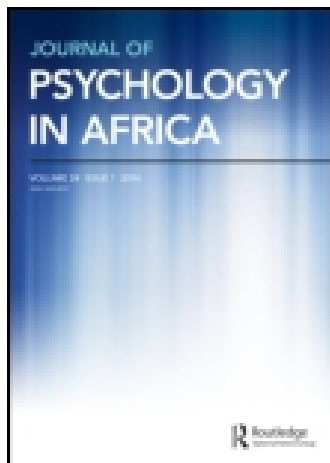


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# A Longitudinal Study of the Role of Trust During Change

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The objective of the study was to explore factors that impact on trust relationships in a sample of South African organisations. A survey on trust was administered to a convenience sample of 484 respondents in the public and private economic sectors in South Africa. Parametric and non-parametric analyses were used to examine differences in trust between economic sectors and sample periods. Public sector participants differed from private sector employees in their levels of trust, compared to those in other sectors. Specifically, measures on the dimensions of change and organisational trust were significantly lower than expected. Senior employees or those at higher job levels experienced trust more positively over time. Higher trust levels were apparent between colleagues and between employees and their immediate managers than between employees and top management.

*Keywords: trust relationships, economic sectors, top management, government sector*

Trust is important in a changing work environment (Sharkie, 2008) and is a crucial strategy for dealing with an uncertain and uncontrollable future (Stompha, 1999; Weick, 2001). According to Reina and Reina (1999, p. 11), trust is “a relationship of mutual confidence in contractual performance, honest communication, expected competence, and a capacity for unguarded interaction”. The effects of the global financial crisis might have placed trust issues across organisations in the forefront. Thus, the “health” of trust is at a premium in many organisations, and was particularly so in the 2008 and 2009 period when the effects of the global financial crisis were most dramatic.

In the South African context, trust in organisations is a significant issue, particularly in view of the socio-political transformation that followed the end of the apartheid era (Düweke, 2004; Israelstam, 1999). For instance, the implementation of employment equity led to organisations no longer being dominated by white males. Some white males might have responded to employment equity requirements by leaving the organisation or, worse still, by remaining in the organisation and covertly resisting employment equity plans and their implementation (Israelstam, 1999). Trust levels might also have been affected by managers making use of the generous severance packages offered as part of employment equity programmes and the resultant flight of key skills. The focus of this article is on investigating the impact of time on the dimension of trust, in particular during the period of the global financial crisis.

## The Trust Construct

According to Arrow (1974), trust is an important lubricant of a social system. It is extremely efficient in that it means that people can rely on that which other people promise. Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) posited that one party decides whether to trust another (the trustee) on the basis of expectations about the other party's future behaviour, as determined by the perceived trustworthiness of the trustee. Bäckström (2008, p. 21) defined trust as follows: “Trust concerns one party's confidence in an exchange partner”.

A summary of the elements in a relationship of trust, as viewed by various researchers, is provided in Table 1.

Den Hartog, Shippers and Koopman (2002) found that employees at lower levels often do not have enough discretion or resources to pursue visions that deviate significantly from basic organisational goals or those proposed by higher management. Similar findings were reported by Bews and Uys (2002).

## Research on Trust in the South African Work Context

Research by Cyster (2005) found significant differences between the results of some biographical groups in a South African company. For instance, personal trust between supervisors and subordinates was much higher in some business units than in others.

Du Plessis (2006) was of the view that where distrust existed, it was likely because knowledge was enclosed in pockets of influence and not shared. Lau, Lam, and Salamon (2008, p. 203) found that “when the composition of vertical dyads follows education and organisational rank norms (i.e., better educated vs. less educated managers, senior managers vs. lower-ranked managers), staff members perceive managerial trustworthiness to be higher than they would if the dyads were compared otherwise”. They found, furthermore, that demographic dissimilarities, compared with demographic similarities, have a more significant influence on perceptions of trustworthiness. Job levels, age, differences in education, gender and race appear to have an impact on trust relationships (Bews & Uys, 2002).

## Goals of the Study

The focus of the current study is to investigate the impact of time and job level of respondents within economic sectors (or industry) on the trust among employees. The first research question of the present study were meant to determine whether there was a significant relationship between the dimensions of trust and the economic sectors over three time periods (before July 2008, after July 2008, and in 2009). The second research question of the study sought to determine whether there was a

Table 1  
*Summary of the Elements in a Relationship of Trust*

Dimensions	Kreitner & Kinicki (1995/2007)	Mayer et al (1995)	Pennington (1992)	Shaw (1997)	Martins (2000)
Ability/competence (team management)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Benevolence		✓			
Communication (information sharing)	✓		✓		✓
Fairness (trust relationship)	✓			✓	✓
Integrity/concern		✓		✓	
Organisational trust			✓		✓
Predictability (credibility)	✓		✓		✓
Respect (trust relationship)	✓		✓		✓
Support (work)	✓				✓
Changes					✓

*Note.* The dimensions in brackets refer to Martins's dimensional names.

significant relationship between the dimensions of trust and job levels over the longer term.

## Method

### Participants and Setting

The participants were a convenience sample of 482 university students from a large South African institution. More than 90% of the participants were part-time students who were working full time in various economic sectors (see Table 2). The three groups consisted of different intakes of postgraduate students and as such, this study should be considered a repeated panel survey and not a classical cohort study.

### Measures

The data was gathered by means of a trust questionnaire (Von der Ohe & Martins, 2010). The demographic data was also gathered as listed in Table 2 above. The trust questionnaire covered a number of aspects (Martins, 2002):

**Credibility.** This includes a willingness to listen, to consider proposals, to allow others the freedom to express feelings, to tolerate mistakes and to ensure that employees enjoy prestige and credibility in the organisation.

**Team management.** This dimension refers to effective management to accomplish team and individual goals and the handling of conflict in groups.

**Information sharing.** This dimension indicates willingness to give individual feedback on performance and reveal company-related information honestly.

**Work support.** This dimension deals with the willingness to support employees when necessary and provide job-related information to accomplish objectives.

**Trust relationship.** The trust relationship dimension in the questionnaire was directly related to the trust dimension and was measured by five questions dealing with various aspects of trust between employees and their immediate supervisors. The trust relationship dimension reflects the relationship with the immediate supervisors in terms of openness, honesty, fairness and intention to motivate employees.

**Organisational trust.** This new dimension focuses on the trust relationship between top management, the immediate manager and colleagues.

**Change.** In addition to the above dimensions, this section was added to the questionnaire to measure participants' satisfaction with changes that had occurred in their organisations.

The trust questionnaire required the respondent to respond to a five-point Likert scale, where a low rating (1) indicated that the respondents strongly disagreed and a high rating (5) that they strongly agreed. The questionnaire was then scored for each of the dimensions. All the dimensions were scored in such a way that a low score indicated non-acceptance or distrust of the specific dimension, while a high score indicated acceptance of the trust dimension or high levels of trust. In addition to the above dimensions, an additional section was added to the questionnaire to measure participants' satisfaction with changes that had occurred in their organisations. Reliability in measuring these constructs was established in a previous study (Martins, 2000; Von der Ohe & Martins, 2010). See Table 3.

### Procedure

The trust questionnaire (consisting of the three biographical questions) was completed by students at doctoral, master's and honours levels during workshops and discussion classes over three time periods, namely the first half of 2008, the second half of 2008 and during 2009. All of the students were studying in the Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology in the School of Economic and Management Sciences at the University of South Africa. More than 90% of the participants were part-time students who were working full time in various economic sectors.

Students completed the surveys during the class workshops and discussions. They were assured that the data would be kept confidential and would only be used for research purposes.

### Data Analysis

Nonparametric statistics were used for the data analysis because the study involved the use of ordinal-level data. Differences were tested at the customary alpha .05.

Table 2

*Study Sample Characteristics by Time Period*

	N Before July 2008	N After July 2008	N In 2009
<b>Sectors</b>			
Primary (mining, manufacturing and construction)	23	45	41
Services	33	57	60
Government	47	52	58
Retail and wholesale	4	18	13
Education	6	14	11
Totals	113	186	183
Missing values	6	2	5
<b>Job levels</b>			
Top and senior management	26	21	24
Middle management	35	45	52
Supervisor	14	16	26
Technical or professional	24	73	59
All other levels	16	26	27
Totals	115	181	188
Missing values	4	6	-
<b>Age groups</b>			
Under 35 years	49	100	93
35 years and older	69	88	91
Totals	118	188	184
Missing values	1	-	4

Table 3

*Reliability Coefficient of Constructs*

Construct	No. of items in scale	Cronbach alpha	
		2008 (N = 307)	2009 (N = 484)
Trust relationship	5	0.929	0.920
Team management	9	0.925	0.923
Work support	3	0.900	0.890
Credibility	13	0.962	0.961
Organisational trust	9	0.876	0.864
Information sharing	4	0.851	0.860
Change	11	0.900	0.883

**Results**

The first research question of the study was to determine whether there was a significant relationship between the dimensions of trust and the economic sector in which the employees were active, measured over three time periods (before July 2008, after July 2008 and in 2009).

**Trust Profiles**

Differences in the trust profiles were observed, particularly in government departments and on two dimensions: (i) change (government and primary) and (ii) organisational trust (government and education).

A more detailed analysis was then conducted on item level to determine whether there were any significant differences by

item for the various sectors for the three time periods. These results are provided in Table 4. The results indicate significant differences for all five economic sectors, mostly for different items. The exception was for the item "I trust top management", which showed significant differences for the following public service sectors:

- education
- government
- services

In the public service, the mean of the item ("I trust top management") was the lowest in the second period, but then increased again in 2009. This trend reoccurred for most of the items in Table 4. The only exception was for education, where

Table 4

*Kruskal-Wallis Test for Items with Significant Differences Between Time Periods for the Sectors*

	$\chi^2$	df	Before July 2008			After July 2008			In 2009		
			M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N
<b>Dimension: Change – primary</b>											
Change: implementation of disability equality	9.183**	2	2.38	1.12	21	3.42	1.20	33	3.00	1.35	34
<b>Dimension: Change – government</b>											
Change: restructuring of the organisation	9.531**	2	3.08	1.14	37	2.47	1.05	43	3.17	1.09	41
Change: appointment of supervisors	10.478**	2	3.21	0.99	38	2.47	0.99	45	2.85	1.06	39
Change: more decision-making power for employees	16.238**	2	2.92	1.30	38	2.14	.87	42	3.02	.88	41
Change: management of employment equity	8.638*	2	3.24	1.12	42	2.62	1.27	45	3.27	1.12	41
<b>Dimension: Organisational trust – education</b>											
I trust top management.	6.578*	2	1.67	0.52	6	2.50	1.02	14	3.00	1.18	11
Change in the organisation is managed effectively.	6.589*	2	1.50	0.55	6	2.77	1.17	13	2.60	0.97	10
<b>Dimension: Organisational trust – government</b>											
I trust top management.	6.228*	2	3.05	1.24	44	2.42	1.07	52	2.69	1.30	54
I trust my colleagues (team members).	5.762*	2	3.65	0.99	46	3.12	1.23	51	3.52	1.11	56
<b>Dimension: Organisational trust – services</b>											
I trust top management.	6.480*	2	3.64	0.96	33	3.30	1.31	53	3.44	1.10	57
<b>Dimension: Team management – education</b>											
Ensures that colleagues and I perform at an acceptable level.	7.827*	2	2.83	.98	6	4.21	.97	14	3.45	0.93	11
Conducts meetings in an effective manner.	8.405	2	2.33	1.21	6	4.14	1.10	14	3.64	0.92	11

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

both items were higher in the second and third time periods than in the first time period.

These results prompted the researchers to also investigate the overall item results and to look specifically at the highest and lowest ranked overall items. These results are depicted in Table 5. An interesting trend that emerged was that the five highest ranked items focused mainly on the dimensions of organisational trust and team management.

Among the five lowest ranked items, three referred to organisational trust (Table 5). The items that appear in both tables are "I trust top management" and "Change in the organisation is managed effectively". The results for these seem to indicate that trust in top management plays a major role in the trust relationships between management and employees. This is confirmed by Sharkie (2008), who found that perceived organisa-

tional support and trust in management are indicators of trust with strong factor loadings – 0.86 and 0.80 respectively.

The highest and lowest ranked overall items were focused mainly on the dimensions of organisational trust and team management. The lowest ranked items included "I trust top management" and "Change in the organisation is managed effectively". These results seem to indicate that trust in top management plays a major role in the trust relationships between management and employees.

The second research question sought to determine whether there is a significant relationship between the dimensions of trust and job levels over the longer term.

Significant differences in trust by job levels ranged from 5 to 10 percent on the following variables: change (5% level), trust

Table 5  
Five Highest and Five Lowest Ranked Statements

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Dimension
<b>Items for five highest ranked statements</b>				
My colleagues trust me.	480	3.96	.948	Organisational trust
My immediate manager trusts me.	476	3.66	1.140	Organisational trust
My immediate manager talks freely about his/her opinions on how things should be done around here.	491	3.85	1.157	Team management
My immediate manager is a self-disciplined person.	485	3.76	1.185	Team management
I have an open and trusting relationship with the person I report to.	492	3.63	1.142	Trust relationship
<b>Items for five lowest ranked statements</b>				
My immediate manager asks for feedback on his/her performance.	485	2.46	1.349	Information sharing
Employees in the organisation are prepared for change that might affect them.	471	2.64	1.138	Organisational trust
Change in the organisation is effectively managed.	472	2.75	1.118	Organisational trust
I trust top management.	476	2.95	1.218	Organisational trust
Change implementation of disability equality.	377	2.93	1.247	Change

relationship (5% level), work support (10% level), organisational trust (10% level), and credibility (5% level).

### Discussion

The results of the current study make several contributions. Firstly, concerning the time dimension for the different sectors, the findings indicate significant differences in the primary, government and educational sectors for the dimensions of change and organisational trust. The reasons for the difference are not apparent. Continued economic growth over the period may explain the observed relationship.

Trust levels mostly sustained over time. A reason for this could be the positive economic climate in South Africa due to the optimistic expectations for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. A further reason could be that the global economic meltdown did not fully hit South Africa, because South Africans were somewhat protected by residual exchange controls (Ross, 2009).

Employees representing the different job levels did not experience trust in the same way across the three time periods. However, of greater importance than the five dimensions that significantly differed over time (namely change, trust relationships, work support, organisational trust and credibility) were the dimensions that remained stable (team management and information sharing) over the three measurement phases. These two dimensions might be more stable over time since they appear to relate to goal accomplishments and performance issues (refer to the respective descriptions above) which should remain equally important in an organisation during times of change.

Top and senior management were the most positive in their trusting. These results confirm the findings of previous research by Bews and Uys (2002), namely that employees at higher job

grades – compared to those at lower grades – have more trust in their direct supervisor (who tends to be part of top management). A more recent study in a South African organisation by Esterhuyze and Martins (2008) indicated a perceived lack of trust between management and employees, with significant differences between the results of the job levels for leadership, which include trust (see also Cyster, 2005).

The highest levels of trust were between colleagues or with immediate managers, while the lowest level of trust was between employees and top management. According to Shaw (1997), in order to succeed, businesses require two things: a winning competitive strategy and superb organisational execution. Distrust is the enemy of both these prerequisites. Ryan and Oestreich (1998) contend that a cycle of mistrust usually develops between employee and employer, which can lead to a continuous cycle that drives self-protective behaviour in a self-reinforcing manner and captures both parties in a snowball effect of mistrust. The reason for the low trust in top management could be a number of economic drivers in the South African economy, including large salary/wage discrepancies between senior management and general workers/staff (see Legassich, 2010).

### Conclusion

We acknowledge the limitation to generalizability of having used a convenience sample. The results suggest that trust is important to organizational health.

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