Full Length Research Paper

Productivity and morale of administrative employees in the South African public service

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This article reports on a study conducted among non-managerial administrative employees in the South African public service to determine what they need to perform to their optimum level and what will make them feel that they are well looked after. The empirical survey focused on perceptions of administrative employees, to determine and identify barriers to efficiency as well as to evaluate the role physical workplace factors play in service delivery and in terms of the morale of the employees. These employees identified many intrinsic as well as extrinsic job factors that influence their productivity and morale negatively. Leaders in government, and managers in the public service, should take every possible measure to identify and decrease the current skills shortage, not only within the ranks of employees, but also among the different management levels. Training and education needs should be addressed to ensure optimum levels of performance and motivated employees. This matter influences the entire country and even the president of South Africa has referred to this issue. The improvement of these issues will not only produce happier and more productive employees, but would probably also lead to cost reduction and savings in the entire public sector of this country.

Key words: Public service, skills shortage, job factors, productivity, morale, administrative function.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking during the African National Congress (ANC) manifesto launch in Rustenburg on 27 February 2011, President Jacob Zuma said that the national and provincial government will intervene at local level to remedy weaknesses in terms of service delivery. In his speech, he also referred to municipalities lacking capacity in management and service delivery, ANC councillors being required to tell their communities about their plans and targets to improve service delivery and government's plans to deal with tendering fraud and corruption (Zuma, 2011). This described situation does not reflect on an efficient, effective and productive public service.

The research on which this article is based was prompted by the poor service delivery in South Africa as well as the fact that little research has been done on non-managerial administrative employees in the South African

The primary objective of most public sector public service.

organisations is to provide a social benefit within a limited budget. This contrasts with private sector organisations, whose primary focus is on increasing profits. It is not surprising, therefore, that private sector organisations have higher productivity and profitability. Because public sector organisations operate in an environment characterised by various resource constraints, market competition and growing client expectations, these organisations are inherently inefficient, because they lack the incentives that exist in the private sector (Agus et al., 2007).

Inefficiency in the public service might be caused by various factors. Wilby (2007) cites Sennet, who points out that inefficient organisations are staffed by personnel who are not in all instances hired for their skills. Kamoche (1997) indicates that in attempting to achieve a complicated set of socio-economic and political objectives, human resource considerations are all too often neglected. It can be argued that before the potential of human

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resources can be realised, all levels of administrators have to acknowledge the value of their knowledge, skills and abilities. The problems identified in the past include inappropriate management practices, weak and inefficient decision making, low efficiency, poor investment planning, low productivity and overstaffing, and a host of other organisational and institutional problems, ranging from a history of ineffectual bureaucratic methods and low-quality administrative skills to political patronage and government interference.

The South African government also needs to acknowledge mistakes being made during the implementation of the policy of employment equity, which is exacerbating the problem of skills shortages. Employment equity does not mean putting an unskilled or inexperienced person in a position in which performance is impossible. Such actions that are driven by political patronage objectives undermine our society's ability to recruit and retain the best people in both the public and the private sectors (TUT, 2007).

Much research has been done on performance management programmes, but this study focused on the intrinsic and extrinsic needs of administrative employees that might affect their performance and wellbeing. If the needs regarding the working environment of these employees can be identified and met – at least to some extent – surely, the morale and productivity of employees should increase. The article provides a background to the functions of administrative employees in the South African public service and the skills required to fulfil their professions. It discusses the selection of administrative candidates in terms of the impact of job and job-related factors, external barriers and *Batho Pele* ("people first") on the morale and productivity of employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The measurable success of any institution relies primarily on a competent, well-trained and accountable workforce. The employees representing the lowest level of the hierarchical structure, namely the administrative employees, form the crucial foundation of the organisation. South Africa is largely government-driven, and the ability of the state to act on pressing challenges, such as poverty and service delivery, depends largely on the capability and commitment of the public service and its employees. The public service in South Africa needs to be transformed, as it is costing the country a great deal of money and frustration is building up in many local communities. This situation regarding local government is one of the state's main challenges. In the spirit of *Batho Pele*, institutions should effectively cater for all the needs of their administrative employees before transformation can be successfully carried out (Mhlanga, 2006: 78). *Batho Pele*, a Sotho phrase meaning "people first", is a simple and transparent mechanism that allows citizens to hold public servants accountable for the level of services

they deliver (DPSA, 2010). This study focused on public services, which can be seen as a subdivision of the public sector.

The non-managerial administrative function

The word 'administration' derives from the Middle English word *administracioun*, which has particular meanings in various contexts, but all retain a sense of service provision. In order to divide the administrative working environment into categories according to job title and the specialised skills needed, the ranks of the administrative positions can be defined as follows (Van Antwerpen, 2003):

Stratum 1: Typist/PC operator/Data capturer/Clerk/Filing clerk/Receptionist
Stratum 2: Junior secretary/Office assistant
Stratum 3: Secretary/Administrative assistant/Office manager/Administrative officer
Stratum 4: Executive secretary/Personal assistant

The administrative professions of both the private and the public sectors can be classified into these levels. The kind of business and the type of industry will determine how businesses divide their administrative spheres. They may not necessarily make use of all the levels or strata indicated. The higher the rank, the more elite the job description becomes, with more responsibility as well as a higher remuneration package (Van Antwerpen, 2003). For the purpose of this article, the strata as subdivided above were adopted.

In order to focus on the administrative function, one needs to know exactly where these candidates are placed in the hierarchy of management. It has to be kept in mind that each organisation compiles its unique structure depending on its personalised needs. In the administrative environment, hierarchy means a graded organisation of several successive steps or levels that are interlinked, integrating the efforts of various individuals with one another (Collins, 1999). Levels of management refer to a line of demarcation between various managerial positions in an organisation; the number of these levels will depend on the size of the organisation and its workforce. These levels can be classified into three broad categories. The administrative level, especially the non-management level, forms a separate level below the management hierarchy of top, middle and lower management. Administrative employees are referred to as non-managerial staff or employees. Their output is usually monitored and managed from the top to the bottom level, in other words in a top-down approach.

Background history of South Africa

In February 1990, Mr FW de Klerk, former State President of South Africa, announced the end of

apartheid in a historic speech in parliament and declared himself in favour of a democratic South Africa. In secret negotiations beforehand, the ANC and the government had agreed to refrain from violence and to work for a peaceful transition and a new constitution (Burger, 2010). In a referendum voted on by the white population in South Africa, almost 70% supported a continuation of the reforms. After a further two turbulent years, a new constitution was drafted.

Due to isolation before 1994, South Africa had to turn inward to meet primary survival needs (Luthans et al., 2004). In April 1994, the first democratic elections were held in South Africa. As expected, the ANC gained an overwhelming majority. The first South African democratic election became a historic turning point in the public service domain, with a black majority government not only putting an end to apartheid, but also initiating a paradigm shift for leaders and employees.

Difficulties in transforming the public service

The South African public service is still in a process of transformation, pressured by high expectations from management as well as from the nation, its client. A study conducted by Curtis (1999) found that the residue of the former underperforming administrative structure was at that time (during the late 1990s) in the midst of rapid change through restructuring, redeployment and process re-engineering. This situation created a climate of power struggles, competition and restructuring, leading to a situation with little complacency. Because the aim was to dismantle and rebuild state structures to a level that will produce excellent outputs, transformation had to take place within a limited time. Expectations set are high, and the temptation must be resisted to borrow existing ideas and experience from other countries, which might not be appropriate for our situation. Luvuno (2005) points out that even prior to the first democratic election in 1994, structural and administrative culture adjustments to the public service were urgently needed. In a more recent study, Cameron (2009) points out that although a number of measures have been taken to improve service delivery, the outcomes are varied. A systematic service culture is perhaps still absent.

Curtis (1999) cites a number of examples of poor performance in government sectors in South Africa. Poor performance may be due to factors such as the continuing pace of externally imposed change, chronic uncertainties and anxieties about amalgamation of different public sectors, and externally imposed contradictions and constraints, such as the balancing of budgets against the pressure not to dismiss any employees. Lack of leadership experience in handling the political–administrative interface is a further negative factor.

It is interesting to note that public sector transformation also occurred in other African countries where, for example, they have attempted to transform their public service from a colonial-oriented to a development-oriented one. This has led to their centralising and expanding public service dominance over their society and economy. The first wave of administrative reforms in the continent had limitations as well as achievements. Great focus was placed on replacing expatriates with indigenous personnel, with a view to transforming the public service into an Africanised organisational structure in order to improve productivity. One of the main characteristics of the first wave of reforms is that they were formulated and implemented by African governments themselves. The second wave was introduced with the exact opposite in mind: to reduce the size and scope of the public service and thus reduce the cost of operations. Such policies resulted in personnel retrenchment and a rigorous census of personnel to eliminate all 'ghost workers' – a term used for employees being falsely recorded as doing a particular job or fulfilling a particular function in order that some benefit, especially money, may be obtained However, the desired effect was not obtained: Skilled senior personnel were the first to exit the public service, which further harmed the institutions involved, in South Africa as well as in other African countries (Olowu and Otobo, 2005).

In South Africa, *Batho Pele* was introduced as an initiative with the aim of making public servants service-orientated and of ensuring that they strive for excellence in service delivery and are committed to continuous service-delivery improvement.

Batho Pele: A South African initiative

Eight *Batho Pele* key principles were developed in South Africa to serve as an acceptable policy and legislative framework for upgrading service delivery in the public service. The key principles are consultation, setting service standards, increasing access, displaying courtesy, providing information, openness and transparency, redress, and value for money. These principles stipulated by the Department of Public Service and Administration are directly aligned with the constitutional ideals of:

i. Promoting and maintaining high standards of professional ethics;
ii. Providing service impartially, in a fair, equitable and bias-free manner;
iii. Utilising resources effectively and efficiently;
iv. Responding to people's needs (citizens are encouraged to participate in policy making); and
v. Becoming an accountable, transparent and development-oriented public administration.

The fundamental role of human resources

It is a global trend that public sector employees represent a significant proportion of all employees. Government

enterprises worldwide are regarded as labour-intensive, being responsible for providing services, enforcing laws and regulations and solving problems. Their missions include protection of the physical environment, safety, education and civil-rights enforcement. All these activities require the intensive use of human resources. The quality of employees working in these various divisions directly affects the performance of the specific department. Although one of the essential tasks of human resource managers is to find qualified employees for these government positions, they also have to promote an attractive working environment for these employees (Huntley and Kleiner, 2005).

One of the responsibilities of human resource managers is to accomplish their mission by partnering with employees and citizens to create a responsive atmosphere that values and supports creativity, risk taking, integrity and diversity to provide excellence in client service. Quah (2010) points out that Singapore has established a Public Service Commission (PSC) with the core function of maintaining an impartial system for the recruitment, promotion and dismissal of people in key positions in its public service. Quah found in his study that any country that wishes to succeed must have a system that enables the best and most suitable candidate to perform a particular job with specifically identified requirements. The right person to do the job must be found and therefore you need an open recruitment system and proper appraisal systems. One of the main challenges of the PSC was to shift the emphasis of its personnel management philosophy from one that was task-oriented to one that was employee-oriented. The PSC places a high value on ensuring that new appointees are suitably qualified for the positions they are appointed to. All promotion and advancement of staff take place only on merit. This policy has resulted in attracting the best and the brightest citizens to join the government and the civil service of Singapore (Quah, 2010).

Holzer and Kloby's (2005) comment, with regard to their study on public performance measurement, is that a key part of managing for quality entails developing human resources. The appropriate employees have to be recruited and provided with training and support. Good managers understand the importance of taking care of the needs of both the employees and the organisation. The public sector can only benefit from recruiting the best employees for the job.

President Jacob Zuma (2010) recently highlighted this problem of inefficient service delivery. He asked representative director-generals of government departments in Cape Town what the problem was, as, according to his knowledge, highly skilled managers were employed who were given sufficient budgets and other resources. He enquired about the appointment process, as the appointted candidates seem to lack the necessary skills to perform their duties efficiently once they have been appointed. On another occasion, Mr. Zuma also commented that after almost two decades in power, the ANC has no more excuses for not delivering faster change (Hamlyn, 2010). He concluded that unless attitudes in the public service change and delivery ethics improve, there will be no progress.

Research problem and objectives

Where other studies in this area have focused either on the views of managerial staff or on the perceptions of clients, looking at the level of service delivery in the global public service environment, this study focused on the key role that administrative employees fulfil in the South African public sector.

The problem examined pertains to administrative employees in the South African public service not performing to their optimum level. The question was asked: "What do these employees need to perform to their optimum level, and what will make them feel as if they are well looked after?"

In order to address this problem, the following objectives were identified:

1. To observe and measure the impact of job and job-related factors on the morale of employees
2. To identify possible external barriers that might impede productivity
3. To establish the impact of *Batho Pele* on service delivery and the morale of administrative employees
4. To investigate the processes used in the public service to recruit staff

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research on which this article was based aimed at isolating the administrative function and identifying possible psychological barriers to efficiency as well as evaluating the role that physical workplace factors might play in service delivery and on the morale of the employees. The target population consisted of administrative employees in an information and communications technology interface public service environment in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Various local and provincial government departments were included in this investigation. This research was not representative of the entire South African environment, as only one province out of nine was included. Data were obtained by using structured questionnaires. The respondents ($n = 51$) simply had to select and mark the applicable answer from a list of options, or rank supplied options according to their importance. Frequency tables, Pearson's chi-square and t-tests were used on results obtained, depending on the outcomes required. The type of study used can be regarded as a combination of quantitative and qualitative data approaches.

RESULTS

The results are dealt with, under two headings, namely, demographic information and factors and barriers influencing productivity.
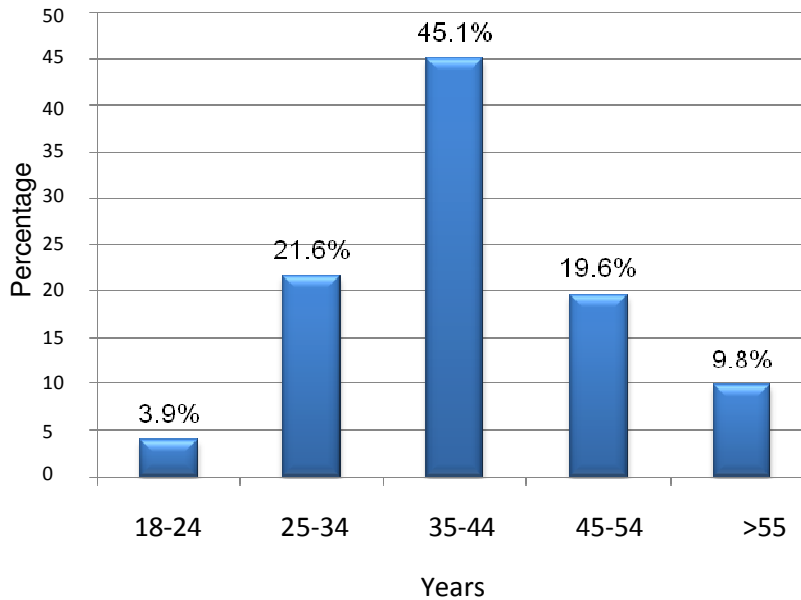
Figure 1. Distribution of age group categories.

Table 1. Benefits offered.

Eligibility	Frequency	% of responses	% of cases
Telework	3	2.8	5.9
Merit/performance bonuses	11	10.2	21.6
Flexi working hours	13	12.0	25.5
Overtime	15	13.9	29.4
Promotion	30	27.8	58.8
Bonus	36	33.3	70.6
Total	108	100.0	211.8

Demographic information

A significant majority (70.6%) of the respondents were female. This result is a true reflection of the fact that the administrative environment is after generations still a female-dominated field (Van Antwerpen and Ferreira, 2010).

Figure 1 provides data on the age distribution of the respondents. The majority of the respondents (74.5%) were 35 years of age and older, indicating that they form part of a more mature workforce that is likely to be more experienced than the younger respondents.

Regarding the number of years of experience in their current positions, 60.8% of the respondents had more than 10 years' experience in the public service. A significant majority (97.1%) formed part of the permanent employee corps, with 64.7% of the respondents earning a gross salary package of R90 000 per annum and above. With regard to qualifications, a total of 41.2% of the respondents have only a Grade 10 to a matric/Grade 12 certificate as their highest qualification. These candidates may, on a salary package of R 90 000 and above per annum with benefits, reflect South African standards equating earnings with level of qualification.

In order to determine to what extent the public service offered additional benefits, the respondents had to indicate for which of six commonly found options they were eligible (they could choose more than one option). Table 1 reflects the results ranked from the least to the most often selected option.

In contrast to the public sectors in several developed countries, the South African public sector has not adapted to the principle of telework. Awarding merit or performance bonuses is a system that benefits only some employees, as only a limited number can be awarded per annum. Arguments can occur between candidates, as the criteria for selection are based on self-evaluation as well as evaluation by superiors. The question that arises is how one measures a candidate's true objectivity in appraising him- or herself. Although 70.6% of the respondents indicated that they received annual bonuses, 29.4% did not have this privilege, which might
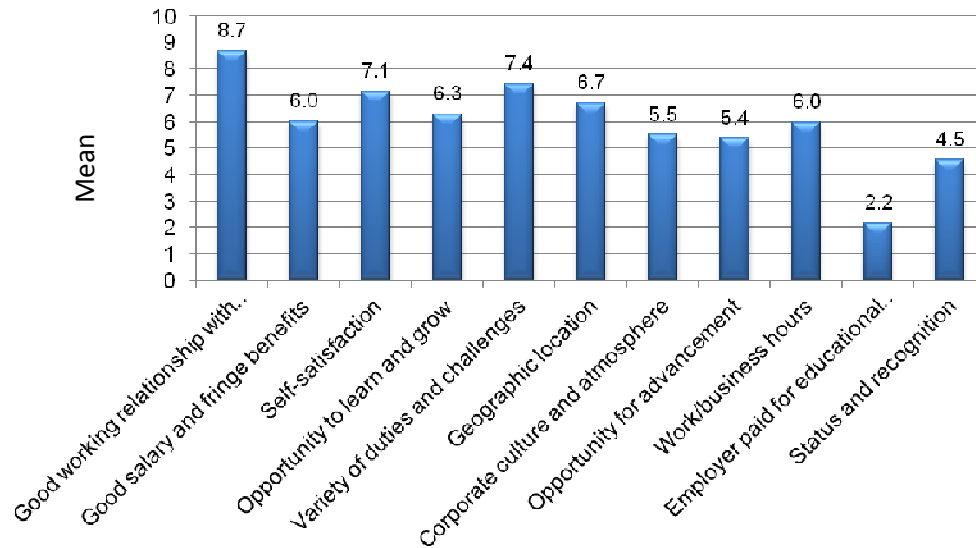
Figure 2. Job satisfaction factors in the working environment.

be common in the private sector, but not in the public sector.

Factors influencing the morale and productivity of employees

The satisfaction of non-managerial administrative employees in the South African public service was determined from their answers to questions covering the physical working environment, their morale and the role government plays in the wellbeing of its employees.

Job and job-related factors and the morale of employees

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents (64.7%) strongly agreed with the statement "Top management make promises they don't keep". Promises made related to a better working environment, better infrastructure, dealing with corruption and skills improvement. The breaking of such promises lowers the morale of employees.

When the respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement that "Clients' needs are more important than those of the administrative employees", 45.1% agreed. Although workers are trained to believe that the "Client is always right", the workers need to be sure that they have the moral support of their superiors. Such support will have a positive effect on their overall productivity and morale. A contented workforce could lead to more satisfied clients.

A significant majority (60.8%) of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement "Top management take decisions without taking into consideration the

logistics required to meet their demands". Decisions are made at the top level of the management hierarchy and passed down to the lower levels. Desired outcomes have to be met, despite the fact that the input from these workers is seldom required and their needs are not taken care of.

Ranking a list of 11 possible job satisfaction factors (Figure 2), the respondents chose "Good working relationship with superiors and co-workers" as the most highly ranked, with a mean score of 8.7. The second highest ranked factor was "Variety of duties and challenges", with a mean score of 7.4. Significantly lower than all the factors listed was the "Employer paid for educational courses", with a mean score of only 2.2. One of the main priorities of the South African government is to provide education to all, with the prospect that education will provide people with a secure future. With a large number of public servants that do not have any tertiary education, this priority of government is commendable in uplifting the workforce to enhance productivity and ensure a skilled labour force. When asked about the opportunity to attend training courses whenever the need arose, 58.8% indicated that they would like to. Educating the current workforce and providing the opportunity for self-enrichment would benefit the general public, the clients, management as well as the public service as an entity.

External barriers and productivity

The least important motivating factors for being employed in the public sector as indicated by the respondents were "Obtaining qualifications through the public service due to a lack of funds" (chosen by only 12%) and "Good salary
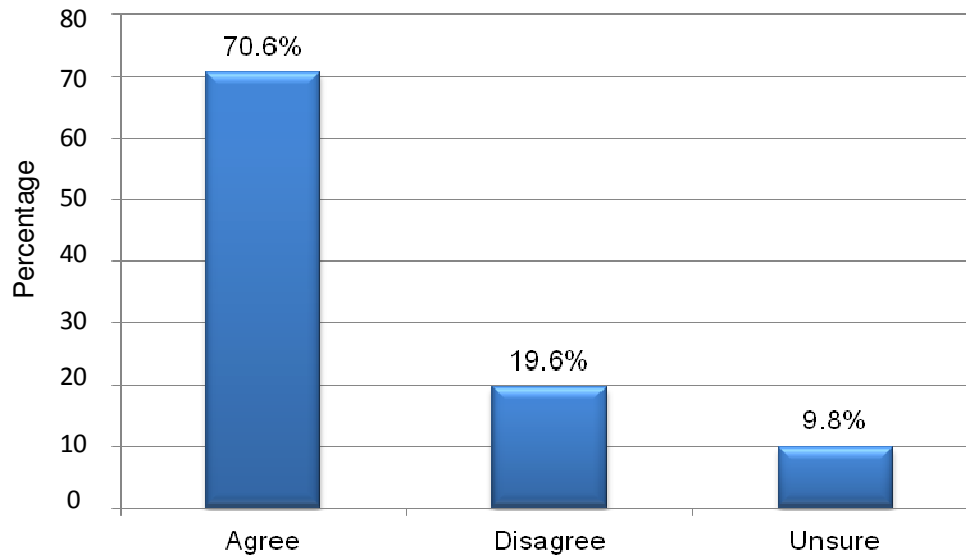
Figure 3. "I work in a stressful environment".

and benefits" (chosen by only 14%). It is generally accepted that salaries of similar administrative positions in the private sector are relatively higher.

Figure 3 illustrates the responses to the statement: "I have a working environment that is stressful". Stressful aspects in the workplace may include factors such as a lack of equipment, incompetence and poor management. Measures creating a stress-free working environment would be the ideal solution. Offering courses on techniques and coping mechanisms (for example, time management, skills improvement and diversity management) to the employees on the lower levels could similarly have a positive effect on productivity.

When asked what they enjoyed about their jobs, 54.9% indicated that they enjoyed dealing with people and an equal number enjoyed the fact that their jobs as administrative employees played an important role in the organisation. Only 19.6% of the respondents ranked "Making decisions" and "Representing my manager(s)" as factors of enjoyment in their jobs, showing once again that they are not really included in the decision-making process.

As the main motivation for being employed in the public service, the majority (56%) of the respondents selected "Secure working environment" and 48% chose "Smaller possibility for retrenchment". The possibility of retrenchment in the public service is relatively small compared to the public sector. Job security is currently one of the main concerns in a country where unemployment figures are extremely high.

Regarding the level of satisfaction with various workspace environmental factors, ranked from the most important to the least important factor, the respondents listed "Lighting", with a mean score of 7.5 as most important, followed by "Comfort level in general", with a

mean score of 6.8, and then "Security", with a mean score of 6.6. A significant majority (64.7%) would like to have faster and more powerful computer hardware, which could improve their overall productivity and efficiency. Another 39.2% of the respondents selected "Additional software/upgraded software" as useful for increasing productivity. According to the respondents, information technology-related problems are taken care of within two hours and more than 70% of calls are taken care of within 24 h.

The process of staff recruitment among the respondents seems quite normal. The only area of concern is related to the presence or absence of an orientation/induction programme. Nearly half of the respondents were not exposed to such a programme. This could have a negative influence on productivity, especially during a public servant's first few months of employment.

Gender-related differences

Although this research was confined to the Gauteng province of South Africa, it confirmed that the administrative environment is still a female-dominated field. Because of the female dominance, some cross-tabulations were performed to determine whether there were any significant differences between the perceptions of the male and female respondents regarding specific issues.

Cross-tabulation was done of the responses of the male and female respondents to the question: "If you had the opportunity to be employed in the private sector, would you exchange the public for the private sector?" The results obtained showed that a significant 83.3% of the women would consider exchanging the public for the

private sector if they had the opportunity to do so.

Cross-tabulation of the responses of the male and female respondents was done on the question asking whether the government sector provided sufficient tools to allow the respondents to do their jobs without obstacles. The null hypothesis was that there were no differences between the two groups on this issue. The Pearson's chi-square measured 7.1497, with an observed probability of 0.008. At the 95% level of significance the probability (p-value) is 0.008, which is smaller than 5% ($p < 0.05$), which means that the null hypothesis is rejected at the 95% level of significance. This test therefore indicates significant differences between the perceptions of the male and female respondents in terms of this question. Men, regarded by some as more technologically orientated than their female counterparts, may have higher technological requirements.

Another cross-tabulation of the responses of the male and female respondents was done on the question referring to the effective and efficient utilisation of resources in their section. The null hypothesis was that there were no differences between the perceptions of the two groups in terms of this question. The Pearson's chi-square measured 9.6150 with an observed probability of 0.047. At the 95% level of significance, the probability (p-value) is 0.047, which is smaller than 5% ($p < 0.05$). This means that the null hypothesis is rejected at the 95% level of significance. Once again the result indicates that male and female respondents have different perceptions of the utilisation of resources. Although both men and women perform the same tasks and jobs, they may have different viewpoints on the type of resources required and how well government utilises its resources.

Cross-tabulations of the responses of the male and female respondents were also done on the following questions, but there proved to be no significant differences between the perceptions of the two groups:

i. I am treated by my superiors as a valuable customer.
ii. I have a working environment that is stressful.
iii. My needs (physical and emotional) are important to my superiors.
iv. I am proud to work for the South African public sector.
v. Top management take decisions without taking into consideration the logistics required to meet theirdemands.
vi. Top management make promises they don't keep.
vii. Clients' needs are more important than those of the administrative employees.

Conclusion

The ongoing discussion reveals that there are many possible reasons for the low levels of productivity and morale of employees in the South African public service. The research uncovered significant sources of job dissatisfaction among these employees. Promises relating to issues such as a better working environment, improved infrastructure, dealing with corruption and skills improvement are made by top management, but are not kept, which lowers the morale of the employees. Centralised decision making by top management without taking into consideration the logistics required in meeting their demands leaves employees vulnerable in trying to meet these demands. This vulnerability influences not only their morale but also their productivity negatively. Employees also feel that they are not well looked after regarding their physical and emotional needs. Although more than half of the respondents would like to make use of opportunities to attend training courses, it seems that the employer does not pay for such courses readily. Although salaries and benefits seem to be good, the employer does not contribute to motivating the employees. The fact that salaries of similar administrative positions in the private sector are relatively higher is generally accepted. It was also interesting to note that more than two-thirds of the respondents consider their working environment to be stressful. Studies in other provinces might uncover similar results.

On a more positive note, most of the respondents enjoy the secure working environment, dealing with people and appreciate the fact that their jobs play an important role in the organisation.

Regarding the external barriers perceived by the respondents, they chose lighting, general comfort and security as the most important factors influencing productivity. They also indicated that faster and more powerful computer hardware could improve their overall productivity and efficiency. These results show that there are many job-related factors as well as external barriers that probably influence the morale and the productivity of the employees in a negative way. Training and education of not only the employees, but also at the different management levels in public sector could improve productivity and morale.

A detailed investigation to determine and address the gap between the current skills of the employees and management and the skills needed to be effective and productive needs to be conducted. The situation regarding the external factors should also be looked at and improved where possible. Ensuring job satisfaction is only one side of the coin. The other is appointing skilled and qualified people for the job. Too many unskilled employees are forming part of the public sector because it provides job security and a limited chance of retrenchment. Human resource departments must ensure that the best candidate for a position is appointed. There is a clear link between skills, education and performance. Prospective candidates must be rigorously tested to determine the true level of skills that will contribute to the working environment. South Africa places high value on education for its people, but lacks the platform to ensure

that unskilled and undereducated employees enjoy the privilege of qualification improvement.

In conclusion, further investigation, training and education are required to enable employees in the public sector to perform at their optimal level and to manage them in a way that makes them feel well looked after. The question may be asked whether anyone could expect people to work effectively and productively and to be motivated if neither the basic extrinsic job factors nor the intrinsic job factors that should motivate them are in place. It is hoped that national and provincial government will respond to the statement of President Jacob Zuma by intervening at local level to remedy weaknesses in terms of service delivery and by addressing municipalities' lacking capacity in management and the delivery of services.

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