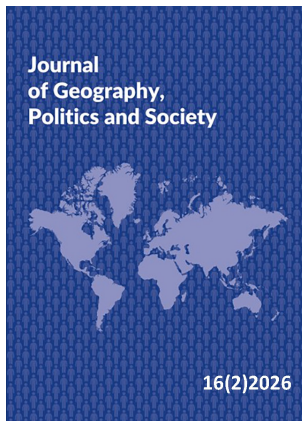




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THE ARCHETYPE OF BARRIER-FREENESS IN THE INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE OF THE CIVIL SERVICE: A SOCIOCULTURAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article provides a sociocultural analysis of barrier-freeness as a fundamental archetype of the contemporary institutional culture of the civil service. Against the backdrop of large-scale social transformations, including digitalisation, demographic change, and the consequences of social crises, public institutions are increasingly required to reconsider their role as inclusive employers and service-oriented partners of society. The article argues that barrier-freeness should not be reduced to technical solutions or the physical accessibility of public spaces. Rather, it should be understood as a deep cultural orientation that entails a shift in the management paradigm from bureaucratic control towards human-centred governance. The study examines changes in value orientations within public organisations and analyses how the archetype of barrier-freeness can reshape human resource management, including recruitment, professional development, internal communication, and performance evaluation. The analysis indicates that sustainable transformation of the public sector requires a barrier-free institutional ecosystem in which employees have equitable access to organisational resources, information, participation, and career development. The article proposes practical mechanisms for diagnosing organisational barriers and overcoming them through inclusive HR practices, empathic leadership, and psychological safety. It concludes that barrier-freeness is not only an ethical imperative but also an important condition for the resilience and adaptive capacity of public institutions under conditions of high uncertainty.

Key words

Sbarrier-freeness, civil service, institutional culture, HR policy, sociocultural analysis, inclusive management, archetype, public sector transformation, human-centredness.

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1. Introduction

In contemporary development of public administration in Ukraine and other European states is characterised by continuous transformation driven by digitalisation, demographic change, the consequences of pandemics, armed conflicts, and

growing public expectations regarding the quality and accessibility of public services. In this context, the civil service, as a central instrument for implementing public policy, faces a critical need to reconsider established approaches to human resource management. Traditional hierarchical structures based on bureaucratic centralism are

increasingly inadequate for responding to demands for inclusion, openness, participation, and equal access to opportunities.

A central problem is that the institutional culture of the civil service continues to reproduce closed managerial patterns that generate cognitive barriers, such as resistance to change; communication barriers, including weak feedback mechanisms; structural barriers arising from excessive regulation and hierarchy; and sociocultural barriers rooted in discriminatory stereotypes. Although legislative and policy initiatives in Ukraine increasingly promote digitalisation, debureaucratisation, and barrier-freeness, including the National Strategy for Creating a Barrier-Free Environment until 2030 (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2021), informal organisational practices may continue to reproduce exclusion. This creates a gap between citizens' expectations of a service-oriented state and the actual organisation of internal HR processes in public institutions.

Research on public-sector human resource management still tends to treat barrier-freeness primarily as a question of physical accessibility or technical compliance. Such an approach is insufficient for explaining the deeper cultural mechanisms through which institutional norms, values, and behavioural expectations either facilitate or impede inclusion. From an archetypal perspective, barrier-freeness may be interpreted as a durable mental and value-based orientation capable of reshaping the institutional culture of the civil service. However, the mechanisms through which this orientation affects civil servants' motivation, professional identity, organisational behaviour, and performance remain insufficiently conceptualised.

The relevance of the study therefore derives from the contradiction between the growing need to integrate the principles of barrier-freeness across all areas of public administration and the inertia of institutional cultures that continue to reproduce exclusionary practices. A scientific understanding of this contradiction requires a framework capable of identifying organisational barriers, explaining their sociocultural foundations, and specifying mechanisms through which public-sector HR management can support the transition towards an inclusive, human-centred institutional model.

2. Literature Review

The problem of barrier-freeness in public administration is inherently interdisciplinary and can be examined through three interrelated strands of research. The first concerns inclusive governance and

the transformation of public institutions. Fukuyama (2014) emphasises the risks of institutional rigidity and political decay, while Osborne (2010) highlights the growing importance of collaboration, co-production, and networked forms of public governance. In the Ukrainian context, Honcharuk (2018) draws attention to the institutional inertia of the civil service and the difficulties associated with introducing modern HR technologies, suggesting that the transition towards barrier-free governance is both a strategic and an operational challenge.

Within Ukrainian archetypal scholarship, archetypes are treated as deep regulators of social and political behaviour and as important sources of institutional change. Donchenko and Romanenko (2001) conceptualise archetypes as enduring regulators of psychosocial and political everyday life, while Afonin and Martynov (2019) link archetypal structures to processes of innovation. From this perspective, the institutionalisation of barrier-freeness requires not only changes in formal procedures but also a transformation of the underlying value orientations and behavioural assumptions that shape organisational culture.

The second strand concerns the sociocultural analysis of institutional culture. The use of the archetype concept in organisational analysis ultimately derives from Jung's (1969) understanding of archetypes as fundamental patterns that structure the collective unconscious. In organisational studies, Morgan (2006) demonstrated how metaphors and deeply embedded cultural assumptions shape the ways organisations are understood and managed. Applied to the civil service, the archetype of barrier-freeness can therefore be interpreted as an emerging cultural pattern that redefines institutional attitudes towards inclusion, openness, and equal participation.

From Morgan's (2006) metaphorical perspective, organisational culture creates largely invisible frameworks that guide employee behaviour and define what is considered legitimate or possible within an institution. Introducing the archetype of barrier-freeness consequently involves changing the cultural code of the civil service by weakening exclusionary hierarchical stereotypes and strengthening norms of openness, accessibility, and mutual recognition.

The New Public Governance paradigm further reinforces this interpretation. Osborne (2010) argues that contemporary public governance increasingly depends on collaboration, interdependence, and the active involvement of multiple actors. Under such conditions, barrier-freeness becomes not merely an additional administrative standard but a prerequisite

for effective interaction between public institutions, employees, citizens, and civil society.

Research on organisational and national culture also demonstrates that deeply embedded assumptions strongly influence employees' readiness to accept institutional change (Hofstede, 2001; Schein, 2010). Schein's three-level model is particularly relevant because it distinguishes visible artefacts from espoused values and underlying assumptions. From this perspective, genuine transformation occurs only when barrier-freeness moves beyond visible accessibility measures and becomes embedded in the basic assumptions that guide everyday organisational behaviour. This is particularly important in the civil service, where institutional inertia is often stronger than in private-sector organisations.

The third strand focuses on strategic human resource management under conditions of turbulence and uncertainty. Ulrich's (1997) model assigns HR professionals the role of change agents capable of aligning personnel practices with organisational transformation. Nevertheless, research on public-sector HRM has devoted considerably less attention to the identification of exclusionary patterns embedded in recruitment, promotion, evaluation, and professional development. Such patterns may include discriminatory filters, gender inequalities, age-based segregation, limited accommodation of disability, and cognitive biases in managerial decision-making. Although accessibility and digital inclusion are increasingly discussed in the literature, the notion of barrier-freeness as an archetypal foundation of institutional culture remains underdeveloped.

According to Ulrich (1997), the modern HR function should contribute not only to administrative efficiency but also to strategic change. In the public sector, this implies that HR units should actively shape an organisational culture capable of adapting to external transformations while safeguarding equal access, participation, and professional development. Barrier-freeness is therefore closely connected with the transformational role of HR management.

Fukuyama (2014) observes that political institutions may gradually become rigid and increasingly oriented towards preserving established arrangements rather than responding to social change. In this sense, the archetype of barrier-freeness can be interpreted as a countervailing institutional orientation that promotes openness, adaptability, and responsiveness and thereby reduces the risk of organisational stagnation.

Hofstede's (2001) analysis of power distance is also relevant to the civil service. High power-distance

cultures tend to normalise hierarchical asymmetry and may discourage initiative, upward communication, and critical feedback. Reducing such barriers is therefore an important precondition for a more democratic and inclusive organisational environment.

Most existing studies address accessibility either as a technical requirement or as a narrowly defined dimension of social inclusion, while paying less attention to the systemic influence of deeply embedded cultural patterns on the behaviour of civil servants and public managers. This reveals a need to integrate sociocultural, archetypal, and managerial approaches within a single analytical framework.

The purpose of this article is to identify the mechanisms through which the archetype of barrier-freeness may influence the effectiveness of human resource management in the public sector and to substantiate strategic directions for creating an inclusive institutional environment that minimises cognitive, communication, structural, and sociocultural barriers in public institutions.

3. Main Analysis

In the sociocultural dimension, the archetype of barrier-freeness extends far beyond the physical accessibility of buildings and infrastructure. It can be understood as a fundamental orientation towards institutional openness. Drawing on the Jungian understanding of archetypes as deep and recurrent patterns of meaning and behaviour, barrier-freeness in public administration may be interpreted as an attempt to overcome the shadow side of bureaucracy: institutional closure, depersonalisation, and alienation from citizens.

First, barrier-freeness functions as a mental model of inclusion grounded in the axiological recognition of human diversity. It requires a transition from viewing society as a homogeneous mass to be administered towards recognising citizens and employees as distinct subjects entitled to equitable access, participation, and opportunities. This understanding is consistent with the inclusion model developed by Shore et al. (2011), which emphasises the simultaneous importance of belonging and individual uniqueness. In this sense, barrier-freeness becomes a cultural code that gradually displaces hierarchical patterns of domination and replaces them with a service-oriented model of public administration.

Second, the sociocultural meaning of barrier-freeness involves the deconstruction of institutional elitism. Historically, civil services in many countries,

particularly in post-Soviet administrative systems, developed features of organisational closure in which access to managerial resources, career advancement, and decision-making could depend on narrow professional circles or informal networks of loyalty. The archetype of barrier-freeness challenges such closure by introducing a normative expectation that recruitment, promotion, evaluation, and participation procedures should not generate unjustified exclusion on the basis of gender, age, disability, health status, or other personal characteristics.

Third, barrier-freeness provides a framework for addressing social exclusion. During periods of systemic crisis, including war, migration, or digital inequality, public institutions often become essential guarantors of continuity and social stability. An institutional culture shaped by barrier-freeness encourages managers to interpret organisational barriers not as unavoidable administrative constraints but as problems that should be identified, evaluated, and removed whenever they unjustifiably restrict participation or access.

The institutionalisation of the barrier-free archetype therefore changes the logic of the civil service itself. Instead of functioning primarily as a self-preserving hierarchy, the organisation can evolve towards an open institutional ecosystem in which equality of opportunity is treated not as a formal reporting requirement but as a basic value guiding managerial and professional behaviour. Such a transformation is fundamental to a human-centred state because a barrier-producing culture ultimately subordinates the individual to institutional convenience rather than organising institutions around legitimate human needs.

Despite sustained efforts to reform public administration, public institutions may continue to reproduce complex systems of obstacles that constrain organisational transformation. These barriers are often embedded in routines, informal norms, and established expectations and can therefore function as an institutional trap that weakens the effects of progressive legislative or policy initiatives.

Cognitive barriers arise from entrenched bureaucratic ways of thinking. They involve more than insufficient knowledge: they reflect a professional mindset in which compliance with instructions may be prioritised over responsiveness to human needs. A strong orientation towards risk avoidance can discourage initiative and innovation and may encourage officials to perceive citizens primarily as objects of regulation rather than as partners in public service delivery.

Communication barriers emerge from organisational closure and excessive formalism. When vertical hierarchy becomes the dominant channel for information exchange, messages may be delayed, distorted, or filtered as they move across organisational levels. Overly technical and bureaucratic language can further distance institutions from citizens and employees, reducing transparency and making public procedures more difficult to understand.

Structural barriers result from organisational designs in which formal accountability and procedural compliance take precedence over outcomes. Excessive hierarchy may impede horizontal cooperation between departments and levels of government, particularly when coordination requires repeated managerial approval. This can fragment public institutions into isolated organisational units and reduce their capacity for synergy, learning, and rapid response.

Cultural and symbolic barriers are often the most resistant to change because they operate through informal norms and taken-for-granted expectations. Paternalistic leadership may encourage conformity among subordinates, while glass ceilings, gender stereotypes, age-based assumptions, and insufficient inclusion of persons with disabilities or minority groups can restrict participation in managerial and decision-making processes. These patterns reduce the representativeness of public institutions and weaken their capacity to reflect the diversity of contemporary society.

Taken together, these barriers produce institutional inertia. The organisation does not simply resist external change; it may absorb reform initiatives and adapt them to existing routines, thereby preserving the underlying logic of the old system. Without deliberate intervention at the cognitive, communicative, structural, and cultural levels, HR reforms may remain superficial because established organisational norms can gradually neutralise new practices.

Under conditions of systemic transformation, public-sector HR management is moving beyond the administrative function of personnel record-keeping and becoming a strategic mechanism for organisational change. HR units can therefore act as key institutional agents responsible for designing and sustaining a barrier-free organisational environment.

First, recruitment policy can function as a barrier-freeness filter. Strategic HR management should identify and reduce prejudicial mechanisms at the point of entry into the organisation. Anonymous or partially anonymised recruitment procedures, in which identifying characteristics such as name,

gender, age, or nationality are withheld during initial screening, can reduce some forms of discriminatory bias, although their effects depend on organisational context and implementation design (Krause et al., 2012). Recruitment should also focus more strongly on relevant competences, including adaptability, empathy, and the ability to cooperate, so that candidates with diverse professional and life experiences are not excluded by unnecessarily rigid bureaucratic criteria.

Second, professional development can serve as an instrument of institutional transformation. HR management should not merely organise training but should use learning processes to reinforce a new organisational ethic. Alongside technical training, development programmes can include inclusive communication, stereotype awareness, conflict management, and public-service values (Malinovsky, 2020). Particular attention should be paid to empathic management, understood as the capacity of managers to recognise the needs of employees and citizens. Experiential learning that exposes staff to accessibility challenges can contribute to a deeper professional identity in which barrier-freeness is understood as an internal organisational value rather than an externally imposed requirement.

Third, HR management acts as an architect of organisational culture. Its role is to create an internal environment in which feedback can move both vertically and horizontally and in which employees can identify barriers without fear of retaliation. Edmondson's (1999) concept of psychological safety is particularly relevant in this regard because it explains why employees are more willing to speak up, ask questions, and report problems when interpersonal risk is reduced. HR management can institutionalise such conditions through mentoring, accessible channels for reporting problems, regular organisational-climate surveys, and transparent mechanisms for responding to employee feedback.

HR strategy thus becomes a bridge between formal barrier-free policies and everyday organisational practice. Without the active involvement of HR professionals, inclusion policies may remain declarative while informal exclusionary mechanisms continue to operate. Successful institutionalisation of barrier-freeness therefore depends substantially on HR transformation that makes inclusion an ordinary and expected component of public-sector employment.

To move from declarative commitments towards an inclusive human resource management model, public-sector organisations need an integrated set of managerial instruments operating simultaneously at the levels of processes, technologies, leadership, and organisational culture.

The transition to a barrier-free governance model requires the replacement of fragmented initiatives with coherent institutional design. Such a transition can be supported through the integration of the following mechanisms into the routine activities of public institutions:

1. Strategic inclusion audit: from declaration to transformation. An inclusion audit should extend beyond formal reporting on physical accessibility or statutory quotas and provide a systematic assessment of the organisational environment across several dimensions:

- procedural audit - reviewing HR processes, from job descriptions and recruitment to performance appraisal, for hidden or unjustified exclusionary criteria;

- analysis of career patterns - identifying organisational bottlenecks at which particular groups, including women, young employees, or persons with disabilities, lose opportunities for professional advancement;

- data-informed decision-making - using appropriately designed indicators to identify disparities in remuneration, participation, professional development, or promotion and thereby move inclusion from a purely ethical discussion towards evidence-based organisational management.

2. Human-centred standards: changing the ethos of public service. Job design and competency frameworks should integrate interpersonal and relational competences alongside technical qualifications. The civil service should gradually move from a function-performer model towards a public-service model:

- competency integration - empathy, emotional intelligence, collaborative skills, and conflict-management capacity should be recognised as relevant professional competences where they contribute to inclusive communication with citizens and colleagues;

- behavioural standards - interactions with public institutions should be understandable, respectful, and accessible, from the language used in communication to the transparency of administrative procedures. The resulting institutional ethos prioritises legitimate human needs rather than the protection of bureaucratic routines.

3. Digital architecture for equal access. Digitalisation of HR and administrative processes can reduce barriers when technological solutions are designed around accessibility and universal usability:

- accessibility of digital tools - platforms should comply with recognised accessibility standards, including the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), enabling employees and citizens with

different abilities to participate effectively in a shared digital environment;

- flexibility as an inclusion mechanism - remote and hybrid work, where compatible with public functions, as well as asynchronous learning can reduce spatial and temporal barriers. Such arrangements may broaden access to public-sector employment for professionals from remote regions, persons with disabilities, and employees with substantial care responsibilities.

4. Inclusive leadership: aligning managerial incentives with organisational change. Senior and middle managers are key carriers of institutional culture; therefore, leadership incentives should support inclusive behaviour and organisational learning:

- inclusion-related performance indicators - managerial evaluation may incorporate evidence concerning employee engagement, the prevention and handling of discriminatory incidents, the development of diverse talent, and the removal of identified organisational barriers;

- mentoring and role modelling - managers should act not only as controllers but also as mentors who actively support professional development and diversity within teams. This weakens rigid hierarchical dynamics and strengthens leadership based on enabling the contribution of each employee.

5. Psychological safety as a safeguard against institutional inertia. Edmondson's (1999) concept of psychological safety is central to overcoming cultures in which employees avoid reporting problems because mistakes or disagreement are associated with sanctions. In the civil service, a psychologically safe environment can strengthen organisational learning and early identification of barriers:

- protected channels for employee voice - mechanisms through which employees can report barriers, irrational procedures, or unequal treatment are necessary for organisational self-correction;

- a culture of responsible experimentation - public institutions should encourage carefully designed initiatives aimed at improving accessibility and inclusion, even where not every initiative produces immediate results. Such an environment supports learning, innovation, and critical reflection rather than passive adherence to outdated routines.

These mechanisms are mutually reinforcing: audits generate evidence, human-centred standards establish normative direction, digitalisation provides practical tools, leadership supports implementation, and psychological safety sustains learning and adaptation. An integrated approach can transform a public institution into a dynamic organisational ecosystem that evolves together with society and

embeds inclusion in its everyday functioning. Such transformation strengthens institutional resilience under conditions of continuing social and administrative change.

4. Conclusions

The study demonstrates that the archetype of barrier-freeness should be understood not merely as a contemporary social-policy trend but as a potentially important foundation for the resilience and effective development of public institutions under conditions of continuing social transformation. In the public sector, barrier-freeness is a sociocultural phenomenon: a deep value orientation capable of reshaping the institutional logic of the civil service from a closed hierarchical model towards a human-centred and more open organisational ecosystem.

The analysis of institutional culture indicates that cognitive, communication, structural, and cultural-symbolic barriers can combine to form an institutional trap that absorbs or neutralises formal reforms. Strategic human resource management therefore assumes a central role in organisational transformation because it can translate the values of barrier-freeness from declarative principles into recruitment, development, communication, evaluation, and leadership practices that provide more equitable access to opportunities and participation.

The proposed mechanisms - strategic inclusion audits, human-centred standards, accessible digital architecture, inclusive leadership, and psychological safety - constitute an integrated framework for reforming personnel policy. Their implementation can reduce unjustified exclusion while simultaneously improving organisational learning, adaptability, and resilience. A public institution that internalises the archetype of barrier-freeness is better positioned to respond to external change and to interact effectively with a diverse society.

Barrier-freeness should therefore be regarded as a strategic imperative for the modern civil service. Further research should develop sector-specific methods for diagnosing organisational barriers and empirically examine the relationship between the inclusiveness of public institutions, employee outcomes, service quality, and citizens' trust in government. The transition towards a barrier-free management model is ultimately part of a broader transformation towards a state that not only declares a commitment to serving people but also creates meaningful and equitable opportunities for participation, employment, and access to public services.

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