





Human resource management in the public sector: A study on recruitment, selection and retention practices in South Africa



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Orientation: Despite the essential importance of strategic human resource management in facilitating effective service delivery, numerous government departments continue to encounter ongoing challenges in attracting and retaining qualified personnel.

Research purpose: This study investigates recruitment and selection strategies, the strategic role of human resource management (HRM) and factors influencing employee retention in the public service organisations.

Motivation for the study: There is limited research critically analysing recruitment, selection and retention practices within the South African public sector. This study aims to provide insights into the organisational and systemic factors influencing workforce management in government institutions. By examining recruitment strategies, selection processes and employee retention methods, the research identifies both challenges and opportunities to enhance human resource management in the public sector.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative, case study design was adopted. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with departmental staff and stakeholders and analysed thematically.

Main findings: Four primary themes were identified: (1) the existence and effectiveness of recruitment strategies, (2) the impact of selection methods, (3) the role of the human resources manager and (4) employee retention practices. Findings indicated limited awareness and inconsistent application of formal recruitment approaches, with an overreliance on informal networks and a lack of standardised, competency-based selection procedures.

Practical/managerial implications: The human resources manager was recognised as a strategic contributor; however, their effectiveness was constrained by bureaucratic processes and resource limitations. Employee retention challenges were attributed to the absence of structured career development programmes, mentorship initiatives and effective leadership.

Contribution/value-add: This study contributes to the global discourse on public sector human resource management by examining recruitment, selection and retention practices through the frameworks of the resource-based view and human capital theory. Utilising insights from South Africa, it identifies key challenges and effective strategies that can enhance workforce stability and improve public service delivery in comparable public sector environments worldwide.

Keywords: recruitment strategy; selection; employee retention; public sector; human resources management; public service employment.

Introduction

In the South African public sector, entities such as provincial departments continue to face challenges in attracting, selecting and retaining qualified personnel, despite the existence of comprehensive policy frameworks (Molotsi, 2021; Nyika et al., 2024). Inefficiencies within recruitment processes, lack of transparency and prolonged hiring timelines often result in the appointment of candidates who may not possess the required skills or suitability (Selane, 2024). These issues contribute to higher turnover rates, decreased organisational productivity and increased operational costs (Ndatshhe et al., 2024).

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Globally, recent research highlights that effective recruitment strategies, competency-based selection tools and targeted retention initiatives significantly improve organisational stability and employee satisfaction (Cherif, 2020). The post-coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) work environment has further intensified retention challenges, with public sector employees increasingly valuing flexible working arrangements, opportunities for career advancement and psychological safety (Selebano et al., 2025).

The processes of recruitment, selection and retention are essential for developing a capable and sustainable public sector workforce. In contexts where service delivery heavily depends on skilled and motivated personnel, the effectiveness of these human resource (HR) practices directly impacts organisational performance (Shikokola, 2024). In South Africa, attracting and maintaining talent is further influenced by the country's historical context and ongoing reforms aimed at redressing inequalities and promoting employment equity.

Legislative frameworks such as the *Labour Relations Act (LRA)*, No. 66 of 1995; the *Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA)*, No. 75 of 1997 and the *Employment Equity Act (EEA)*, No. 55 of 1998 have been instrumental in fostering fairness and inclusivity in the workplace. However, despite this robust legal environment, many public institutions continue to experience inefficiencies in recruitment procedures, delays in hiring and a misalignment between candidate capabilities and organisational needs (Molotsi, 2021; Nyika et al., 2024). These challenges often lead to high turnover rates, reduced productivity and increased costs (Ndatshe et al., 2024).

Human resource management (HRM) is central to an efficient and responsive public sector, especially where the quality-of-service delivery depends on the availability and capacity of skilled staff (Shikokola, 2024). Post-apartheid reforms have shaped HRM practices towards promoting equality, inclusivity and organisational effectiveness. The enactment of key legislative frameworks has played a significant role in reducing discriminatory practices and creating more equitable work environments.

Effective HRM extends beyond administrative functions to a strategic level, involving the planning, coordination and implementation of policies that help organisations acquire, develop and retain their workforce in line with their objectives (Ochieng, 2023). In the public sector, HRM must operate within unique institutional constraints while fostering workforce engagement, complying with legislative mandates and ensuring organisational sustainability (Roziqin, 2025). This study draws upon the resource-based view (RBV) and human capital theory (HCT), emphasising the strategic importance of aligning human resources with organisational performance, guiding both the research process and its interpretation.

As the South African labour market becomes increasingly competitive domestically and globally, public departments need to reconsider their approaches to managing

human capital. Modern HRM theories highlight the importance of aligning recruitment and retention practices with organisational goals, employee engagement and policy objectives (Mahlasela & Chinyamurindi, 2020). This study focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of recruitment, selection and retention strategies within the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Transport (DoT). By exploring the experiences of HR practitioners in the South African public sector, the research offers insights that extend beyond the specific context, providing broader lessons for improving workforce stability and public service delivery across government departments. To analyse the challenges faced by the DoT, this study utilises the RBV and HCT, which view skilled employees as valuable and unique resources critical to sustained organisational performance (Barney, 1991; Becker, 1993).

Research objectives

The study had the following objectives:

- To assess the effectiveness and implementation of recruitment and selection strategies within the South African public sector
 - To explore the role of HRM in shaping recruitment, selection and employee retention practices in government institutions
- To identify key factors influencing employee retention and to propose strategies for improving long-term workforce stability in the public sector

Literature review

This literature review explores recruitment, selection and retention practices within the public sector, with particular emphasis on South Africa, while also referencing global scholarship to highlight broader insights. The review is organised into seven sections: recruitment in government departments, selection mechanisms, retention strategies, policy and legislative frameworks, the relationship between HRM practices and organisational performance, psychological testing in candidate selection and the theoretical framework. This structure facilitates a focused examination of relevant literature, illustrating how gaps in human resource practices can lead to workforce instability and diminished service delivery, while also identifying potential avenues for reform.

Recruitment in public sector organisations

Public sector recruitment often faces challenges related to inefficiencies, limited transparency and prolonged hiring procedures, which can result in the appointment of candidates who are insufficiently qualified or poorly aligned with organisational needs (Selane, 2024). In South Africa, despite the existence of comprehensive policy frameworks, provincial departments continue to encounter difficulties in attracting and retaining skilled personnel (Molotsi, 2021; Nyika et al., 2024). These issues contribute to delays in filling critical positions, increased turnover and higher organisational costs (Ndatshe et al., 2024).

International research emphasises that transparent, timely and inclusive recruitment processes are vital for attracting a diverse and capable workforce (Cherif, 2020). For South African public institutions, aligning recruitment strategies with labour market realities and organisational requirements is essential to address skills shortages and enhance service delivery. Formal recruitment methods such as the strategic advertisement of vacancies across national, provincial and local platforms aim to attract diverse pools of candidates while promoting fairness and equity (Lee & Mao, 2023). Nevertheless, implementation challenges remain, with inefficiencies sometimes leading to concerns about favouritism and political interference, which can undermine public trust (Mutambara & Ntombela, 2024).

In addition to formal processes, informal recruitment practices such as headhunting and cadre deployment are still common in government departments, including the DoT. While headhunting can assist in securing highly skilled professionals, cadre deployment has raised concerns regarding politicisation and nepotism in appointments (Mophethe, 2023). Such practices can undermine merit-based selection, contributing to inefficiencies and reduced service quality within the public sector (Mutambara & Ntombela, 2024).

Selection mechanisms and practices

Selection processes within the public sector play a vital role in ensuring that appointed candidates possess the necessary competencies and align with organisational objectives. Global research highlights the importance of competency-based assessments, structured interviews and merit-based evaluations in fostering fairness, objectivity and alignment with institutional needs (Demanuele, 2025). In South Africa, however, selection practices are often challenged by bureaucratic inertia, inconsistent policy implementation and limited talent development pipelines, leading to a mismatch between employee capabilities and organisational requirements (Makapan, 2024). Such discrepancies can impact operational efficiency, workforce capacity and overall institutional performance.

To effectively address these issues, selection systems should not only adhere to legislative frameworks but also promote principles of meritocracy, equity and accountability within public institutions. Enhancing these mechanisms involves adopting proactive strategies that cultivate stronger talent pipelines and increase access to qualified candidates. Approaches such as collaborations with educational institutions, targeted recruitment initiatives, internship programmes and leveraging digital platforms are crucial in attracting suitable talent (Agbai & Okechukwu, 2024; Silva, 2025). By integrating transparent, merit-based selection processes with proactive talent sourcing, public sector agencies can strengthen workforce planning and improve overall organisational effectiveness.

Retention strategies and workforce stability

Retention is a vital aspect of ensuring workforce sustainability within the public sector, as high employee turnover can disrupt institutional knowledge and impact service delivery. Evidence indicates that key factors influencing retention include employee engagement, supportive supervision, opportunities for professional development and clear career progression pathways (Selebano et al., 2025). In South Africa, government departments often face ongoing challenges in retaining skilled personnel because of competition from the private sector, which frequently offers more competitive salaries, greater career mobility and improved working conditions (Oosthuizen et al., 2021; Steen & Schott, 2019). These circumstances contribute to persistent shortages in technical and leadership positions, thereby weakening organisational capacity.

To effectively address these issues, implementing structured retention strategies is essential. Such approaches may include mentorship programmes, targeted training initiatives and performance-based incentives to enhance employee engagement and reduce turnover within government entities (Selebano et al., 2025). Additionally, establishing transparent career advancement systems can promote employee stability and foster long-term workforce loyalty.

However, retention efforts are often hindered in environments where political interference, patronage and cadre deployment are prevalent. Practices such as appointing individuals based on political connections rather than merit undermine workforce quality and fairness (Mathonsi et al., 2022; Obicci, 2025). These practices can erode trust, deter qualified candidates and diminish public confidence in institutions, ultimately compromising workforce stability. Addressing these systemic challenges requires strengthening merit-based retention policies that emphasise fairness, transparency and the professional development of employees over political considerations.

Policy and legislative frameworks shaping human resource management

South Africa's post-apartheid reforms established comprehensive legislative frameworks aimed at redressing inequalities and promoting fairness in employment practices. Key legislation includes the *Labour Relations Act (LRA, No. 66 of 1995)*, the *Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA, No. 75 of 1997)* and the *Employment Equity Act (EEA, No. 55 of 1998)*. Collectively, these laws provide a foundation for promoting equity, transparency and inclusivity within HRM.

Despite the strength of this legal framework, challenges in implementation remain. Research indicates ongoing discrepancies between legislative objectives and actual HR practices, leading to inefficiencies in recruitment processes, delays in hiring and misalignment between candidate skills and organisational needs (Molotsi, 2021; Nyika et al., 2024). These gaps can impact organisational performance and hinder the public sector's ability to attract and retain skilled talent.

Interviews highlight key issues within the selection process. When conducted effectively, interviews can yield valuable insights into candidates' competencies and potential contributions (Masenya et al., 2020). However, inconsistencies in interviewing methods, a lack of standardisation and reliance on subjective judgements often compromise their reliability (Stebbins et al., 2023). For example, inconsistent questioning and differing evaluation criteria can lead to uneven assessments and perceptions of unfairness (Masenya et al., 2020).

Biases pose additional risks. Unconscious prejudices related to race, gender, age or socio-economic background may influence interviewers' perceptions, potentially disadvantaging qualified candidates (Goya-Tocchetto et al., 2024). Furthermore, subjective criteria such as 'cultural fit' or 'personality' can favour candidates who resemble interviewers rather than those best suited for the role (Masenya et al., 2020). The lack of diversity among interview panels can further reinforce biases and contribute to homogeneity in hiring decisions (Papagelis, 2024).

To address these challenges, organisations should implement measures that translate policy commitments into consistent and fair practices. Standardised interview protocols, training for interviewers on unconscious bias and diverse interview panels are recommended to enhance fairness, reliability and inclusivity in candidate selection (Masenya et al., 2020). By strengthening the connection between legislative intent and practical application, public institutions can improve HR management outcomes and foster a more capable and representative workforce.

Linking human resource management practices to organisational performance

Recruitment, selection and retention practices are fundamental to enhancing the capacity of public sector institutions to deliver efficient and sustainable services. Organisational performance within government departments is closely linked to the availability, competencies and stability of skilled personnel (Shikokola, 2024). Deficiencies in HRM processes can lead to increased operational costs, diminish public trust and hinder the ability of institutions to fulfil their mandates. Conversely, implementing transparent recruitment procedures, competency-based selection methods and structured retention strategies can significantly improve employee satisfaction, ensure workforce stability and enhance service delivery outcomes (Selebano et al., 2025; Stebbins et al., 2023).

In the South African context, where policies emphasising equity and redress remain central, effective HRM is not only a technical requirement but also a strategic necessity for building a capable, sustainable and inclusive public service. Ensuring that recruitment and selection processes are rigorous, equitable and transparent is critical to strengthening institutional integrity and performance.

Reference checks exemplify how HRM practices can influence organisational effectiveness. When conducted systematically,

reference checks validate candidates' qualifications, confirm employment histories and provide valuable insights into past performance and reliability (Eds. McCandless & Gooden, 2024). However, their success hinges on the thoroughness and impartiality of the process. Unstructured or inconsistent approaches, reliance on biased referees or failure to standardise questions can compromise outcomes and affect hiring decisions (Lee & Mao, 2023).

To mitigate these risks, departments should establish clear guidelines for selecting referees, standardise questions to ensure comparability and train staff to recognise and reduce unconscious biases during the process (Molapho, 2024; Roziqin, 2025). Strengthening the rigour of reference checks can enhance the fairness and credibility of the selection process, thereby supporting better workforce decisions.

Ultimately, robust HRM management practices including comprehensive recruitment, competency-based selection and strategic retention are essential for improving workforce quality and, consequently, organisational performance within the public sector.

Psychological testing in candidate selection

Psychological assessment has become a significant component of selection procedures within the public sector, offering departments a means to evaluate candidates' cognitive capabilities, personality characteristics and job-related skills (Govender & Bussin, 2020). When implemented appropriately, these assessments assist in identifying individuals who are most suitable for specific roles and provide valuable insights into prospective job performance. The utility of these tools, however, relies on their validity, that is, the degree to which a test measures what it is intended to measure and their reliability or the consistency of results across different occasions and contexts (Lee & Mao, 2023).

A primary concern involves ensuring that psychological tests accurately assess attributes relevant to the specific role. For example, a test designed to evaluate problem-solving skills must measure relevant competencies rather than unrelated abilities; otherwise, its predictive value for job performance is compromised (Govender & Bussin, 2020). In addition, unreliable testing processes that produce inconsistent outcomes undermine the fairness and credibility of the selection process.

It is equally important to address potential biases in psychological testing. Culturally biased assessments can disadvantage certain demographic groups, leading to unfair discrimination and eroding confidence in the recruitment process (Lee & Mao, 2023). This issue is particularly pertinent in contexts such as South Africa, where diversity, equity and inclusion are fundamental policy priorities.

To mitigate these challenges, organisations should utilise validated psychological assessments that are directly relevant to the job requirements and ensure standardised

administration and scoring procedures (Masenya et al., 2020). Employing culturally neutral or locally normed tests, providing necessary accommodations for candidates with disabilities and training HRM personnel in unconscious bias awareness are vital steps towards fostering fairness and inclusivity (Taala et al., 2023).

By rigorously assessing the validity, reliability and fairness of psychological evaluation tools, public sector entities can strengthen their selection processes. This, in turn, enhances the likelihood of recruiting candidates well matched to the role's demands and supports broader objectives related to workforce stability, service quality and organisational effectiveness.

Theoretical framework on public sector human resource management

This study is grounded in the theoretical constructs of HRM, specifically drawing upon two interrelated paradigms: the RBV and HCT. Collectively, these theoretical frameworks furnish a comprehensive basis for elucidating the way recruitment, selection and retention strategies contribute to organisational efficacy within the public sector, with a particular emphasis on the DoT in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN).

Resource-based view

The RBV of the firm, initially conceptualised by Barney (1991), asserts that organisations attain sustained competitive advantage through the acquisition and management of resources that possess attributes of value, rarity, inimitability and non-substitutability (VRIN). Among these pivotal resources, human capital is distinguished as a fundamental asset that significantly influences organisational performance. Within the framework of RBV, recruitment and selection processes transcend mere administrative functions; rather, they serve as strategic mechanisms for the acquisition of talent capable of enhancing efficiency, fostering innovation and improving service delivery.

In the specific context of the South African public sector, the results of the investigation indicated deficiencies in recruitment planning and communication, alongside a disjunction between selection instruments and job specifications. Such deficiencies compromise the organisation's ability to attract and retain high-calibre human capital, thereby constraining its potential to cultivate distinctive competencies. Thus, the fortification of recruitment and selection strategies is imperative for transmuted employees into a source of strategic advantage. The RBV offers a conceptual lens through which these findings may be interpreted: effective HR practices augment organisational capability, while ineffective processes impede institutional performance.

Human capital theory

Human capital theory, founded by Becker (1993), emphasises the significance of investment in human resources as a catalyst for productivity and economic advancement.

Human capital encompasses the skills, knowledge and competencies that employees acquire through avenues such as education, training and experiential learning. From this viewpoint, organisations that allocate resources towards employee development are optimally positioned to realise long-term performance enhancements, as such investments correlate with elevated levels of job satisfaction, retention and organisational commitment.

The findings of this study resonate with the principles of HCT, particularly concerning employee retention. Sustaining workforce stability hinges on the critical aspects of ongoing training, supportive HRM initiatives and engagement tactics. These practices can be conceptualised as investments in human capital, which not only enhance individual performance but also bolster institutional efficacy over time. For the South African public sector, this highlights the necessity to transcend compliance-oriented HRM activities in favour of a more strategic paradigm that proactively nurtures and retains talent.

Integrating resource-based view and human capital theory

While RBV underscores the strategic significance of attracting and retaining rare and valuable talent, HCT elucidates the ongoing investments necessary for the sustenance and development of that talent. In concert, these theoretical frameworks accentuate that effective recruitment and selection constitute the foundational elements for securing high-quality personnel, while retention strategies that are anchored in training, engagement and support ensure that these individuals persist in contributing to organisational objectives. In the realm of the public sector, where service delivery and accountability are of utmost importance, these frameworks provide a compelling rationale for the enhancement of HRM practices to bolster institutional capacity and ensure long-term sustainability.

Together, these frameworks underscore the importance of aligning HRM practices with organisational needs, while also demonstrating how public sector institutions can strengthen their human resource base to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Research methodology

The methodology utilised in this study was designed to examine the effectiveness of recruitment, selection and retention strategies for public sector employees within the DoT. A qualitative research approach was selected, guided by the RBV and HCT, which highlight the significance of specialised skills and workforce investments in enhancing organisational performance. This theoretical framework informed the development of interview questions and the analysis of emerging themes. The methodology section outlines the research design, population and sampling strategies, data collection methods, research procedures, data analysis techniques and ethical considerations undertaken to accomplish the study's objectives.

Research design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine recruitment, selection and retention practices within the public sector. The case study methodology was suitable, as it facilitated an in-depth exploration of organisational processes within their real-world context, providing a comprehensive understanding of how HRM strategies are implemented and experienced (Azungah, 2018).

The KwaZulu-Natal branch of the South African DoT was selected as the research site, exemplifying the systemic HRM challenges prevalent in the South African public sector. As a key agency responsible for infrastructure development and transportation, the DoT's operational effectiveness relies heavily on its capacity to recruit, select and retain a qualified and dedicated workforce. However, the department faces a constrained human resource environment characterised by bureaucratic delays, limited talent pipelines and inconsistent implementation of HRM policies. These challenges are further exacerbated by the historical legacy of unequal access to employment opportunities, which continues to manifest in workforce disparities, especially in management and leadership positions (Mzezewa, 2019). Investigating the South African public sector offered valuable insights into broader workforce management challenges and potential avenues for reform.

The study was conceptually guided by the RBV and HCT, which highlight the strategic importance of a skilled workforce and underscore the necessity of investing in employee development and retention. These theoretical perspectives informed the design of the interview protocol, focusing on perceptions of recruitment effectiveness, employee development initiatives and retention strategies, as well as the analysis of emerging themes to ensure alignment between empirical findings and theoretical frameworks.

Research paradigm and approach

The study was grounded in the purview of interpretivism, which means that organisational realities are socially constructed through human interactions. This perspective emphasises the understanding of subjective phenomena and highlights the need to explore human experiences within the complex environment of organisations (Poth & Shannon-Baker, 2022).

Population and sampling techniques

The target population comprised administrative and senior management staff within the HRM division of the DoT in KwaZulu-Natal who had been employed for at least 1 year. These individuals were selected because of their direct involvement in the recruitment, selection and retention processes, and thus their capacity to provide meaningful insights. Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was employed to deliberately select participants based on their relevance to the study objectives

(Creswell, 2018; Roestenburg, 2021). As Schurink et al. (2021) explain, purposive sampling allows researchers to gain information-rich cases that can offer deep insight into the phenomenon under study. The researcher selected 10 participants from senior and 10 participants from middle management, ultimately interviewing 20 individuals. Sampling continued until data saturation was reached, that is, when no new themes or significant insights were emerging from the data, which occurred around the 17th interview. The final three interviews (18–20) were conducted to validate and reinforce the identified themes. This ensured that the sample size was sufficient to provide a comprehensive understanding of the HRM practices under investigation while maintaining methodological rigour (Engel & Schutt, 2017). The sampling strategy ensured a diverse representation in terms of gender, role and experience, which helped to capture varied perspectives on HRM practices within the department.

The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Data collection methods

Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews, which allowed participants to articulate their experiences, perceptions and attitudes in-depth (Roestenburg, 2021). Interviews provided the flexibility to probe further into responses, clarify meanings and explore emerging themes in real time. An interview guide with open-ended questions was developed to ensure consistency while also allowing room for spontaneous elaboration. The questions focused on participants' knowledge of recruitment strategies, involvement in selection processes, perceived challenges and views on retention efforts within the department. Each interview lasted between 45 min and 60 min and was conducted in a private setting to ensure confidentiality and to encourage openness. The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed insights into recruitment, selection and retention practices. Examples of these questions included: How effective are the recruitment and selection strategies implemented within the department? What role does HRM play in shaping recruitment, selection and employee retention practices? What key factors influence employee retention, and what strategies could be proposed to enhance long-term workforce stability?

TABLE 1: Demographic profile of participants ($N = 20$).

Variable	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	12	60
	Female	8	40
Age group (years)	21–30	4	20
	31–40	6	30
	41–50	7	35
	51+	3	15
Education level	Diploma	5	25
	Bachelor's degree	8	40
	Postgraduate degree	7	35
Years of service	1–5	6	30
	6–10	8	40
	11+	6	30

TABLE 2: The process of coding and theme development.

Data extract (Verbatim quote)	Initial code	Category	Theme
'Most of us don't even know when new posts are advertised; the information doesn't reach everyone'.	A lack of awareness of recruitment plans	Recruitment challenges	Recruitment communication and transparency
'Sometimes people are hired because of connections, not because they meet the requirements'.	Perceived unfairness in selection	Selection alignment issues	Competency-based selection processes
'If we had more training opportunities, staff would feel valued and stay longer'.	Training opportunities foster retention	Capacity-building for retention	Retention through engagement and capacity-building
'Policies exist, but they are not consistently applied across units'.	Inconsistent policy implementation	HR policy gaps	Recruitment communication and transparency
'Engagement with employees is weak, and many feel disconnected from management decisions'.	Weak employee engagement	Engagement barriers	Retention through engagement and capacity-building

HR, Human Resource.

Data analysis methods

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the step-by-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). This involved multiple readings of the data to identify patterns, similarities and differences. Codes were developed inductively, grouped into categories and refined into overarching themes aligned with the research objectives. This method involved several stages: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for patterns, defining and naming themes and producing the final report, and emerging themes were continually refined through iterative comparison and reflection. The thematic approach enabled the researcher to identify recurring ideas, perceptions and issues across participant narratives and to organise these into meaningful categories aligned with the study's research objectives. This process facilitated a systematic understanding of participants' experiences and supported the development of contextually grounded insights into the factors shaping recruitment, selection and retention within the public sector (Ahmed et al., 2025).

To ensure the rigour and quality of this qualitative inquiry, the study employed strategies that address credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) cited in Enworo (2023):

- **Credibility**

Credibility refers to the confidence in the accuracy and truthfulness of the findings (Bang, 2024). To enhance credibility, the researcher employed prolonged engagement with participants and used member checking during and after interviews to verify the meanings of responses. Participants were occasionally asked to clarify or validate emerging interpretations to ensure that their perspectives were accurately represented. During and after the interviews, participants were occasionally asked to clarify points or expand on ambiguous responses to ensure that their perspectives were correctly understood. This occurred primarily at the end of each interview, where the researcher briefly summarised, key issues raised and invited participants to confirm, refine or correct the interpretation. In addition, during the coding process, emerging themes were checked with two participants through brief follow-up conversations (conducted by telephone or email) to validate that the identified themes resonated with their experiences. This process strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis. Triangulation was also applied by comparing

responses across different hierarchical levels (middle vs. senior management) to validate recurring patterns. Where similar concerns emerged among both middle and senior managers (such as limited clarity in recruitment strategies), these recurring patterns reinforced the robustness of the themes. At the same time, variations in emphasis across levels, such as middle managers highlighting implementation challenges while senior managers pointed to systemic policy constraints, provided complementary perspectives that deepened understanding of recruitment, selection and retention dynamics. Together, these strategies enhanced the credibility, depth and rigour of the thematic analysis.

- **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of the study can be applied to similar contexts (Weise et al., 2020). To support this, thick, rich descriptions of the research setting, participants' demographics and context-specific dynamics were provided. This level of detail allows readers to make informed judgements about the applicability of the findings to other public sector departments or provincial contexts within South Africa.

- **Dependability**

Dependability concerns the consistency and reliability of the research process (Dobakhti, 2020). A detailed audit trail was maintained throughout the study, including documentation of interview schedules, decision points in coding and theme development and analytic memos. Peer debriefing was also conducted with academic colleagues to discuss the coding process and verify the consistency of thematic interpretations.

- **Confirmability**

Confirmability ensures that the findings are based on participants' experiences and not researcher bias (Ahmed, 2024). The researcher maintained reflexive notes throughout the research process to document potential personal assumptions, monitor bias and enhance objectivity. The use of direct quotations in the presentation of findings further reinforces that the results are grounded in the participants' voices.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations encompassed informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and voluntary participation. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, risks and their rights before providing consent (Woodfield, 2018). Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured to protect participants' privacy, and voluntary participation allowed individuals to withdraw from the study at any time they felt

the need to. This comprehensive methodology ensured the validity, reliability and ethical integrity of the study on recruitment strategies in the DoT. To ensure ethical adherence, the study was approved by the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) under the protocol number HSSREC/00004998/2022.

Results

The findings additionally shed light on the mechanisms that underpin employee commitment and the alignment of personnel practices with broader organisational objectives. Participants' responses were organised into four key themes, each representing a vital aspect of the recruitment-to-retention continuum. These themes are outlined and discussed in the next section, supported by illustrative excerpts from participant interviews.

Theme one: Existence and effectiveness of a recruitment strategy

Many participants expressed unawareness of a specific recruitment approach within the DoT in KZN. While some acknowledged the importance of a recruitment strategy, they observed a lack of detailed explanations or opportunities to engage with the strategy. However, there was a consensus among participants that a transparent and well-defined recruitment strategy, aligned with the department's goals, is crucial for attracting qualified candidates. Governmental regulations, such as the *Basic Conditions of Employment Act, 1997*, and the *Labour Relations Act, 66 (1995)*, shape recruitment practices in the public sector, emphasising fairness and equality in hiring. In addition, participants highlighted the importance of utilising both internal and external channels for recruitment, with increasing reliance on referrals and online job portals.

A solid recruitment strategy, as indicated by Ryan et al. (2015), is essential for ensuring that the DoT recruits personnel of the highest calibre and who possess the necessary skills. A recruitment plan must also be straightforward for an organisation to understand and implement effectively. In addition, such a strategy should align with the organisation's long-term goals and workforce needs, ensuring both immediate staffing solutions and sustainable talent development. Clear guidelines and measurable objectives within the plan enhance consistency, reduce bias and improve overall recruitment outcomes.

One participant was quoted saying:

'To successfully compete with the private sector, government agencies must alter their recruitment strategies. A good strategy will draw qualified candidates with a certain set of skills, talents, and personal qualities to job openings in an organisation.' (P3, Male-52yrs-Senior Mgt.)

Another participant responded:

'Honestly, I've never seen the recruitment strategy document. We just hear about posts being advertised, but we don't really know the bigger plan behind it.' (P6, Female-42yrs-Middle Mgt.)

'If there is a strategy, it's not something we are involved in. Sometimes, we just rely on HR to send out notices or tell us what positions are open.' (P8, Male-39yrs-Middle Mgt.)

Participants emphasised the value of using both internal promotions and external recruitment sources, including referrals and online platforms. However, concerns were raised about possible overreliance on informal networks, which may compromise fairness or transparency:

'There's too much dependence on referrals. It's like, if you know someone, you get in. That's not a strategy it's favouritism.' (P7, Female-45yrs-Middle Mgt.)

'We should be targeting a wider pool of applicants, especially online. That way, we get more diverse candidates.' (P13, Male-58yrs-Senior Mgt.)

The importance of aligning recruitment strategies with long-term workforce planning was also highlighted:

'We're not just hiring for today's vacancies we need people who can grow with the department and help it evolve.' (P1, Male-54yrs-Senior Mgt.)

A successful recruitment strategy should draw individuals from a wider range of backgrounds, especially for important, strategic positions. It is crucial to determine the best requirements and abilities needed to hire the most qualified and skilled personnel, as well as the best sources from which to recruit individuals (Mzezewa, 2019). Knowing the sources of recruiting and knowing which one may help the organisation find talented employees are therefore essential.

Theme two: Effect of the selection strategy

Participants underscored the indispensable role of HRM in steering recruitment and selection processes, and they emphasised the significance of HRM's involvement in evaluating candidates and ensuring their alignment with organisational objectives. The pivotal role of HRM extends beyond mere administrative tasks; it encompasses strategic planning, coordination and supervision of the entire recruitment and selection process. As one participant articulated:

'HRM is, responsible for planning, coordinating, directing, and supervising the entire process.' (P18, Male-42yrs-Middle Mgt.)

This highlights the multifaceted responsibilities vested in HRM, ranging from designing effective recruitment strategies to conducting thorough candidate evaluations. Moreover, the HRM's involvement in orientation, training and motivation initiatives was deemed crucial for fostering employee retention and satisfaction. By overseeing these aspects comprehensively, the HRM plays a pivotal role in shaping organisational culture and driving employee engagement.

As one participant stated:

'HRM personnel are crucial during the selection process because they are the ones that evaluate each candidate.' (P4, Male-49yrs-Middle Mgt.)

This underscores the pivotal role of HRM in ensuring that the organisation attracts and retains top talent that not only possesses the requisite skills but also resonates with the organisational ethos.

Many participants stated the following:

'Selection is dependent on the role at hand; it is simple for casual and generic labour, but more difficult for specialised labour.' (P2, Male-35yrs-Middle Mgt.)

'HR should make sure the selection process is based on merit. Sometimes you find people in positions who don't know the job, and that demotivates others.' (P19, Male-44yrs-Middle Mgt.)

'Selection must go beyond qualifications. We need to see if people have the right attitude and commitment.' (P20, Male-52yrs-Senior Mgt.)

The variability in selection processes depending on job role was particularly noted. Simpler, more streamlined processes were applied to casual labour, while more rigorous procedures were reserved for specialised or supervisory roles:

'For entry-level work, the process is pretty basic. But for specialist roles, we have to do panel interviews, tests, and sometimes even presentations.' (P18, Male-41yrs-Senior Mgt.)

'We need to invest more in assessments that are role-specific. One size doesn't fit all.' (P11, Male-52yrs-Senior Mgt.)

Participants also highlighted the long-term implications of effective selection for retention and organisational performance:

'If we select well from the start, we reduce problems later. Poor selection leads to poor performance, and then we start the whole process again.' (P12, Female-39yrs-Senior Mgt.)

These findings underscore the need for competency-based selection tools and structured decision-making processes, guided by HR best practices and contextual sensitivity.

Ryan et al. (2015) similarly note that selecting unskilled labour for certain roles poses minimal challenges and does not require an extensive selection process. However, for supervisory and higher-level positions, a more comprehensive and rigorous selection method becomes essential. Finding and placing a candidate is an expensive process; therefore, it is critical for a human resources manager to ensure that a candidate is interested in the position provided and that they possess the necessary qualifications and abilities (Mzezewa, 2019:65).

Theme three: Role of the human resource manager

The participants in the study echoed a unanimous sentiment regarding the pivotal role of the HRM in driving the recruitment and selection processes within the organisation. They emphasised that the HRM's involvement is not merely administrative but extends to strategic planning, coordination and supervision of the entire process.

One participant aptly put it:

'HR is not just about filling vacancies. They need to understand the department's strategic needs and make sure we hire people who fit into that bigger picture.' (P5, Female-32yrs-Senior Mgt.)

Overall, the insights gleaned from the participants underscore the strategic importance of HRM in recruitment, selection and retention processes. When organisations recognise and leverage HRM's pivotal role, they can cultivate a motivated and engaged workforce that contributes to organisational success. According to Pariani (2024), a good HRM team will ensure that selected employees obtain a sense of belonging and fulfilment; otherwise, such new incumbents would not fit well in the department and will suffer from tiredness and discouragement (Friedlander, 2018). Ability tests, for example, are extremely useful indicators of job success and hence frequently aid in the selection process, but a personality test measures the tendency to be honest, dependable and trustworthy.

Theme four: Retention strategies

While some participants acknowledged efforts towards employee retention within the DoT, others emphasised the importance of training, development and leadership in promoting employee loyalty and productivity (Al Mehrzi & Singh, 2016). Training and development programmes were seen as crucial for enhancing employee competency and motivation, ultimately contributing to retention (Griffin & Moorhead, 2017). Effective leadership was identified as a key factor in creating a positive work environment and fostering trust among employees, thus influencing retention rates:

'People leave not just because of money, but because they feel ignored or stagnant.' (P6, Male-36yrs-Senior Mgt.)

'If we don't invest in our employees through training or giving them opportunities – they won't stay.' (P9, Male-74yrs-Senior Mgt.)

Several participants highlighted that while some retention strategies were in place, such as pension benefits and job security, there was insufficient emphasis on career progression, mentorship and leadership development:

'Yes, we have benefits, but there's no clear path to grow. People feel stuck in one position for years.' (P16, Male-33yrs-Middle Mgt.)

The findings suggest that sustainable retention strategies require an integrated approach that addresses both institutional structures and individual employee needs. The findings further underscore the significance of comprehensive recruitment, selection and retention strategies at the DoT in KZN. Legislative frameworks and organisational policies shape recruitment practices, emphasising fairness and transparency. Effective selection strategies are essential for identifying qualified candidates, while HRM plays a central role in coordinating these processes and fostering employee retention through training, development and leadership (Al Mehrzi & Singh, 2016).

Discussion

This study examined recruitment, selection and retention practices in the South African public sector through the lens of the KwaZulu-Natal DoT as a case example. The findings illustrate broader systemic challenges common to many government departments, including bureaucratic recruitment delays, limited pipelines for talent development and inconsistencies in policy implementation. Such challenges align with prior scholarship highlighting the tension between merit-based recruitment principles and administrative inefficiencies in the public sector (Nkgapele & Mofokeng, 2024). This gap mirrors findings in public sector HRM literature, which emphasise that well-structured recruitment plans must be effectively communicated to ensure organisational buy-in and alignment (Stadler, 2023). Transparent recruitment is associated with increased candidate trust, enhanced organisational image and improved application rates (Abrams, 2022).

Moreover, the study revealed that recruitment often relied on traditional vacancy postings rather than proactive talent sourcing, a finding consistent with evidence that public institutions sometimes lag in adopting modern recruitment tools such as targeted outreach, digital platforms and employer branding (Demanele, 2025). Inadequate strategic planning in recruitment can contribute to a smaller, less diverse talent pool and longer vacancy periods, ultimately affecting service delivery (Tran & Kelley, 2024).

The analysis indicated a deficient cognisance among personnel concerning the presence of a cohesive recruitment strategy. Although formalised policies may be in place, the absence of effective communication and employee involvement in their execution undermines their practical utility. This observation corroborates the argument posited by Ryan et al. (2015) that, for recruitment strategies to achieve efficacy, they must not only be meticulously designed but also explicitly communicated and consistently enforced. Within the South African public sector framework, recruitment processes are regulated by legislative statutes such as the *Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1997)* and the *Labour Relations Act (1995)*, which prioritise fairness, equity and transparency. Nonetheless, as highlighted by Naidoo (2015), the operationalisation of these legal mandates into effective strategies continues to be inconsistent across numerous governmental departments. The findings reinforce the centrality of RBV and HCT in understanding HRM practices in the public sector. From an RBV perspective, recruitment inefficiencies undermine the department's ability to secure scarce, high-value skills, thereby constraining its capacity to deliver on its mandate. Similarly, HCT helps to explain how limited opportunities for professional growth and inadequate retention strategies reduce returns on workforce investment, contributing to attrition and instability.

There is increasing dependence on informal recruitment practices such as referrals, which, although expedient, may jeopardise the principles of equal opportunity and

meritocratic hiring (Mzezewa, 2019). This is congruent with the observations made by Erasmus et al. (2017), who caution against nepotism and patronage in public sector recruitment, as these practices undermine institutional integrity and obstruct the recruitment of a diverse and proficient applicant pool. The necessity for a recruitment strategy that aligns with both the department's strategic objectives and the overarching transformation agenda is paramount (Mello, 2015).

Selection practices within the department appear to be inconsistent, with streamlined procedures employed for lower-tier positions, while more stringent methods are reserved for specialised or senior roles. This differentiation aligns with scholarly literature; as Ryan et al. (2015) contend, the intricacy of the selection process should correlate with the strategic significance and skill prerequisites of the position. However, the investigation reveals that even for higher-level positions, standardised and competency-based selection instruments are not uniformly implemented. From an RBV perspective, the department's inability to attract skilled professionals diminishes its capacity to leverage human resources as a source of institutional strength. Similarly, HCT helps explain how the lack of structured training and career pathways reduces the return on investment in employees, leading to attrition and instability. Research underscores that effective selection processes should be job-specific, valid and reliable, integrating both cognitive and non-cognitive measures (Shikokola, 2024). Such approaches not only enhance the quality of hires but also reduce turnover by improving alignment between employee competencies and job demands (Molotsi, 2021).

The significance of HRM lies in assessing both the technical competencies and cultural compatibility of candidates, an approach endorsed by Breaugh (2009), who champions comprehensive selection strategies that take into account both hard and soft skills. Nevertheless, the perceived deficiencies in execution and the sporadic lack of transparency in the shortlisting process resonate with the concerns articulated by Van der Westhuizen et al. (2012) regarding inefficiencies and favouritism in public service recruitment.

Retention challenges were a recurring theme in participant responses, with turnover attributed to limited career growth opportunities, perceived unfair promotions and inadequate recognition. This aligns with recent studies showing that retention is not solely determined by pay but also by organisational culture, professional development and perceived fairness (Pereira et al., 2023). Public sector employees often value stability, yet retention is compromised when performance management and promotion systems are perceived as opaque or biased (Maake et al., 2021). By framing the study through RBV and HCT, recruitment and retention emerge as strategic rather than administrative functions. This suggests that addressing skills shortages, strengthening development pathways and creating supportive work environments are not only managerial tasks but also critical to sustaining public service performance.

Strategically integrating retention into HRM planning is essential. Literature suggests that retention strategies should include continuous skills development, succession planning and non-financial incentives such as flexible work arrangements and recognition programmes (Ntirandekura & Ainebyoona, 2022). Retention could be enhanced by aligning performance evaluation systems with transparent career progression pathways.

A recurring theme evident throughout the interviews was the pivotal function of HRM in strategising, coordinating and implementing recruitment and selection procedures. Participants perceived HRM not solely as a bureaucratic operative but as a strategic entity tasked with ensuring that recruitment practices are congruent with the department's overarching mission, legal responsibilities and human capital requisites. This perspective is robustly corroborated in existing literature, wherein HRMs are progressively recognised as strategic collaborators in organisational advancement (Armstrong, 2014).

Nonetheless, the findings elucidate considerable obstacles confronting HRMs within the public sector, including bureaucratic limitations, restricted autonomy and deficiencies in resources. Such challenges are reiterated in the research conducted by Van der Walt (2018) and Dhanpat et al. (2020), who contend that HR practitioners in the public sector frequently lack the requisite flexibility to innovate and respond expeditiously to evolving workforce requirements.

Moreover, the investigation underscored the essential function of HRM in post-recruitment activities such as onboarding, training and the motivational aspects of employee engagement, all of which are crucial for enhancing staff involvement and mitigating turnover rates (Tiainen, 2023). The absence of a systematic continuum from recruitment to integration and professional development was identified as a deficiency that could potentially jeopardise employee retention and satisfaction.

The findings reveal that HRM plays a largely administrative rather than strategic role, with limited integration of workforce planning into broader organisational goals. Strategic HRM literature stresses that HRM should act as a partner in organisational strategy, aligning people management practices with service delivery outcomes (Armstrong & Taylor, 2023). In the public sector, this requires embedding HRM in policy formulation, succession planning and leadership development (Barrett, 2021).

The lack of proactive HRM engagement hinders the department's ability to attract and retain talent in a competitive labour market. Modern HRM frameworks advocate for using data-driven decision-making, talent analytics and evidence-based HR policies to improve recruitment and retention outcomes (Cascio & Collings, 2022).

Particularly salient was the recognition of insufficient training and development opportunities as a demotivating element,

especially among younger employees. This observation aligns with empirical studies by Bradford (2024), which accentuate the significance of affective commitment nurtured through opportunities for growth and supportive managerial practices in retaining personnel. Furthermore, the findings substantiate the assertions made by Okojie et al. (2023), who argue that employee engagement is contingent upon both structural supports (such as resources and training) and relational supports (such as leadership and feedback).

The impact of leadership style on organisational culture and employee morale is profound. Effective and empathetic leadership was correlated with elevated levels of trust and commitment, reflecting the transformational leadership paradigm proposed by Deng et al. (2023), which posits that leaders who inspire, support and empower their subordinates engender heightened organisational loyalty and productivity. The study not only contributes to understanding HRM at the departmental level but also provides insights into systemic barriers that hinder effective workforce management across the public sector.

Implications and recommendations

The findings contribute to the broader discourse on public sector HRM by illustrating how systemic barriers such as bureaucratic procedures, uneven policy implementation and limited talent development directly impact workforce stability (Zolak Poljašević et al., 2025). For scholars, the study underscores the importance of grounding HRM theory in the contextual realities of developing-country public sectors, where institutional legacies and administrative constraints play a defining role. For policymakers and practitioners, the study highlights that effective HR practices are not simply an internal administrative matter but a strategic enabler of public sector performance. Investing in transparent recruitment, robust selection and meaningful retention initiatives has implications beyond staff management; it strengthens institutional capacity and contributes to more efficient and sustainable public service delivery across government departments.

Findings from this study suggest that public sector institutions should prioritise greater transparency and communication in recruitment processes, ensure competency-based selection practices and design structured retention programmes that emphasise career progression and employee engagement (Benayoune, 2024). Addressing bureaucratic inefficiencies in recruitment is particularly important, as delays in filling posts undermine both organisational performance and public service delivery. At a policy level, HRM reforms should emphasise strategic workforce planning and talent pipeline development, moving beyond compliance-driven procedures to proactive capacity-building strategies. By aligning recruitment and retention with broader service delivery mandates, public sector organisations can improve not only workforce stability but also citizen trust in government institutions.

Limitations

As a qualitative case study, this research is limited to one department and therefore does not claim statistical generalisability. However, the purpose of case-based inquiry is analytical generalisation using a bounded example to illuminate broader dynamics in the field. By focusing on the DoT, the study provides a window into the lived realities of HRM implementation in the South African public sector, which can inform theoretical debates and policy discourses.

Future research

For future research, we recommended longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effectiveness of implemented strategies and explore the impact of external factors, such as legislative changes or technological advancements, on recruitment, selection and retention practices. In addition, comparative studies across different sectors and regions could provide valuable insights into the contextual factors influencing employee management strategies.

Conclusion

This study examined recruitment, selection and retention strategies, revealing critical gaps in communication, clarity of recruitment plans and alignment of HRM practices with organisational needs. The findings underscored the importance of rigorous, role-specific selection processes to ensure the appointment of qualified candidates, alongside consistent HR planning to strengthen overall effectiveness. Retention was shown to depend on employee engagement, continuous training and supportive HRM practices that promote job satisfaction and long-term commitment.

Drawing on the RBV and HCT, the study demonstrates that effective HRM practices are vital for reducing turnover, enhancing organisational performance and sustaining service delivery in the public sector. The insights generated provide practical direction for policymakers and HR practitioners in developing transparent recruitment strategies, competency-based selection methods and structured retention initiatives to build a more stable and capable workforce.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Christopher S. Nzimande: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. Shaun Ruggunan: Investigation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Tafadzwa C. Maramura: Investigation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Olaniyi J. Olabiyi: Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Olaniyi J. Olabiyi, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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