This commentary is written from the perspective of a board-level decision maker in the public and not-for-profit sectors. My comments focus on the application of the authors’ findings in this context.

In a continued climate of austerity in the British public sector, there is significant competition for resources between spending on developing and motivating employees and supporting frontline public services. The impact of the former is less easy to define in terms of organizational targets for public service provision, whereas the latter can present obvious and immediate results. Research demonstrating the impact of investments in employee motivation and development will provide much-needed evidence for practitioners.

In their article “High-Performance Human Resource Practices and Employee Outcomes: The Mediating Role of Public Service Motivation,” Ahmed Mohammed Sayed Mostafa, Julian Seymour Gould-Williams, and Paul Bottomley recognize tensions between measures having a direct impact on “hard” financial returns, profitability, and service performance and those demonstrating “softer” returns, including organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs). Harder performance returns will often have a more favorable hearing at times when resources for investment are short.

When boards and other decision makers decide how to invest scarce resources, they will want to see evidence of links between their investments and clear outcomes in the areas of importance to the organization. They will measure their priorities and seek to match spending to service outcomes. These outcomes may be dictated by workforce performance in service industries and the public sector, but that message is often harder to convey. The emphasis of a resource-hungry board is likely to be short-term delivery rather than investment resulting in improved performance over a longer period, particularly in organizations run by elected politicians, whose mandate is therefore time limited.

The article describes links between high-performance human resource practices (HPHRPs), public service motivation (PSM), and employee outcomes in three broad areas. The first is that investment in HPHRPs by itself can have a direct positive impact on employee performance and commitment because employees will see this as a positive affirmation of the organization’s commitment to them. The second anticipates that the existence of PSM will lead to improved outcomes “when employees can express their prosocial motivations to serve the public at work.” Third, PSM should enhance the impact of HPHRP deployment in two ways. It will encourage employees to exercise PSM within the organization as well as outside it, and aspects of HPHRPs will reinforce and enhance employees’ PSM, for the good of the organization.

The article reports research that focuses on this third area: PSM as a mediator between HPHRPs, affective commitment, and OCBs. The research undertaken was limited in terms of numbers, culture (data are based on Egyptian professional workers), and organization, but it allows the authors to draw the conclusion that “PSM is a notable mechanism by which HPHRPs are associated with desirable employee outcomes in public sector organizations.”

This conclusion has practical implications for public sector decision making with respect to investment in human resources. First, it supports the public sector’s common practice of actively recruiting individuals who can demonstrate PSM, or the ability to develop it, as capitalizing on PSM as an intermediary between HPHRPs and positive outcomes. However, the authors recognize that there may be other mediators in this area, including prosocial impact, where the benefits of work in the public sector for service receivers are perceived by employees and enhance their commitment.

Second, the research demonstrates that although a comprehensive approach to HPHRP investment may be preferred, the areas of training and communication...
were identified as being particularly helpful in driving affective commitment. The article, therefore, provides some guidance as to areas of focus for investment likely to produce the most favorable results.

The rehearsal of the linkages between HPHRPs and OCBs is likely to provide useful background to investment decision making. However, when confronted with difficult choices about whether, for example, to close a popular local library or to spend on a cohesive HPHRP program, the content of the article is not conclusive, although it provides valuable background evidence.

Recognizing these limitations, the authors identify areas for future research, which would certainly prove to be helpful for those making difficult spending decisions. In my experience, there is little relevant longitudinal research in the field testing actual performance data against variation in investment in HPHRPs. This could include, as the article identifies, supervisory ratings or managerial perspectives, as well as measurable performance outcomes for the organization against its priorities. Although this would be complex and demanding research, its utility for investment decision making would be very substantial.