



Article

Public workforce expansion: how institutional restructuring embodies the new public bureaucracy

Annika Naschitzki, Karl Löfgren

School of Government, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand

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Corresponding author

Annika Naschitzki

Tel: +64-4-463-6599

E-mail: annika.naschitzki@vuw.ac.nz

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ORCID

Annika Naschitzki

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3732-938X>

Karl Löfgren

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9303-0895>

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Abstract

Institutional restructuring in public organisations is often associated with downsizing, where organisations reduce employee numbers and consolidate functions. Yet restructuring is equally a mechanism through which organisations grow, expand functions, and rearticulate how work is divided and coordinated. Where does that growth concentrate, and what does it reveal about where contemporary public administrations direct institutional resources? This study draws on the emerging concept of a “new public bureaucracy”, characterised by an expansion of managerial, coordinating, and corporate functions within public sector organisations. The study examines all identified cases of internal restructuring across New Zealand public service organisations between 2018 and 2021 (484 cases), a period during which the core public service workforce grew by 19%. Using formal consultation and decision documents, the paper shows that growth concentrates disproportionately in advisory, coordinating, and accountability-facing functions, while frontline roles grow more slowly and administrative and information and communication technology (ICT) functions contract. Detailed analysis of restructuring at the New Zealand Police and New Zealand Transport Agency further reveals that corporate and operational functions restructure according to fundamentally different logics. At a time when public administrations across comparable jurisdictions face increasing scrutiny regarding administrative growth, cost, and effectiveness, these findings matter beyond the New Zealand case. The paper argues that jurisdictions relying on restructuring as a primary instrument of institutional change are structurally predisposed to bureaucratic corporatisation: when formal structure is the only lever deployed, accountability redistribution becomes the only change it can reliably deliver.

Keywords: restructuring, public bureaucracy, public workforce

Introduction

Existing scholarship has identified long-term expansion of organisational-professional functions in public sector organisations (Löfgren et al., 2022; Torsteinsen, 2012). Influenced by private sector counterparts and political interventions alike, the growth of managerial posts, risk managers, human resource (HR) officers, and quality assurance staff has transformed how we conceive professionalism in public organisations (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2008). Beyond a burgeoning literature involving

administrative intensity, red tape and new forms of bureaucratic layers (see below), much less attention has been paid to the actual mechanisms through which such expansion is enacted organisationally through restructuring processes during periods of workforce growth. Restructurings are not by default ways of axing jobs (Brickley & Van Druenen, 1990)—it is just as often a way of establishing new posts.

Restructuring is obviously not the only mechanism through which the new cohorts of organisational experts are taking up new jobs in public sector organisations. Many of these new positions have been filled as part of other strategic decisions. Yet, the extant literature has notably overlooked that internal restructuring is an important process to bolster new cadres of organisational professionals. Consequently, the research question in this article is: ‘to what extent are internal restructures in public sector organisations affecting the expansion of organisational professionals?’

Through an analysis of the written documentation of all restructures in New Zealand public services based on 363 cases of restructuring (out of a total of 484 cases, the remaining 121 were excluded due to insufficient or incomplete documentation), we seek to establish the proportional growth (and reduction) in various occupational categories. Our data is based on the mandatory documentation, which has been retrieved through information requests under the national freedom of information regulation. As two special organisational cases, we are specifically examining restructures in two specific public service organisations—the New Zealand police and the New Zealand Transport Agency/Waka Kotahi (NZTA). Our findings show that where restructuring produces workforce growth, that growth concentrates disproportionately in the organisational professional categories identified by Löfgren & Hall (2026).

In order to answer our research question, we will in the next section present the literature on new forms of professionalism in the public sector as well as the extant body of literature on restructuring in the public sector. In section three, we present our data and methodology, including our database on internal restructures in New Zealand 2018–2021. Section four subsequently, presents our empirical observations, after which we summarise and discuss our findings in section five. Concluding remarks follow in chapter six.

Literature

Organisational professionals

The distinction between organisational and occupational professionalism is by no means novel (Evetts, 2009; Larson, 1979). Mintzberg (1989) describes various organisational configurations, based on functional differentiation, where different environments and level of technology affect the balance between the different parts of the organisation, and with the ‘techno-structure’ and the ‘strategic apex’ being separated from the rest of the organisation. While the occupational professions are associated with those key actors necessary to support the operating core, the organisational ones have the role of ensuring that the mission of the organisation is on track. Modern theories on administrative intensity (Kasarda, 1973; Tosi & Patt, 1967) and red tape (Bozeman & Feeney, 2014; Herd & Moynihan, 2019) all entail an implicit premise that the core production in public sector

organisations is being offset by the augmentation of new layers of managers and intra-organisational corporate roles caused by either internal factors (Dunleavy, 1991) or external (political) forces (Peters, 2001). This also aligns with a normative story about hegemonic ‘neo-liberal’ ideas resulting in the degrading and deskilling of professional identities (Calnan & Williams, 1995)—often with a victim (or a resistance) perspective. Meanwhile, the same methods that have reduced the role and status of traditional occupational professionalism have in many cases been the motivation for professionalising the new organisational cohorts of public sector staff (such as e.g. project managers and event organisers). This has in many cases taken place through an imitation of the same mechanisms (a common body of knowledge and established ethical codes of conduct) that traditionally have characterised traditional professions (Alvesson, 2013; Noordegraaf, 2007).

Organisational professionalism manifests through a discourse of control, leaning towards the managerial side of the organisation and incorporating rational-legal forms of authority. At the same time, occupational professionalism emerges out of the discourse of common knowledge, collegial authority, and trust from both employers and constituents (such as, e.g., clients, patients, etc.). Evetts points out that these are ideal types with the aim of discussing changes in public management, far from the complex reality of practice (Evetts, 2009).

The meaning and function of organisational professionals have been further developed in more recent works on the growth of a new public bureaucracy (Löfgren & Hall, 2026; Löfgren et al., 2022). Contrary to the widespread ambitions to cut back on bureaucracy, new cohorts of managerial roles, public relations (PR) and technology experts, HR administrators, quality assurance officers and other corporate roles have created a new type of bureaucracy (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2008; Travers, 2007). This development seems to have taken place despite the negative connotations associated with ‘bureaucracy’ in the public debate since the 1980s.

Unlike the existing literature on administrative intensity and red tape, which examines budgets and productivity outcomes, the new public bureaucracy literature focuses on the composition of the public sector workforce.

“A new type of bureaucracy composed of organisational professionals expands as accountability becomes a core drive of modern public administrations. The claim [...] is that the combined forces of managerialism, politicisation, and professionalisation have led to new forms of (or consolidation of) control and monitoring efforts through delegated fiscal accountability, reporting requirements, quality and performance assurances, and other forms of monitoring mechanisms, in line with the general argument of modern society as a society of organisations” (Löfgren & Hall, 2026, p. 2).

While not overtaking other occupational groups in absolute numbers, the available workforce data in these studies shows that the growth rates among those working in either managerial or corporate roles in the public sector are significantly higher than among other groups. Furthermore, these works suggest that this growth is the result of an increased focus on accountability in society, rendering a call for ‘organisational airbags’ deflecting the organisation (and its leadership), and bouncing off ‘external’ requirements whether political, legal, administrative, social or professional. Contrary to earlier systems of accountability, which were based on interpersonal

relationships, formal qualifications and merits, and the profession's internal norms and values, modern organisational structures are based on values related to 'objective' and 'neutral' criteria for organisational success, and often implemented through self-appraising techniques (Moynihan, 2009).

Defining the organisational professionals

Although the portraits of organisational professionals are vibrant in the practitioner narratives and public culture (often 'bureaucratic leeches'), the definition is far from clear in the academic literature. Andrews et al. (2017) refer in one of their works to the 'central administrative function' of the organisation which is defined as:

"...those personnel with no direct role in service production, such as the senior management team, corporate services (e.g., finance, HR, IT, marketing) and other workers of providing services to the whole of an organisation" (Andrews et al., 2017, p. 116).

Noordegraaf et al. (2014) provide us with a different, and yet very similar, definition based on the job function where organisational professionals are workers who are responsible for 'organising and organisational improvement' (Noordegraaf et al., 2014, p. 24). By contrast, definitions of the occupational professionals are more pertaining to identity (Elliott, 1972), or to skills (Whitley, 1989). To be clear, our definition of the new public bureaucracy only takes account of functions pertaining to 'general management' of the organisations (Allison, 1983) containing functions related 'to strategy, managing internal components' (e.g. staffing and performance) and 'external constituencies' (communication, public relations etc.) and other accountability relationships. We are not including the rather broad groups of unskilled and semi-skilled clerical, administrative and technical workers which—although having been reduced in numbers in recent years—still inhabit many public sector organisations. Table 1 summarises the different 'systems' and the type of bureaucracy (highlighted) we are referring to.

Although this distinction is useful for defining our unit of analysis, we acknowledge its limitations. First, we acknowledge that we need to avoid the hair-splitting pursuit of exact definitions of professions and rigid boundaries between them (Abbott, 1988). Professions are components of broader 'ecosystems' rather than just static entities. While we categorise different types of professions, we fully recognise that this classification is far from precise. Second, the present distinction can be perceived as a clearcut boundary between frontline and back-office 'workers'

Table 1. Defining organisational professionals (Löfgren & Hall, 2026).

Organisational professional	Front office	Back office
Managerial level	Occupational managers (senior doctors, head teachers etc.)	Senior management team ¹⁾
Professional	Street-level bureaucrats	Corporate services ¹⁾
Clerical, technical	Front desk staff	Office clerks, maintenance, ICT support etc.

¹⁾ ICT (Information and Communication Technology).
ICT, information and communication technology.

in the organisation. With the rise of modern office organisations (including call centres) and the digitisation of work, this boundary has gradually become less clear (Zomerdijs & de Vries, 2007). Third, the definition does not account for occupational ‘hybrid’ roles, where typically traditional professions are promoted or seconded to managerial or corporate positions within the organisation while still keeping the connection back to their regular post (Giacomelli, 2020; Noordegraaf, 2007). Finally, many modern job functions in the public sector are now being performed by contractors and consultants from the private sector. This constitutes a grey area that complicates efforts to estimate the size and composition of the public sector workforce. However, it is likely that this trend will lead to the development of new organisational functions within the remaining public sector (procurement is one notable example).

Restructuring in public service

In much of the scholarly literature on public administration, the term “restructuring” refers to machinery-of-government changes—the creation, abolition, merger, or transfer of entire government organisations (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000; Yui & Gregory, 2018). The present study is concerned with a distinct and less examined phenomenon: restructuring that occurs ‘within’ organisations, involving alterations to the composition of departments, groups, divisions, units, or teams, as well as changes to individual roles including their title, job description, pay band, and reporting lines (Naschitzki et al., 2025).

The New Zealand system shares many features with other Westminster systems, such as parliamentary sovereignty, an uncodified constitution, concentration of power in cabinet government, ministerial responsibility to parliament, and a non-partisan civil (Rhodes et al., 2009). However, the public service has still undergone some significant changes since the 1980s (Boston, 2016; Duncan & Chapman, 2010) with managerial authority over internal structure being delegated since the State Sector Act 1988. This transformed the employment model of the public service from a centralised career system to one in which individual departmental chief executives became the employer of their own staff, with full discretion over internal employment decisions (State Sector Act 1988, 1988; Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission, 2024). This delegation of HR authority to the agency heads—subsequently consolidated under the Public Service Act 2020—arguably created the institutional preconditions for the proliferation of internal restructuring as a managerial practice: empowered leaders with broad discretion over organisational structure and limited central oversight of how that discretion is exercised.

This institutional configuration is not shared across all administrative traditions. In systems with strong centralised personnel authorities, strict civil service grade structures, or constitutional protections for public servants’ tenure, the degree of managerial discretion over internal structure is considerably more constrained. In many East Asian administrative traditions, for instance, organisational structure at all levels tends to be more tightly regulated by central government directives, with restructuring decisions requiring higher-level authorisation (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000). The New Zealand model, by contrast, entrusts organisational design almost entirely to agency leadership, subject only to employment law constraints rather than structural prescription.

Employment law is directly relevant to how restructuring is conducted in practice. Under the

Employment Relations Act 2000, employers must inform affected employees of proposed changes, provide genuine opportunity for consultation before decisions are finalised, and consider employee feedback before confirming new structures (Employment New Zealand, 2025). This legal framework produces two formal documents for each restructuring event: a consultation document presenting proposed changes to affected staff, and a decision document recording employee submissions, organisational responses, and the confirmed new structure. These documents also constitute the empirical foundation of this study.

New Zealand's particular propensity for internal restructuring reflects a durable institutional culture that predates the present study period. As Yui & Gregory (2018) demonstrate, the frequency of organisational restructuring across the state sector increased markedly after the reforms of the late 1980s and has remained elevated ever since—what they characterise as the endless aftershocks following the seismic reforms of 1986–92. New Zealand's State Services Commission observed as early as 1998 that “a restructuring culture” had taken hold, describing it as an “instinctive reach for the restructuring option regardless of the nature of the problem being solved” (State Services Commission, 1998, as cited in Yui & Gregory, 2018). Norman & Gill (2012) concluded from focus group research in New Zealand that restructuring had become “almost an addiction”—a preferred and reflexive response to institutional problems regardless of whether structural change was the most appropriate intervention. This culture may itself be a product of the managerialism introduced by the reforms (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Hall, 2021; Hood, 2001): as more people are recruited to executive positions who regard good management as primarily a function of organisational design, structural intervention becomes both available and normalised (Norman & Gill, 2012; Shannon, 2017). It is against this backdrop of institutionalised structural activism—and within the legal framework of good faith consultation that it must navigate—that the 484 restructuring events examined in this study took place. This culture is further reflected in how restructures are typically conducted in practice and has been described as a self-feeding quality: the shortcomings of one structural intervention become the rationale for the next (Donadelli & Lodge, 2019). Empirical analysis of formal restructuring documentation across New Zealand's public service has shown that structural changes are rarely accompanied by complementary operational interventions—such as process reform, workforce development, or performance evaluation—suggesting that restructuring frequently operates as a self-contained symbolic act rather than an integrated change programme (Naschitzki et al., 2025).

Methods

This study adopts an interpretivist and inductive research approach, treating internal restructures not as neutral administrative events, but as organisational practices through which institutional priorities and forms of administrative ordering become observable. The unit of analysis is the individual internal restructuring event, examined through formal consultation and decision documents produced across New Zealand public service organisations between 2018 and 2021.

The dataset was assembled through Official Information Act (Official Information Act 1982, 2024) requests submitted to 61 public service organisations and cross-referenced with the annual

review documents that each institution submits to its parliamentary select committee. This process identified 484 restructuring events across the three-year period, of which 363 contained sufficiently complete documentation for the role-level analysis presented here. Formal consultation and decision documents constitute a legally mandated genre of organisational communication: consultation documents present proposed structural changes to affected staff, while decision documents record employee submissions and confirm the final structure. Each document was coded for the type and scope of structural change: roles disestablished, added, modified in title or responsibility, or reassigned to new reporting lines. Building on prior typological work in the restructuring literature (Dunphy & Stace, 1993; Heugens & Schenk, 2004), restructure events were classified by their dominant structural impact into five types: growth, replacement, reduction, rearrangement, and fine-tuning. Team functions were then coded into the categories used in Table 1, distinguishing between organisational professional functions and frontline operational roles.

The qualitative analysis drew on this full account through crosstabulation and comparison of how different types of roles and functions were proportionally affected across organisational tiers. Rather than treating each restructure event in isolation, the analysis examined patterns across the corpus—identifying which functional categories and hierarchical levels were systematically more likely to grow, contract, or be reconfigured, and whether these patterns varied between organisational professional and frontline operational domains.

The functional categories used to classify restructured teams in this study—policy, HR, communications, data and research, strategy and Enterprise Project Management Office (EPMO), legal and finance, and regulatory and assurance—correspond directly to what Löfgren & Hall (2026) identify as the organisational professional domain: roles concerned with the general management of the organisation, including strategy, staffing, performance, accountability, and external communication, as distinct from both occupational frontline professionals and clerical support. The frontline and operations category, by contrast, represents the operational core of service delivery. This alignment allows the restructuring data to serve as an empirical window into where organisational resources are directed during periods of workforce growth, and specifically whether the composition of that growth reflects the expansion of organisational professional functions that the new public bureaucracy thesis predicts.

In addition, each restructure event was coded for its dominant narrative type alongside the structural analysis. A purposive sample of 25 restructure documents was selected for close reading using Bamberg's (2012) concept of narrative units, in which texts are segmented into orientation, complication, action, and resolution to capture the structured logic of the managerial account. The recurring narrative signifiers identified through this process were then applied systematically across the full corpus to classify each restructure event by its dominant narrative type. Two dominant narrative types emerged. 'Strategic-aspirational narratives' present restructuring as a transformational or strategic initiative, invoking abstract language around alignment, capability, new ways of working, or strategic ambition without specifying operational mechanisms. 'Utilitarian narratives' frame restructuring as a response to a concrete structural or personnel problem, with a clear causal link between the identified issue and the proposed solution. This classification proved stable across the corpus, with persistent patterns observable even across teams and divisions with

widely different functional and operational dispositions.

Several limitations of this approach warrant acknowledgement. Restructuring documents are not neutral artefacts: they are collaboratively produced by HR, legal, and communications specialists, and reflect managed institutional communication as much as direct managerial intent, with senior leaders nonetheless remaining accountable for their content. Coding role impacts required interpretative judgement in ambiguous cases, particularly where documents listed roles in aggregate form rather than individually—in such cases, all roles in the aggregate were coded as disestablished and re-established, reflecting the formal procedural reality that all incumbents must reapply in a ring-fenced process. Finally, the dataset captures formal structural outcomes rather than the actual redeployment of individuals: headcount figures reflect what was procedurally enacted, not necessarily who remained employed in which role after the restructure concluded.

Results

System-level observations

In the three financial years 2018 to 2021, 6,447 roles were disestablished while 8,073 roles were newly established in a formal restructure. This represents an increase of the public workforce by 6.9% (Table 2).

These developments are unequally distributed across the types of teams and functions being restructured. In absolute terms, ‘the largest growth in roles occurs in corporate functions’. Growth in frontline roles is proportionally not as strong. Roles in the restructures of leadership teams alone have stayed neutral, and roles in ICT/digital teams and administrative teams decreased in this period. The drop in headcount in ICT/digital teams is, to some extent, due to a substantial transformation at the internal revenue department (the tax authority) that cut hundreds of roles over several restructure stages, but also in a few other cases where functions have been externalised to contractors/suppliers (Table 3).

To examine how restructuring impacts are distributed across hierarchical levels, rather than functional categories alone, a crosstabulation of role type and impact type reveals a further dimension of the data. Most restructures affect multiple types of roles. However, senior leaders (SLT, tier 2–3) see their role title and responsibility changed proportionally more than other roles, and middle managers (MM, tiers 4–5) more often have their reporting line changed (to a different SLT). Subject matter experts (SME) and frontline (FL) roles more commonly see their roles disestablished and/or newly established—so their roles are notably more affected by the replacement dynamic that triggers “ring-fenced” reapplication processes that require disestablished staff to apply for the newly

Table 2. Count of restructures, affected roles and net change, 2018–2021

Number of restructure events	363
Total count of roles part of a restructure	23,399
Count of roles disestablished	6,447
Count of new roles established	8,073
Total of roles after restructures	25,025
Net	1,626
% growth	6.9

Table 3. Restructure role impacts for different types of teams

Type of team	Sum of roles not affected	Sum of positions changed	Sum of reporting lines changed	Sum of roles disestablished	Sum of new roles	Total roles	Balance	% of total
Data/Research	141	39	151	43	99	473	56	12
HR	187	247	194	226	359	1,213	133	11
Policy	309	132	296	292	379	1,408	87	6
Communication	88	56	102	83	111	440	28	6
Frontline ops	3,375	1,503	3,743	4,068	4,970	17,659	902	5
Reg/assurance	135	48	92	99	118	492	19	4
Legal/finance	293	166	278	269	320	1,326	51	4
Strategy/EPMO	371	167	317	308	364	1,527	56	4
Leadership	589	104	330	134	136	1,293	2	0
ICT/digital	733	248	561	815	697.5	3,054.5	-117.5	-4
Admin/support	50	19	21	165	132	387	-33	-9
Total	6,271	2,729	6,085	6,502	7,685.5	27,199.5		

HR, human resource; EPMO, Enterprise Project Management Office; ICT, information and communication technology.

created roles. This dynamic partly reflects the legal definition of what constitutes a significant role change (one that requires formal disestablishment and reapplication), but may also indicate targeted selection and removal of staff through restructuring (Norman & Gill, 2012) (Table 4).

To further differentiate restructure dynamics in time over overall workforce growth, we define ‘restructure types’ by the dominant impact on roles that is carried out, as defined in Table 5.

The comparison of restructure types and the main type of role affected shows that replacement and growth restructures affect leadership roles (Executive Leaders ELT, SLT to a lesser degree MM), and SME roles. Restructures that mainly reduce the team’s headcount disproportionately affect teams with FL operational roles.

The narrative framing used to justify restructures varies systematically by the type of role chiefly affected (see Table 6). Strategic-aspirational narratives dominate restructures involving leadership and management roles, while utilitarian narratives become progressively more common as restructures concern lower hierarchical tiers and frontline functions.

Restructures affecting ELT and SLT roles are justified through strategic-aspirational language in 73% and 82% of cases, respectively. By contrast, restructures chiefly affecting frontline roles are utilitarian in 68% of cases. SME-focused restructures sit at the boundary, split evenly between the two types.

Table 4. Crosstabulation of role impacts for different types of hierarchical roles affected

Type of role impact	Main type of role affected in restructure						Total
	ELT	SLT	MM	SME	FL	Multiple	
# roles not affected	248	211	849	1,442	369	4,098	7,217
% of row total	3	3	12	20	5	57	100
# position changed	65	172	280	1,043	272	1,381	3,213
% of row total	2	5	9	32	8	43	100
# reporting line changed	195	310	2,728	791	268	2,844	7,136
% of row total	3	4	38	11	4	40	100
# roles disestablished	87	129	548	1,198	2,008	3,159	7,129
% of row total	1	2	8	17	28	44	100
# new roles	90	162	837	1,795	1,793	3,848	8,525
% of row total	1	2	10	21	21	45	100

ELT, executive leaders; SLT, senior leaders; MM, middle managers; SME, subject matter experts; FL, frontline.

Table 5. Definition of restructure types

Type of restructure	Characteristic	Count
Replace	A large proportion of impacts are roles made redundant with a similar number of new roles added. New roles added may be slightly more or fewer than the roles that were removed (within +/- 10%). Reporting line and title changes may also take place but in smaller proportion.	137
Growth	A larger number of roles are newly established (more than 10%). There may also be redundancies that get replaced with new roles but in smaller proportion. Reporting line and title changes may also take place but in smaller proportion.	79
Rearrange	Most changes represent new reporting lines, a smaller proportion of redundancies and added roles may also take place.	53
Reduce	A larger number of roles is made redundant (more than 10%). There may also be new roles added but in smaller proportion. Reporting line and title changes may also take place but in smaller proportion.	53
Finetune	Minor changes are made to a few roles in a team, changes are mostly titles and reporting lines with only a few redundant or added, a large proportion of roles is not affected.	41
Total		363

Table 6. Crosstabulation of types of restructure narratives used in relation to types of roles predominantly affected (unit: %)

Type of restructure narrative	ELT	SLT	MM	SME	FL	Multiple	Total
Strategic-aspirational	73	82	63	50	32	77	61
Utilitarian	27	18	38	50	68	23	39
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

ELT, executive leaders; SLT, senior leaders; MM, middle managers; SME, subject matter experts; FL, frontline.

This pattern suggests that different organisational domains not only restructure at different rates and in different structural forms but require different forms of managerial legitimisation. In part, this may reflect different audience expectations: frontline staff are more likely to recognise and accept concrete operational reasoning, while restructures affecting leadership and corporate roles are pitched to audiences more accustomed to strategic discourse. But the pattern also reveals something more fundamental about the nature of restructuring across organisational domains. When more abstract, coordinative, and meta-functional roles are being reconceived and expanded—as is consistently the case in corporate and leadership restructures—the rationale for change is itself more abstract, because the functions being reorganised are harder to ground in identifiable operational problems. Strategic-aspirational framing may thus be not merely rhetorical dressing: it reflects the genuine difficulty of specifying what problem a new advisory layer or a reorganised governance function is solving. Utilitarian framing, by contrast, remains available to frontline restructures precisely because the problems they address—caseloads, reporting spans, service locations—are concrete and legible. The narrative data therefore reinforces the structural finding: corporate and leadership restructures operate according to a different institutional logic, one in which ambition and coordination replace measurable demand as the primary justification for change.

The data does not substantiate assumptions that the growth of the public workforce is significantly driven by an expansion of leadership positions. However, it does show that leadership positions are often less affected by more invasive restructure procedures (disestablishment and replacement). The data does indicate that growth in corporate functions is proportionally higher than growth in frontline and operational roles. Especially policy, HR, data & analysis and strategy teams witness more restructures that purely grow the number of staff. Administrative and ICT/digital teams have been reduced over this period. This may reflect the degree to which these functions are susceptible to automation, centralisation, and outsourcing.

The two cases: the New Zealand police and the New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA)

Detailed analysis of the restructures in our two specific cases—NZTA and police—reveals that strategic and organisational-professional functions restructure differently from operational frontline functions. To examine this, the net balance of roles gained or lost in each hierarchical tier was tracked across individual restructure events.

Both NZTA and police are large organisations, but police has both substantial corporate divisions and its main workforce in operational/frontline roles. NZTA is mainly a corporate organisation responsible for the delivery of policy set by the Ministry of Transport.

NZTA's restructures more often show reporting-line redesign, specialised function creation, and multi-layer organisational reshuffling. Notably, the degree to which proposed plans are adjusted through consultation is greater at NZTA than police. The observed dynamics may be interpreted as diversification of functions and layering of leadership structures, reorganising coordination and governance capacity, instead of merely adjusting staffing numbers (Table 7).

The restructures in the New Zealand police show, by contrast, a dual logic: operational-utilitarian restructures in frontline operative teams, and divisions often represent dynamics such as physical or structural centralisation/decentralisation of services or locations, involving moderate operational adjustments and frequently have low change-ratios post-consultation. Strategic-organisational restructures in corporate teams and divisions more closely resemble NZTA patterns: proportionally larger growth of SME roles, organisational reshuffling and renaming across multiple reporting lines (Table 8).

Discussion

The growth in the public sector workforce is not a uniform phenomenon. The data presented here show that the 6.9% net increase in roles produced through restructuring across New Zealand's public service between 2018 and 2021 was concentrated disproportionately in organisational professional functions—policy, HR, data and research, communications, and strategy—while frontline and operational roles grew at lower rates and administrative and ICT functions contracted. This distribution is consistent with the new public bureaucracy thesis advanced by Löfgren & Hall (2026): 'it is not simply that public organisations are getting larger, but that they are getting

Table 7. Restructures at NZTA, net balance of roles reduced or gained for each hierarchical tier

Restructure at NZTA	Team type	Restructure type	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tier 4	Tier 5	Tier 6	Tier 7	Team change (%)
Transport Ops Centre	FL/ops	Replace	0	0	1	0	0	0	11
Transport Ops Centre2	FL/ops	Growth	0	0	0	3	9	0	112
Legal Services	Legal/fin	Growth	0	4	5	0	0	0	73
Safety, Health & Envir	Other corp	Growth	0	3	11	0	0	0	23
Regulatory Services	Reg/assure	Growth	0	3	4	0	0	0	9
Channels & Design	Comms	Growth	0	2	0	0	0	0	17
Technology Review	ICT	Growth	0	3	6	54	0	0	117
People Group	HR	Growth	0	2	14	−7	0	0	25
Agency Revitalisation	Org	Rearrange	−1	0	0	0	0	0	−1
Corp Transport Tech	ICT	Replace	0	−3	−1	5	0	0	8

NZTA, New Zealand Transport Agency; FL, frontline; ICT, information and communication technology; HR, human resource.

Table 8. Restructures at police, net balance of roles reduced or gained for each hierarchical tier

Restructure at police	Team type	Restructure type	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tier 4	Tier 5	Tier 6	Tier 7	Team change (%)
BOP Prevention	FL/ops	Replace	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
HB Prevention Groups	FL/ops	Replace	0	-2	1	0	0	0	-7
Nat Fingerprinting	FL/ops	Replace	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
WC Prevention Group	FL/ops	Replace	0	0	0	1	-1	0	0
Southern District	FL/ops	Growth	0	0	100	0	0	0	104
AUCK Public Counter	FL/ops	Reduce	0	-3	-3	-5	-12	10	-38
Whāngaia Ngā Pā	FL/ops	Rearrange	0	0	0	0	-2	1	3
Emergency Services	FL/ops	Rearrange	0	0	-2	0	0	0	-6
Physical Education	FL/ops	Rearrange	0	0	0	-1	0	0	-6
Gisbourne Rural	FL/ops	Rearrange	0	0	1	2	-2	0	3
Property Group	Legal/fin	Growth	0	-5	8	0	0	0	20
Maori, Pacific, Ethnic1	Other corp	Growth	0	0	0	1	0	0	25
Operationally-focus	Leadership	Replace	-1	2	4	1	0	0	12
Nat Road Policing	Research	Growth	0	0	3	20	9	0	125
Media and Comms	Comms	Growth	0	7	1	0	0	0	4
Maori, Pacific, Ethnic2	Other corp	Growth	0	-1	0	9	7	0	83
File and Transcript	Admin	Reduce	0	0	-13	-14	0	0	-19

BOP, Bay of Plenty; HB, Hawkes Bay; WC, Wellington Central; AUCK, Auckland; FL, frontline.

compositionally different⁷, with the organisational professional domain expanding at the expense of other categories. Notably, the data do not support the assumption that senior leadership positions are the primary beneficiaries of growth. Tier 2 roles were in fact marginally reduced across the two institutions examined in detail. Growth is concentrated in tiers 3 to 5—senior management, MM, and SMEs—suggesting that bureaucratic “thickening” takes the form of coordinative layering and functional differentiation rather than the simple addition of chiefs (Hood & Dixon, 2015).

This layering dynamic constitutes what this paper identifies as the primary mechanism of the new public bureaucracy’s enactment. Internal restructuring—conducted event by event, team by team, across hundreds of formally discrete decisions—is one organisational process through which the compositional shift Löfgren and Hall document at the aggregate workforce level is enacted. “Replacement” is the single most common restructure type and is particularly significant in this regard: formal responsibilities are redistributed, accountability relationships are reworked, and the compositional character of the team shifts—often enhancing advisory, coordinating, and governance capacities—without any net addition to headcount and without public visibility as growth. Accountability and formal responsibility are, in this sense, the prime currency of restructuring: the things that can be traded and redistributed when structure alone is the instrument of change.

The dual logic observed across the New Zealand police and NZTA restructures adds a further dimension to this picture. Organisational-professional and operational functions do not merely grow at different rates—they restructure according to different logics. Operational- and frontline restructures are characterised by utilitarian framing, moderate role impacts, and low change ratios through consultation: they respond to identifiable service demands, physical reorganisation, or centralisation imperatives. Corporate restructures, by contrast, are characterised by strategic-aspirational framing, multi-layer organisational reshuffling, redesign of reporting lines, and the creation of specialised functions. This distinction in justifying logic is not incidental. It reflects the different accountability environments in which these two organisational domains operate:

frontline restructures are answerable to measurable service demand, while organisational-professional restructures are answerable to the more abstract imperatives of coordination, capability, transformation, and strategic alignment. The language of the latter may reflect the formation of alliances between new professional groups and organisational leadership (Löfgren & Hall, 2026, p. 129). This distinction in justifying logic need not, however, be read as evidence of deliberate manipulation. Strategic-aspirational framing may equally reflect the genuine difficulty of specifying what operational problem a new advisory layer or reorganised governance function is solving—the abstraction is intrinsic to the function, not merely a rhetorical choice.

This dynamic is further sharpened when considered alongside what restructuring does not do. Prior analysis of New Zealand restructuring documentation has demonstrated that structural changes are rarely accompanied by complementary operational interventions: process reforms, workforce development, new tools, or performance evaluation (Naschitzki et al., 2025). Yet the rhetoric justifying these restructures consistently promises operational improvement, new ways of working, and behavioural change (Hirsch & De Soucey, 2006). When structure is the only instrument deployed, the only things that can be redistributed are formal roles, reporting lines, and accountabilities. Restructuring that relies on structural intervention alone is therefore almost bound to trade accountabilities as its prime currency—because formal structure is the only instrument at its disposal. The implicit logic is that rearranging who is formally responsible for what will, by itself, enable the operational and strategic outcomes promised in the consultation document. This is a broken logic, and it has a predictable systemic consequence: each restructure elaborates the accountability architecture of the organisation, because redistribution of formal responsibility is the only change mechanism the instrument can actually deliver.

Jurisdictions which rely heavily on restructuring as a means of institutional change may be particularly susceptible to the corporatisation of their bureaucracy—not by design, but as a near-inevitable consequence of the tool they habitually reach for (Sarkar & Osiyevskyy, 2018). The net effect, accumulated across hundreds of events, is ‘a gradual but systematic redistribution of organisational capacity toward the back office’—not through any single decision, but through the aggregate of locally justified, individually modest structural changes.

The headcount caps introduced by successive governments—including a formal cap on core public service numbers introduced in New Zealand in 2009 (Löfgren & Hall, 2026)—generated perverse effects through the overuse of external contractors and fixed-term staff. They represent a further iteration of the same structural logic: attempting to contain bureaucratic growth through formal constraints on numbers, while retaining the managerial discretion and accountability pressures that drive compositional change. The new public bureaucracy, on this reading, is not an aberration or a failure of governance. It is what restructuring-dependent change management, under conditions of expanding accountability, reliably produces.

Conclusion

Public sector bureaucracies are not simply getting larger—they are getting compositionally different, with organisational professional functions expanding at rates that outpace frontline

and operational roles. This study shows that internal restructuring is one concrete mechanism through which this compositional shift is enacted: across 363 restructuring events in New Zealand's public service, growth concentrates in advisory, coordinating, and accountability-facing functions, replacement restructures reshape team composition without registering as headcount growth, and the two organisational domains—corporate and operational—restructure according to fundamentally different logics. These patterns provide micro-level empirical grounding for the new public bureaucracy thesis, and point toward a further argument: that jurisdictions relying on restructuring as a primary instrument of institutional change are structurally predisposed to bureaucratic corporatisation, because when formal structure is the only lever deployed, accountability redistribution is the only change it can reliably deliver—and accountability redistribution is precisely what organisational professionals are there to manage.

Whether this dynamic is the product of deliberate strategic choice, the aggregated effect of locally rational decisions, or simply what restructuring-dependent governance reliably produces under conditions of expanding accountability is an open and important question. The findings presented here are consistent with the institutional logic Löfgren & Hall (2026) describe, but establishing causation will require longitudinal and comparative research across administrative traditions with different restructuring cultures and accountability regimes. What this paper does establish is that the question matters: understanding the organisational mechanisms through which the new public bureaucracy expands is a necessary step toward evaluating whether that expansion serves the public institutions it inhabits.

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