



Fostering Capacity for Ministerial-Level Civil Servants to Work in an International Environment in the Context of Viet Nam's Active Engagement in Free Trade Agreements

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ABSTRACT: In the context of Viet Nam's expanding international integration through the signing and implementation of an increasing number of free trade agreements, the competency requirements for ministerial-level civil servants have undergone significant changes, particularly with regard to their capacity to work in an international environment. This article examines the characteristics of the new integration landscape, identifies the core competencies that civil servants need to be fostered, and proposes directions for improving fostering activities in accordance with modern governance standards. The study affirms that fostering the international working capacity of civil servants not only enhances the effectiveness of implementing commitments under free trade agreements but also establishes a critical foundation for strengthening national governance effectiveness and overall competitiveness in the context of deepening international integration.

KEYWORDS: Civil servants, fostering capacity for working, free trade, Viet Nam, international environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Viet Nam's process of international economic integration has unfolded amid complex and rapidly changing regional and global dynamics. Strategic competition among major powers has intensified, protectionist tendencies have re-emerged in various new forms, and international trade and investment have become increasingly uncertain. These factors have created significant pressures on developing economies, particularly those with a high degree of trade openness such as Viet Nam.

In response to the need to expand growth opportunities, maintain macroeconomic stability, and participate more deeply in global value chains, Viet Nam has proactively pursued a comprehensive economic integration strategy through the signing and implementation of free trade agreements (FTAs). These FTAs not only aim to liberalize trade in goods and services but also include high-standard provisions on investment, intellectual property, labor, the environment, and sustainable development. Participation in FTAs-especially new-generation FTAs-demonstrates Viet Nam's efforts to adapt to global competition, strengthen the internal capacity of its economy, and consolidate its position within the multilateral trading system. This context highlights that active engagement in FTAs is a strategic choice for Viet Nam to foster long-term growth, enhance competitiveness, and ensure substantive and effective international economic integration.

While these FTAs have created numerous development opportunities, they have also imposed higher demands on the policy implementation apparatus - especially ministerial-level civil servants, who form the core force in formulating, administering, and overseeing the execution of international commitments. In practice, the rapid evolution of the global economic-legal environment requires civil servants to possess stronger adaptive capacities, including knowledge of international rules, cross-cultural interaction skills, and the ability to address complex issues arising from integration. However, current efforts in fostering capacity for ministerial-level civil servants to work in an international environment in Viet Nam still exhibit notable limitations. This reality underscores the need for a systematic examination of the theoretical framework, competency requirements, and training content, thereby identifying solutions to strengthen the fostering of international working capacity for ministerial-level civil servants in the context of Viet Nam's active engagement in FTAs.

This study employs a set of qualitative methods to analyze competency requirements and propose solutions for fostering capacity for ministerial-level civil servants to work in an international environment amid Viet Nam's deepening participation in FTAs. First, the method of document analysis and synthesis is applied to review, compare, and systematize theoretical and practical sources relating to civil service competencies, public human resource management, international competency standards, and research concerning the implementation of new-generation FTAs. The sources include legal documents, ministerial reports,



publications from international organizations, and domestic and foreign academic studies. Second, policy analysis methods are employed to assess the impact of FTAs on competency requirements for ministerial-level civil servants. This approach helps identify changes in roles, tasks, and expectations for civil servants involved in implementing and coordinating international commitments. Third, logical reasoning is applied throughout the research process to connect data, clarify relationships between competency requirements and fostering solutions, and formulate coherent arguments for proposed directions. The combination of these qualitative methods ensures a systematic and reality-based analysis, providing a solid foundation for developing appropriate solutions to enhance the international working capacity of ministerial-level civil servants.

This study aims to elucidate the theoretical and practical foundations of fostering capacity for ministerial-level civil servants to work in an international environment amid Viet Nam's active participation in FTAs. By systematizing conceptual approaches to international capacity building and FTAs, the study analyzes newly emerging competency requirements for ministerial-level civil servants, identifies appropriate fostering content, and proposes feasible solutions to strengthen their capacity to operate effectively in an international environment. The findings are expected to contribute scientific evidence to support policy formulation and capacity-building initiatives for civil servants in the current context of deepened integration.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. *Fostering Capacity for Ministerial-Level Civil Servants to Work in an International Environment*

In Viet Nam, the concept of *civil servants* is clearly defined in the 2025 Law on Cadres and Civil Servants. According to Clause 2, Article 4 of this Law, civil servants are Vietnamese citizens recruited into positions in agencies of the Communist Party of Viet Nam, the State, the Viet Nam Fatherland Front, and socio-political organizations at the central, provincial, and communal levels; in agencies and units of the Viet Nam People's Army who are not officers, professional servicemen, defense workers, or defense public employees; in agencies and units of the People's Public Security who are not officers, non-commissioned officers, or professional servicemen; and in cryptographic organizations who are not engaged in cryptographic work, working under payroll and receiving salaries from the state budget (National Assembly, 2025).

Although the 2025 Law does not provide a separate definition for "ministerial-level civil servants," based on Clause 2, Article 4 of the Law and relevant provisions defining the functions, duties, authority, and organizational structure of ministries and ministerial-level agencies in Decree No. 123/2016/ND-CP and Decree No. 101/2020/ND-CP, ministerial-level civil servants can be understood as Vietnamese citizens who are recruited and appointed to ranks, positions, or titles corresponding to job positions in ministries or ministerial-level agencies; work under payroll, receive salaries from the state budget, and are subject to the direct management and assignment of the Minister or the head of the ministerial-level agency.

Regarding the concept of *fostering civil servants*, one perspective defines it as "the updating and supplementation of knowledge, skills, and working attitudes to enhance civil servants' capacity to perform public duties or meet job position requirements" (Government, 2025).

Regarding *capacity to work in an international environment*, it has been suggested that this refers to "a composite of qualities, knowledge, skills, and attitudes that individuals need in order to effectively perform professional tasks in contexts with international, transnational, and cross-cultural elements" (Bau, 2025).

From these perspectives, fostering capacity for ministerial-level civil servants to work in an international environment may be summarized as a targeted process of updating and developing the necessary qualities, knowledge, skills, and attitudes enabling such civil servants to effectively perform their duties in contexts involving international, transnational, and cross-cultural dimensions. This activity aims to help civil servants meet job requirements, strengthen their advisory and international cooperation capabilities, improve negotiation and policy implementation in accordance with international standards, and adapt to the demands of public administration in a context of deepening integration.

2.2. *Free Trade Agreements*

Free trade agreements (FTAs) have been conceptualized from multiple perspectives, reflecting the diversity of their regulatory scope and the varying levels of commitment among participating countries.

One perspective views an FTA as "an agreement between two or more countries in which the parties agree on certain obligations affecting trade in goods and services, as well as measures to protect investors and intellectual property rights, among



other issues” (Tran, 2022). This viewpoint emphasizes the legal nature of FTAs as bilateral or multilateral commitments governing a wide range of trade and investment-related areas.

Another perspective approaches FTAs from an economic efficiency standpoint, asserting that FTAs “bring significant benefits to the economy, such as promoting export growth, expanding markets, attracting foreign investment, and simultaneously enhancing production capacity and the competitiveness of Vietnamese enterprises” (Hang, 2025). This approach highlights the macro- and micro-level impacts of FTAs on national economies and business communities.

FTAs have also been defined as “a treaty between two or more countries or territories aimed at liberalizing trade in one or several product groups” (Van, 2021). This definition suggests that the scope of commitments in FTAs may vary-ranging from narrowly focused to broadly comprehensive-depending on the agreements reached by participating parties.

Synthesizing these perspectives, FTAs can be understood both as legally binding international treaties and as instruments promoting trade liberalization and expanding opportunities for economic cooperation among countries in the context of global integration.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Requirements for capacity to work in an international environment for ministerial-level civil servants in the context of Viet Nam’s active participation in free trade agreements

As Viet Nam deepens its international economic integration and engages more extensively in new-generation free trade agreements (FTAs) with broad commitments, high standards, and stringent enforcement mechanisms, the requirement to strengthen the capacity to work in an international environment among ministerial-level civil servants has become a strategic imperative. This stems from the unique role of ministerial-level civil servants—those directly involved in policy formulation, negotiation, implementation, and supervision of international commitments. To meet the increasingly complex demands of integration, they must develop a comprehensive capacity framework composed of four core dimensions: political steadfastness and ethical integrity; knowledge; skills; and professional attitude.

First, in terms of political steadfastness and ethical integrity, ministerial-level civil servants must demonstrate firm adherence to the Party’s and State’s orientations on foreign policy and international integration. They must also exhibit independent thinking, consistency in principles, and the ability to address complex and sensitive issues related to national interests. In a highly competitive international environment, integrity, transparency, and professional conduct are essential for building trust with partners, enhancing institutional credibility, and safeguarding the national image. Ethical standards, a strong sense of responsibility, and adherence to both domestic and international legal norms form the foundation for professionalism and consistency when performing duties in an international environment.

Second, regarding knowledge, ministerial-level civil servants must be well-versed in international law, the coordination and monitoring mechanisms of FTAs, and the operating principles of international and regional organizations in which Viet Nam participates. In addition to deep domain-specific expertise, they need interdisciplinary knowledge in international economics, trade policy, public governance, digital technologies, non-traditional security issues, and global risk management. A solid understanding of FTA commitments—such as investment, intellectual property, labor, environment, government procurement, technical standards, and trade in services—is essential to ensure proper implementation while effectively leveraging integration opportunities.

Third, in terms of skills, ministerial-level civil servants must cultivate complex, adaptable skills to operate effectively in diverse international contexts. These include proficiency in specialized foreign-language skills for negotiation, presenting national positions, interpreting legal texts, and direct engagement with international partners. Essential skills also include bilateral and multilateral negotiation, policy analysis and forecasting, and assessing the impacts of international commitments on sectors and the broader economy. Moreover, coordination skills—particularly within negotiation teams, FTA implementation working groups, or policy consultation mechanisms—are increasingly critical due to the cross-sectoral nature of contemporary international issues. Competence in digital technologies for information retrieval, data processing, and reporting is equally necessary to function effectively in a digitalized working environment.

Fourth, regarding professional attitude, ministerial-level civil servants must demonstrate proactiveness, openness to learning, adaptability to rapidly changing international contexts, and receptiveness to advanced international norms. Working in a multicultural environment requires respect for diversity, cooperative behavior, and a high sense of responsibility when representing



government institutions or the nation. Professionalism, commitment, and diligence are essential determinants of long-term performance in international duties.

Collectively, these four components constitute the core competency framework enabling ministerial-level civil servants to effectively fulfil their crucial roles in promoting and implementing international integration. Meeting these requirements not only ensures Viet Nam's effective implementation of FTA commitments but also enhances national governance quality and the country's competitiveness in the context of deepening globalization.

3.2. Contents of fostering capacity for ministerial-level civil servants to work in an international environment in the context of Viet Nam's active participation in free trade agreements

Given Viet Nam's growing engagement in FTAs-especially new-generation FTAs with high standards and rigorous enforcement-ministerial-level civil servants must be equipped with a comprehensive and professional capacity system to meet the demands of internationalized public governance. The contents of capacity-building should therefore be developed holistically across four foundational dimensions: political steadfastness and ethical integrity; international knowledge; skills for working in an integrated environment; and professional attitudes aligned with international standards. Specifically:

First, fostering political steadfastness and ethical integrity. In a context of increasingly complex international cooperation and competition, ministerial-level civil servants represent national interests in policymaking, negotiations, and implementation of international commitments. Capacity-building should therefore strengthen political acumen, the ability to identify and manage sensitive issues related to sovereignty and national interests, and a thorough understanding of the Party's and State's policies on foreign affairs and international economic integration. Ethical capacity-building-which emphasizes integrity, transparency, responsibility, and compliance with legal norms-is crucial to ensure proper conduct in international interactions and minimize undue influence from sectoral or individual interests.

Second, fostering international knowledge. International knowledge is fundamental for ministerial-level civil servants to participate effectively in policy formulation, advisory processes, and implementation of FTAs. Training should cover the operational mechanisms, commitment structures, and implementation requirements of FTAs to which Viet Nam is a party; the international legal system governing investment, trade, environment, labor, intellectual property, and services; and emerging global trends related to digital transformation, geopolitical dynamics, economic security, and cross-sectoral issues. Understanding the institutional structures, governance models, and cultural norms of partner countries is also essential to enhance adaptability and cooperation effectiveness.

Third, fostering and strengthening skills for working in an international environment. Implementing new-generation FTAs requires ministerial-level civil servants to master high-level and comprehensive skills. Training should focus on: (1) policy analysis, impact assessment, and development of responsive adjustment options; (2) bilateral and multilateral negotiation and consultation skills, especially in technical areas such as intellectual property, the environment, technical standards, and trade in services; (3) specialized foreign-language proficiency, information access, data analysis, and application of digital technologies in public administration; and (4) intercultural communication, diplomatic problem-solving, international networking, and cross-sectoral coordination. Strengthening these skills enhances policy responsiveness, professionalism, and effective cooperation with international partners.

Fourth, fostering professional attitudes aligned with international integration requirements. Professional attitude is a pivotal element influencing performance in the high-pressure international work environment. Capacity-building should promote adaptability, innovative thinking, openness to new knowledge, and respect for multicultural diversity. Ministerial-level civil servants must cultivate responsibility when representing government agencies or the nation, as well as collaborative attitudes and long-term vision-key factors for implementing cross-sectoral FTA commitments.

Establishing capacity-building content around these four dimensions-political and ethical integrity, international knowledge, skills for integrated environments, and professional attitude-constitutes a crucial orientation for developing a capable and internationally competent ministerial-level civil service. These components enhance the effectiveness of FTA implementation, strengthen institutional capacity, improve strategic advisory quality, and elevate Viet Nam's position in the international arena.



3.3. Solutions for fostering capacity for ministerial-level civil servants to work in an international environment in the context of Viet Nam's active participation in free trade agreements

Accordingly, fostering capacity for ministerial-level civil servants to work in an international environment must be treated as a strategic, long-term, and continuous task within the public sector. Proactive and coordinated implementation of this task will help build a professional, modern civil service with global mindset and responsible conduct-adequate for handling foreign affairs, external economic functions, and national governance in an increasingly complex integration landscape. Key solutions include:

First, improving mechanisms and policies for training and capacity-building toward modernization and international integration. A competency framework for ministerial-level civil servants should be developed and applied consistently, clearly defining knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for working in an international environment. Training programs must adopt a competency-based approach aligned with the demands and commitments of new-generation FTAs. Coordination among ministries is essential to standardize requirements and avoid resource fragmentation.

Second, innovating training contents and methods toward specialization, practicality, and integration relevance. Programs should be regularly updated with global trade developments, international standards, and emerging negotiation trends. Active learning methods-such as international negotiation simulations, cross-border case studies, policy debates, and interdisciplinary problem-solving-should be promoted to strengthen practical application, policy responsiveness, and situational competence.

Third, expanding international cooperation in training and capacity development. Strengthening collaboration with international organizations, research institutes, and foreign training institutions will enable Viet Nam to adopt advanced training methodologies and best practices. Ministerial-level civil servants should be encouraged to participate in short-term courses, knowledge-exchange programs, study visits, and online training offered by international partners to enhance foreign-language proficiency, intercultural competence, and multinational working skills.

Fourth, leveraging the expertise of specialists and civil servants with international experience. Experts with experience in negotiations, policy advisory roles, or service in international organizations should be engaged in curriculum development, teaching, and mentoring. Mechanisms for knowledge-sharing and documenting lessons learned from experienced civil servants should be institutionalized to disseminate best practices across the system.

Fifth, applying digital technologies in training and capacity-building. Digital platforms enable flexible, individualized, and cost-effective training. Online learning systems, digital libraries on FTAs, open data resources, and AI-assisted learning tools can support continuous knowledge acquisition and skills development. Digital technologies also facilitate objective monitoring and evaluation of training outcomes.

Sixth, strengthening incentives and professional motivation aligned with integration requirements. Training effectiveness is maximized when capacity development is linked to performance evaluation, career planning, and appointment decisions. Mechanisms should be put in place to recognize training achievements, promote civil servants with strong international capacity, and build a learning-oriented culture within government agencies.

In summary, these solutions must be implemented in a coordinated and targeted manner, tailored to the specific mandates of each ministry. Adequate investment in fostering capacity for ministerial-level civil servants to work in an international environment will contribute to building a professional civil service with global vision and capability to effectively implement Viet Nam's FTA commitments, thereby enhancing national competitiveness and strengthening the country's position in the context of deepened international integration.

4. CONCLUSION

In the context of Vietnam's active participation in free trade agreements, the requirement for fostering capacity for ministerial-level civil servants to work in an international environment has become particularly important to ensure the effective implementation of international commitments and to enhance the nation's overall integration capacity. The study demonstrates that this capacity must be developed comprehensively-from political acumen and ethical standards to international knowledge, professional skills, and professional attitudes aligned with global norms. The synchronized implementation of institutional reforms, training programs, international cooperation, and digital applications will contribute to building a professional and modern civil service corps capable of meeting the demands of deep international integration and contributing positively to the country's sustainable development.



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