

# A Generic Competency Framework for Labour Relations Practitioners in the South African Public Service

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## Abstract

This article reports on the findings of a qualitative content analysis study that explored the generic competencies required of labour relations practitioners in the South African public service with a view to developing a generic competency framework for these practitioners. Data were gathered through conducting semi-structured interviews with 17 labour relations experts from different institutions. The data were coded and categorised, and themes were identified that characterised the participants' experiences, perceptions and views, providing evidence about the competencies of labour relations practitioners. From the data, 44 competencies were identified that could be regarded as essential to labour relations practitioners' successful and efficient fulfilment of their role, and these competencies were grouped into nine themes. A generic competency framework for labour relations practitioners was developed based on the results obtained. The findings of this study could potentially form the foundation of new theory for the advancement, training and development of labour relations practitioners.



**Keywords:** labour relations; labour relations practitioner; competency; competency framework; qualitative content analysis

## **Introduction**

Labour relations, which are relevant to most work situations, such as in shops, offices, factories, mines, hospitals, public service departments, on farms and in private households, refer to the relationship between employers and employees. For this reason, the concept of labour relations is a complex and dynamic one (Finnemore, 2013, p. 1). The complexity of the discipline of labour relations is due to the fact that it exists in the broad context of many roles, rights, expectations, obligations and duties in the workplace, and what makes it even more complex is that these roles, rights, expectations, obligations and duties may apply to either an individual or a group (Bendix, 2015; Van der Westhuizen & Wessels, 2011). As the authors acknowledge the diverse nature of labour relations, they propose that the following definition be considered for the purposes of the current study:

Labour relations is the study and practice of the relations between the parties in the labour relationship, the roles and interactions, the processes, procedures, rules and regulations which govern the relationship, as well as the legislation, structures and institutions involved. (Botha, 2016, p. 31)

From its inception in 1919, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has worked to ensure labour justice by promoting tripartite agreement as a means of giving a voice to all parties (ILO, 2013). This tripartite relationship involves three core players, namely employees, employers and the state (Finnemore, 2013; Tustin & Geldenhuys, 2000). In the public sector, the state itself is an employer, a role which may conflict with its other roles of legislator, conciliator and regulator (Bendix, 2015). This creates unique challenges in labour relations management that organisations in the private sector do not typically encounter (Bendix, 2015).

Conflict between labour and management in the public service is not a narrow labour relations issue of interest to the parties alone (Adler, 2000). With over 1.5 million employees, the public service is the biggest single employer in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2014). Through its procurement policies, the public service is also the biggest single consumer of goods and services. Its wages and the benefits it provides have a significant influence on demand, particularly in provinces where public servants make up a large proportion of the total workforce (Adler, 2000; Van der Westhuizen & Wessels, 2011). In 2007, the then Minister of Public Service and Administration, Fraser-Moleketi, cautioned that harmonisation of labour relations in the public service was crucial. The endeavour to advance and improve service delivery to the people through a unified system of public administration and management will be seriously compromised if harmonisation of labour relations practices and policies cannot even be

achieved in the public service. It is therefore essential that labour relations practitioners possess certain generic competencies in order to achieve harmonisation.

The main purpose of the research on which this article is based was to explore the generic competencies required of labour relations practitioners in the South African public service in order to formulate a framework of competencies.

The research question that guided the study was: What competencies should be identified for inclusion in a generic competency framework for labour relations practitioners in the South African public service?

This article presents a literature review on workplace-level labour relations management practices in the South African public service and it outlines the specific roles, responsibilities and competencies of labour relations practitioners indicated by the literature review.

## **Workplace-Level Labour Relations Management Practices in the South African Public Service**

The practices and activities applied in managing public service workplace labour relations are viewed as those aimed at improving relations and cooperation and at minimising conflict levels among a variety of employees, irrespective of whether or not trade unions exist. These practices and activities include the following aspects: communicating with employees, handling grievances and retrenchments, disciplining employees, handling disputes and using collective bargaining (Public Service Commission [PSC], 2005; Van der Westhuizen & Wessels, 2011).

### **Communicating with Employees**

The importance of communication in labour relations is emphasised by the PSC (2012, p. i) when it states that effective communication is the lifeblood of an organisation. Effective communication is vital for sound labour relations and the survival of the organisation (Ferreira, 2006). One of the most important tasks that all public-sector managers have to perform is communicating with their subordinates so as to ensure that a common perspective is adopted in the pursuit of a required result (Mthembu, 2011; Van der Westhuizen & Wessels, 2011).

### **Handling Grievances**

According to Bendix (2015), grievances may be defined as dissatisfaction or complaints in respect of workplace-related issues as experienced by individual employees or groups of employees.

When a public service employee is unhappy or disgruntled about something in the workplace, the employee should have the opportunity to have the applicable issue(s)

addressed in a formalised manner through a grievance procedure (Diphofa, 2011; Van der Westhuizen & Wessels, 2011).

The Grievance Rules for the Public Service were published in *Government Gazette* No. 25209 of July 25, 2003 (PSC, 2003a) to make provision for the investigation of grievances and to promote sound labour relations within the public service. The labour relations component in a department has an important role to play since the designated employee in this component is responsible for the resolution of grievances (Diphofa, 2011).

### **Retrenchments**

The Public Service Regulations make provision in chapter 1, Part VII. 4.1 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2001) for the discharge of public servants for operational reasons. This discharge is subject to the condition that it complies with section 17(2)(b) and (c) of the Public Service Act 103 of 1994 (RSA, 1994) and sections 189 and 190 of the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 (RSA, 1995), as well as section 189A of the Labour Relations Amendment Act 12 of 2002 (RSA, 2002). The ILO (1963) recommended the implementation of a retrenchment procedure by stating that positive steps should be taken by all parties concerned to avert or minimise reductions of the workforce as far as possible.

The labour relations component of an institution is responsible for the formulation, implementation and maintenance of a retrenchment policy and procedure (PSC, 2005).

### **Dealing with Discipline**

The main purpose of disciplinary action is to inspire an employee to comply with the organisation's performance standards (Van der Bank, Engelbrecht, & Strümpher, 2008). Van der Westhuizen and Wessels (2011) and Finnemore (2013) affirm that discipline should be seen in a positive light, namely as a constructive element of management that facilitates corrective actions, learning, and opportunities for personal growth. Consistency is a key principle that endorses fair labour practice (PSC, 2008).

The aim of the disciplinary code in the public service is to correct unacceptable behaviour and adopt a progressive approach in the workplace that creates certainty and consistency in the application of discipline (PSC, 2003b).

### **Handling Disputes**

Although the intention of the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 (RSA, 1995) is to encourage collective bargaining and negotiation, it must be acknowledged that bargaining may break down on various occasions. This is why one of the objectives of the Act is to facilitate and encourage successful and efficient dispute resolution. Disputes often arise in public service labour relations issues, and the labour relations

component has an important role to play in assisting and advising employers and/or managers and employees regarding the contents of the policies and procedures (PSC, 2005; Van der Westhuizen & Wessels, 2011). Both the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 (RSA, 1995) and the dispute procedure for the Public Service Co-ordinating Bargaining Council (PSCBC, 1998) provide for dispute resolution through a dispute resolution committee and through conciliation, mediation or arbitration.

When a dispute cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of both parties, industrial action is often the result. Although there was some strike action in previous years, the 2007 public service strike was the biggest and most damaging strike in the country's history up to that point (Maree, 2013). In 2010, a dispute over the wage increase unleashed the biggest public service strike in the history of South African labour relations, which severely crippled service delivery (Maree, 2013) and accounted for 12 000 000 lost person-days (Department of Labour [DoL], 2012). According to Mle (2012), it is estimated that the 2010 strike cost the country one billion rand a day with an accompanying negative effect on the image of the country and investor confidence.

### **Collective Bargaining**

Collective bargaining is central to labour relationship because of the role it plays in building harmonious employment relations (Nel, Kirsten, Swanepoel, Erasmus, & Jordaan, 2016; Van der Westhuizen & Wessels, 2011). Mnisi (2011) states that the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) represents the entire government as the employer in collective bargaining on matters of mutual interest that are negotiated at the PSCBC.

Within the PSCBC, all the negotiation councils negotiate both collectively and separately when dealing with matters relating to their respective sectors. Labour relations practitioners in the public service are therefore involved in collective bargaining in their respective sectors, provinces and departments. This engagement ranges from negotiators on behalf of management to others who are used as consultants to provide guidance and advice and still others who provide secretariat services (Mnisi, 2011; Van der Westhuizen & Wessels, 2011).

### **The Role and Responsibilities of Labour Relations Practitioners in the Public Service**

A labour relationship exists between an employer and employee(s). The practice of sound labour relations is central to the managerial function within an organisation, and includes all levels of management (Bendix, 2015). In the course of their duties, managers are responsible for dealing with their subordinates and maintaining a sound working relationship. They are expected to communicate with their subordinates, deal with grievances, apply discipline and deal with conflict and disputes (Tustin & Geldenhuys, 2000).

It is important to note that the practitioner has a staff function and should not be placed in the front line when labour relations shop-floor issues and problems arise, but should rather fulfil the broader role of facilitator, adviser and counsellor to all stakeholders (Bendix, 2010). Mahlangu (2007) is of the opinion that the labour relations practitioner in the South African public service should give advice to line managers on labour relations policy and ensure a harmonious relationship with unions. Mthembu (2011) adds that labour relations practitioners serve as change agents by interfacing with internal and external stakeholders at various levels and also proactively engaging with management on labour relations issues, procedures and standards.

Nel et al. (2016) describe South African workplaces as culturally diverse and state that the labour relations practitioner should be able to deal with this diversity. According to Mahembe and Engelbrecht (2014), cultural intelligence is an important attribute in enhancing effective social interactions among individuals from different cultures and backgrounds in order to avoid potential conflict, which could affect organisational performance negatively. Lastly, the role they play in these social interactions is also influenced by what is expected and required of them by employers and/or managers and the employees whom they support and guide (Botha, 2016).

## **Required Competencies of Labour Relations Practitioners**

Competencies of an employee are defined as the employee's fundamental characteristics, namely those related to purpose, quality, skill, self-image, social role and knowledge that result in superior performance (Boyatzis, 1982; Olesen, 2013). Campion et al. (2011) concur by pointing out that, although some practitioners define competencies as behaviours, competencies are best defined as knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics, whereas behaviours depict or exhibit the observable activities on the job as a result of the competencies (i.e. behavioural indicators). McClelland (1973, p. 3) is credited with introducing the concept of "competency" into literature on human resources (HR). His research found that academic aptitude and knowledge content tests alone did not predict high job performance or success in life, but that individual qualities or competencies capable of identifying high performers were better indicators.

The above roles, role requirements and responsibilities of labour relations practitioners in the public service determine the competencies required of them to fulfil their roles successfully. The South African public service as an organisation is compelled by the *Green paper on public service training and education* (RSA, 1997) to implement a competency-based approach to effective job performance. In the present study, the researchers developed a generic competency framework for labour relations practitioners in the South African public service. A competency framework refers to collections of knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics that are needed for effective performance in a given job (Campion et al., 2011). The *Competency framework for human resource management and development in the public service*

(DPSA, s.a.) describes a competency framework as a set of competency standards for employees that clearly describes the expected knowledge, skills and attributes of employees for the benefit of those within and outside the public service.

The labour relations function is integrated into the HR function and relies heavily on the successful implementation of HR-related aspects such as recruitment, selection, interviewing, job grading, performance appraisal and training. To a certain extent, labour relations competencies are also informed by existing HR competencies, as illustrated in the HR competency model of the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) (2012), the HR model of Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich (2012) and the HR competency model of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) (Cohen, 2015). The SHRM HR competency model (Cohen, 2015) focuses mainly on competencies in general as well as on the competencies of managers and human resource practitioners. However, limited information has been found that focuses on the competencies of labour relations practitioners in the broader South African context and specifically in the South African public service.

In 2011, Queen's University in Canada identified and categorised competencies that successful labour relations professionals required, and on this basis it developed a competency framework (depicted in Table 1, which is sourced from Grant, 2011).

**Table 1:** Competency framework for labour relations professionals

<i>Labour relations area</i>	<i>Competencies</i>
Relevant legislation/jurisprudence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have knowledge of labour relations legislation, labour codes, employment standards, human rights codes and health and safety legislation</li> <li>• Understand and apply labour relations statutes</li> <li>• Understand and apply human rights concepts</li> <li>• Oversee/conduct fact finding and investigations</li> </ul>
Labour management relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have knowledge of union/management perspectives</li> <li>• Understand and apply key elements and best practices with regard to labour/management committees and meetings</li> <li>• Facilitate change management</li> </ul>
Management of the collective agreement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have knowledge of conflict resolution</li> <li>• Possess negotiation and dispute resolution skills</li> <li>• Utilise models of negotiation</li> <li>• Handle, process and settle grievances</li> <li>• Utilise grievance mediation</li> <li>• Manage and design dispute resolution processes</li> </ul>
Collective bargaining	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepare and participate in collective bargaining</li> </ul>
Enforcement of the collective agreement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have knowledge of and ability to interpret collective agreements</li> <li>• Have knowledge of and ability to apply principles and best practices with regard to progressive discipline</li> <li>• Possess skills in arbitration preparation/advocacy</li> <li>• Understand and apply key concepts and best practices in rights arbitration</li> </ul>

The study conducted by Queen’s University illustrates the shift in the labour relations landscape from the traditional approach that there are core expectations of labour



relations practitioners to an approach that is more sophisticated and focuses on strategic collaboration.

Additional competencies that labour relations practitioners in South Africa are likely to require for 2013 and beyond were identified by Naudé (2013). These competencies and skills were identified for the purpose of uncovering and indicating the evolving role of the labour relations practitioner.

**Table 2:** Competency requirements of labour relations practitioners, 2013 and beyond

<i>Knowledge and abilities of/in</i>	<i>Lesser-rated knowledge and abilities</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labour legislation</li> <li>• Negotiation skills</li> <li>• Dispute resolution</li> <li>• Communication skills</li> <li>• Ability to work in a team</li> <li>• Change/Transformation management</li> <li>• Identification of risks</li> <li>• The new strike management rules</li> <li>• Budgets, costs and financial implications of decision-making</li> <li>• Skills development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Report-writing</li> <li>• Disciplinary process and case preparation</li> <li>• Information systems</li> <li>• People knowledge</li> <li>• Record-keeping</li> <li>• Labour competencies</li> <li>• Ability to do investigations</li> </ul>

Source: Naudé (2013)

The competencies identified by Naudé (2013) and summarised in Table 2 emphasise the unique nature of the competencies associated with the labour relations practitioner in the South African context.

In addition, PSC (2005) identified the following labour relations competencies required in the public service:

- Knowledge of and the ability to apply labour legislation and prescripts
- Ability to analyse, interpret and apply policies, decisions, collective agreements and legislation
- Ability to conduct research and to formulate policies in the field of labour relations
- Good writing and verbal communication skills
- Exceptional interpersonal skills, including excellent listening, superior oral and written communication, presentation, conflict resolution skills
- Ability to assess the people being dealt with, impartially and fairly

- Mediation/facilitation skills: ability to work with various parties with an understanding of the influences on their behaviour and attitudes
- Ability to establish, develop and strengthen individual relationships with a wide range of stakeholders and persons
- Ability to draft, recommend changes to and substantiate departmental policies and procedures based upon analysing trends in the labour relations environment
- Ability to use discretion and flexibility with considerable independence and to adapt policies and procedures to individual cases
- Ability to manage complex group and personal dynamics and relationships while contributing effectively in a team environment

The above list of competencies serves to provide a perspective on the role and requirements of labour relations practitioners in the public service.

As may be deduced from the literature reviewed above, there is no recent account of the integrated generic competencies that labour relations practitioners in the South African public sector should possess. This article aims to address this gap in research on this important sector.

## **Research Design**

### **Research Approach**

Working from a constructivist paradigm, the researchers adopted a qualitative approach that is best suited to identifying how people perceive and interpret their experiences in their natural setting. The study made inferences about data and provided answers to the research questions (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché, & Delport, 2002; Krippendorf, 2013; Maree, 2016; Mouton, 1996). Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), as well as Lapan, Quartaroli, and Riemer (2012), argue that the central assumption of constructivism is that reality is socially constructed in that individuals develop subjective meanings about their own personal experiences. In addition, the main purpose of qualitative research is to examine a phenomenon as it is, in its natural setting and in rich detail (Ary, Jacobs, Sorrensen, & Walker, 2014; Creswell, 2013), and this is what constitutes the purpose of this study.

In order to formulate a competency framework, the study explored the generic competencies that labour relations practitioners in the public service needed. Data were collected and analysed from the experiences, views and perceptions of subject matter experts in the field as well as from evidence of their experience in labour relations.

## **Research Strategy**

Qualitative content analysis was applied in this study to enable a comprehensive and methodical examination of the contents of a particular body of material of human communication for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes or prejudices (Flick, 2009; Krippendorf, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The human communication consisted of written materials in the form of interview transcripts and field notes, and documentation of human experiences, interactions and spontaneous situations (Saldaña, 2011). The researchers used direct content analysis and were guided by existing theory from the literature review in identifying key concepts or variables as initial coding categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and were subsequently coded and categorised (Nishishiba, Jones, & Kramer, 2014; Schreier, 2013). The themes that emerged from the categories constructed from the data were used in the discussions of the inquiry (Creswell, 2014; Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smit, 2004; Krippendorf, 2013).

## **Research Method**

### *Research Context*

The research involved various government departments in every province of South Africa, thus ensuring geographical representivity. Participants in this research study were selected on the basis of their expertise and because they were uniquely qualified to provide insight into the phenomena studied, namely the competencies required by labour relations practitioners to function effectively. An expert preferably had to head the labour relations component in the relevant organisation at management level. Labour relations experts were identified as participants based on the eligibility criteria set, and the data they provided were used up until the point that data saturation had been reached.

### *Sampling*

A purposive sampling technique was used to identify 17 participants for this study. Elo et al. (2014) argue that purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative studies where the researcher is interested in informants with the best knowledge of the research topic. Before participants could be included in this study, they had to meet the following criteria: a relevant three-year tertiary qualification with 12 years' labour relations-related experience of which three years were gained at management level, or a relevant postgraduate qualification with 10 years' labour relations-related experience of which three years were gained at management level.

Table 3 presents the demographic profile of the participants.

**Table 3:** Participants' demographic information

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Department</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Qualification(s)</i>	<i>Years' experience</i>
P1	Director	National	Male	BJuris, LLB	15
P2	Director	Mpumalanga	Male	BJuris	18
P3	Director	North West	Male	BPublic Admin	24
P4	Deputy Director	Northern Cape	Male	Postgraduate diploma	15
P5	Director	Limpopo	Male	BProc	15
P6	Director	National	Male	BJuris	23
P7	Director	National	Male	BPublic Admin	15
P8	Director	Gauteng	Male	BPublic AdminHons	10
P9	Director	National	Male	BEdHons	17
P10	Director	National	Male	LLM	14
P11	Director	National	Male	Teaching diploma	20
P12	Director	National	Female	Postgraduate diploma	17
P13	Director	KwaZulu-Natal	Male	BTech	12
P14	Chief Director	KwaZulu-Natal	Male	LLM	16
P15	Director	Western Cape	Female	BEd	13
P16	Director	Western Cape	Male	Master of Labour Law	23
P17	Director	Eastern Cape	Male	MSoc Sci in Industrial Sociology	11

For the sake of confidentiality, codes were used to identify the participants (as indicated in Table 3).

### *Data Collection*

The research interview is a well-known strategy for collecting qualitative data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In this study, the researchers used both field notes and semi-structured interviews to collect data on the personal experiences, perceptions and views of and the evidence provided by experts working in the field of labour relations regarding the competencies required to be successful in the field. The objective was not to generalise but to develop a best practice competency framework by exploring the experiences, perceptions, views and evidence of experts working in the field of labour relations in the public service. An inductive research process enabled the building of abstractions through exploration and the collection of data from different sources and the use of multiple sources of evidence, namely document analysis (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013) and semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002).

The compilation of the semi-structured interview questions was guided by the research questions as well as by the literature review. These semi-structured interview questions were open-ended and allowed participants to communicate in their own words and without reservations their views and perceptions about the required competencies of labour relations practitioners. The interview guide related to the following questions:

- Tell me more about your experiences as a labour relations practitioner.
- In your opinion, what are the challenges that you are faced with in your line of duty as a labour relations practitioner?
- As a labour relations practitioner, what are your role expectations?
- In your experience, what are the competencies required of labour relations practitioners in the South African public service in order to function effectively?
- In your opinion, what are the management implications of the labour relations roles and competencies in your job?

A digital voice recorder was used to collect the raw data as accurately as possible during each semi-structured interview. This was an “indispensable” aid (Patton, 2002, p. 387) that facilitated data capture (Letsoalo, 2013). All the interviews were transcribed verbatim by an independent transcriber for analysis (Henning et al., 2004) and audited by the researchers by comparing them with the original recordings to further enhance reliability. All quotations provided in this article are reported verbatim and unedited.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis commenced once the researchers had received the transcription of the first interview. The researchers applied the data analysis process of Tesch (1990) and Hsieh and Shannon (2005), which involves the preliminary analysis of the data by reading and rereading the transcripts, identifying possible themes and topics, organising these themes and topics, and developing categories without resorting to intensive coding, which could detract from the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2014; Curtis & Curtis, 2011). In accordance with the recommendation made by Joubert (2012), the researchers coded and categorised the data and developed themes that represented the participants’ experiences, perceptions, views and evidence in order to develop a framework of the competencies required of labour relations practitioners. After analysing the data, the researchers used a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package (ATLAS.ti Version 7.0) to manage the data and heighten the effectiveness and quality of the data analysis (Curtis & Curtis, 2011; Davis, 2013; Scales, 2013). The data referred to were obtained from the 17 interviews and field note transcripts—these sources are termed “primary documents” in ATLAS.ti. The researchers highlighted some 1 575 quotations, which yielded 214 subcategories that were grouped together into 44 categories (competencies). The codes were then assembled into nine code clusters

(competency themes), links were subsequently established between the codes, and a variety of networks were created (Mayring, 2014).

### *Ethical Considerations*

Certain ethical considerations were addressed in conducting the study. Leedy and Ormrod's (2013) suggestion of keeping the data confidential by assigning a pseudonym to each participant and using fictitious names both during data collection and in the final research report was applied. The interview guide, letter of consent and covering letter were approved by the relevant institutions' research and ethics committees.

## **Findings and Discussion**

In analysing the coding, the researchers distinguished subcategories from which they developed categories (competencies). They clustered these categories into nine competency clusters, which made up competency themes. The overwhelming evidence from the findings, which was supported by the theory, suggested a clear distinction between foundational generic competency themes and associated competencies, which could be regarded as indispensable prerequisites for effective performance in other competency areas, as well as other more essential generic competencies.

### **Foundational Generic Competencies**

Table 4 presents the foundational generic competency themes and associated competencies.

**Table 4:** Foundational generic competency themes and competency categories

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Categories</i>
Interpersonal relations	Conflict management
	Social intelligence
	Teamwork
Communication	Consultation
	Dialogue
	Diplomacy
	Listening skills
	Persuasion
	Presentation skills
	Verbal skills
	Written skills
Emotion management	Assertiveness
	Emotional intelligence
	Resilience
	Self-efficacy
Jurisprudence/labour codes	Disciplinary procedure management
	Grievance procedure management
	Investigation/fact finding
	Legislation

### *Interpersonal Relations*

In this study, the term interpersonal relations refers to a strong, deep or close association or affiliation between two or more people, which plays a critical role in the development and maintenance of trust and a cordial atmosphere in an organisation. The ability to navigate and negotiate complex social relationships, circumstances and environments effectively was pointed out by the participants. For example, P2 stated, “You will be able to talk to them in such a way that you don’t create enemies or enemy between yourself and them.” The participants shared their experiences in the area of good people skills that are required for dealing with difficult people in order to work collaboratively with a group of people to achieve a common goal or purpose. P8 noted, “You need good interpersonal skill ... somebody that is a team player.” P10 added, “the relationship part is very important in terms of building teams ... you do things with them jointly.” These views on interpersonal relations endorse those expressed by the Public Service Commission (2005), Naudé (2013) and SHRM’s HR Competency Model (Cohen, 2015).

### *Communication*

In terms of this study, communication is regarded as a two-way process of reaching mutual understanding, a process in which participants not only exchange information,

news, ideas and feelings, but also create and share meaning. The importance that the labour relations experts attach to effective communication skills was evident from the statement by P15, who said, “if you don’t have good communication skills you will not be able to do this.” P7 agreed and emphasised that “good communication, both written and verbal” was required. In addition, P8 expressed the view that, “Labour relations’ core function should be that of advising.” P2 added the following: “In certain situations the presentation was not good ... presentation skills—you must have this skill.” P3 stated, “Present your facts to the level that people can understand exactly what you are saying.” These findings, which confirm the findings of the Public Service Commission (2005), Bendix (2010), SABPP (2012) and Cohen (2015), reflect the overwhelming importance that labour relations experts attach to all the competency categories under the competency theme of communication, even going as far as to argue that it is not possible to perform effectively in labour relations without good communication skills.

### *Emotion Management*

In this study, emotion management was seen as a form of emotional regulation that ensured that feelings were expressed appropriately and effectively, enabling people to work together smoothly toward their common goals. Participants agreed that labour relations practitioners could find themselves in an intimidating environment, therefore they needed to be able to withstand pressure. This was put into words by P7 who said, “I sometimes take some of the things on the chin.” P8 emphasised, “You need to have a strong labour relations manager who is able to withstand the challenges.” P9 elucidated that, “Emotion intelligence is an important measure of a labour relations person.” This was supported by P15, who commented, “you must be emotionally mature.” P8 added, “You need somebody that is very resilient ... somebody who is fearless,” and P10 confirmed, “Being able to stand your ground especially in an environment like this.” These views on the competencies of the management of emotion support the views of various authors (Bendix, 2010; PSC, 2005; SABPP, 2012; Cohen, 2015).

### *Jurisprudence/Labour Codes*

In the context of this study, competencies relating to jurisprudence/labour codes refer to having knowledge of the science or philosophy of law, court cases and labour codes. In line with the views of the PSC (2005), Grant (2011), Van der Westhuizen and Wessels (2011), Finnemore (2013), Naudé (2013) and Bendix (2015), the majority of the participants ranked the competencies relating to knowledge of jurisprudence/labour codes the highest. P1 stated, “You need to know the disciplinary code as well, how to discipline a person.” P4 added, “you need good grievances handling skills,” and P8 explained, “Another challenge that you face as labour relations practitioner is you need investigative skills.” Furthermore, P4 stated that, “thorough knowledge of the law, the labour law, and legislative prescript” was important. This was supported by P16, who emphasised that, “The person should have the competency to understand legislation. They should have the competency to debate it and to actually implement it as well.” It



is evident from the overwhelming importance that participants attached to the competency categories under the competency theme “jurisprudence/labour codes” that these legislative aspects affect and dictate all areas within the labour relations function. In this respect the participants concurred with the views of the authors indicated above.

### Essential Generic Competencies

Table 5 presents the essential generic competency themes and associated competencies.

**Table 5:** Essential generic competency themes and competency categories

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Categories</i>
Business acumen	Knowledge of finance
	Knowledge of HR
	Knowledge of technology
	Political savvy
	Strategic agility
Transformation innovation	Change management
	Coaching/mentoring
	Cultural intelligence
	Facilitation
	HR development
Collective bargaining management	Collective bargaining
	Dispute resolution
	Negotiating skills
Labour relations specialist expertise	Labour peace
	Labour relations practice
	Problem-solving
	Professionalism
	Service delivery
	Strike management
Strategic management and leadership	Analytical reasoning
	Being proactive
	Integrity
	Labour relations management
	Project management knowledge
	Research skills
	Strategic business management

#### *Business Acumen*

In this study, “business acumen” describes the experiences on which participants commented regarding business-related issues that typically require a prompt and appropriate response if they are to have a favourable outcome in the workplace.

Participants' experiences reflected the importance of the financial implications of decisions, collective agreements and proposals. P9 emphasised, "When I put up a proposal I must cost it, I must estimate it ... they all have an element of financial implication." Furthermore, P1 stated, "you must understand the HR processes" and P11 elaborated that "LR practitioners need to know HR matters ... understand the conditions of service." With regard to strategic agility, P1 emphasised, "You need to give a strategy, think quickly ... as a manager you need to be seen as the leader at the front and as a person that is giving directions." Participants indicated that information technology is not optimally utilised. P5 stated, "we don't use information technology to our best advantage." These views support those expressed by Naudé (2013) and Cohen (2015).

### *Transformation Innovation*

In the context of this study, transformation innovation is the application of a structured process and procedures to deal with changes in the business environment. Labour relations practitioners implement interventions to change the mind-set and attitudes of line managers with regard to their labour relations responsibilities. As noted by P5, "the only way is a change of mind-set and attitude to the line managers—we try to change the mind-set and attitude." P16 mentioned that their role is "to manage transformation and re-transforming." P7 noted, "the capacity-building role of the labour relations practitioner—you need to be able to do mentoring, counselling," and P3 reiterated, "You are supposed to empower them [line managers]. Training of colleagues is important." The participants' indication of the importance of transformation innovation competencies support the views expressed by the PSC (2005), Grant (2011), Naudé (2013) and Cohen (2015).

### *Collective Bargaining Management*

In terms of this study, collective bargaining management is a process of setting goals, planning and/or controlling, organising, leading, facilitating and consulting with regard to the execution of the collective bargaining activity and all related issues. The PSC (2005), Queen's University in Canada (Grant, 2011) and Van der Westhuizen and Wessels (2011) have stressed the importance of collective bargaining in labour relations. This view is supported by the evidence the majority of the participants provided when relating their experiences of collective bargaining, which ranged from basic to very complex situations. P4 mentioned, "We also do collective bargaining in our environment where we have interactions with organised labour." P16 complained, "collective bargaining. Management has got no clue what exactly it entails," and P8 added, "they also expect us to resolve disputes ... when it comes to dispute management, managers are not trained." Most of the participants emphasised the importance of negotiation, even describing it as critical, as noted by P9, who stated, "One of the critical functions is the negotiations function ... you must have negotiation skills."

### *Labour Relations Specialist Expertise*

In this study, labour relations specialist expertise refers to the ability of a labour relations practitioner to provide expert advice, in an organisational as well as a consulting capacity, on the provision and application of various policies, procedures and practices. The acknowledgement by the participants of their role in promoting and maintaining labour peace was supported by P12, who noted, “I am expected to promote sound peace,” and P9 even stated, “labour peace is something that is quite challenging.” P9 spoke about their endeavours to “construct a relationship between the employer and employees” and P17 complained, “Management expects us to speak on their behalf even on issues where they have fallen short.” With regard to their role in problem-solving, P5 explained, “they see us as problem-solvers ... unions see us as the middleman to resolve problems.” P11 explained that labour relations practitioners had to be “good in problem-solving.” The participants emphasised their role in strike management. P14 elaborated, “I have handled strikes over the years—2007 and 2010—the big strikes that we had.” These views support those of Naudé (2013), Franks (2014) and Cohen (2015).

### *Strategic Management and Leadership*

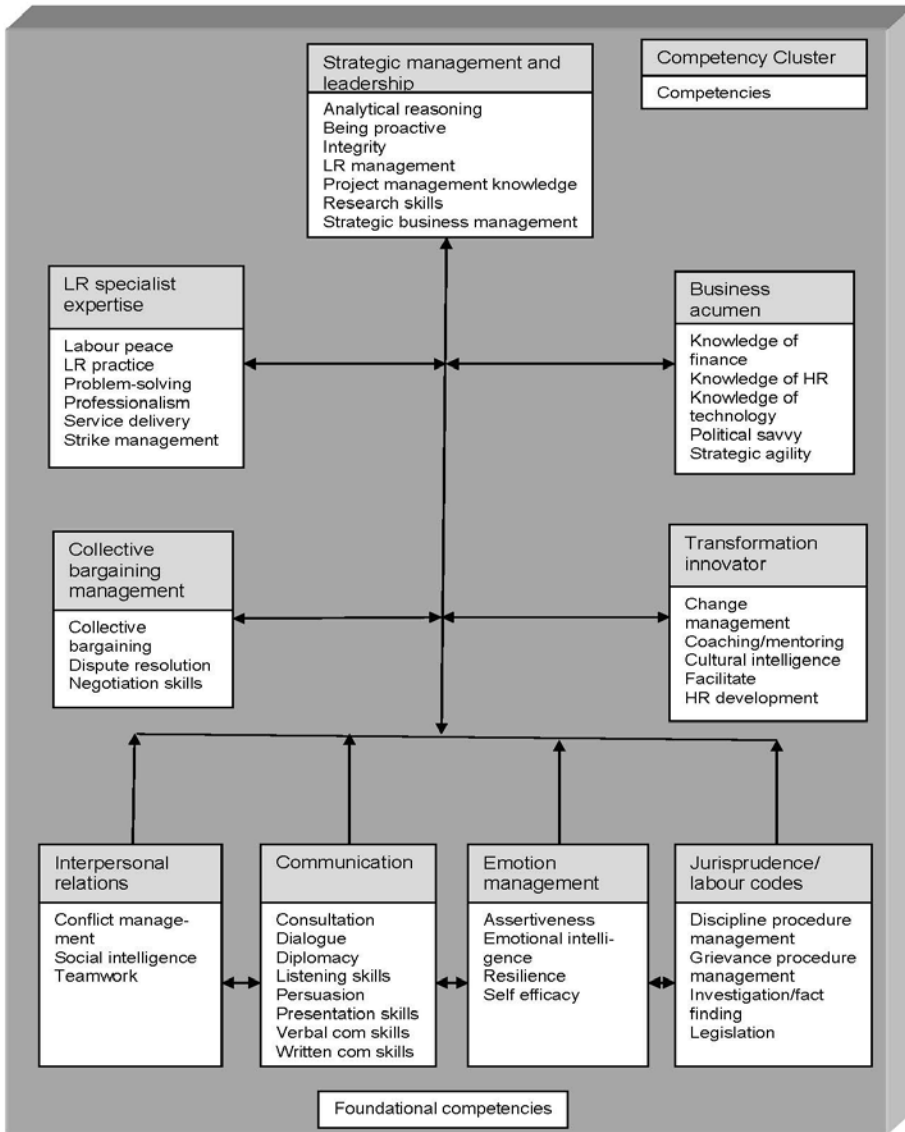
In the context of this study, strategic management and leadership refer to the set of decisions and actions that result in the formulation and implementation of strategies designed to enhance the achievement of labour relations objectives. The participants elaborated on their role in analytical reasoning, for instance, P1 explained, “You need to analyse the person before the person can talk to you.” This view was supported by P17 who noted that a labour relations practitioner had to have “an analytical mind because quite often you have to assess.” In addition, P12 indicated that, “one needs to be very proactive in terms of information analysis.” P4 referred to “strategic leadership that can influence employees,” and P5 reiterated, “You need to be strategic ... you cannot manage labour relations if you are not strategic yourself on how to deal with issues.” P3 emphasised that, “you must know the labour relations process ... the issues in labour relations” with which P14 agreed when he said, “You’ve got to manage and must keep abreast with developments in labour relations.” The importance of strategic management and leadership competencies is emphasised by the PSC (2005), Grant (2011), Mthembu (2011), Naudé (2013), Franks (2014) and Cohen (2015).

## **Competency Framework Integration**

A generic competency framework for labour relations practitioners in the South African public service was developed on the basis of an integration of the literature review with the findings of this study. Figure 1 represents the proposed generic competency framework for labour relations practitioners in the South African public service.

Figure 1 depicts the dynamic relationships between the competency themes and competencies that make up the generic competencies required of labour relations practitioners in the South African public service.

As Figure 1 shows, there is a clear distinction between the foundational generic competency themes and their associated competencies, which can be regarded as indispensable prerequisites for effective performance in other competency areas, and other more essential generic competencies.



**Figure 1:** A generic competency framework for labour relations practitioners in the South African public service

*Note.* LR = Labour relations

## Recommendations and Conclusion

The purpose of the research on which this article is based was to design a generic competency framework for labour relations practitioners in the public service. The study therefore makes a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge in the field of labour relations with regard to the requirements relating to and the challenges facing labour relations practitioners in the public service. First, unlike previous studies that focused mainly on frameworks of competencies associated with the HR profession (Cohen, 2015; SABPP, 2012) and managerial employees (Franks, 2014), this study provides a framework of competencies related to labour relations practitioners in the public service. Second, the study demonstrates that the required competencies of labour relations practitioners in the public service are related to the unique characteristics of the public service organisational context. Third, the findings of this study could lead to the development of new theory to enhance and facilitate the equipment, training and development of labour relations practitioners that meet the specific requirements of an organisation.

The study, which presents a framework of competencies relating to labour relations practitioners in the public service, has practical value for current HR practices in the South African public service. The competencies listed in the framework should be considered when recruiting labour relations practitioners because these competencies would help to increase the reliability and validity of the recruitment process. In order to identify at an early stage the people who are most likely to succeed in the profession, it is recommended that the competencies identified be used in conjunction with the traditional predictors of success (Mthembu, 2011). It is further recommended that the competencies identified as being critical for selection purposes should be integrated into a performance management system. In this way, performance expectations are clarified at the outset and the assessment of performance is fair and objective as all job incumbents are assessed on the same basis. In addition, it is recommended that the equipment, training and development of labour relations practitioners in the public service be focused on the identified skills and competencies that relate to the applicability of the competencies to the level of the labour relations practitioner. Furthermore, these identified competencies should be incorporated into development plans for labour relations practitioners.

Since this study only focused on the public sector, it is recommended that the research be extended to include the private sector. The process the researchers followed in developing the framework should be equally relevant and applicable to other occupational groups, such as HR practitioners and HR development practitioners.

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