

Interpreting Conflict of Interest in Public Service: The Role of Training and Professional Competence

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Abstract

This study examines how conflicts of interest are understood and interpreted within the public service system, with particular attention to the perceived role of training and professional competence in the application of related regulations. Using an exploratory mixed-methods design, the research combines 29 expert interviews with survey data from 10,255 public servants in Kazakhstan. The findings show that difficulties in conflict-of-interest regulation are connected not only to formal rules but also to how these rules are understood and applied in practice. Both qualitative and quantitative results indicate that public servants often demonstrate fragmented understandings of conflict of interest and frequently associate it with corruption. The study also reveals strong support for training and preventive educational measures, which are perceived as important for improving the practical interpretation and application of conflict-of-interest regulations. Overall, the findings suggest that effective conflict-of-interest regulation depends not only on formal compliance mechanisms but also on professional competence and the practical ability of public servants to recognize and assess ethical risks in everyday administrative practice.

Keywords: *Conflict of interest, public service, professional competence, ethics training, public integrity*

Introduction

Issues of integrity and conflict-of-interest prevention are increasingly important in public administration systems worldwide. International studies show that, despite the development of regulatory mechanisms, their practical effectiveness remains limited. According to the OECD, despite strong regulations on conflicts of interest, OECD countries have implemented an average of only 40% of standard practices in this area, indicating a significant gap between formal rules and their implementation in public service practice (OECD, 2024).

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In this context, not only the existence of regulatory requirements but also public servants' ability to understand and apply them in their professional activities becomes especially important. This is closely related to the level of professional competence that enables them to recognize and interpret conflicts of interest. Research on public integrity also shows that conflict-of-interest regulation has become an important part of modern public administration systems. Most OECD countries have developed regulations, codes of conduct, and interest declaration procedures aimed at preventing private interests from influencing public decisions (Jenkins, 2015). However, even with such mechanisms in place, their effective implementation remains challenging, since identifying and preventing conflicts of interest requires not only formal rules but also the practical ability of public servants to recognize and assess such situations (OECD, 2005).

The OECD Public Integrity Handbook also emphasizes that sustainable integrity in the public sector requires not only regulatory frameworks but also training, consultation, and awareness-raising tools (OECD, 2020). Similar principles are reflected in international legal documents. In accordance with the United Nations Convention against Corruption, states are expected to strengthen the professional training of public servants and develop their capacity to prevent corruption risks, including conflict-of-interest situations (United Nations, 2003, art. 7).

Academic research likewise suggests that ethics and compliance programs can support ethical awareness and decision-making, while civic and constitutional competence is important for ethical public service (Treviño et al., 1999; Kennedy, 2013). In this study, such learning processes are considered an important part of developing professional competence in the public service system. However, despite the prevalence of training initiatives, existing research has focused primarily on legal and organizational mechanisms for regulating conflicts of interest. Much less attention has been paid to how conflicts of interest are understood and interpreted in practice, as well as to the perceived role of training and professional competence in understanding and applying conflict-of-interest regulations. This reveals an important empirical gap in the literature.

Kazakhstan provides a relevant empirical context for analyzing this problem. In recent years, the country has been modernizing its public service system and anti-corruption policies, including the development of training programs for public servants. Recent studies in Kazakhstan also highlight the connection between public administration reforms and the functioning of the public service system (Issenova et al., 2024). However, the role of training and professional competence in

understanding and applying conflict-of-interest regulation within the public service system remains insufficiently explored.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine how conflicts of interest are understood and interpreted within the public service system, as well as the perceived role of training and professional competence in understanding and applying conflict-of-interest regulations.

RQ1. How are conflicts of interest understood and interpreted within the public service system?

RQ2. What role are training and professional competence perceived to play in the understanding and application of conflict-of-interest regulations?

The scientific novelty of the study lies in its focus on the interpretive dimension of conflict-of-interest regulation within the public service system. Drawing on 29 expert interviews and a large-scale survey of 10,255 public servants, the study examines how conflicts of interest are understood in practice and how training and professional competence are perceived in relation to the understanding and application of relevant regulations.

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on the role of training and professional competence development in conflict-of-interest regulation within the public service. Unlike studies that focus primarily on legal and organizational regulatory mechanisms, this article examines training and competency-based aspects of how conflicts of interest are understood, interpreted, and applied in professional practice.

This study considers training as an important element in the development of professional competence within the public service system. In this context, professional competence is understood not only as formal knowledge of regulations but also as the practical ability to recognize, interpret, and assess conflict-of-interest situations in everyday administrative practice. Contemporary public administration literature emphasizes that public integrity systems encompass not only formal rules and control mechanisms but also elements that foster a culture of behavior and develop relevant knowledge and skills among public servants (OECD, 2020). OECD recommendations note that the effective functioning of such systems requires not only the existence of regulatory requirements but also their understanding and application in everyday practice, which requires the development of professional competence and mechanisms for clarification and consultation (OECD, 2017; OECD, 2005). At the same time, contemporary public

administration research increasingly emphasizes the importance of professional and institutionally resilient public service systems for maintaining effective public governance (Yesilkagit et al., 2024).

A similar approach is presented in the academic literature, where integrity is viewed as a phenomenon encompassing norms, values, and behavior. In particular, Huberts (2018) emphasizes that the analysis of integrity is not limited to adherence to formal rules but includes the broader context of ethics and behavior in public administration. In this context, a distinction is made between compliance-based and values-based approaches, which are associated with different ethical and behavioral orientations in organizations (Treviño et al., 1999).

This perspective is also reflected in more recent studies, which note that ethical regulation in public administration depends not only on formal rules but also on the development of an integrity culture and broader institutional support mechanisms (Goncharuk & Tomoszek, 2024).

Concerning conflicts of interest, this means that the existence of formal regulatory rules is accompanied by the need to interpret and apply them in practice. Classic studies view conflicts of interest as situations in which private and public interests interact in professional activities (Davis & Stark, 2001), requiring public servants not only to be familiar with the rules but also to recognize such situations and make decisions under uncertainty.

In this regard, the role of training and professional competence is particularly important. Kennedy (2013) demonstrates that ethical behavior in public service depends not only on formal requirements but also on the level of civic literacy and so-called “constitutional competence,” which provides an understanding of the principles of public authority. Questions related to ethics, competencies, and professional values are also receiving increasing attention in contemporary discussions of public administration and public service development (Dobrowolski et al., 2022).

Recent studies in Kazakhstan also emphasize the growing importance of competency-based approaches in public administration education, particularly in developing communicative and professional competencies among future public servants (Iskindirova et al., 2024).

The issue of training and developing professional competencies in the public service is considered in the literature as an independent area related to the development of professional judgment and the ability to make decisions in complex situations. Early studies focused on the teaching of ethics in the training of public servants. For example, Dwivedi (1988) emphasized the need to incorporate ethics into educational programs and to develop not only knowledge of norms but also an

understanding of their practical implications. A similar emphasis is maintained in later studies, where training is viewed as an integral part of professional development in public administration (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021; James, 2023).

Similar conclusions are reflected in recent studies on the Kazakhstani public service system, which emphasize the importance of communication and professional competencies for effective public administration and institutional responsiveness (Bokayev et al., 2024a, 2024b, 2025).

It is emphasized that learning is not limited to the transfer of knowledge and should be viewed as a process that develops the ability to interpret and apply norms. Research shows that various pedagogical approaches, including case analysis and situational modeling, are used in practice to develop decision-making skills (James, 2023). At the same time, it is noted that learning outcomes depend on the context in which they are applied and do not automatically guarantee appropriate behavior (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021).

In addition, significant attention is being paid to training implemented directly within public sector organizations. Empirical research shows that such programs are widespread and used both to ensure regulatory compliance and to develop employees' ability to recognize and analyze ethical situations (West & Berman, 2004). However, the content of such programs can vary significantly. Some focus on compliance, while others aim to develop a broader understanding of integrity and professional responsibility (Perlman et al., 2021).

Practical training initiatives in the field of public integrity increasingly focus not only on explaining formal procedures but also on helping public servants recognize conflicts of interest and apply ethical standards in everyday professional practice (Resimić, 2022).

Anti-corruption training constitutes a separate area of research. Boehm and Nell (2007) note that such programs aim to both understand the nature of corruption and develop practical response skills, including risk recognition and the application of procedures in specific situations. More broadly, the influence of the organizational environment and culture on the development of ethical behavior in public servants is emphasized (Menzel, 2015).

In contemporary literature, public ethics education is not considered in isolation, but rather within a broader integrity management framework. Research shows that educational programs often combine regulatory requirements with the analysis of practical situations and ethical dilemmas as part of ethics training and professional development (Wyatt-Nichol & Franks, 2009; Cohen, 2022).

In this context, conflicts of interest are viewed as part of a broader set of ethical situations that require professional judgment (Pliscoff-Varas & Lagos-Machuca, 2021).

In parallel with academic research, applied international training practices in this area continue to evolve. OECD documents emphasize the importance of integrating training, guidance, and awareness-raising measures into conflict-of-interest management systems in order to strengthen public servants' ability to recognize and address conflict-of-interest situations in practice (OECD, 2004; OECD, 2005; OECD, 2020).

Despite advances in both scientific research and practical educational initiatives, the existing literature largely focuses on either general issues in ethics and education or on institutional mechanisms for regulating conflicts of interest. Meanwhile, empirical studies examining the relationship between training and professional competence, as well as the understanding and interpretation of conflicts of interest in public service practice, remain limited.

Thus, a research gap is emerging between the recognized importance of conflict-of-interest training and the insufficient empirical understanding of how training and professional competence are reflected in the interpretation and application of conflict-of-interest regulations in public service practice. This gap necessitates further analysis, including a combination of research methods.

Method

Research Design

This study builds on survey data previously used to analyze perceptions of conflict of interest in the public service system (Nauryzbek & Bokayev, 2025). However, unlike previous study, the present article incorporates evidence from expert interviews and focuses on the role of training and professional competence in understanding and applying conflict-of-interest regulations, as well as in assessing related policies.

The study employed an exploratory mixed-methods approach, in which qualitative expert interviews served as the primary interpretive component. The quantitative survey was used to examine the extent to which the identified patterns and perceptions were reflected across the public service system.

This approach was chosen because conflict-of-interest regulation is not only normative but also interpretive in nature and cannot be fully captured by standardized instruments alone. In this study,

expert interviews therefore served as the primary source for identifying recurring interpretive patterns regarding the understanding of conflict of interest, its frequent conflation with corruption, and the perceived role of training and professional competence in recognizing and managing such situations.

The survey component was subsequently used to examine the broader prevalence of these perceptions and assessments among public servants. These qualitative themes were not directly transformed into individual survey questions. Rather, they informed the analytical framework used to interpret survey responses regarding understanding of conflict of interest, policy assessment, and attitudes toward training and preventive measures.

Thus, the research design combines qualitative interpretation with quantitative comparison, enabling the study to provide both in-depth analysis and a broader understanding of perceptions of conflict of interest within the public service system.

The quantitative component relied primarily on descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to identify broader patterns of perceptions among public servants. Inferential statistical testing was not applied, as the purpose of the quantitative component was exploratory and interpretive rather than predictive or causal.

Participants

The study sample included two complementary groups of participants: experts and public servants. The qualitative component of the study was based on 29 in-depth interviews with experts representing different professional and institutional backgrounds. The expert sample included political and administrative public servants, representatives of the public sector, academics, representatives of international organizations, and experts from various countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Estonia, Latvia, Finland, Georgia, and Qatar. Experts were purposively selected based on their professional experience and involvement in conflict-of-interest regulation and public integrity issues. This approach ensured the inclusion of diverse institutional and international perspectives.

The quantitative component of the study was based on a survey of 10,255 public servants in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The sample included representatives of central, regional, and local executive bodies, enabling examination of institutional differences in the understanding and assessment of conflict-of-interest regulation.

The survey was administered using an online questionnaire (Google Forms) distributed through institutional channels within the public service system. In particular, the questionnaire was disseminated through ethics officers at public bodies, enabling broad institutional outreach across different levels of government. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents completed the questionnaire on a self-selection basis.

As a result, the study relied on a non-probability sample. However, the large number of respondents and the broad institutional coverage provided a substantial empirical basis for identifying patterns in conflict-of-interest perceptions within the public service system. According to recent official reporting, the size of Kazakhstan's public service exceeds 80,000 employees (Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan for Public Service Affairs, 2025), demonstrating the substantial scale of the collected dataset. The composition of the expert sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Composition of the expert sample

Expert category	Number
Political public servants	3
Administrative public servants	10
Public figures	2
Academic community	2
International organizations	3
USA	2
United Kingdom	1
Estonia	1
Latvia	1
Finland	1
Georgia	2
Qatar	1
Total	29

Data Collection Tools

Interview Guide

The qualitative component of the study was based on a semi-structured interview guide designed to examine various aspects of conflict-of-interest regulation and its interpretation in professional practice. Particular attention was paid to interpretive differences in understanding conflict-of-interest situations, barriers to effective regulation, and the role of training and professional competence in recognizing and managing such situations.

The structure of the interview guide included several interrelated thematic blocks addressing the understanding of conflict of interest, its distinction from corruption, the assessment of existing regulatory mechanisms, institutional barriers to effective implementation, and the role of training and professional competence in recognizing and managing conflict-of-interest situations. The interview questions were designed to allow respondents to elaborate on their professional experiences and interpretive challenges related to conflict-of-interest regulation.

The semi-structured format allowed respondents to elaborate on professional experiences, institutional practices, and interpretive difficulties related to conflict-of-interest regulation, while also ensuring consistency across the main thematic areas addressed in the interviews. The main thematic blocks of the interview guide are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Structure of expert interview guide

Block	Content focus
Conceptual	Definitions and understanding of conflict of interest, its boundaries, and its distinction from corruption
Interpretive	Differences in the interpretation and perception of conflict of interest across institutional and national contexts
Policy and Institutional	Assessment of current regulatory mechanisms, implementation barriers, institutional responsibilities, and policy effectiveness
Preventive and Educational	The role of ethics, training, professional competence, and preventive measures in recognizing and managing conflict-of-interest situations
International and Comparative	International experience, successful and unsuccessful regulatory practices, and recommendations for Kazakhstan

Questionnaire

The quantitative instrument was a structured questionnaire developed based on existing literature on conflict of interest and public integrity, as well as the main themes examined in the qualitative component of the study. The questionnaire was intended to examine respondents' perceptions, interpretations, and assessments of conflict-of-interest regulation within the public service system. The questionnaire was designed primarily for exploratory and interpretive analysis rather than for constructing standardized psychometric scales. It included a combination of socio-demographic questions, multiple-choice items, and Likert-scale statements to examine respondents' understanding of conflict of interest, their assessment of existing policies, perceptions of institutional barriers, and attitudes toward training and preventive measures.

The questionnaire was organized into several thematic blocks. The first block collected socio-demographic and professional information, including education level, position, and work experience. The second block focused on respondents' understanding and interpretation of conflict of interest. The following sections examined perceptions of policy implementation, institutional challenges, preventive mechanisms, and the perceived roles of training and professional competence in conflict-of-interest regulation.

Likert-scale statements were used to assess respondents' levels of agreement with statements related to training, ethical values, and preventive measures, enabling a descriptive examination of broader attitudes toward conflict-of-interest regulation across the public service system.

Both instruments were developed in accordance with the research objectives and the study's conceptual focus on conflict-of-interest regulation in the public service system. The thematic structure of the interview guide and questionnaire was informed by existing literature on public integrity, ethics, and conflict-of-interest regulation, thereby contributing to the conceptual consistency of the instruments across the study's qualitative and quantitative components.

To improve the consistency of the data collection process, the interview guide followed a common semi-structured format across interviews. At the same time, the questionnaire used standardized wording and response formats for all respondents. The instruments were designed to support exploratory and interpretive analyses of perceptions, assessments, and experiences related to conflict-of-interest regulation within the public service system.

Data Collection

The study combined qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques to examine different dimensions of conflict-of-interest regulation within the public service system. The use of multiple data sources enabled comparison of interpretive perspectives with broader patterns identified among public servants.

The qualitative component included 29 semi-structured expert interviews conducted with representatives of different professional and institutional backgrounds. The interviews involved public servants, academics, representatives of international organizations, and experts in public administration, ethics, and anti-corruption policy from several countries. Depending on the participants' availability and location, interviews were conducted either online or in person. The semi-structured format allowed respondents to elaborate on professional experiences, institutional practices, and interpretive challenges related to conflict-of-interest regulation, while maintaining consistency across the interview guide's main thematic areas.

The quantitative component was based on an online survey administered through Google Forms. The questionnaire was distributed through institutional channels within the public service system, primarily with the assistance of ethics officers in public bodies. This distribution approach enabled broad institutional outreach across central, regional, and local levels of government.

Participation in both the interviews and the survey was voluntary. Respondents were informed of the study's academic purpose, and the data were analyzed in aggregate to ensure confidentiality and reduce the risks associated with discussing sensitive institutional and professional issues.

Data Analysis

The study combined qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine various dimensions of conflict-of-interest regulation within the public service system. Together, these approaches made it possible to compare expert interpretations with broader patterns identified among public servants.

The qualitative interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis focused on identifying recurring interpretive patterns, institutional perspectives, and common themes related to the understanding of conflict of interest, the distinction between conflict of interest and corruption, barriers to effective regulation, and the perceived role of training and professional

competence in preventing conflict-of-interest situations. Particular attention was paid to similarities and differences in expert perspectives across institutional and national contexts.

Recurring themes and interpretive patterns were identified across interviews conducted with participants representing different institutional and national contexts. The inclusion of experts with diverse professional backgrounds contributed to the breadth and consistency of the interpretive perspectives examined in the study.

The analysis continued until recurring interpretive themes became sufficiently stable across interviews. The inclusion of participants representing diverse institutional and national contexts enhanced the credibility and breadth of the qualitative findings.

The quantitative survey data were analyzed primarily through descriptive analyses of respondents' perceptions, assessments, and interpretations regarding conflict-of-interest regulation. The quantitative component was used to identify broader patterns across the public service system and to support the interpretation of themes identified in the qualitative interviews.

Finally, the qualitative findings were interpreted alongside broader patterns identified in the survey data. This approach enabled the integration of in-depth qualitative interpretation with a broader understanding of perceptions of conflict of interest within the public service system.

Findings

The findings are based on expert interviews and survey data, which together help identify recurring patterns in how conflicts of interest are understood and interpreted in the public service.

Expert interviews suggest that the main difficulties in regulating conflicts of interest arise not only from the regulatory framework itself, but also from how it is understood and applied in practice. The survey data reflect a similar pattern, showing that public servants often have fragmented and inconsistent understandings of what constitutes a conflict of interest.

Overall, experts demonstrate relative agreement in defining conflict of interest. Most of them (62.1%) describe it as a contradiction between official duties and personal interests. At the same time, international experts frequently cited a limited understanding of conflict of interest as a practical barrier. In contrast, Kazakhstani experts more often emphasized the need to clarify and expand the conceptual framework.

This lack of shared understanding is also reflected in the survey data. Only 30.0% of respondents view conflict of interest as a contradiction between personal interests and official duties.

Meanwhile, 18.6% are unfamiliar with the concept, 12.1% interpret it as outright corruption, 10.7% see it as a threat of corruption, and 14.1% associate it with actions contrary to the state's interests.

This pattern is consistent with the expert interviews. Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative findings indicate that conflict of interest is often understood as an already committed violation rather than as a preventive risk requiring early recognition and management.

A similar tendency is evident in respondents' evaluations of existing policies. A majority rated both the level of regulation (61.5%) and the effectiveness of implementation (61.8%) below average, suggesting that these problems are perceived as systemic rather than isolated. These critical assessments may reflect not only dissatisfaction with formal regulation but also difficulties in understanding and applying conflict-of-interest rules in practice.

Experts also point to a disparity between the formal and substantive aspects of policy. Current processes are mostly concerned with disclosures, restrictions, and prohibitions. At the same time, the development of practical skills for recognizing and assessing conflicts of interest remains limited. As a result, regulation often becomes formalized, where a clear understanding of risks does not always accompany compliance with procedures.

In this context, training is seen as a key element in strengthening the system. A majority of experts (69.0%) identify training and professional development as among the most effective measures (see Figure 1), while an additional 17.2% emphasize the importance of information and awareness-raising.

This perspective is also reflected in the survey results. A substantial share of respondents associate policy weaknesses with gaps in knowledge and skills. Thus, 42.5% identify a lack of knowledge and competencies as a factor in policy weakness, while 30.9% associate it with the emergence of conflicts of interest.

Taken together, these data indicate that the problem is not limited to formal regulation. It is also connected to how public servants understand, interpret, and apply conflict-of-interest rules in practice.

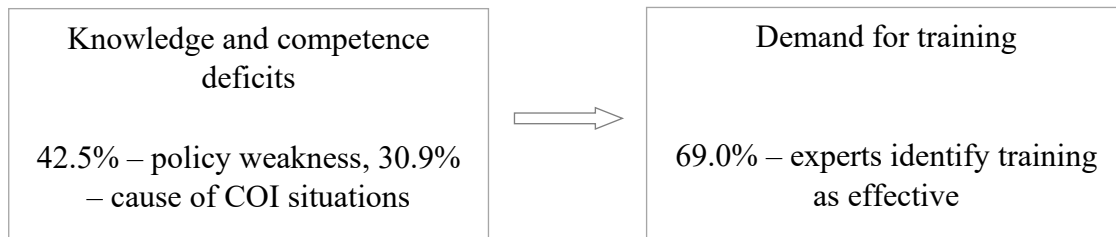


Figure 1. Factors contributing to weaknesses in conflict-of-interest regulation (multiple responses allowed)

Figure 1 shows how respondents explain the weaknesses in conflict-of-interest regulation. Respondents were allowed to select multiple response options when identifying factors contributing to weaknesses in conflict-of-interest regulation.

The results indicate that many respondents associate these weaknesses with gaps in knowledge and practical skills. In particular, 42.5% pointed to a lack of knowledge and competencies as a factor in weak policy implementation, while 30.9% linked it to the emergence of conflicts of interest.

What is important here is that these responses do not point to external or institutional constraints, but to difficulties in understanding and applying the rules in practice. In other words, the problem is not only about formal procedures, but about how they are interpreted and used in real situations. This helps explain why experts place such strong emphasis on training. In their view, training responds to the problems identified in the survey, especially limited understanding and difficulties in applying the rules. This is reflected in the interviews, in which 69.0% of experts identified training and professional development as among the most effective measures. The survey results also show strong demand for training, though the pattern varies depending on how the question is asked.

When respondents were asked to select the most important measures, 52.3% identified training as a key priority. However, when the same issue was assessed using Likert-scale statements, the level of support was even higher. For example, 79.0% of respondents agreed that systematic training is needed, and 82.8% supported the importance of developing ethical values as a preventive measure (see Figure 2). The percentages presented in Figure 2 reflect the share of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the respective statements.

This difference does not indicate inconsistency, but reflects different types of responses. While the first question requires respondents to choose between several options, Likert-scale questions capture their general level of agreement with specific statements.

Overall, these results suggest that training is not only recognized as one of several policy tools but is also widely supported as an important element of the system.

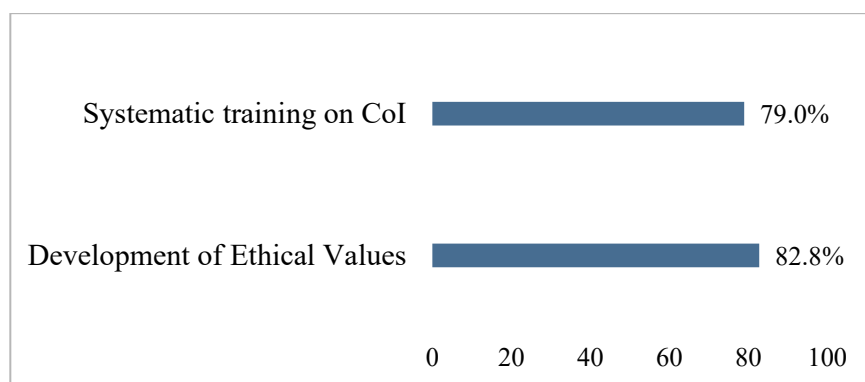


Figure 2. Share of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with statements related to training and preventive measures

Figure 2 presents respondents' agreement with statements, measured on a Likert scale, regarding the role of training and ethical values in conflict-of-interest prevention. The results show strong support for both measures. Thus, 79.0% of respondents agree that systematic training is necessary, while 82.8% emphasize the importance of developing ethical values.

Taken together, these results demonstrate consistently high support for training and preventive educational measures, regardless of the format used to assess these issues.

The results show that the role of training becomes more evident depending on how it is assessed. When respondents are asked to select specific measures, training appears as one of several important options. However, when they evaluate statements, the level of support for training is much higher.

Overall, the findings point to a consistent pattern. Survey data indicate that many public servants have difficulty understanding conflict-of-interest situations and tend to assess existing policies critically. At the same time, expert interviews suggest that training and professional competence are perceived as important to improving the interpretation and practical application of conflict-of-interest regulations.

This suggests that the issue is not only related to formal regulation, but also to how these rules are understood and used in real situations, which depends on the level of professional competence.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the problem of conflict-of-interest regulation in the public service system should be understood not only in terms of the existence of formal mechanisms, but also in terms of how these mechanisms are perceived and applied in professional practice. While regulatory frameworks remain important, the results indicate that many difficulties arise in understanding and interpreting conflict-of-interest rules.

The fragmented perception of conflict of interest and its frequent conflation with corruption indicate that formal definitions do not automatically ensure a shared understanding in practice. This finding is consistent with studies that view conflict of interest as a situation requiring contextual interpretation and professional judgment rather than only formal rule-following (Davis & Stark, 2001). Also, it aligns with the broader public integrity literature, which emphasizes that ethical regulation depends not only on formal rules but also on an integrity culture and institutional support mechanisms (Huberts, 2018; Goncharuk & Tomoszek, 2024).

These findings also support the position reflected in OECD documents, according to which effective integrity systems require not only legal and procedural instruments, but also awareness, consultation, and practical capacity to apply rules in everyday administrative situations (OECD, 2005; OECD, 2020). In this sense, conflict-of-interest regulation should be understood not only as a legal mechanism but also as part of a broader integrity system that depends on how public servants recognize and assess ethical risks.

While integrity frameworks emphasize values and ethical principles, the findings of this study suggest that these principles may be insufficient in practice if public servants lack the practical skills to recognize and interpret conflicts of interest. Moreover, this strengthens the argument that training should be connected not only to knowledge of rules but also to the development of professional judgment.

The findings help clarify the relationship between rule-based and values-based approaches to integrity management. Formal mechanisms may support compliance, but they do not necessarily ensure that public servants understand the ethical risks behind the rules. This is consistent with studies showing that ethics and compliance programs may differ depending on whether they focus

mainly on legal compliance or on broader values, integrity, and professional responsibility (Treviño et al., 1999; Perlman et al., 2021). Also, practical integrity training is important because it helps public servants recognize conflicts of interest and understand how ethical standards should be applied in public service practice (Resimić, 2022).

In this context, the study's findings further clarify why formal compliance may be limited in practice. The gap between the existence of rules and their practical application appears to be related to public servants' ability to recognize, assess, and interpret conflict-of-interest situations. In turn, this helps explain why professional competence is important to the practical functioning of conflict-of-interest regulation.

The strong demand for training identified in the study should therefore be interpreted not simply as a general preference for professional development, but as a response to difficulties in understanding and applying conflict-of-interest rules. Thus, this aligns with research on ethics education, which emphasizes ethics training, discussion of practical situations, and the development of ethical reasoning in public service settings (James, 2023; Cohen, 2022).

Taken together, these findings suggest that training and professional competence are perceived as important conditions for improving the practical interpretation of conflict-of-interest regulations. Training may therefore help public servants better understand conflict-of-interest situations, distinguish them from corruption, and apply existing rules more consistently in practice.

These differences in interpretation also suggest that conflict-of-interest regulation operates not only through formal legal rules but also through established administrative practices and professional understandings within public institutions. This interpretation is consistent with Scott (2013), who argues that institutions operate not only through formal regulations but also through shared norms and professional practices. This helps explain why the same rules may be interpreted differently across institutions and professional contexts.

A similar idea can also be found in the work of Meyer and Rowan (1977), who argue that formal organizational structures do not always determine how rules function in everyday practice. In the context of this study, this helps explain why the existence of formal conflict-of-interest regulations does not necessarily lead to a shared understanding of these rules among public servants.

Previous research using the same survey data also showed that respondents with higher levels of education tended to assess conflict-of-interest policies more critically (Nauryzbek & Bokayev, 2025). In the context of this study, this may indicate that more critical assessments are related not

only to dissatisfaction with existing policies but also to a better understanding of conflict-of-interest regulation and its practical difficulties.

Both the survey results and expert interviews underscore the importance of training and professional competence for more effective conflict-of-interest management. In the context of Kazakhstan, where the system of conflict-of-interest regulation continues to evolve, this emphasizes training as part of broader preventive integrity mechanisms.

At the same time, these findings suggest that training-related factors should not be considered only at the level of individual employees. They should also be viewed as part of the institutional context in which conflict-of-interest norms are understood, interpreted, and applied in practice.

Conclusion

This study examined how conflicts of interest are understood and interpreted within the public service system, as well as the perceived roles of training and professional competence in understanding and applying related regulations. To explore these issues, the study combined 29 expert interviews with survey data from 10,255 public servants in Kazakhstan.

The findings suggest that the main difficulties in conflict-of-interest regulation stem not only from formal rules but also from how these rules are understood and applied in practice. Both expert interviews and survey results indicate that public servants often interpret conflict of interest inconsistently and frequently associate it with corruption. The findings also point to a strong perceived need for training and practical guidance in this area.

The survey results further show that many respondents critically assess existing conflict-of-interest policies and attribute existing difficulties to limited knowledge and practical understanding of how the rules should be applied. At the same time, respondents demonstrate consistently high support for training and preventive educational measures.

Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative findings provide a broader understanding of how conflict-of-interest regulations are perceived within the public service system. The interviews help explain the interpretive difficulties identified in the survey data, while the survey demonstrates how widespread these issues are across different groups of public servants.

The results allow us to address the study's research questions as follows.

First, the findings suggest that conflicts of interest are understood differently across the public service system and are often interpreted not as preventive risks, but as already committed

violations or forms of corruption. The results indicate that difficulties in understanding and applying conflict-of-interest regulations remain an important issue in administrative practice.

Second, both expert interviews and survey results demonstrate strong support for training and preventive educational measures. Training is widely perceived not only as a supplementary administrative measure but also as an important tool for supporting the practical interpretation and application of conflict-of-interest regulations within the public service system.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective conflict-of-interest regulation depends not only on the existence of formal rules but also on how these rules are understood and applied in practice. In this context, training and professional competence should be viewed as important elements that support the practical functioning of conflict-of-interest regulation within the public service system.

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