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How conscientiousness and ethical climate affect job performance: Mediating role of integrity

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Orientation: Understanding the factors that drive job performance is essential for organisations aiming to enhance workplace efficiency and ethical behaviour. This study examines how conscientiousness and ethical climates shape employees' integrity and performance, offering insights for enhancing organisational ethics and productivity.

Research purpose: To examine the direct effects of conscientiousness and ethical climates on job performance and the serial mediation roles of employees' sense of integrity and acts of integrity.

Motivation for the study: While previous studies confirm the independent effects of conscientiousness and ethical climates on job performance, the mechanisms underlying these relationships remain unclear. This study seeks to bridge this gap by integrating integrity-related variables.

Research approach/design and method: Employing a correlational research design, the study collected 738 matched pairs of questionnaires from the university personnel and their supervisors. Data analysis was performed with partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM).

Main findings: Conscientiousness significantly predicted job performance, while ethical climates did not. Both factors influenced employees' sense of integrity, which led to acts of integrity, ultimately enhancing job performance. Serial mediation analysis confirmed these relationships.

Practical/managerial implications: Organisations should prioritise conscientiousness in hiring and promotions and cultivate strong ethical climates. Ethical training, leadership modelling, and integrity-based performance evaluations can reinforce ethical behaviours and improve job performance.

Contribution/value-add: By distinguishing between sense of integrity and acts of integrity, this study enhances understanding of how personality traits and organisational ethics interact to influence workplace outcomes, providing a comprehensive framework for fostering ethical and high-performing workplaces.

Keywords: conscientiousness; ethical climate; job performance; sense of integrity; acts of integrity.

Introduction

In today's complex work environments, organisational success depends on both individual and collective performance. Recent research highlights the importance of individual attributes and organisational environments in shaping job effectiveness (Prieto-Díez et al., 2022). Among individual attributes, conscientiousness is the strongest noncognitive predictor of job performance (Wilmot & Ones, 2019). Conscientious employees, characterised by efficiency, organisation, and dependability, demonstrate higher levels of dedication, task proficiency, and overall performance (Turiano, 2020). At the organisational level, ethical climate – a shared understanding of formal and informal ethical policies and practices – significantly impacts employee performance (Friend et al., 2020). A strong ethical climate fosters moral attitudes and intentions, shaping behaviours and ultimately enhancing job performance (Teresi et al., 2019).

While the independent effects of conscientiousness and ethical climate on performance are well-established, their interaction and underlying mechanisms remain less understood. This study addresses this gap by exploring the serial mediating roles of employees' sense of integrity and acts of integrity in the relationship between conscientiousness, ethical climate, and job performance.

Employees' sense of integrity refers to their internal moral compass, including personal beliefs, values, and intentions that drive ethical behaviours such as honesty and rule adherence (Smithikrai et al., 2024). This internal attribute is covert, inferred through self-report or observation. In contrast, acts of integrity are its observable manifestations, including fairness, policy compliance, responsibility, and prioritising collective interests over personal gain (Smithikrai et al., 2024).

This study proposes a model showing how conscientiousness and ethical climate enhance job performance through sense of integrity and acts of integrity. We hypothesised that conscientious individuals are likely to develop a strong sense of integrity, leading to ethical actions and improved performance. Similarly, a strong ethical climate fosters a sense of integrity, promoting acts of integrity that enhance job outcomes.

This research bridges psychology, organisational ethics, and performance management, offering an interdisciplinary perspective on workplace behaviour. By distinguishing between sense of integrity and acts of integrity, it resolves inconsistencies in prior studies and highlights how individual traits and organisational factors interact to shape ethical behaviour and performance. The findings of this study provide theoretical insights and practical strategies for promoting ethical conduct and performance in diverse organisational contexts.

Research framework and objectives

This study is grounded in an integrative theoretical approach that draws upon trait theory and ethical climate theory, supplemented by the concepts of moral self-regulation and integrity as a psychological and behavioural mediating mechanism. Trait theory, particularly the Five-Factor Model, explains how stable dispositions such as conscientiousness influence job performance (Wilmot & Ones, 2019). Ethical climate theory highlights the role of shared organisational norms in shaping ethical behaviour (Teresi et al., 2019; Victor & Cullen, 1988). Within this framework, moral self-regulation (Aquino & Reed, 2002) guides ethical conduct through an internalised sense of integrity, which manifests in observable acts of integrity. Together, these theories help to explain how individual traits and organisational context interact to influence performance through ethical behaviour. Thus, the objective of this study was to investigate the direct effects of conscientiousness and ethical climates on employees' job performance. Additionally, it explored the serial mediating roles of employees' sense of integrity and acts of integrity in the relationship between conscientiousness and job performance and between ethical climates and job performance.

Literature review

The influence of conscientiousness on employees' job performance

Conscientiousness is a personality trait characterised by a strong sense of responsibility, organisation, and reliability. People who exhibit a high degree of conscientiousness manage their time and environment effectively, approach their goals with discipline, aim for precision and excellence in their work, and thoughtfully consider their options when making decisions (Lee & Ashton, 2018). Conscientious individuals are also dependable, often fulfilling obligations and commitments with care and precision.

The positive relationship between conscientiousness and job performance has been well-established in work and organisational psychology literature. Studies have consistently demonstrated that conscientiousness is one of the most robust and broadly applicable predictors of job performance across diverse occupations and performance criteria (Wilmot & Ones, 2019). Moreover, conscientious individuals typically exhibit proactive work behaviour (Tu et al., 2020), and report more positive emotions, growth, resilience, and prosperity in the workplace (Dudley et al., 2006).

Several mechanisms have been proposed to explain this relationship. Firstly, conscientious employees are more likely to set challenging goals for themselves and persist in the face of obstacles, leading to higher task performance (Bates et al., 2023). Secondly, they tend to engage in more citizenship behaviours, contributing to the overall functioning of their work unit beyond their formal job requirements (Pletzer et al., 2021). Thirdly, conscientious individuals are more likely to demonstrate career adaptability, further enhancing their performance (Gonçalves et al., 2020). Based on the above literature, this study hypothesised the following relationship:

H1: Conscientiousness positively predicts employees' job performance.

The influence of ethical climates on employees' job performance

An ethical climate is a work environment shaped by norms that reflect an organisation's moral procedures, policies and practices (Martin & Cullen, 2006). It emerges from organisational communication about expected ethical behaviour, guiding employees in decision-making and fostering integrity. Ethical climates discourage misconduct and reduce counterproductive behaviours that harm organisations (Tiamboonprasert & Charoensukmongkol, 2020).

Social exchange theory (SET) helps explain how ethical climates influence job performance. According to SET, individuals act in ways they believe will result in rewards while avoiding actions linked to punishment (Blau, 1964). Employees are more likely to behave ethically when they perceive benefits such as recognition, career advancement, or

job satisfaction. Conversely, organisations that fail to emphasise integrity may inadvertently encourage unethical conduct.

Research highlights the broad benefits of ethical climates, including improvements in job satisfaction, well-being, and organisational commitment (Martin & Cullen, 2006). Ethical climates positively affect outcomes like financial performance, organisational citizenship behaviour (Shin et al., 2014), and innovation (Moon & Choi, 2014). A meta-analysis across 293 samples from 46 countries confirmed positive associations between ethical climates and outcomes such as commitment, job performance, and employee well-being (Parboteeah et al., 2023). Furthermore, ethical climates help reduce workplace misconduct (Kuenzi et al., 2019).

Studies also link ethical climates to enhanced job performance through specific mechanisms. For example, Briggs et al. (2012) found that ethical climates improve sales performance by reducing lone wolf tendencies, while Jaramillo et al. (2013) noticed that they promote mindfulness, thereby enhancing performance. Based on the above literature, this study hypothesised the following relationship:

H2: Ethical climates positively predict employees' job performance.

Influences of conscientiousness and ethical climates on employees' sense of integrity

The sense of integrity reflects an individual's beliefs, feelings, and intentions that uphold actions such as honesty, rule adherence, and resistance to misconduct or corruption. It is a deeply rooted, covert behaviour, not immediately visible to others, inferred through self-report or observation. In contrast, acts of integrity are outwardly visible and align with core values such as fairness, accountability, and honesty. A person's sense of integrity motivates behaviours such as honesty, responsibility, and respect for organisational rules, safeguarding collective interests.

We proposed that the sense of integrity model, based on the 'trilogy of mind' (Hilgard, 1980), includes three components: cognition (knowledge and beliefs), affection (emotional responses such as satisfaction or dissatisfaction), and conation (intentions to act). This framework evaluates psychological traits, applicable in areas such as consumer behaviour (Quoquab & Mohammad, 2020) and student learning (Kwahk et al., 2018). The cognitive component aids in discerning right from wrong, the affective component fosters ethical commitment, and the conative component translates these into action. Ingerson (2014) similarly described integrity as an attitude, emphasising consistent alignment of ethical thoughts, feelings, and intentions, which strongly predicts behaviour. The model suggests that integrity develops through socialisation and experiences, becoming a stable, but adaptable aspect of a person's psyche. An employee's sense of integrity acts as their moral compass, shaped by personal traits and environmental influences. Conscientiousness and ethical climates are proposed as key contributors to this development.

Conscientious individuals, known for their strong sense of duty, organisation, and reliability, often develop a robust sense of personal integrity (Moon, 2001). Their adherence to principles extends to moral and ethical domains, fostering internal commitment to ethical behaviour. Although this connection has been acknowledged (Marcus et al., 2006), its workplace implications remain underexplored. Similarly, a strong ethical climate promotes integrity by providing clear ethical guidelines, reinforcing ethical behaviour, and fostering shared moral understanding (Treviño et al., 1998). Employees in ethically robust organisations internalise these values, thereby strengthening their sense of integrity (Victor & Cullen, 1988). Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H3: Conscientiousness positively predicts employees' sense of integrity.

H4: Ethical climates positively predict employees' sense of integrity.

The relationship between employees' sense of integrity and acts of integrity

The relationship between a person's sense of integrity and his or her actions can be explained using moral identity theory (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 1984). Moral identity refers to how central moral values such as justice and accountability are to an individual's self-concept. When these values are deeply ingrained, they motivate moral actions through a sense of responsibility and self-consistency, where individuals align their behaviour with their self-image as moral beings (Blasi, 1984).

A strong sense of integrity likely correlates with moral identity, as both involve the internalisation of ethical principles and values. This internal foundation influences behaviour, as established in moral psychology (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Those with a strong moral identity tend to engage in ethical actions, as doing so reinforces their self-concept and positive self-regard (Rest et al., 2000).

In the workplace, moral identity predicts proactive efforts to prevent unethical behaviour (Aquino & Freeman, 2009) and resistance to pressures to act unethically (Gino & Pierce, 2010). Thus, we proposed that employees with a strong sense of integrity will consistently demonstrate acts of integrity:

H5: Employees' sense of integrity positively predicts their acts of integrity.

The relationship between employees' acts of integrity and job performance

The connection between employees' acts of integrity and job performance can be explained through the lens of SET. The SET suggests that workplace interactions are founded on mutual exchanges between employees and their organisations (Blau, 1964). Employees who consistently show integrity are often perceived as dependable and trustworthy by their peers and superiors (Simons et al., 2022). This enhanced trust can result in various benefits, such as appreciation, respect, incentives, professional connections, greater work autonomy, access to

crucial information and assets, and expanded responsibilities (Konadu et al., 2024). These advantages can improve employees' access to resources and opportunities, potentially boosting their job performance. Studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between employee integrity and job performance (Giordano et al., 2020). Drawing from these insights, this research proposed the following hypothesis:

H6: Employees' acts of integrity positively predict job performance.

The serial mediating roles of employees' sense of integrity and acts of integrity

Research has shown links between conscientiousness and job performance, as well as between ethical climates and job performance. This study proposes a more complex relationship, suggesting that these connections are mediated by employees' sense of integrity and acts of integrity. Specifically, this study posits a serial mediation model where conscientiousness and ethical climates contribute to a strong sense of integrity, which then leads to integrity-based actions that enhance job performance.

Social cognitive theory (SCT) provides a framework for understanding this process (Bandura, 1989). Conscientious employees internalise workplace values such as integrity through observational learning and cognitive processing. In organisations with strong ethical climates, these values align with employees' personal standards, fostering a robust sense of integrity. The SCT suggests that behaviour is shaped by self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to act) and outcome expectations (belief that actions lead to positive results). Employees with a strong sense of integrity are more likely to perform ethical actions, creating a feedback loop that strengthens their belief in ethical behaviour and enhances job performance.

Positive outcomes, such as trust from colleagues and personal satisfaction, further reinforce these behaviours. Thus, SCT explains how conscientious employees, supported by ethical climates, achieve high performance by developing and enacting integrity. Building upon this theoretical basis, this study proposed the following hypotheses:

H7: Employees' sense of integrity and acts of integrity serially mediate the effect of conscientiousness on job performance.

H8: Employees' sense of integrity and acts of integrity serially mediate the effect of ethical climate on job performance.

Research design and sampling

This study employs a correlational research design to investigate relationships among specified variables within the conceptual framework. Participants were employees at a large public university in Chiang Mai, Thailand. To determine an appropriate sample size for path analysis and structural equation modelling, researchers often use the *N*:*q* ratio (Jackson, 2003), which represents the number of observations to estimated parameters. Kline (2015) recommends a 20:1 ratio, suggesting 20 observations per estimated parameter. With 11 parameters in this study, the minimum sample size would be 220 participants. However, this research used stratified random sampling to select 5000 individuals, stratified by employment type.

The population was divided into strata based on faculty or work unit affiliations, with random sampling within each stratum to ensure a representative sample. With the university administration's endorsement, questionnaires were distributed to the selected university personnel through university mail. These were accompanied by a letter from the vice president soliciting cooperation in the research project. Participants returned completed questionnaires in pre-addressed, sealed envelopes. The response rate was 40.84%, yielding 2042 fully completed and analysable questionnaires.

The authors then identified and contacted the direct supervisors of the responding personnel, requesting that they complete measures assessing their subordinates' acts of integrity and job performance. Of the contacted supervisors, 738 returned fully completed and analysable questionnaires. Consequently, 738 matched pairs of questionnaires from university personnel and their supervisors were used for data analysis. To facilitate matching between personnel and their supervisors, the researchers assigned distinct codes to respondents in both groups. Participants were not informed about the significance of these codes to maintain the integrity of the research process and avoid potential bias.

Measures

Conscientiousness scale

The levels of employees' conscientiousness were assessed using a subscale from the HEXACO-60 developed by Ashton and Lee (2009). To ensure linguistic equivalence, the scale was translated from English into Thai and then back-translated. This 10-item questionnaire utilised a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale demonstrated an internal consistency reliability of 0.74.

Ethical climates scale

This scale was constructed based on the domain sampling model (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), which posits that a measure represents a random sample from a hypothetical domain encompassing all possible items related to a given concept. The development process begins with defining the theoretical domain of the concept and identifying its core attributes. Items that uniquely and comprehensively represent the concept are then operationalised into a measurement tool. For ethical climates, a literature review was conducted to determine relevant indicators. The final scale included seven items designed to assess employees' perceptions of their organisation's ethical climate. Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a coefficient alpha of 0.88.

Sense of integrity scale

This instrument was previously developed by Smithikrai et al. (2024) and has demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties. The development of this scale was based on the 'trilogy of mind' concept (Hilgard, 1980), comprising three fundamental components: (1) cognition, (2) affection, and (3) conation. The scale consists of 45 items, with each component of the sense of integrity incorporating 15 items. Participants used a 5-point rating scale to provide their responses, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for the cognitive and conative dimensions, and from 1 (not true at all) to 5 (very true) for the affective dimension. The coefficient alpha for the scale was 0.95.

Acts of integrity scale

This scale was previously developed by Smithikrai et al. (2024) based on two approaches: a deductive approach and an inductive approach. The deductive approach involved conducting an extensive literature review to establish the theoretical definition of the construct being studied. The definition was then utilised as a reference for creating items. On the other hand, the inductive approach was employed by generating questions based on descriptions of behaviour provided by a sample of qualified respondents (Hinkin, 1995). The scale consists of 15 items measuring behaviours reflecting integrity at work. Supervisors provided subjective ratings, which ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The coefficient alpha of the scale was 0.92.

Job performance scale

This 5-item scale measuring employees' job performance was completed by the supervisors of the sample group. The ratings ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (always) for each item. The coefficient alpha of the scale was 0.88.

All research instruments described above were assessed for construct validity prior to data collection.

The results of the assessment are described in the measurement model validation section.

Data analysis

The analytical process consisted of two distinct steps. Initially, we examined the measurement model to verify its reliability and validity, a crucial step to confirm that the constructs accurately reflected the intended variables. Subsequently, we analysed the structural model and its mediating effects, aiming to ascertain the strength and statistical significance of the proposed relationships between variables.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from Chiang Mai University Research Ethics Committee (Project No. R000030736).

Results

Measurement model validation

The authors assessed the reliabilities and validities of the measurement model using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.1.0.6 (Ringle et al., 2024). Convergent validity was evaluated through outer loadings (λ) of indicators and average variance extracted (AVE). Typically, reflective measure loadings should exceed 0.70, but indicators loading between 0.40 and 0.70 are only removed if doing so increases composite reliability above the threshold (Hair et al., 2017). Consequently, two items from the conscientiousness scale were eliminated because of low loadings. While the conscientiousness factor's AVE fell below the recommended 0.50 threshold, Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggest that convergent validity remains acceptable if composite reliability (CR) surpasses 0.60. The conscientiousness factor showed a CR of 0.82 and an alpha coefficient (α) of 0.74, indicating adequate internal consistency and convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was assessed using two methods. Firstly, cross-loadings examination revealed no indicators loading higher on opposing constructs. Secondly, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations showed all values below the 0.85 threshold, confirming sufficient discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2016). These results validate the reliability and validity of all construct measures, paving the way for testing the proposed relationships among the constructs.

Hypothesis testing

As can be seen from Table 1, conscientiousness significantly correlated with job performance ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$), sense of integrity ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$), and acts of integrity ($r = 0.12$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, ethical climate showed positive correlations with job performance ($r = 0.13$, $p < 0.01$), sense of integrity ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$), and acts of integrity ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, both sense of integrity ($r = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$) and acts of integrity ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$) were significantly related to job performance. Table 2a and Table 2b presents the standardised regression coefficients for the studied variables.

TABLE 1: Means, standard deviations, and correlations between study variables ($N = 738$).

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Job performance	4.23	0.56	1.00	-	-	-	-
2. Conscientiousness	3.75	0.51	0.19*	1.00	-	-	-
3. Ethical climate	4.19	0.56	0.13*	0.20*	1.00	-	-
4. Sense of integrity	4.45	0.35	0.17*	0.36*	0.41*	1.00	-
5. Acts of integrity	4.52	0.41	0.65*	0.12*	0.19*	0.22*	1.00

M, mean; SD, standard deviation.
*, $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 2a: Results of serial mediation analysis (N = 738).

Variable	SI		AI		JP	
	β	95% CI	β	95% CI	β	95% CI
C	0.32*	0.27, 0.40	-	-	-	-
EC	0.35*	0.29, 0.42	-	-	-	-
SI	-	-	0.24*	0.17, 0.31	-	-
AI	-	-	-	-	0.66*	0.62, 0.71

Note: SI - R^2 = 0.30*; AI, R^2 = 0.06*; JP - R^2 = 0.47*.

C, Conscientiousness; EC, Ethical climates; SI, sense of integrity; AI, acts of integrity; JP, job performance; CI, confidence interval.

*, p < 0.01.

TABLE 2b: Results of serial mediation analysis (N = 738).

Effects	β	95% CI
Direct effect of C on JP	0.13*	0.07, 0.19
Indirect: C → SI → AI → JP	0.05*	0.03, 0.07
Total	0.18*	0.12, 0.24
Direct effect of EC on JP	-0.04	-0.09, 0.02
Indirect: EC → SI → AI → JP	0.06*	0.04, 0.08
Total	0.02	-0.04, 0.08

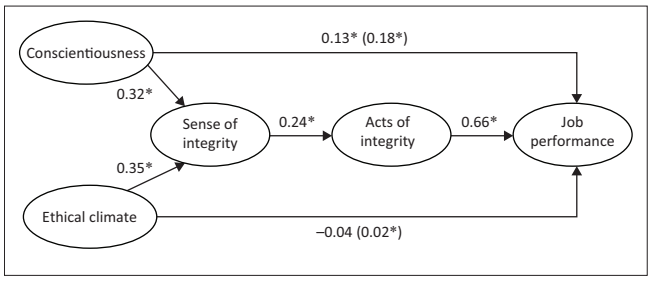
Note: Bootstrap sample size = 5000; Standardised regression coefficients (β) are reported.

C, conscientiousness; EC, ethical climate; SI, sense of integrity; AI, acts of integrity; JP, job performance; CI, confidence interval.

*, p < 0.01.

Conscientiousness significantly predicted both employees' job performance (β = 0.13, p < 0.01) and sense of integrity (β = 0.32, p < 0.01), supporting Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 3. Ethical climates did not significantly predict job performance (β = −0.04, p = 0.17), leading to the rejection of Hypothesis 2. However, ethical climates significantly predicted employees' sense of integrity (β = 0.35, p < 0.01), supporting Hypothesis 4. The results also support Hypothesis 5 and Hypothesis 6: employees' sense of integrity had a positive effect on acts of integrity (β = 0.24, p < 0.01), and employees' acts of integrity significantly predicted job performance (β = 0.66, p < 0.01).

To test the serial mediating effects, the authors calculated total and specific indirect effects of conscientiousness on job performance through two serial mediators. The total effect of conscientiousness on job performance was significant (β = 0.18, p < 0.01). The direct effect of conscientiousness on job performance remained significant even after controlling for the impacts of sense of integrity and acts of integrity (β = 0.13, p < 0.01). The specific indirect effects of conscientiousness on job performance via sense of integrity and acts of integrity (β = 0.05) were statistically different from zero with 95% confidence. For ethical climate, the total effect on job performance was not significant (β = 0.02, p = 0.56). However, the specific indirect effects of ethical climates on job performance via sense of integrity and acts of integrity (β = 0.06) were statistically significant. These findings support Hypothesis 7 and Hypothesis 8. Figure 1 illustrates the results of the analysis.



Note: Values in parentheses represent the total effects.

*, p < 0.01.

FIGURE 1: Results of analysis.

Discussion

This study confirmed significant relationships between conscientiousness and job performance, as well as between conscientiousness and employees' sense of integrity. Although ethical climates did not directly predict job performance, they significantly influenced employees' sense of integrity. The results also supported the hypothesised relationships between sense of integrity and acts of integrity, and between acts of integrity and job performance. Importantly, the study demonstrated the serial mediation roles of sense of integrity and acts of integrity in the relationships between conscientiousness and job performance, as well as ethical climates and job performance. These findings suggest that both individual traits (conscientiousness) and organisational factors (ethical climates) shape job performance through the development of a strong sense of integrity, which subsequently drives observable acts of integrity.

The positive relationship between conscientiousness and job performance is consistent with prior research, which identifies conscientiousness as a robust predictor of performance across occupations (Wilmot & Ones, 2019). Goal-setting theory and self-regulation provide insights into this relationship, as conscientious individuals set challenging goals and persist in overcoming obstacles (Bates et al., 2023). In addition, their propensity for citizenship behaviours (Pletzer et al., 2021) and career adaptability (Gonçalves et al., 2020) further supports their superior performance.

Contrary to expectations, ethical climates did not directly predict job performance. This result diverges from some prior studies (e.g., Briggs et al., 2012; Numminen et al., 2015), possibly because the relationship between ethical climates and performance is more complex and mediated by factors such as job satisfaction or organisational commitment (Martin & Cullen, 2006). Ethical climates may primarily impact employees' ethical cognitions and behaviours rather than directly influencing performance outcomes.

The study also highlighted the importance of conscientiousness and ethical climates in shaping employees' sense of integrity. These findings align with moral identity theory (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 1984), which emphasises the internalisation of moral values. Conscientious individuals, with their strong sense of duty and adherence to principles, are likely to develop a robust sense of integrity. Similarly, ethical climates reinforce employees' sense of integrity by offering clear ethical guidelines and promoting ethical behaviour.

Employees' sense of integrity positively predicts acts of integrity, which, in turn, positively predict job performance. These findings can be explained through moral identity theory and SET. A strong sense of integrity, rooted in moral identity, motivates individuals to align their actions with their ethical beliefs (Blasi, 1984). These acts of integrity foster trust and reciprocal exchanges, enhancing performance (Blau, 1964; Simons et al., 2020).

The study further validated the serial mediation hypotheses, showing significant indirect effects of conscientiousness and ethical climates on job performance via sense of integrity and acts of integrity. According to the 'trilogy of mind' concept, sense of integrity comprises cognitive (knowledge and beliefs), affective (feelings), and conative (intentions) components (Hilgard, 1980). Conscientious individuals develop a robust internal moral compass, as their understanding of ethical values is reinforced by emotional commitment and a desire to act accordingly. This internalisation leads to consistent acts of integrity, which are vital for effective performance. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989) also explains this process, as conscientious employees in ethical organisations internalise workplace values, creating a feedback loop that enhances job performance.

Ethical climates, while not directly predicting performance, significantly influence sense of integrity, which then drives acts of integrity and job performance. Ethical climates function as essential contextual factors shaping moral behaviours. The SET provides a meaningful interpretation, suggesting that employees engage in behaviours that are likely to yield positive outcomes, such as recognition or career advancement (Blau, 1964). Organisations with strong ethical climates encourage employees to internalise ethical standards, aligning personal values with organisational expectations and fostering ethical behaviours that enhance performance.

Overall, the findings deepen our understanding of how individual traits and organisational factors interact with employees' internal ethical dispositions (sense of integrity) and behaviours (acts of integrity) to influence job performance. They highlight the importance of fostering both individual ethical development and organisational ethical climates to create high-performing workplaces.

Conclusion and recommendation

This study empirically supports a serial mediation model linking conscientiousness and ethical climates to job performance through employees' sense of integrity and acts of integrity. It underscores the interplay between individual traits, organisational environments, and ethical behaviour in shaping workplace outcomes. By differentiating internal moral standards from observable ethical actions, the research provides a nuanced understanding of integrity in organisations. Future studies should expand on these findings to further investigate how personal and contextual factors influence ethical behaviour and performance. Such research could inform evidence-based practices for building ethical workplaces and improving organisational effectiveness.

The findings also have practical implications for organisations. Firstly, the strong link between conscientiousness and job performance suggests that conscientiousness should be a factor in hiring and promotion decisions. Personality assessments could help identify candidates likely to perform well and exhibit workplace integrity. Secondly, while ethical climates did not directly predict job performance, their significant influence on employees' sense of integrity highlights the need for strong ethical environments. Organisations should focus on clear ethical policies, provide ethics training, and encourage leaders to model ethical behaviour. These efforts can nurture employees' sense of integrity, leading to integrity-driven actions that enhance performance.

Thirdly, the relationship between acts of integrity and job performance underscores the importance of recognising and rewarding ethical behaviour. Evaluation criteria could include acts of honesty, accountability, and fairness, with performance appraisals reflecting these values to reinforce the importance of ethics in daily activities. Lastly, given the mediating role of sense of integrity, organisations could implement programmes to develop ethical reasoning and moral identity, such as ethics workshops, mentoring programmes, or discussions on ethical dilemmas.

Future research should explore additional mediating or moderating factors affecting the relationship between conscientiousness, ethical climates, and job performance. Researchers should also use longitudinal designs to clarify causal relationships and temporal dynamics among these variables. Examining interventions to enhance employees' sense of integrity or strengthen ethical climates could provide further insights into improving integrity-driven performance over time.

While this study offers valuable contributions, it has certain limitations. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Future longitudinal research is required to confirm the temporal sequence of the proposed relationships.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

C.S. was responsible for the conceptualisation of the research, data analysis, writing of the draft article, project administration and writing of the discussion and conclusion. V.W. was involved in project administration, data analysis, and funding acquisition. C.P. was responsible for writing of the draft article, data curation and acquiring resources. T.H. was responsible for the conceptualisation of the research, methodology, and data analysis. P.C. was responsible for data gathering and software.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, C.S. upon reasonable request.

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