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Talent management practices for minimising talent turnover in a public sector organisation

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Author:
Edith A. Gandi¹
Musawenkosi D. Saurombe²

Affiliation:
¹Department of Management, Faculty of Commerce, Administration and Management, STADIO Higher Education, Johannesburg, South Africa

²Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Musawenkosi Saurombe
mdsaurombe@uj.ac.za

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Background: Public sector organisations often invest in the employment of skilled or promising public officials. However, there is an ongoing trend of public sector employees using their government employment as a stepping stone to greener pastures, as these organisations are often unable to effectively manage and ultimately retain their human capital.

Aim: The aim of this research was to explore talent management practices for minimising talent turnover in critical functions of a public sector organisation.

Setting: The research was conducted within a selected public sector organisation in Gauteng, South Africa.

Method: A qualitative case study research approach, using purposive sampling, was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among 14 employees at the selected public sector organisation both virtually and in person.

Results: The findings primarily revealed deficient talent management practices leading to talent turnover within the public sector organisation. The main causes of talent turnover were identified as follows: management and leadership, the search for personal fulfilment, performance management and recognition, and training and development. On the other hand, these themes were also thought to have the ability to minimise turnover within the organisation, if applied effectively.

Conclusion: To enjoy the benefits of effective talent retention, public sector organisations must become more intentional about the implementation of their talent management practices, starting with their management and leadership.

Contribution: This research offers strategies for the enhancement of talent management and retention in the public sector.

Keywords: public sector; talent management; talent retention; talent retention strategies; talent turnover.

Introduction

It is becoming increasingly challenging for public sector organisations that are losing many talented and skilled employees as they pursue greener pastures once they gain the necessary experience. More specifically, talent management (TM) challenges in the public sector are primarily associated with the attraction, training, development and retention of employees in critical positions (Barkhuizen & Masale 2022; Kravariti & Johnston 2020). Leaders who implement TM strategies and processes are more organised, and ready to compete locally and globally than their competitors and have the advantage of capitalising on new opportunities (Collings, Mellahi & Cascio 2019; Khilji & Schuler 2017). Talent management practices are the best instruments for attracting and retaining superiorly skilled people in essential organisational roles. However, the successful implementation of TM practices is often recognised as a challenge and point of contention within organisations globally, including the South African public sector (Barkhuizen & Masale 2022; Kravariti, Tasoulis, Scullion & Alali 2022; Mthintso, Saurombe & Mabaso 2024).

Talent management is essential for modern organisations for various reasons, including the initiation of the knowledge economy (often characterised by employees selling their skills and expertise to the highest bidder); a multigenerational workforce (characterised by the highest number of generations currently represented in the global workforce history); and the desire for organisations to become more strategic and competitive (necessitating innovative ways of managing human capital) (Nesindande, Saurombe & Joseph 2024; Van Hoek 2016). The effective practice of TM requires organisations to be intentional regarding employees' experience from start to finish,

including the pre-employment (recruitment) stage (Naidu, Saurombe & Mogoai 2025). Existing literature suggests that public organisations that meticulously manage the life cycle of their employees are more likely to maximise the utilisation of their talent (Lee & Van der Waldt 2020; Theys & Barkhuizen 2022).

One of the keyways organisations can enhance their competitive advantage is by retaining the talent they attract, especially when it comes to superior talent (Barkhuizen & Masale 2022). The high talent turnover currently characterising public sector organisations leaves them in a chronic state of underperforming, especially when the departed officials were occupying critical positions. Additionally, the increasing competition for and shortage of talent in the public sector urgently necessitates research on effective TM and retention practices, yet such research remains limited in the public sector compared to the private sector. The authors of this article identified acute TM related challenges leading to talent turnover in a selected public sector organisation, prompting their desire to explore these challenges within the particular research context, with the aim of offering appropriate recommendations. This research therefore explored the TM practices for minimising talent turnover in the critical functions (that is, the most pivotal operations) of a public sector organisation.

Research purpose and objectives

The aim of this research was to explore TM practices for minimising talent turnover in critical functions of a public sector organisation in Gauteng. The objectives of the research were to explore the current TM practices in the public sector organisation; explore the perceived importance of TM in the public sector organisation; explore the main causes of talent turnover in the organisation and explore the retention strategies that could minimise talent turnover in the public sector organisation.

Literature review

This section outlines the theory selected to underpin the research, namely, the Human Capital Theory. The section also delineates the key concepts relating to the research as identified in the literature, namely, TM, TM practices, talent turnover and talent retention.

The Human Capital Theory

Although there has not been a formal theory developed specifically concerning TM, alternative theories such as the Human Capital Theory can help us dissect TM research because of their close relation. The Human Capital Theory was therefore adopted in this research to better understand the TM practices for minimising talent turnover in a public sector organisation. Srivastava and Das (2015) describe human capital as the training, skills and expertise that set employees apart in terms of the value they offer to an organisation. The Human Capital Theory underpins how employees apply their abilities, skills and capabilities to enhance an organisation's overall performance (Kang & Mok 2022). It recommends different strategies for developing, utilising and retaining talent at various organisational levels (Kang & Mok 2022). The theory encourages organisations to develop suitable job profiles aligned to specific capabilities to enable the effective attraction, development, management and retention of human resources (talent) to enhance overall organisational productivity and sustainability (Irfan et al. 2023).

Adopting the Human Capital Theory in this research helped the authors understand how applying various TM practices such as management support, performance management and recognition, as well as training and development may help minimise talent turnover while enhancing retention in the South African public sector organisation. The theory was additionally considered appropriate for underpinning this research because it emphasises investment in organisational talent (through training and development) as being pivotal to ensuring a more engaged and committed workforce that is less likely to quit the organisation, and this emphasis can be applied to the South African public sector (Barkhuizen & Saurombe 2022).

Talent management

Since the coining of the phrase 'the war for talent' in 1997 by a group of McKinsey consultants, the topic of TM has received considerable attention among practitioners and academics (Keller 2017). Nonetheless, as outlined in the section above, no concrete theory has been specifically developed concerning TM to date. From a global perspective, Keller (2017) describes TM as pertaining to the various ways in which human capital is managed by organisations and their leaders from the acquisition stage until they ultimately leave the organisation. Keller (2017) further suggests that the field of TM usually pays attention to certain employees who exhibit or are expected to deliver high performance. From a South African perspective, Poisat, Mey and Sharp (2018) opine that TM relates to creating a superior-performance culture at all organisational levels by ensuring that employees are well informed of what constitutes competitive advantage. Specifically focussing on the public sector, Mokoena, Schultz and Dachapalli (2022) suggest that a critical aspect of TM is the continuous training of personnel to maintain the desired level of performance. Employees who undergo personal and professional development are expected to be more innovative and to contribute exceptionally to the success of the organisation (Mokoena et al. 2022).

Talent management continues to be of critical importance in organisations, as it endeavours to respond to the developing methods the environment requires. However, it is noted that TM is a concept that is not clearly defined (Collings et al. 2019). Talent management particularly in the public sector is still of global concern, especially in connection with the retention of talented employees (Kravariti & Johnston 2020; Theys & Barkhuizen 2022). A review of empirical TM research

by Kravariti et al. (2022) notes that fewer publications on TM pay attention to public sector organisations. This research therefore contributes to addressing this identified gap in existing literature by focusing on the recently growing interest in TM studies within the public sector, specifically focusing on the South African context.

Talent management practices

Globally, the public sector is facing unprecedented challenges (Mashaba & Saurombe 2023; Mousa et al. 2022), as it grapples with the pressures of cost-cutting and rationalisation, coupled with a steady increase in demand for services (Hinkley 2023), making the TM agenda in public organisations more urgent than ever. Raizenberg (2024) proposes that organisations follow a customised array of TM practices. Besides applying a common set of TM principles, Raizenberg (2024) lobbies organisations to subscribe to various generic talent-related practices, emphasising that the best practices are only 'best' when applied in a suitably given context. Talent management practices that have been tested have proven that the ones which have yielded good results in one company, may not necessarily have a positive effect in another. Therefore, organisations need to adapt TM practices to fit in with their own business strategy and circumstances (Raizenberg 2024); hence, this research befittingly focused on a selected public sector organisation which was identified (by the authors) to be struggling with high talent turnover rates in various critical positions.

Organisations experience challenges regarding the alignment of TM policies, practices and organisational strategy (Mthintso et al. 2024; Saurombe & Barkhuizen 2022; Schuler 2015). In the global context, Schuler (2015) found that the talent acquired by an organisation has an impact on the strategic direction of the organisation, particularly in the private sector. Meanwhile, local perspectives found that an environment that supports talent and a learning culture in an organisation also promotes innovation, open communication and effective sharing of knowledge, and is built on the core values of respect and integrity, which in turn positively affects the acquisition and retention of talent (Ngobeni, Saurombe & Joseph 2022; Swanepoel & Saurombe 2022). Studies have shown that successful private companies prioritise the integration of their core business values and principles into their various TM practices such as talent acquisition, talent development, performance management and talent retention (Alshehhi 2024; Schuler 2015). To be successful, competitive and sustainable, public sector organisations must urgently likewise prioritise the TM agenda.

Talent turnover

Employee turnover can be described as the rate at which employees leave an organisation for various reasons whether voluntary or involuntary, typically calculated within a year (Fields 2024). Thusi and Chauke (2023) found that employee turnover takes place when employees are miserable in an organisation. On the other hand, Fields (2024) acknowledges that every employee will eventually leave the organisation, emphasising that employee turnover is also a natural part of the working environment, and is thus unavoidable, despite how it takes place. Notwithstanding, it remains imperative to leverage the best TM practices for minimising talent turnover rates as turnover negatively affects organisations' overall effectiveness, productivity and sustainability (Amushila & Bussin 2021). For instance, Alshehhi (2024) found that TM practices such as enhancing employee job satisfaction, improving compensation and benefits, as well as enabling better work-life balance, positively affected turnover rates in the private sector.

Meanwhile, Thusi and Chauke (2023) found that public service departments in South Africa have been facing challenges in maintaining skilled employees, as they often move to greener pastures in the private sector. In the current era, private organisations are becoming even more competitive than before (Ngobeni et al. 2022). This necessitates public organisations to enhance their provision of quality service as a way of obtaining a competitive advantage (Tyskbo 2019). Schlechter, Syce and Bussin (2016) report that organisations are bound to be in competition to attract and maintain talented employees in a working environment where there is a shortage of skills. Mthintso et al. (2024) indicate that public service departments in South Africa have been challenged in maintaining skilled employees. Further, Mthintso et al. (2024) and Schlechter et al. (2016) found that in South Africa, talented employees who have outstanding working skills are in demand, and are neither easy to acquire nor retain. Hence, it is crucial for public organisations to establish customised and sustainable TM strategies for reducing their turnover rates – especially when it comes to employees occupying pivotal positions – as was the aim of this research.

Talent retention

Employee retention is a major challenge encountered by organisations in a competitive environment and is often linked to talent turnover in the literature, as talent turnover is a consequence of poor talent retention (Saurombe & Barkhuizen 2022; Schlechter et al. 2016). Retaining efficient and skilled employees plays an important role in the organisation's success because their skills and competencies are central to the organisation, regarding achieving and maintaining a competitive advantage in the market. Kossivi, Xu and Kalgora (2016) note the challenge organisations face nowadays when it comes to keeping employees motivated and loyal as long as possible. Sen (2019) further indicates that employees join organisations not only to achieve organisational goals but also to meet their own personal and professional goals. Thus, either private or public sector employees are more likely to leave a job because of unacceptable compensation, poor management and leadership, an unconducive working environment, deficient performance management and recognition, and a lack of training and development (Mey, Poisat & Stindt 2021; Mokoena et al. 2022).

Recent research alludes that organisations are struggling to align their goals to the expanding demand for a balanced organisational environment where basic human needs are satisfied and work equals personal fulfilment (Kubiak 2020; Mabaso 2020). Kossivi et al. (2016) further state that globalisation has made competition keener across industries, which affects employees' well-being as organisations put pressure on their employees to remain competitive in their respective industries. Meanwhile, a rapid shift in employee expectations because of swift technological advancements leading to increasingly digitalised workplaces has made it more challenging for private sector employers to retain their talent, as more employees are quitting organisations that overly put pressure on them to achieve operational targets, while rather gravitating more towards flexible working environments (Nesindande et al. 2025; Ngobeni et al. 2022). Despite this pursuit of alternative, more flexible employment by private sector employees, public institutions have not been able to exploit this gap because of the largely deficient TM practices that characterise the public sector (Musakuro & De Klerk 2021), making them an unworthy alternative.

Research design

The authors utilised Saunders et al.'s (2016) research perspective by specifically delineating the philosophy of the research, the approach used to develop the research findings (in this case, a combination of deductive and inductive techniques), the various methodological assumptions, research strategy, including the data gathering and analysis techniques. The following subsections are dedicated to these aspects.

Research approach

A qualitative case study research approach was used for this research (Cresswell & Creswell 2018). Considering the novelty of this research within its particular context, the qualitative approach was deemed to be the most appropriate. The research specifically aimed to explore the case of a selected public sector organisation regarding its application of TM practices for minimising talent turnover in critical functions within the organisation, thus justifying the adoption of a case study strategy.

The current research further followed an exploratory research design. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), one of the chief reasons for conducting an exploratory study is that little is known about a research topic, environment and/or population being studied. Thus, an exploratory research design was regarded as appropriate for this study, given that little (if any) research on TM in the chosen public sector organisation had been done before.

A constructionist ontology was adopted in this research. Constructionism supports phenomena that only exist because of social constructs, that is, the reality that exists because of social interaction (Lopez-Campos et al. 2019). Constructionism was therefore found appropriate for this research, as it focused on the participants' day-to-day experiences, perceptions and understanding of TM in the public sector organisation.

An interpretivist epistemology was utilised. Interpretivism outlines the life experiences of individuals where their personal perspective is the main reference point (Saunders et al. 2016). This assumption enables researchers to make sense of things from the perspective of their participants and cannot be executed without the interpretative effort of the researcher. The interpretivist epistemology helped the authors to interpret participant narratives and personal interpretations regarding employee turnover in a public sector organisation, leading to more customised practical implications and recommendations regarding effective TM strategies for critical functions within the organisation.

Research strategy

A case study research strategy was employed as the authors sought to understand how TM can minimise turnover in critical functions of a specific public sector organisation. To ensure unique recommendations regarding TM and retention strategies, the perspectives of certain employees within the specific organisation were obtained and interpreted (Priya 2021). The authors considered the case study strategy most appropriate as it enabled them to categorise and analyse the context-specific patterns, similarities and differences that developed in the data, for the sake of inferring customised recommendations regarding the TM practices likely to promote talent retention in the selected organisation (Bryman et al. 2017).

Research method
Research setting

The research was conducted within a selected public sector organisation in Gauteng – a province in South Africa. The specific research environment was the premises of the organisation for the in-person interviews and Zoom for the virtual interviews.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The authors held each other accountable for upholding the ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the research. Both authors contributed to the initial conceptualisation of the research, synthesis of ideas and methodological design (including designing the interview guide), while the main author did the fieldwork (data collection). To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, both authors conducted independent analyses. A comparison and merge of the analyses was then performed, resulting in the final development of the themes and subthemes.

Research participants and sampling methods

Purposive sampling was employed in this research (Denzin & Lincoln 2018). The sample consisted of general

employees, middle management and senior management employees as shown in Table 1. In line with Denzin and Lincoln's (2018) recommendation, the authors included participants who could provide pertinent information regarding talent turnover in critical functions within the public sector organisation. The sample of the study consisted of 14 participants in total, including 3 human resource personnel, 8 core business personnel, 2 corporate unit personnel and 1 participant from the import and export unit. The participants were drawn from the four most critical divisions (frequently referred to as critical functions in this article) within the public sector organisation as these divisions experienced the highest talent turnover in the organisation. Participants' employment in any of these four divisions was the primary criterion for inclusion in the research. Table 1 indicates various demographic characteristics of the sample.

Data collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in this research using an interview guide containing open-ended questions, that is, questions that require further engagement rather than a mere 'yes' or 'no'. The interview guide was developed from scratch by the authors. The research aim was to explore the perceptions of members of the sample on the research topic. Data collection took place for about three months. The interviews were conducted one-on-one and in English. Depending on their preference, participants were either interviewed in their offices at the public sector organisation's premises or online via Zoom. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were audio recorded on an external recording device. In line with Braun and Clarke (2021b), the authors considered data saturation to determine approximately when they had collected sufficient information beyond the possible development of new insights. Once saturation was perceived (around the eighth interview), a few more interviews (six to be exact) were conducted to ensure that indeed no new knowledge could be generated. Beyond data saturation, the authors additionally endeavoured to produce as profound as possible insights concerning the research topic.

TABLE 1: Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Participants	Gender	Age (years)	Race	Position	Years of experience
1	Male	31–45	African	Middle manager	05–10
2	Male	46–65	African	Senior manager	10–15
3	Female	31–45	African	General employee	10–15
4	Male	31–45	African	General employee	05–10
5	Female	31–45	African	General employee	10–15
6	Male	31–45	African	General employee	05–10
7	Male	31–45	African	Middle manager	10–15
8	Female	46–65	African	Senior manager	10–15
9	Female	31–45	African	General employee	10–15
10	Female	31–45	African	Middle manager	05–10
11	Male	18–30	African	General employee	05–10
12	Female	31–45	African	Middle manager	10–15
13	Female	46–65	African	General employee	05–10
14	Female	31–45	African	General employee	05–10

Data recording

The interviews were recorded using an external recording device (with the permission of interviewees), as well as the Zoom application. Interview data were later played back, transcribed and saved using Microsoft Word software. All the data trails were then saved on an external hard drive (kept in a locked safe) and a Google Drive folder, where these were supposed to be kept for a minimum period of 10 years.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Strategies used to ensure the trustworthiness of the data and findings of this research as proposed by Bryman et al. (2017) and Korstjens and Moser (2018), entailed ensuring that the study explored what was intended, which was to determine the causes of talent turnover and the process of minimising these causes in the public sector organisation. The authors utilised self-reflection, peer-debriefing, triangulation and thick description to further ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings (Hadi & Closs 2016). The authors self-reflected by outlining their role in the research and being aware of any bias that could have been induced by personal opinions. This enhanced the research's reliability and validity. The authors applied peer debriefing and researcher triangulation by conducting independent analyses of the raw research data, then convening to discuss commonalities and differences in analyses and eventually agreeing on common themes and subthemes, guided by the research objectives. This amplified the credibility and conformability of the research findings. The substantive descriptions of the various field research procedures promoted the research's transferability, ensuring that readers can better assess the research's applicability to alternative contexts.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out on the collected data, as explained by Brewerton and Millward (2018). The recorded interviews were transcribed, and then the transcripts were perused and reviewed thoroughly. A combination of inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis was employed, enabling the authors to exploit the strengths of both approaches, by allowing the generating of organic themes and subthemes, while also referring to existing literature to establish a framework for the findings. Where applicable, the research findings were particularly viewed through the lens of the Human Capital Theory which underpinned this research.

Braun and Clarke's (2021a) six stages for thematic analysis were specifically used in this research. The authors first familiarised themselves with the data by going over the transcripts independently. The researchers then combined the second and third stages by identifying and generating codes simultaneously to draw initial themes from the data. The initially identified and generated codes from the

combined participant transcripts were then grouped together to produce more refined themes. The themes were then reviewed and the responses were checked to determine accuracy and alignment with the research objectives. The themes were further reviewed to generate subthemes which were linked to the refined codes, with all similar subthemes being grouped under an overarching theme. Finally, the authors of this article wrote a report based on the analysed data.

Reporting style

A narrative reporting style was adopted, with verbatim participant quotes being used to substantiate the various themes and subthemes outlined.

Ethical considerations

The authors obtained permission to conduct the research from the Chief Executive Officer of the public sector organisation. Ethical clearance was then obtained from the STADIO Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of data collection (ethical clearance number: Stadio-202202—MM-21520373). The authors adhered to the various acceptable ethical principles in academic research, especially ensuring that participants were protected from harm throughout the research (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe 2023). The purpose of the research was discussed in detail with each participant, and consent was requested before each interview. Voluntary participation and the opportunity to withdraw at any point during the study (except after the completion of the findings report) were further emphasised to participants (Mirza, Bellalem & Mirza 2023). Confidentiality regarding participants' information and responses was maintained throughout the study, and no names or obvious organisational identifiers were indicated (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe 2023). Participants were further assured that the same confidentiality would be upheld even after the completion of the research, in adherence with the *South African Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act*.
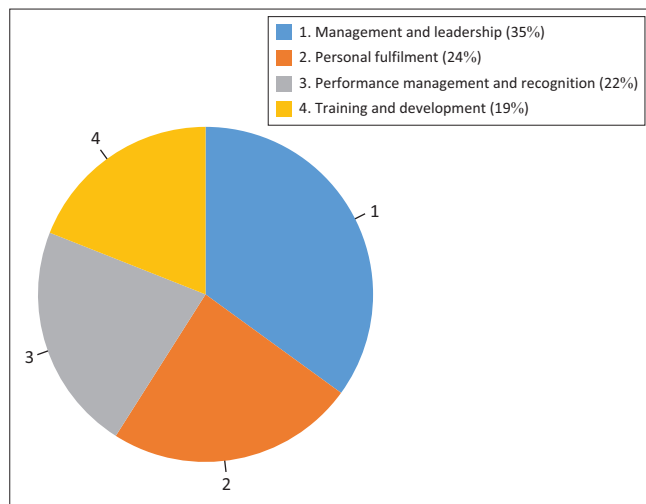

FIGURE 1: Themes identified.

Results

Figure 1 depicts the research findings, which were grouped into different themes as per participants' responses. Four themes and eleven subthemes were identified from the interviews. The themes were management and leadership, personal fulfilment, performance management and recognition and training and development.

Table 2 presents the subthemes that were identified from the themes, as well as the determinants of TM in line with the research topic.

Theme 1: Management and leadership

The participants' main concern was management and leadership as the most discussed theme in this research, including the following subthemes: *management culture and style*; the *working environment* and *conflict management*. Participants agreed that the institutional management's overall outlook and behaviour towards TM greatly influenced the likelihood of its successful implementation. Additionally, management's ability to foster a conducive working environment for TM practices to thrive was considered imperative. Participants further opined that management plays a pivotal role in diffusing and resolving conflict between themselves and subordinate employees by being less authoritarian and more open to welcoming employees' views, as well as mediating conflict between and among other employees.

Subtheme 1.1: Management culture and style

Most concerns were regarding the management style of line managers. Participants highlighted that officials were not given the same opportunities as others were, which seemed unfair to them:

'In order for you as an official to be acknowledged with your talent or skills you need to be part of a certain group of people then you can be provided better opportunities to participate in critical activities of the organisation.' (Participant 6, male, general employee)

'I have observed from the previous years that management of work by line managers has changed from the previous ways of doing things of which previously, research-based work was assigned to the relevant [*qualified*] appointed officials not just anyone who the manager favours. As a result [*of this change*], officials are demoralised and their confidence is [*negatively*] tempered with.' (Participant 9, female, general employee)

TABLE 2: Classification of themes and subthemes.

Themes	Subthemes
1: Management and leadership	1.1: Management culture and style
	1.2: Working environment
	1.3: Conflict management
2: Personal fulfilment	2.1: Personal growth
	2.2: Lack of succession planning
3: Performance management and recognition	3.1: Deficient teamwork
	3.2: Recognition
4: Training and development	4.1: Optimum utilisation of skills
	4.2: Innovation and flexibility
	4.3: Budget

Subtheme 1.2: Working environment

The working environment was identified as a key reason for public sector officials' intention to leave the public sector organisation because of their lack of employee motivation and often rigid workplace culture:

'The current working environment is not flexible and welcoming; most people are discouraged and self-absorbed, which is not motivating as a new official within the organisation. Those who are welcoming will be more focused on what talent or skill you can offer for them to be more competitive than you. There is no teamwork.' (Participant 2, male, senior manager)

'The working environment is very rigid, no platform for innovation, suggestions are acknowledged and supported depending on who is saying them. This type of working environment demoralises the growing talent or skills and I am scared to expose some of the things I know due to reception, whether it will be highly accepted or rejected. There is no platform for mistakes.' (Participant 5, female, general employee)

Subtheme 1.3: Conflict management

Conflicts formed part of the topic, as participants indicated that when they experienced conflict with their colleagues or managers, it tended to affect how they were treated going forward regarding their overall performance and sometimes even prompted their intended departure from the organisation:

'Disagreements between manager and a subordinate affect how you get treated going further. Whether you work hard and show your skills the best way you can, the fact that you had a disagreement shatters all your hard work and you become sidelined in all the great projects. Our managers have a perception that everything they say and do is always correct and no suggestion should be added, that is how talent is treated in [*the*] organisation.' (Participant 4, male, general employee)

'Office conflicts [*between employees are*] escalated to personal vendettas, people don't get past challenges and focus on work to an extent where others decide to leave the organisation based on that, not because they are not happy with the organisation but because of people. There is no hope because the organisation is losing important people in critical positions due to something that can be easily resolved [*by management's intervention in conflict resolution*].' (Participant 5, female, general employee)

Theme 2: Personal fulfilment

Participants indicated that personal fulfilment was a contributing factor regarding employee turnover in the public sector organisation, as employees tended to leave for greener pastures. The subthemes *personal growth* and a *lack of succession planning* were identified and are outlined below. The participants were particularly concerned about how the public organisation, like many others in the South African public sector, did not embrace change and innovation, which inherently stifled the opportunities available for employee growth. Additionally, the often limited, ambiguous and unfair path to succession in various positions – despite a succession plan supposedly existing on paper in the organisation – dampened employees' zeal towards achieving their advancement aspirations.

Subtheme 2.1: Personal growth

Participants especially felt that their organisation does not present them with sufficient opportunities to grow, which increased their likelihood of seeking alternative employment prospects that could afford them growth opportunities:

'Everyone requires growth whether it is within the organisation or outside. For me it is whatever comes first, but to be honest I would love to leave this organisation; it does not encourage or promote personal growth, it's more of competition than growth.' (Participant 12, female, middle manager)

'It is unfortunate growth in the public sector seems to be scarce. External growth is more viable, because young people are dynamic and flexible [*making them more prone to leaving for better growth opportunities*]. Public sector organisations have old officials who are waiting for pension, which reduces chances of growth internally. This creates stagnation in talent [*growth*] internally.' (Participant 7, male, middle manager)

'Public sector organisations prefer their old ways of doing things and are always scared of taking chances, [*claiming*] "if the formula works, why change it?" Such behaviours force you to seek growth elsewhere other than the public sector organisations.' (Participant 3, female, general employee)

Subtheme 2.2: Lack of succession planning

Some participants agreed that while the public sector organisation had a succession planning policy, it was not well implemented in practice, if at all. Meanwhile, many participants believed that the organisation neither had a robust nor a sustainable succession planning strategy whatsoever:

'I could say that we do have a succession plan policy on paper, however, it is not practiced and that discourages a lot of employees from participating in [*and*] helping with extra work, when these are a need. I believe that our organisation prefers new officials most of the time. Sometimes it is discouraging to assist your new line manager, whilst they have less knowledge than you as a subordinate.' (Participant 14, female, general employee)

'Succession planning is for private organisations; in the public sector it's more of political appointment. For example, you somehow find positions being created just to promote an [*earmarked*] official.' (Participant 13, female, general employee)

Theme 3: Performance management and recognition

Most of the participants were concerned about their performance and recognition in the public sector organisation. The subthemes *deficient teamwork* and *recognition* were identified and are outlined below. Participants highlighted how appreciating certain individuals' contributions above others promotes a toxic workplace culture and unhealthy competition within teams. Participants were further concerned regarding how recognition seemed limited to certain favoured individuals, without a clear explanation of the recognition criteria.

Subtheme 3.1: Deficient teamwork

The findings revealed a lack of teamwork in the public sector organisation and more of an unhealthily competitive environment where individuals look out for personal interests rather than acting in the best interests of the greater team and organisation.

'There is no teamwork, instead there is more competition, which discourages the best performance of others. Instead of motivating subordinates, managers compete with them. Managers always want to be right even if you can propose better options, they [*the proposed options*] are discouraged.' (Participant 11, male, general employee)

'My work is more of teamwork, even though responsibilities differ. There tends to be a culture of who did his or her duties better than the other [*when it comes to team performance management*] even though the responsibilities are not the same. Competition is more of an active factor than talent grooming.' (Participant 8, female, senior manager)

Subtheme 3.2: Recognition

Participants generally felt that while a culture of recognition for work well done existed within the organisation, it was neither equitable nor based on objective performance measures, especially concerning tasks involving multiple parties from start to finish:

'I would say recognition for best performance is there in a form of performance assessment, which assesses the performance of officials and later a selection of the best performance of an official is selected. However, you can put in so much effort towards a task as I work in a chain method work, but the final implementer will be the one who is more recognised than you, who has created the document. I don't think our performance assessment method is true and credible.' (Participant 6, male, general employee)

'It came to my attention since I arrived that there is no sharing of skills. There are officials who are assigned to activities that are more recognised than others and when they are not there, work comes to a standstill, just because so and so is not in the office, whilst there are other personnel who can execute the duty, goes unrecognised.' (Participant 2, male, senior manager)

It was further suggested that for some, recognition only came upon resignation, which of course by then would be too late:

'Talented officials are only recognised when they are leaving the organisation and they get to be proposed to stay and be informed how important their contribution is towards the organisation while being offered counteroffers to the new job prospects.' (Participant 10, female, middle manager)

Theme 4: Training and development

The importance of training and development was emphasised by participants. The subthemes *optimum utilisation of skills*, *innovation and flexibility*, and *budget* were noted and are subsequently outlined. Under par TM practices were considered the main reason for the underutilisation of the public organisation's key talent. The policy inundation that often characterises public sector organisations was further considered an encumbrance to flexibility and innovation by highly skilled employees, which often prompted their departure in search of opportunities offering more leeway to apply their expertise. Participants also opined that prior to noteworthy budget cuts, public sector organisations used to provide more training and development opportunities for their employees, especially those most talented; whereas now, such employees are forced to empower themselves, only to then look for alternative employment.

Subtheme 4.1: Optimum utilisation of skills

Participants largely agreed that the organisation possesses great talent; however, they are not able to fully tap into it because of their deficient TM practices:

'I know each organisation has its own requirements when searching for talent, however, even the current officials can provide what others are bringing. I am saying this because, the very same officials that are acquired with new talent still have to be assisted or trained by the same old officials, which for me internal development is better and saves time and money.' (Participant 7, male, middle manager)

'I could say as an individual I'm studying towards my master's degree, which I have a lot that I could offer as a form of assistance in providing solutions to some of the problems we experience as an organisation. [*For*]: example, times have evolved from the old ways of doing things, but management have a fear of change, [*as*] methods that were used fifteen years ago are still the same. How could talent be advanced or acknowledged if management is scared of change?' (Participant 8, female, senior manager)

Subtheme 4.2: Innovation and flexibility

Innovation and flexibility were identified as factors influencing turnover in public sector organisations. The participants specifically noted rigidity within their organisation when it comes to various systems and methods of doing things:

'Public sector organisations are mostly guided or regulated by some form of policies and frameworks, which leaves no space for innovation. As a result, officials leave public sector to other sectors where they can get an opportunity to become more innovative and their opinions will be valued and acknowledged.' (Participant 2, male, senior manager)

'As for me, I could say line managers are the main challenge when it comes to flexibility; they have no platform for innovation and new ideas. Once [*an*] official expresses their ideas of something, they are always deemed not required [*excluded*] for that specific project. However, it's not like it will ever be required for anything even in the future no matter how good your proposal is.' (Participant 3, male, general employee)

Subtheme 4.3: Budget

The budget was identified as one of the problems, specifically in terms of how it applies to the development of existing employees:

'It is a problem that public sector organisations don't have budget for skills and talent development. 80% of officials are investing in themselves academically in order to improve their skills so they can later leave the public sector. This action has become a culture that the most educated and talented employees are based in other sectors other than [*the*] public sector.' (Participant 1, male, middle manager)

'I think budget is just a management excuse [*not*] to develop officials, because even if your manager knows that you are enrolled academically, they show no interest in what you are studying and how it [*your studies*] can assist the organisation. The lack of interest indicates being careless about talent development.' (Participant 4, male, general employee)

Discussion

Outline of the results

The aim of this research was to explore TM practices for minimising talent turnover in critical functions of a public sector organisation in Gauteng. The following discussion subsections are based on the research objectives.

Research objective one: To explore the current talent management practices in the public sector organisation

The findings revealed that the management and leadership (theme one) was primarily responsible for the currently deficient practice of TM within the public sector organisation. Most of the participants highlighted that the public sector organisation would primarily need to change its management style to curb the TM challenges experienced by the organisation. The members of the sample seemed to have a limited knowledge of TM and TM practices in the public sector organisation. However, they knew more about skills and skills management. Considering the research findings, it can be assumed that TM and its practices have largely been neglected by the management of the public sector organisation, in comparison to skills management and development.

Some participants felt that TM is more of a fancy word for traditional Human Resource Management. Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen (2016), as well as Nyanhongo et al. (2023) opine that there is little academic attention given to specific TM issues in public sector organisations, as well as how these organisations refer to the concept of talent and how effectively they manage their talent amid the ongoing global battle for talent. Van Hoek (2016) indicates that many organisations are negatively challenged by TM issues, such as attraction, development and retention. Organisations often fail to implement TM effectively because of their management's lack of knowledge of how to obtain, develop and retain talented employees in this competitive world (Mey et al. 2021; Pannell 2015). Meanwhile, the Human Capital Theory asserts that employers who invest in the development of their employees' skills, abilities and capabilities set these employees up for better performance, which ultimately translates to improved overall organisational performance (Aman-Ullah et al. 2022).

The participants in the current research generally understood talent as skills that they can offer to their organisation, which differentiate them in terms of their performance. Some further indicated their belief that each employee has a specific skill that can be valued and useful to the organisation. Irfan et al. (2023) indicate that placing employees in positions in which they perform well, benefits both employees and employers. Employees who are well-equipped and utilised perform better than those who feel underutilised (Lee & Van der Waldt 2020). According to the participants, TM practices or skills development were not perceived as strategies for employee retention in the public sector organisation. Thus, retaining talented employees in critical positions of the public sector organisation seemed not quite a priority for the management in the public sector organisation. Meanwhile, the Human Capital Theory proffers that highly effective employees are more likely to quit an organisation that does not prioritise TM for improving talent retention (Kang & Mok 2022).

Kravariti et al. (2022), Saurombe, Schutte and Barkhuizen (2017), Tyskbo (2019) and Van Hoek (2016) argue that TM is indispensable in modern organisations because of the initiation of the knowledge economy, new generations joining the workforce and the desire for organisations to become more strategic and competitive. These factors necessitate management's creation of new ways to manage human capital (Nesindande et al. 2024). Knies et al. (2018), Mokoena et al. (2022) and Shingenge and Saurombe (2022) indicate that new ways of managing and developing human capital, in both public and private sectors, are at the core of effective service delivery to the public and to customers, yet this strategy has been neglected by the management of the public sector organisation. The Human Capital Theory particularly emphasises employee development as being critical to enhancing organisational performance and effectiveness (Irfan et al. 2023).

Research objective two: Explore the perceived importance of talent management in the public sector organisation

The importance of TM in the public sector organisation primarily revolved around themes two, three and four, as participants highlighted how the sound application of TM practices regarding personal fulfilment, performance management and recognition as well as training and development could improve the current discrepancies being experienced concerning talent turnover. The Human Capital Theory echoes the same, particularly regarding training and development (Aman-Ullah et al. 2022). Organisational leaders need to understand the importance of talent in the overall effectiveness of the organisation (Saurombe et al. 2017). Mey et al. (2021) and Saurombe and Barkhuizen (2022) support the view that an active leadership style plays a significant role in employee retention.

The participants in the current research indicated that some of the policies that were not effectively implemented, such as the succession planning policy and the mentoring of employees could assist with enhancing TM. Such policies were not considered transparent, and when implemented, were not considered fair to some employees. It was said that there used to be skills development policies, which were implemented to equip employees in their required field of training, as well as bursaries for those who wanted to study further. However, during the time when the current research was conducted, no budget existed for any of that, which according to the Human Capital Theory is detrimental to the organisation's success as employees are arguably an organisation's most pivotal resources and must thus be invested in to enhance their productivity and ultimately, enhance organisational success (Kang & Mok 2022).

According to the participants, such benefits are used to help retain employees, especially those who pursue growth in the organisation. Succession planning seeks to ensure an organisation's ability to identify key positions needed in future while simultaneously ensuring the availability of qualified and talented employees to occupy these various critical positions (Dougherty & Van Gelder 2015; Varhegyi & Jepsen 2017). The implementation and benefits of succession planning, however, are not well understood by many organisations (Varhegyi & Jepsen 2017).

Participants noted that counter-offers were the commonly known strategy used in an attempt to retain employees in the public sector organisation. When employees resign, however, exit interview findings indicated that employees rarely can be retained following the counter-offer. It can thus be concluded that the public sector organisation did not fully appreciate the importance of TM and the role it plays in retaining employees who hold critical positions. Chilvers et al. (2019) argue that retention strategies are guidelines and tactics that organisations use to satisfy the various needs of employees and create an environment that inspires employees to stay in the organisation; something which the public sector organisation is not effectively doing.

Research objective three: To explore the main causes of talent turnover in the organisation

The findings of the research, resulting from individual interviews, identified the main causes of talent turnover in the public sector as relating to all the themes namely management and leadership, personal growth, performance management and recognition and lastly, training and development. These findings were further revealed in terms of the specific subthemes subsequently discussed.

In terms of management culture and style, participants indicated that management failed to execute their duties as expected and lacked sufficient knowledge regarding TM. Meanwhile, the Human Capital Theory suggests that without buy-in from organisational leadership regarding the importance of investing in talent, the human capital development agenda is unlikely to be successfully achieved (Aman-Ullah et al. 2022). Mey et al. (2021) further emphasise that participative and appropriate leadership and management practices successfully achieve high performance in the public service, rather than transformational culture shifts. Thunnissen's (2016) study on the mediating role of line managers in TM and employee performance in the public sector context showed that the implementation of TM strategies in Dutch academic departments was influenced by academic line managers, and that the power of HR departments was limited (Chulie et al. 2014).

In terms of the working environment, participants largely reported a negative working environment, resulting in poor performance in public sector organisations. Sen (2019) states that employee confidence is enhanced once they can share their views and ideas, resolve conflicts and different grievances and participate in organisational change. Participants also identified poor conflict management as a recurring challenge that is not easily resolved, resulting in employees leaving the organisation.

Regarding personal growth, most participants indicated this as an opportunity for which they would quit their current job. According to Fields (2024), when employees leave the organisation of their own free will, it is defined as voluntary turnover. Voluntary turnover is often prompted by an employee's feelings of unmet expectations or overall dissatisfaction with the working conditions of their current position, which pushes them to seek better options elsewhere (Mabaso 2020). Research suggests that if an employee acquires a rare skill that is in demand while being dissatisfied with their current organisation, they may contemplate leaving the organisation for higher pay, better benefits, and organisations that offer better personal growth and development (Chilvers et al. 2019; Saurombe & Barkhuizen 2020).

Concerning succession planning, the public sector organisation was said to have such strategy in place to retain talented employees; however, the processes of implementing it were neither equitable nor transparent. Mey et al. (2021) emphasise that managers must have regular discussions with employees regarding their envisaged future within the organisation to ensure the long-term commitment and retention of especially highly talented employees.

Performance management and recognition constituted challenges according to the participants, with an indication that there was little recognition and fairness in acknowledging excellent performance, especially in a team setting. Successful performance management practices are crucial elements of strategic tools to assist in ensuring that the objectives of the organisation are met through the performance of talented employees (Masri & Suliman 2019). The Human Capital Theory insinuates that a keyway to managing and enhancing employees' performance is by ensuring alignment between each job or task and each individual or team's capabilities to enable the effective attraction, development, management and retention of talent (Irfan et al. 2023). Further, the fairness and trustworthiness of performance management systems and assessments contribute to retaining talented employees (Altindağ, Çirak & Acar 2018). When employees perform at their utmost best, managers are required to recognise and acknowledge such performance. According to Sen (2019), employees should feel appreciated and valued, as they contribute most of their daily lives to improving the organisation's market value.

The findings indicated that teamwork was a challenge in the public sector, as most employees are self-orientated in a

competitive way, instead of sharing information, because of the type of work being more like a value chain. According to Mey et al. (2021) and Raizenberg (2024), various interventions can be instituted to manage and retain talented employees in an organisation. These include encouraging employees to share ideas, knowledge and skills among themselves for developmental purposes, as well as customising TM strategies among employees, even in a team setting.

When it comes to the optimal utilisation of skills and innovation, participants strongly indicated that they were not given enough opportunities to showcase their skills in respect of their duties and innovation. The participants lamented that no platform for innovation, creativity or flexibility was apparent in the public sector organisation. Meanwhile, the Human Capital Theory implies the importance of not only developing employees' skills and capabilities but also ensuring that they can utilise these acquired expertise, which leads to job satisfaction (Kang & Mok 2022). Mabaso (2020) further indicates that when employees are happy with their work, they perform well in their line of work, initiate innovation and apply their capabilities to an optimal extent. Additionally, they are more likely to remain within the organisation as they are happy and satisfied with their work (Kubiak 2020; Mabaso 2020; Saurombe & Barkhuizen 2022).

Participants of this research reiterated the financial challenges that public sector organisations are tormented with, which put a stop to many of the benefits which were previously available to employees, for example, team building, bursaries and performance bonuses. Meanwhile, scholars encourage public sector organisations to enhance their TM by creating synergy and collaboration among their employees and teams, as well as providing incentives for superior performance (Nyanhongo et al. 2023), as this has been found to improve employee satisfaction (Mabaso 2020).

Research objective four: To explore and recommend retention strategies that could reduce talent turnover in the public sector organisation

Like research objective three, research objective four was addressed by all four themes namely management and leadership, personal growth, performance management and recognition and lastly, training and development, as participants offered recommendations for minimising talent turnover in the public sector organisation, based on all four themes. The participants agreed that investing in TM and aligning their organisational strategies and goals with TM, will be beneficial for excellent service delivery. Additionally, the participants felt that the successful design and implementation of TM strategy by management in the public sector organisation will encourage employees to stay longer, as highlighted by Mokoena et al. (2022). These views support what Kravariti et al. (2022) found in their study, citing the importance of public sector management having a mindset for TM which encourages a more intentional approach to the implementation thereof.

The current research also found that public sector employees are likely to thrive where opportunities for personal growth are afforded to them, in line with their professional roles and responsibilities, and as buttressed by the Human Capital Theory (Irfan et al. 2023). Specifically, participants agreed that the equitable availability of opportunities for promotion and succession planning would enhance their zeal and drive concerning their work. These sentiments resonate with Varhegyi and Jepsen's (2017) and Kravariti and Johnston's (2020) research which highlights that the lack of clear career advancement pathways in the public sector demoralises employees and further incites a sense of complacency.

The participants in this research resoundingly raised concerns regarding the criteria used for measuring talent performance (particularly in teams) and determining recognition in the public sector organisation, citing inconsistencies with how employees are recognised within a team setting. Such inconsistencies were said to discourage employees from excelling in the organisation as they often felt their best was not good enough. Masri and Suliman (2019) found that discrepancies regarding the recognition of employees within the public sector such as favouritism and nepotism marred the future efforts of high-performing employees who feel recognition is reserved for a certain elect. Thus, eliminating such discrepancies would ensure equitable talent recognition and consequently improve talent retention. Raizenberg (2024) further encouraged that employees' performance be recognised at varying levels of effort (i.e. entry to executive level employees; quality versus quantity outputs; once-off versus continuous tasks, etc.).

Participants agreed that the public sector organisation must prioritise the training and development of their employees, particularly concerning the budget allocation for such activities. Accordingly, the Human Capital Theory highlights the prioritisation of investing in talented employees, especially those who demonstrate irreplicable skills and abilities required in critical organisational functions (Aman-Ullah et al. 2022) such as those in the public sector organisation explored in this research. Participants also noted that many public sector employees typically pursue their own developmental opportunities via avenues such as further tertiary education and would thus appreciate the mere support of their employers concerning their personal efforts towards increased knowledge acquisition and skills advancement. Meanwhile, extant literature promotes public organisations' prioritisation of training and development initiatives in their annual budgeting processes (Fields 2024), including sponsoring or subsidising employees' pursuit of advanced tertiary qualifications (Saurombe & Barkhuizen 2020).

Practical implications

The practical implications of this research are based on the best practices suggested by the participants for minimising talent turnover, as outlined in the previous discussion section. Firstly, the public sector organisation must inculcate a culture of TM among its leadership as a top-down approach to the

acceptance of TM is critical (Shingenge & Saurombe 2022). Secondly, the public sector organisation is encouraged to create more opportunities for its employees to grow within their individual and team portfolios, preferably using a more customised approach that speaks to specific individual employee and team needs which would ultimately benefit the organisation at large in terms of productivity (Raizenberg 2024). Thirdly, the public sector organisation should promote equitable and inclusive criteria for recognising their employees' contributions, an exercise which would also benefit from customisation. For example, an entry-level or junior employee may appreciate a bonus or salary increment for superior performance, whereas a more established and financially settled employee might prefer more paid time off to spend with family or on pursuing personal interests (Van Hoek 2016). Fourthly and finally, the public sector organisation is advised to implement a performance management system which incorporates the training and development needs revealed at the end of each performance cycle. For example, employees may require training to enhance their proficiency in the use of new software and systems that may be implemented by their organisations in the adoption of the global digitalisation agenda (Nesindande et al. 2024). Additionally, some employees may require support in acquiring advanced training and/or qualifications to enhance their eligibility for promotion (Mokoena et al. 2022).

Limitations and recommendations

Since the research findings were based upon a qualitative approach employing a mere sample size of 14 (which was sufficient to garner good insights regarding the research topic), the generalisability of the research is inherently limited. As the research was targeted specifically at the critical functions within the public sector organisation (which were also the most affected functions by talent turnover), the target sample within the organisation was further minimised. Within the critical functions of the public sector organisation, some employees initially targeted for participation were either unwilling or unavailable to participate; hence, an equitable representation of participants from each critical function was not achieved.

Future studies should consider investigating similar research topics using a quantitative approach, ensuring an increased generalisability of the research results. The future inclusion of all functions or divisions of public sector organisations is also advised as turnover ultimately affects all organisational functions. Including all organisational divisions will also ensure a greater sample from which to obtain information. Nonetheless, if future studies choose to focus on specific organisational divisions, it is advised that they ensure equitable representation among the chosen departments.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate how public sector organisations experienced challenges regarding the retention of employees. The lack of knowledge in respect of how TM can promote the retention of employees in critical positions, proved to be a challenge. TM is currently perceived as a non-priority for the public sector organisation; however, it is important for all sectors, especially to provide a better service delivery to the public. The public sector organisation studied needs more exposure to TM practices for improved employee retention, as well as better service delivery. Further research should be conducted on how local public sector organisations can become more flexible and innovative in adopting new strategies ensuring their global competitiveness in terms of service delivery.

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