The very well-done article “International Comparison of Public and Private Employees’ Work Motives, Attitudes, and Perceived Rewards” by Justin B. Bullock, Justin M. Stritch, and Hal G. Rainey provides some thought-provoking research and analysis about similarities and differences in what attracts and motivates employees in each sector. This is particularly timely and relevant information for public administrators and public policy officials in the United States given the beating that much of the public sector workforce has taken over the last several years with diminished resources, increased workloads, politically or ideologically driven denigration of public service, and, on occasion, diminished pay and benefit packages. Knowing what motivates and engages employees in the workplace can be a powerful tool for countering some of the negative impact of those developments. As with any tool, however, it can be wasted if it is not used or if it is not used well. Answering the “so what” question can help.

After reading the article by Bullock, Stritch, and Rainey, I found myself reflecting on the results of the annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey conducted by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. My organization, the Partnership for Public Service, uses the results of that survey to track and compare employee satisfaction and commitment within and among individual federal organizations. We also track employee satisfaction government-wide against a private sector benchmark. We publish the results online at http://www.bestplacestowork.org.

In our Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings, we use a weighted average of the positive responses to three questions to create a Best Places index score. Those questions are as follows:

- “I recommend my organization as a good place to work.” (strongly agree = 1, strongly disagree = 5)
- “Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?” (very satisfied = 1, very dissatisfied = 5)
- “Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization?” (very satisfied = 1, very dissatisfied = 5)

When we published the first Best Places results in calendar year 2003, the government-wide Best Places index score was 60.5, meaning that about 60.5 percent of all federal employees gave, on average, a positive response (strongly agree or agree; very satisfied or satisfied) to these three questions. By 2010, that score had increased to 65.0. It then started a precipitous decline, and in 2014 a new low was reached when, among the 392,752 federal employees who responded to the survey, only about 56.9 percent of them gave, on average, a positive response to our three key questions. By 2010, that score had increased to 65.0. It then started a precipitous decline, and in 2014 a new low was reached when, among the 392,752 federal employees who responded to the survey, only about 56.9 percent of them gave, on average, a positive response to our three key questions. The composite responses from private sector employees (compiled by Hay Group based on survey responses from more than 6.7 million employees at 400 companies around the world) saw movement in the opposite direction. In calendar year 2014, for example, the comparable Best Places score for the private sector was 72—more than 15 points higher than in the federal workforce. Clearly, federal employees were reacting very differently to their work environment compared with their private sector counterparts.

The good news is that there is considerable interest in the public sector in taking action to improve employee satisfaction and engagement. This interest is driven by a growing recognition of the positive correlation between improved organizational effectiveness and increased employee engagement. In fact, the Barack Obama administration has made strengthening federal employee engagement and organizational performance a cross-agency priority goal. The findings in the article by Bullock, Stritch, and Rainey can help. In that context, here are three suggested responses to the “so what” question for the public sector:

1. Because public sector employees are more likely than those in the private sector to feel rewarded and motivated by perceived social impact—that is, helping others and doing
work that benefits society—dealing with issues that hinder their ability to do that must be given priority. Insufficient resources to get the job done, for example, can be highly demotivating for public sector employees. This can be partially dealt with by engaging with employees and their representatives to find alternative ways to improve mission accomplishment with the resources that are available.

2. Recruiting well-qualified and motivated employees to the public service in the first place will be affected by public perceptions of government, and efforts to inform and influence those perceptions will be very important. Talented individuals with a public service motivation will be turned off by public sector work if they believe, even incorrectly, that government does not offer the ability to truly benefit society. For example, whatever his intent, Ronald Reagan’s pronouncement in his first inaugural address that “government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem” made recruiting the best talent to government service more difficult for years thereafter.

3. The findings regarding organizational commitment suggest that part of the “so what” here is that government managers and leaders can and do make a significant difference. As noted in the article, there is a general trend toward higher organizational commitment in the public sector, but with a number of notable exceptions. As posited in the article, “This suggests that organizational commitment can be influenced by more proximal conditions such as leadership and organizational policies as opposed to the institutional locus of the organization.” This is actually well demonstrated within the U.S. federal government, in which degrees of expressed commitment vary widely among federal agencies and, within the larger federal agencies, vary widely among major subcomponents. For example, most federal agencies were negatively affected by the same external events, such as tight budgets, sequestration-related drawbacks and furloughs, and an early fiscal year 2014 government shutdown. However, even though government-wide employee job satisfaction dropped in 2014 to the lowest levels in 12 years, fully 43 percent of the 389 organizations in the Best Places rankings saw an increase in employee satisfaction. The conclusion: Management matters and good management matters most.

In summary, there is much to be learned and reflected on in data and findings in the subject article, and perhaps the greatest value will be gained when public administrators and others interested in effective government seek to answer the “so what” questions.

If you are working on a rigorous review that critically assesses a body of theory and empirical research, articulates what is known about a phenomenon and ways to advance research about it, and identifies influential variables and effect sizes associated with an existing body of empirical research, please contact Michael McGuire, the Research Synthesis Editor, at mcguirem@indiana.edu.