

Development of the system of customs experts – the example of China Customs

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Abstract

In recent years, the ever-evolving internal and external environment has made the development and professional construction of human resources (HR) crucial to the realisation of Customs' overall strategic goals. In this context, a customs expert system, is a policy arrangement that has received extensive attention from the members of the World Customs Organization (WCO). Here, the paper systematically reviews the contributions of the WCO and the best practices of its members in customs HR professional development. The paper analyses in detail the three reasons for the introduction of the customs expert system by China Customs and explain its content. The paper also emphasises the management model including methods to identify experts, their tenure and their regular assessment. After analysing the achievements of and problems faced by China Customs regarding the existing expert system, the author proposes the following five suggestions for the future development of the expert system: first, to expand the classification of customs experts; second, to learn from other countries' customs expert systems through extensive international customs cooperation events; third, to conduct in-depth studies of the system's connection between professional and technical civil servants and customs experts; fourth, to improve the relevant institutional arrangements for 'expert-type leaders', and further clarify the setting of expert levels; and lastly, to actively explore the utilisation of expert teams.

Keywords: People development, customs professionalism; expert system; career development; China Customs

1. Literature review

1.1. Achievements of the World Customs Organization (WCO) in the professional development of customs human resources

To meet the growing demand for professional training of customs officers, the WCO has established three major assessment dimensions in the field of HR training and management: knowledge, skills, and attitude. It has also created the Partnership in Customs Academic Research and Development (PICARD)-centric standards for customs HR professional management and development. The different training standards for strategic and operational levels have greatly promoted the scientificity of each member's training systems for customs officers (WCO, 2019a). Through ongoing cooperation with the International Network of Customs Universities (INCU), the WCO has been able to further promote the PICARD standards in the customs academic community and has obtained support in

the content argumentation and regular revision of the standard (WCO, 2019a). In addition, the WCO has comprehensively addressed the theoretical models and best practices from members for the professional development of customs human resources in the ‘WCO Framework of Principles and Practices on Customs Professionalism’ (FPPCP), and highlighted the important role of the dual career paths available to customs officers in the process of human resource management and development (HRMD) (WCO, 2016, p. 130).

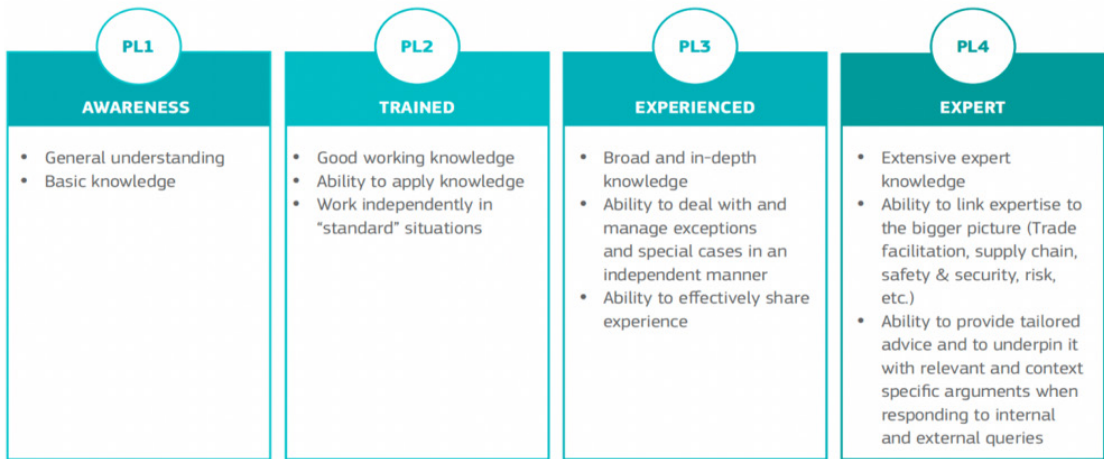
The WCO has elaborated in detail how to implement the three dimensions (knowledge, skills, and attitude) step by step, and how to conduct regular assessments in its ‘Guide to Implementing Competency-based Human Resources Management in a customs administration environment’, to provide guidance for members to cultivate competent customs officers from a practical level (WCO, 2019b). In addition to providing relevant guidance in response to the demand of members, the WCO itself conducts professional assessment and accreditation for customs officers from each member administration in a variety of fields (such as time-release study, free zone, cross-border e-commerce and HRMD) on a global scale. The qualified officers are recognised as WCO ACE (Accredited Customs Experts) and customs modernisation advisers, providing international intellectual support for the modernisation and reform for members (WCO, 2018).

1.2. Best practices of the WCO members in HR professional development

The competency-based human resources management framework has been widely implemented among the WCO members. The customs authorities from the European Union, New Zealand, Korea, and Thailand have had fruitful outcomes in the exploration of customs expert systems. The EU Customs regards competency-based human resource management as an important way to promote customs modernisation. The EU Customs provides a dual career path (general management track and expert track) for its customs officers and stipulates four types of competencies (management competencies, operational competencies, professional competencies and customs core values). Four levels of proficiency are also proposed (Figure 1): Awareness, Trained, Experienced and Expert. By adopting this dual career path, EU Customs provides its officers with the opportunity to become experts or senior executives by drawing on the WCO competency-based human resource management (HRM) framework and realises the comprehensive development of customs’ human resources (European Commission, 2019).

The New Zealand Customs Service also fully embodies the idea of a dual career path in the ‘Customs Rank Career Pathway’ planned for its officers. After being promoted to senior customs officers, the employees have an option to become ‘supervising customs officers’ or customs technical specialists. Both professional paths have great career development potential (New Zealand Customs Service, 2019). The Korea Customs Service adopts a career path model based on the principle of rotation that categorises experts and requires a three-year rotation period to familiarise the experts with all major tasks in different departments before entering the customs specialist streams (WCO, 2016, p. 134). Thai Customs also has experts in, for example, Rules of Origin, Classification, Valuation, Legal affairs, Human Resources Management and Human Resources Development, ranking slightly higher than section director in the administrative level (Thai Customs Academy, 2017).

Figure 1: Four levels of proficiency of EU customs officers



Source: European Commission (2019, p. 9).

1.3. The experience gained by China Customs in professional development of human resources

China Customs, as one of the ministerial-level government departments, implements a three-layer vertical management system (General Administration of China Customs, Customs Districts and Customs Houses). China Customs has carried out various reforms of, and investigations into, the professional development of human resources in recent years, with relevant research performed by customs officers and scholars. At the initial stage of implementation of the customs expert system, some proposed that the rank promotion system for customs officers needed to further increase the level of non-leadership positions in grassroots units, and introduce a broader competition mechanism (She, 2013); others took the current situation of human resource career management in different customs districts as examples, and concluded that customs should further establish the 'people-centric' way of human resources management, and improve the job classification management system to achieve the professional development of the team (Deng, 2011). After comprehensive implementation of the customs expert system, some discovered that optimising the customs expert system needs to follow the four basic principles of overall planning, separation of political affairs, flexible job adjustment and appropriate proportions (Cai, 2020). In addition, it is also believed that countermeasures to solve the bottleneck of human resources professional development of customs mainly include: relying on technological means to reduce the work pressure, strengthening the positive incentive measures for customs personnel and improving the level of personnel training (Han, 2019).

2. Basic information about the China Customs civil servant (personnel) system

2.1. Management bodies of customs HRM at all levels

China Customs has adopted the three-layer vertical management system described above in its institutional design. The management bodies of customs personnel (except for the department leaders) also follow this vertical management system.

2.1.1. Upper level: Department of Personnel and Education, General Administration of China Customs (GACC)

The Department of Personnel and Education of the GACC is responsible for the HRM institutional design, management of customs ranks, remunerations and benefits, and training of personnel across all customs agencies. It also guides the development of customs talent teams, affiliated customs college and other training institutions.

2.1.2. Middle level: Personnel & Education Division, customs districts

The Personnel & Education Division of the customs district is responsible for implementing the resolutions and decisions made by the GACC on personnel management, formulating plans for the management of customs personnel and implementing the management system for the customs rank system.

2.1.3. Grassroots level: Personnel Section, customs houses

The Personnel Section of the customs house is responsible for implementing all laws and regulations regarding personnel management, such as carrying out publicity and education on anti-corruption; undertaking talent development, personnel management and retired personnel management and undertaking the daily management of contract staff and labour dispatch personnel of the customs house.

2.2. Positions and administrative ranks of customs civil servants

The China Customs HRM system of positions and ranks fully implements the ‘Regulations on Parallel Positions and Ranks of Civil Servants’ issued by the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. The regulation clearly points out that the rank of civil servant is a promotion channel parallel to leadership positions. It reflects the political quality, professional ability and seniority contribution, which is an important basis for determining remuneration and other benefits. The (administration) ranks do not have leadership responsibilities. Civil servants who hold leadership positions perform their leadership duties, and civil servants who do not hold those positions perform their duties and accept leadership and command according to their affiliation.

2.3. Ranking of civil servants

The rankings of China Customs officers are set up according to three categories: comprehensive management, administrative law enforcement, and professional and technical (customs) civil servants (Table 1).

Table 1: Three categories of China Customs officers and related rankings

Category	Comprehensive management	Corresponding former non-leadership positions	Administrative law enforcement	Professional and technical
Rank	Counsel First-class	Counsel (Director-general level)	-	Commissioner General First-class
	Counsel Second-class	Deputy Counsel (Deputy Director-general level)	Supervisor	Commissioner General Second-class
	Consultant First-class	-	Senior director First-class	Senior manager First-class
	Consultant Second-class	Consultant (Director level)	Senior director Second-class	Senior manager Second-class
	Consultant Third-class	-	Senior director Third-class	Senior manager Third-class
	Consultant Fourth-class	Deputy Consultant (Deputy Director level)	Senior director Fourth-class	Senior manager Fourth-class
	Principal Staff First-class	-	Director First-class	Manager First-class
	Principal Staff Second-class	Principal Staff (Section chief)	Director Second-class	Manager Second-class
	Principal Staff Third-class	-	Director Third-class	Manager Third-class
	Principal Staff Fourth-class	Deputy Principal Staff (Deputy Section chief)	Director Fourth-class	Manager Fourth-class
	Staff First-class	Staff	Administrative law enforcer First-class	Professional technician
	Staff Second-class	Clerk	Administrative law enforcer Second-class	-

Source: Relevant regulations on Chinese civil servants

3. Reasons for the establishment of the China Customs expert system

3.1. Changes in the customs environment have spawned the demand for professional development of human resources in China Customs

Since the start of the 21st century, with the continuous development of information technology and the exponential growth of trade volume, customs officers must be able to adapt to the rapidly changing trade environment, master more professional business knowledge and skills and complete the various tasks of their positions. In addition, the functions of customs are also constantly expanding and changing, from focusing on trade facilitation to pursuing a balance between trade facilitation and security. In this context, with the increasing systematisation of professional knowledge in the various fields of customs, it is difficult for customs officers to become ‘generalists’ who have a comprehensive knowledge of all the various business areas. From the perspective of human resource managers, the cost of training such ‘generalists’ is also not very economical. Therefore, China Customs adopted the expert system as an important measure to solve this problem.

3.2. The preferential policies for the promotion of customs rank have been adjusted, and there are restrictions on the promotion of grassroots customs officers

In 2019, the GACC formulated the ‘Implementation Plan for the Classification Management of Customs Civil Servants and the Parallel System of Positions and Ranks’. The implementation plan set a proportional limit on the number of ranks and positions, which made the previous ‘promotion when the time comes’ a thing of the past. The previous preferential policy stipulated that someone could be promoted to the rank of deputy principal after four working years and could be promoted to the rank of principal after seven. This adjustment of policies had lowered the promotion ‘ceiling’ of grassroots customs officers; for example, one customs district has implemented a classification scheme for customs civil servants, paralleling their positions and ranks under the guidance of the GACC. It requires an unlimited number of positions below the rank of first-class principal in the area of comprehensive management, and that the number of positions from first to fourth class sponsors must not exceed 60 percent of the total number of administrative law enforcement positions, of which the number of first- and second-class directors shall not exceed 50 percent of the total number of directors. According to the previous non-leadership promotion system for grassroots customs officers, a newly recruited customs officer who had worked for four years and who was qualified could be promoted to the rank of deputy principal, and then be promoted again after three years to become a principal staff. However, the current existing promotion channels cannot meet the demands for all officers.

3.3. The existing customs leadership positions are approaching saturation and there is an urgent need to expand personnel promotion channels

In March 2018, the ‘Plan for Deepening the Reform of Party and State Institutions’ decided to assign the management responsibilities and the teams of entry-exit inspection and quarantine to China Customs. Therefore, the number of personnel was further expanded. According to data released by the WCO in 2021, there were more than 70,000 customs officers in China Customs, and more than 100,000 people working in customs overall. The number of customs leadership positions has not increased proportionally following the reform. The existing customs leadership positions have become increasingly saturated and career development of grassroots customs officers is relatively limited. The customs expert system should work to improve the current situation.

4. China Customs Expert System

4.1. Definition of China Customs Expert System

‘Customs experts’ refers to professionals who have technical expertise in a certain field of customs. Their main responsibilities include participation in regulation and policy design, regional economic development planning, customs-related research, evaluation of difficult and complex issues, and providing viewpoints for decision-making and various technique training.

4.2. Development of China Customs Expert System

4.2.1. Initial establishment

In October 2011, the GACC proposed to ‘concentrate resources that can be mobilised to the maximum extent to establish a customs expert system as soon as possible. In May 2012, the GACC issued the ‘Guiding Opinions on Establishing the Customs Expert System (for Trial Implementation)’, which clarified the five aspects of the Customs Expert System’s guiding ideology, objectives, main contents, incentives and guarantees, and implementation. According to this document, China Customs focussed on tariffs, statistics and technology as pilot areas. They then formulated the ‘Detailed Operational Rules for the Comprehensive Evaluation of Customs Expert Appointment (for Trial Implementation)’ and the ‘Administrative Measures for the Written Examination of Customs Expert Appointment (for Trial Implementation)’, taking personal qualifications, meritorious awards, theoretical research results, and work performance as the four bases for expert evaluation, and conducting written tests and interviews in related professional areas. Once launched, the system and selection method have received continuous attention and positive response from Customs across the country.

4.2.2. Pilot expansion

In 2013, the GACC issued the ‘Administrative Measures for the Use of Customs Experts (for Trial Implementation)’, which further clarified the relevant requirements on expert professional (knowledge & skills) development, assessment, dynamic adjustment, incentives and guarantees. In 2014, in addition to the original three areas (tariffs, statistics and technology), the customs expert system was extended to four more areas: laws and regulations, bonded issues, post-clearance audit and finance.

4.2.3. Future trends

As of 2020, more than 400 customs experts were accredited by China Customs. To further strengthen the development of high-quality professional customs personnel, the Department of Personnel and Education has issued relevant plans to improve the customs expert system, in which the expert classification is further optimised to four levels: chief, first-class, second-class and third-class. The expert team will cover civil servants and public institution personnel in Customs and the customs expert system will be deployed in 15 fields, including risk management, comprehensive customs business, health and quarantine, flora and fauna quarantine, food safety, foreign affairs and technology etc.

4.3. Overall structure of the China Customs Expert System

There are four levels of customs experts, namely chief, first-class, second-class and third-class experts. Among them, the Talent Work Leading Group of the Party Committee of the GACC is responsible for the selection of chief and first-level experts. The office of this leading group has been set up in the Department of Personnel and Education. Meanwhile, the GACC has set up working groups in various professional fields that are responsible for formulating the selection, accreditation, training

and assessment systems for experts in that field of interest. The working groups are also responsible for the selection of second-level experts in this field and third-level experts from the headquarter of China Customs, and perform selection, training and assessment for all four levels of customs experts. Each customs district is responsible for formulating the system for the selection, management and assessment of customs experts of its own unit. Each is also responsible for the selection, training, management and assessment of the third-level experts of its own unit.

4.4. Management of the China Customs Expert System

4.4.1. Accreditation of customs experts

The method for accreditation of customs experts contains two separate parts: a comprehensive evaluation and a written examination. The comprehensive evaluation includes evaluation of customs business ability and a professional defence, both of which are assessed using a quantitative scoring method based on a percentage system. Generally, second-class and above experts are selected by comprehensive evaluation or other methods, and third-class experts are selected by written examination. The evaluation of customs business ability mainly concerns the personal qualifications of the participants, meritorious service and awards, theoretical research achievements, work performance and recommendations from their departments. Applicants for the second-class and above expert qualifications should complete the form 'Customs Expert Business Capability Evaluation Items and Standards', following which the materials are reviewed by the personnel department and the relevant customs business department. Then, the customs expert working group designates a third party to verify the scores and provide a grading to get a clear opinion on whether to agree with the shortlisted professional defence. The customs expert working group oversees the professional defence at all levels. The applicant must participate in the interview and prepare for the Q & A session. The working group gives grades according to the performance and calculates a professional defence score. The results of the final comprehensive review are based on both the evaluation of customs competency and the interview score. The evaluation of third-class experts is directly determined by the score on the written examination. The content of the professional written examination is uniformly stipulated by the relevant customs business departments of the GACC, organised by the Department of Personnel and Education, and adopts a closed-book mode.

4.4.2. Tenure and promotion of customs experts

The tenure of a customs expert (at all four levels) is generally four years. After the term expires, they can apply for re-accreditation, and they must be re-accredited in accordance with the prescribed conditions and procedures. Experts at the upper levels are generally generated from experts at the lower levels, and only after serving two consecutive terms at the same level can they be accredited as experts at the higher level. Experts who have outstanding performance in major tasks during their tenure can be recommended by the leading department or unit in the professional field and can be promoted to the next level as determined by the corresponding expert working group.

4.4.3. Assessment of customs experts

The assessment of customs experts involves a combination of special assessment, mid-term assessment and tenure assessment. The special assessment mainly assesses the role of experts in their tasks related to a professional field; the mid-term assessment mainly focuses on the performance of customs experts in the current year, which is carried out in combination with the annual assessment; the tenure assessment mainly assesses the performance of experts' duties during their whole tenure, which is generally conducted once every four years.

Specifically, the assessment of customs experts is generally carried out according to the following procedures:

1. Self-evaluation: The expert writes a report on their performance during their tenure, fills out the 'Customs Expert Assessment Registration Form, and submits related debriefing materials that support their report.
2. Professional evaluation: The working group assesses and reviews the expert's performance report and other supporting materials.
3. Institutional evaluation: To determine whether the assessed experts are 'excellent', 'competent' or 'not competent'. The evaluation of the chief experts differs from the other three levels, and is based on their level of innovation and contribution to China Customs. The proportion of 'excellent' first-class experts in the assessment cannot exceed 35 percent of the total number of first-class experts in the professional field, the proportion of 'excellent' second-class experts in the assessment cannot exceed 30 percent of the total number of second-class experts in the professional field, and the proportion of 'excellent' third-class experts in the assessment cannot exceed 25 percent of the total number of third-class experts in the unit.

5. Achievements of and problems with the China Customs Expert System

5.1. Achievements of the China Customs Expert System

Through continuous exploration and innovation of the expert system, China Customs has trained more than 400 experts at all levels. This has played a positive role in promoting customs professionalism. Experts in relevant fields have played an important role in diagnosing customs clearance problems, formulating regulatory policies and participating in international negotiations. They have actively disseminated professional knowledge and skills in their respective customs positions, cultivated more knowledge-based customs officers and formed a good atmosphere of professional competency development. Regarding human resources development, the system has actively contributed to the improvement of customs professional team building.

5.1.1. Providing intellectual support for high-level decision-making

Compared with regular, non-expert customs officers, customs experts at all levels have a deeper understanding of relevant business processes and are better able to find problems and possible solutions under complex conditions. When making decisions, customs experts can provide professional advice to customs executives based on their rich experience, reducing resistance to policy implementation. Multiple experts can be united to form professional working groups that can provide scientific advice, through joint analysis and assessment of problems.

5.1.2. Promoting the construction of customs high-end think tanks

Customs experts at all levels have an in-depth understanding of current key issues and future development trends. Therefore, a team of experts is very important for building high-end think tanks for Customs. At present, customs experts can disseminate first-hand customs reform information in the Shanghai Customs College (a WCO Regional Training Centre) and other institutions through, for example, joining high-level research projects and invited lectures; they can provide in-depth explanations of the best practice of China Customs for domestic and foreign trainees, and they can cooperate with relevant scholars to perform research on, for example, customs reform and development.

5.1.3. Stimulating the sustainability of customs teamwork

The customs expert system encourages customs personnel to conduct in-depth research in their respective areas of expertise, improving the professional and technical expertise of customs officers, guiding them to re-evaluate their career paths, and apply the professional knowledge and skills they have acquired in their daily work. Customs experts can guide the younger officers in the team with their experience and knowledge, which may create a sustainable mechanism for professional personnel training.

5.2. Existing problems with the China Customs Expert System

5.2.1. The growing number of ‘expert-type’ leaders may reduce policy incentives

The customs expert system, on the one hand, is deployed mainly to improve the professional level of personnel; on the other hand, it also provides a new career development path for customs officers in related positions. At present, a considerable number of customs officials are in leadership positions as well as being experts in a certain business field. Such ‘expert-type leaders’ account for a significant proportion of the current total number of experts. Experts in leadership positions contribute to professional management activities within Customs and promote scientific policy formulation. However, it is more difficult for young customs officers to obtain one of the limited positions of customs experts, which may hinder the sustainable cultivation of customs experts and the motivation of personnel.

5.2.2. The need to strengthen teamwork between experts in different fields remains

At present, the reform of China Customs is faced with complex problems in multiple fields, which often involves synergistic analysis from multiple perspectives. At present, many customs experts master relevant professional knowledge mainly in one particular field, and are often unable to consider all the aspects involved in complex issues. There is a lack of practice for experts to collaborate. Therefore, the formation of multiple expert teams should be a priority for reform of the pilot customs expert system in the future.

5.2.3. The distinction between customs experts and scientific research civil servants remains to be clarified

The expert system is an internal institutional arrangement of China Customs. At present, the relevant state departments have made innovative supplements to the civil service system and have proposed to establish a category of ‘scientific research’ civil servants. This has raised the following questions: what is the specific connection or difference between customs experts and scientific research civil servants, and can these two achieve mutual recognition? These issues need to be discussed and resolved as a matter of priority.

5.2.4. Research on customs expert systems from other WCO members needs to be strengthened

The development of the customs expert system has achieved considerable results. Faced with the continuous challenges of the professional management of human resources, however, China Customs still needs to further improve ideas of institutional design and specific standards of the expert system with reference to practices from other customs authorities.

6. Suggestions on further development of the China Customs Expert System

6.1. Further expansion of the customs expert classification

Based on the existing system of chief, first-, second-, and third-class experts, appropriate consideration may be given to further expanding the classification of experts in the future. With communication and negotiation with relevant departments, China Customs may consider adding experts at the international level (such as WTO Accredited and WCO Accredited Experts), to achieve in-depth integration with relevant international institutional arrangements. This would provide more working conditions for customs experts to help achieve the various development goals of Customs.

6.2. Draw on the experience of customs expert systems from other WCO members through international events

In future, China Customs may consider sending more personnel to participate in related WCO regional human resource management seminars and other activities. When customs experts from China perform WCO missions or other tasks, they could hold talks with the relevant representatives of Customs and obtain first-hand information on different customs expert systems. Following analysis and comparison of the relevant arrangements and best practices, the results can be used to support higher-level decision-making.

6.3. Perform in-depth research of the institutional connection between professional and technical civil servants and customs experts

The current pilot situation of professional and technical civil servants in the field of customs tariff management has highlighted the need to thoroughly review relevant experience and identified problems, to organise human resources experts to conduct in-depth research and discussions, and to communicate with other relevant departments. This would enable the exploration and early establishment of a set of job rotation principles or a connection mechanism between the professional and technical civil servant system and the customs expert system. Policymakers need to make breakthroughs on key issues such as change in rank and qualification periods.

6.4. Improve relevant institutional arrangements for ‘expert-type leaders’

The relevant customs departments need to investigate and analyse the accreditation, assessment, tenure and other issues related to ‘expert-type leaders’ to issue correspondingly detailed regulations in the future. Possible solutions may include increasing the proportion of young customs officers in the process of expert accreditation in the future and developing expert training plans for young officers.

6.5. Explore the working model of expert teams to achieve a synergistic effect

China Customs could consider establishing a research team composed of multiple customs experts from different areas to jointly analyse and solve complex problems. It is also feasible to establish pools of experts and encourage experts to further expand their fields of expertise.

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