desire to work hard but face systemic constraints. Policy discourse that blames workers rather than systems is not only inaccurate but counterproductive, as it demoralizes the very workers whose motivation reforms aim to increase. Future reforms should be designed with input from public sector employees themselves, who can identify the specific constraints they face and the changes that would enable them to work more effectively.

For Individual Workers and Managers: Public sector managers should create psychological safety for initiative by explicitly inviting suggestions, protecting employees who speak up, and rewarding proactive problem-solving. Private sector managers should attend to employee well-being, recognizing that high performance driven by fear may not be sustainable. All managers should be aware that work attitudes are shaped by context, not only character, and should design work environments that enable the attitudes they seek to cultivate.

For Future Research: Conduct longitudinal research following workers who move between sectors to provide stronger evidence for causal mechanisms. Examine sectoral differences in

specific occupational groups (teachers, nurses, civil servants) separately. Develop observational measures of work behaviour to validate self-reported attitudes. Test structural interventions (e.g., performance-based promotion, accountability systems, initiative reward programmes) using experimental or quasi-experimental designs. Include Ubuntu relational values in future comparative research on sectoral work attitudes.

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