

Work Stress And Competence As Direct Predictors of Employee Performance: Work-Life Balance Does Not Mediate The Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of work stress and competence on employee performance and tests whether work-life balance mediates these relationships among employees of the Public Works and Spatial Planning Agency (Dinas PUPR) of Palembang City. Using a quantitative associative design, data were collected from 180 of 358 employees through a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS. The results show that work stress has a negative and significant effect on employee performance, whereas competence has a positive and significant effect. Competence also has a positive and significant effect on work-life balance, while work stress does not significantly affect work-life balance. Work-life balance does not have a significant direct effect on employee performance. The indirect effects of work stress and competence on employee performance through work-life balance are also not significant at the 5% level. These findings indicate that employee performance is more directly associated with managing work stress and strengthening competence than with work-life balance as a mediating mechanism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Public-sector organizations are increasingly required to improve employee performance, service quality, and adaptability while facing heavier workloads, more complex tasks, rapid technological change, and higher organizational targets. These conditions may increase work stress and challenge employees' ability to balance work and personal roles. At the same time, employee competence remains

essential because effective performance depends not only on completing assigned tasks but also on having the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required by the job.

These issues are relevant to the Public Works and Spatial Planning Agency (Dinas PUPR) of Palembang City, which is responsible for infrastructure development, including roads, drainage, sanitation, drinking water, and spatial planning. The agency's performance targets for 2024-2026 include an increase in the Road Infrastructure Index from 74% to 79% and an increase in the implementation target for construction-service NSPK from 59.26% to 66.67%. In 2024, six of eight major performance indicators exceeded their targets, while one indicator did not reach the target. This pattern indicates high performance demands that may not be distributed evenly across work units (Dinas PUPR Palembang City Performance Report/LKjIP, 2024).

Previous studies report mixed relationships among work stress, work-life balance, and employee performance. Arif et al. [4] found that job stress significantly affected both work-life balance and job performance, with work-life balance mediating the stress-performance relationship. Yusnita and Nurlinawaty [1] found that work-life balance significantly affected job performance, whereas work stress did not have a significant direct effect. Parent-Lamarche and Boulet [2] reported that work-life balance dissatisfaction was directly associated with lower job performance and also had an indirect effect through stress, indicating a different causal mechanism. Ramadhan et al. [3] also examined work-life balance as a mediator between work stress and employee performance. These differences suggest that the relationships are sensitive to occupational and organizational context.

Competence is also an important determinant of employee performance, particularly in public organizations with technical and managerial responsibilities. Studies in public and organizational settings generally report a positive relationship between competence and employee performance [10]-[12]. In Dinas PUPR Palembang City, this issue is especially relevant because employees perform field, administrative, supervisory, and infrastructure-management tasks that require job-specific competence. A pre-survey of 30 employees showed that 70% considered their competence aligned with their field of work, although 53% still needed additional training and 48% reported a need for continuous competence development. Regarding work-life balance, 55% reported that work interfered with family time, 50% considered their rest time suboptimal, and 58% stated that work-life balance still needed improvement. For work stress, 63% perceived a relatively high workload, 57% experienced physical or mental fatigue, and 60% identified deadlines as a source of stress.

Although prior studies have examined work stress and performance through work-life balance, and other studies have tested competence as a predictor of performance, research that integrates work stress and competence simultaneously with work-life balance as a mediator remains limited in regional public organizations with technical service responsibilities. In addition, earlier findings on the role of work-life balance are inconsistent across contexts [1]-[4]. The contribution of this study is therefore to test an integrated model of work stress, competence, work-life balance, and employee performance in a local-government technical agency. This model provides evidence on whether work-life balance functions as an explanatory mechanism or whether work stress and competence affect performance primarily through direct paths.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the effects of work stress and competence on employee performance and to test the mediating role of work-life balance in these relationships among employees of Dinas PUPR Palembang City.

2. METHOD

This study used a quantitative survey approach with an associative research design to examine the effects of work stress and competence on employee performance, with work-life balance as a mediating variable. The study was conducted among employees of the Public Works and Spatial Planning Agency (Dinas PUPR) of Palembang City. A quantitative design was appropriate because the

study collected questionnaire data and applied statistical analysis to test relationships among variables [5].

The study population comprised 358 employees of Dinas PUPR Palembang City, including 183 civil servants (PNS) and 175 government employees with employment agreements (PPPK). Data were obtained from 180 respondents, consisting of 92 PNS and 88 PPPK employees. Respondents were required to be active employees, have at least one year of service, hold PNS or PPPK status, participate in organizational activities, and be willing to complete the questionnaire. The sampling technique used was Proportionate Stratified Random Sampling, a probability sampling method in which every element of the population has a known and non-zero chance of being selected, thereby supporting the statistical generalizability of the results [5]. The sample size was considered adequate for PLS-SEM analysis with reference to methodological guidance provided by Hair et al. [6].

The study used primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from 180 respondents using a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Secondary data were obtained from staffing records, employee-performance reports, and other relevant agency documents. Questionnaire items were developed to measure work stress, competence, work-life balance, and employee performance, using indicators adapted from established sources: work-stress indicators followed Mangkunegara [16]; competence and employee-performance indicators followed the e-leadership competency and self-rated performance measures of Alkhayyal and Bajaba [17]; and work-life balance indicators followed Borgia et al. [18]. Before analysis, questionnaires were checked for completeness and respondent eligibility.

The research procedure consisted of problem identification, literature review, specification of variables and indicators, determination of the population and sample, questionnaire preparation and distribution, data collection, data screening, descriptive analysis, and hypothesis testing. Descriptive analysis was used to summarize respondent characteristics and response patterns for each construct.

Relationships among variables were tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS. PLS-SEM was selected because the model contains several latent constructs and tests both direct and indirect effects through a mediating variable [7]. The analysis comprised evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) and the structural model (inner model). The measurement model was evaluated to assess indicator validity and construct reliability. Convergent validity was assessed using outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), discriminant validity was examined to verify construct distinctiveness, and reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability.

All outer-model criteria were met. Outer loadings for every indicator across the four constructs exceeded the 0.70 threshold [6], supporting convergent validity. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were 0.885 for Work Stress (X1), 0.729 for Competence (X2), 0.780 for Work-Life Balance (Z), and 0.886 for Employee Performance (Y), all above the 0.50 minimum. Reliability was well established, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.943 (Work-Life Balance) to 0.986 (Employee Performance) and composite reliability (ρ_c) ranging from 0.955 to 0.987, both far above the 0.70 threshold. Discriminant validity was confirmed through cross-loading analysis, in which each indicator loaded more strongly on its own construct than on any other, and through the Fornell-Larcker criterion, in which the square root of each construct's AVE exceeded its correlations with other constructs.

After the measurement model met the required criteria, the structural model was evaluated using the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values. Hypotheses were tested using the bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS with a significance level of 5%. A relationship was considered statistically significant when $p < 0.05$.

Mediation analysis examined two indirect paths: work stress $\rightarrow$ work-life balance $\rightarrow$ employee performance and competence $\rightarrow$ work-life balance $\rightarrow$ employee performance. Indirect effects were evaluated from the SmartPLS bootstrapping results using the path coefficient, t-statistic, and p-value.

Mediation was considered supported only when the relevant indirect effect was statistically significant at the prespecified 5% level.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

3.1.1 Structural Model Evaluation

The structural model represents the hypothesized relationships among the latent constructs. In PLS-SEM, structural-model evaluation was used to assess the explanatory strength of the model, the relative contribution of each predictor, and the statistical significance of the proposed direct and indirect paths. The analysis was conducted using the PLS Algorithm and bootstrapping procedures in SmartPLS.

The structural-model assessment included the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), direct-effect testing, and specific indirect-effect testing. R^2 indicates the proportion of variance in an endogenous construct explained by its predictors, while f^2 indicates the relative contribution of an exogenous construct to an endogenous construct. Hypothesis testing used bootstrapped path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values, with $p < 0.05$ as the criterion for statistical significance.

Table 1. Determination Coefficient Test (R^2)

	R Square	R Square adjusted
Employee Performance (Y)	0.17	0.156
Work Life Balance (Z)	0.719	0.716

As shown in Table 1, the R^2 value for Work-Life Balance (Z) was 0.719, with an adjusted R^2 of 0.716. Thus, work stress (X1) and competence (X2) jointly explained 71.9% of the variance in work-life balance, while 28.1% was associated with factors outside the model.

For Employee Performance (Y), the R^2 value was 0.170 and the adjusted R^2 was 0.156. Therefore, work stress (X1), competence (X2), and work-life balance (Z) jointly explained 17.0% of the variance in employee performance, while 83.0% was associated with factors not included in the model.

Table 2. Effect Size (f^2) Results f^2

	Employee Performance (Y)	Work Life Balance (Z)
Competencies (X2)	0.027	2.539
Work Stress (X1)	0.152	0.002
Work Life Balance (Z)	0.010	-

Table 2 presents the effect-size (f^2) results. Competence (X2) had a very large effect on Work-Life Balance (Z), with $f^2 = 2.539$. Work Stress (X1) had a moderate effect on Employee Performance (Y), with $f^2 = 0.152$.

Competence (X2) had a small effect on Employee Performance (Y), with $f^2 = 0.027$. Although statistically significant in the path analysis, its relative contribution to the explained variance in employee performance was limited when the other predictors were included in the model.

Work Stress (X1) had a negligible effect on Work-Life Balance (Z), with $f^2 = 0.002$, and Work-Life Balance (Z) had a negligible effect on Employee Performance (Y), with $f^2 = 0.010$. These effect sizes are consistent with the non-significant paths reported in the direct-effect analysis.

3.1.2 Direct Effect Analysis

The direct-effect analysis showed that competence was positively associated with employee performance and work-life balance, while work stress was negatively associated with employee

performance. In contrast, the path from work stress to work-life balance and the path from work-life balance to employee performance were not statistically significant. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Direct Effect Results

Relationships between variables	Direction	t-statistic	p-value	Conclusion
Competence -> Employee Performance	Positive	3.233	0.001	Significant
Competence -> Work-Life Balance	Positive	38.044	<0.001	Significant
Work Stress -> Employee Performance	Negative	4.694	<0.001	Significant
Work Stress -> Work-Life Balance	Positive	0.648	0.517	Not significant
Work-Life Balance -> Employee Performance	Negative	1.861	0.063	Not significant

Three of the five direct relationships were statistically significant at the 5% level: Competence (X2) -> Employee Performance (Y), Competence (X2) -> Work-Life Balance (Z), and Work Stress (X1) -> Employee Performance (Y). Each relationship had a t-statistic above 1.96 and $p < 0.05$.

Two direct relationships were not statistically significant: Work Stress (X1) -> Work-Life Balance (Z) and Work-Life Balance (Z) -> Employee Performance (Y). Their p-values were 0.517 and 0.063, respectively. Accordingly, the hypotheses for these two direct paths were not supported by the data.

3.1.3 Indirect Effect Analysis

Neither indirect effect reached statistical significance at the prespecified 5% level. The indirect effect of Work Stress (X1) on Employee Performance (Y) through Work-Life Balance (Z) had $p = 0.587$, while the indirect effect of Competence (X2) on Employee Performance (Y) through Work-Life Balance (Z) had $p = 0.067$. Therefore, the mediation hypotheses were not supported at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Table 4. Specific Indirect Effect Results

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (IO/STDEV I)	P Values	Mediation conclusion (alpha = 0.05)
Work Stress (X1) -> Work-Life Balance (Z) -> Employee Performance (Y)	-0.005	-0.005	0.008	0.543	0.587	Not supported
Competence (X2) -> Work-Life Balance (Z) -> Employee Performance (Y)	-0.148	-0.147	0.081	1.834	0.067	Not supported

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1 The Effect of Work Stress on Employee Performance

Work Stress (X1) had a negative and statistically significant effect on Employee Performance (Y), with an original sample coefficient of -0.358, $t = 4.694$, and $p < 0.001$. The negative coefficient indicates that higher work stress was associated with lower employee performance. Therefore, H1 was supported.

This finding suggests that excessive work pressure may function as a hindrance rather than a productive challenge. When job demands exceed employees' available resources, concentration, energy, and persistence can decline, which may reduce task quality and completion speed. In the context of Dinas PUPR Palembang City, the result indicates that managing excessive workload and time pressure is relevant to maintaining employee performance.

The result is consistent with Parent-Lamarche and Boulet [2], who reported a negative association between stress and job performance. However, it differs from Kumala and Maksum [8], who found that the direct relationship between work stress and performance was negative but not statistically significant. These differences reinforce the possibility that the strength of the stress-performance relationship varies across occupational settings and work conditions.

From a job demands-resources perspective, high job demands that are not balanced by adequate organizational resources may increase exhaustion and reduce work engagement. For Dinas PUPR Palembang City, practical responses may include more balanced workload allocation, clearer scheduling, supportive supervision, and early identification of excessive work pressure.

3.2.2 The Influence of Competency on Employee Performance

Competence (X2) had a positive and statistically significant effect on Employee Performance (Y), with an original sample coefficient of 0.285, $t = 3.233$, and $p = 0.001$. Therefore, H2 was supported.

This result indicates that employees with stronger knowledge, skills, and work-related attitudes tend to perform better. In a technical public agency, adequate competence can support more accurate work procedures, faster task completion, better problem solving, and fewer operational errors.

The finding is consistent with previous studies reporting a positive relationship between competence and employee performance [10]-[12]. These studies support the view that competence is an important individual resource for translating job requirements into effective work outcomes. Nevertheless, the benefits of competence may still depend on organizational support, appropriate job placement, adequate facilities, and work procedures that allow employees to apply their capabilities effectively.

Accordingly, competence development should remain a strategic priority. Targeted training, certification, coaching, and continuous capacity development can help employees maintain the technical and managerial capabilities required by changing job demands.

3.2.3 The Influence of Work Stress and Work-Life Balance

Work Stress (X1) did not have a statistically significant effect on Work-Life Balance (Z), with an original sample coefficient of 0.026, $t = 0.648$, and $p = 0.517$. Therefore, H3 was not supported. This result indicates that variation in work stress was not sufficiently associated with variation in work-life balance among the respondents. One possible explanation is that employees may use coping strategies or role-boundary practices that reduce the spillover of work pressure into personal life. However, this explanation remains tentative because coping strategies and boundary-management practices were not measured directly in this study.

From a job demands-resources perspective, the effect of work pressure on employees' non-work roles may depend on the availability of personal and organizational resources. Employees who have greater control over work, supportive supervision, or effective coping resources may experience stress without necessarily reporting a corresponding decline in work-life balance. This non-significant result differs from Arif et al. [4], who found that job stress significantly affected work-life balance among health workers. The difference may reflect variations in occupational demands, organizational systems, and respondent characteristics. The result therefore supports the need to interpret the stress-work-life balance relationship within the specific institutional context studied.

3.2.4 The Effect of Competency on Work-Life Balance

Competence (X2) had a positive and statistically significant effect on Work-Life Balance (Z), with an original sample coefficient of 0.850 and $p < 0.001$. Therefore, H4 was supported.

The result suggests that employees with stronger competence may be better able to organize tasks, solve work problems efficiently, set priorities, and complete responsibilities within available working time. These capabilities may reduce unfinished work and help employees preserve time and energy for non-work roles.

This finding is consistent with Jessciha and Noerman [15], who reported that competence had a positive and significant effect on work-life balance. Their study also found no significant indirect effect of competence on performance through work-life balance, which is relevant to the mediation result obtained in the present study. The evidence suggests that competence may improve work-life balance without necessarily making work-life balance a significant mechanism linking competence to performance.

In practical terms, competence development may have benefits beyond direct performance improvement because employees who master their work may manage time and task demands more effectively. However, organizational policies remain important: inflexible schedules, uneven workload distribution, or excessive overtime can still undermine work-life balance even among highly competent employees.

3.2.5 The Effect of Work-Life Balance on Employee Performance

Work-Life Balance (Z) had a negative but statistically non-significant effect on Employee Performance (Y), with an original sample coefficient of -0.174, $t = 1.861$, and $p = 0.063$. Therefore, H5 was not supported.

Because the relationship was not statistically significant, the negative coefficient should not be interpreted as evidence that better work-life balance reduces performance. Rather, the result indicates that work-life balance did not explain a significant additional proportion of employee performance after work stress and competence were included in the model.

This finding differs from Yusnita and Nurlinawaty [1], who reported a significant effect of work-life balance on job performance, and from Parent-Lamarche and Boulet [2], who found that work-life balance dissatisfaction was associated with lower job performance. The contrast suggests that the performance relevance of work-life balance may depend on job characteristics, organizational arrangements, and the other predictors included in the model.

For Dinas PUPR Palembang City, work-life balance may still be important for employee well-being even though it did not show a statistically significant direct effect on performance in this model. The low effect size ($f^2 = 0.010$) indicates that performance variation was explained more strongly by other factors, particularly work stress and competence.

3.2.6 The Role of Work-Life Balance Mediation in the Relationship Between Work Stress and Employee Performance

The indirect effect of Work Stress (X1) on Employee Performance (Y) through Work-Life Balance (Z) was -0.005, with $t = 0.543$ and $p = 0.587$. Because $p > 0.05$, the indirect effect was not statistically significant. Thus, H6 was not supported, and work-life balance did not mediate the relationship between work stress and employee performance in this sample.

This result differs from Arif et al. [4], who found that work-life balance mediated the relationship between job stress and job performance among health workers. The difference may be explained by contextual variation across occupations and organizations. In the present model, work stress affected employee performance primarily through a direct path rather than through work-life balance.

3.2.7 The Role of Work-Life Balance Mediation in the Relationship Between Employee Competency and Performance

The indirect effect of Competence (X2) on Employee Performance (Y) through Work-Life Balance (Z) was -0.148, with $t = 1.834$ and $p = 0.067$. At the prespecified 5% significance level, this indirect effect was not statistically significant. Therefore, H7 was not supported and work-life balance was not established as a mediator of the competence-performance relationship.

This pattern is similar to the findings of Jessciha and Noerman [15], who reported that competence significantly improved work-life balance and employee performance but did not have a significant indirect effect on performance through work-life balance. In both studies, competence appears to operate more strongly as a direct predictor of performance than through the proposed mediation mechanism. The result also shows why mediation should be interpreted from the statistical significance of the indirect effect rather than from the significance of the individual component paths alone. In this study, competence significantly predicted work-life balance, but work-life balance did not significantly predict employee performance; consequently, the indirect effect was not significant at $\alpha = 0.05$.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings show that work stress and competence are directly associated with employee performance at Dinas PUPR Palembang City. Work stress has a negative and significant effect on performance, whereas competence has a positive and significant effect. These results indicate that reducing excessive work stress and strengthening employee competence are important considerations for performance management.

Competence also has a positive and significant effect on work-life balance, while work stress does not significantly affect work-life balance. In addition, work-life balance does not have a statistically significant direct effect on employee performance. Thus, work-life balance is relevant as an employee condition but was not established as a direct predictor of performance in the tested model.

At the 5% significance level used in this study, neither indirect effect is statistically significant. Work-life balance therefore does not mediate the relationship between work stress and employee performance and does not mediate the relationship between competence and employee performance. The evidence supports predominantly direct effects of work stress and competence on performance.

Practically, the agency should prioritize competence development and the management of excessive work stress while maintaining policies that support work-life balance. Future research may examine additional organizational and personal factors that could explain the relatively low proportion of variance in employee performance captured by the present model.

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