

PROMOTION AS AN ANTECEDENT TO RETENTION OF TALENTED EMPLOYEES IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICE

ABSTRACT

Globally, talent retention is a challenge, and this phenomenon of talent retention has global and local implications for human resource management. More specifically, the issues of talent management and talent retention are complex in former colonial countries. The structural adjustments programmes and liberal competitive markets have led to higher informalisation. The colonial governance had also been forced to compromise with local governance and decision making. Additionally, this compromise seems to have a negative impact on institutional development and human resource management. Following a qualitative research methodology, this study has critically reviewed the concept of "promotion" and talent retention in the global and local context of South Africa. The study follows the method of discourse analysis to understand how the concept of promotion and talent retention has been discussed from diverse geopolitical standpoints. This study argues that the notion of promotion has been defined by the universal standard definition as heralded in the West, with a very limited understanding of its

context-specific implementation challenges. Thus, the study argues that even though the South African Government has framed humane human resource legislation, it has paid limited attention to implementation challenges of such legislation.

Keywords: South Africa, promotion, talent management, staff retention, recruitment.

INTRODUCTION

South African people have undergone trajectories of development to cope with poverty, unemployment and colonial structures of subjugation. Since independence, the South African government has followed the model of a welfare state to ensure quality service delivery to its citizens through the development of government institutions. Simultaneously, to explore economic potential, the South African government adopted various reformatory policies for intrinsic development. The South African Public Service focuses on infrastructure and human resources development of the country, thus, the public service structures have undergone fundamental changes since 1994, moving from a non-credible,

non-legitimised, fragmented, and non-inclusive structure to become a more centralised, hierarchical, and representative arm of the democratically elected government that came into power in 1994. A range of policies has been introduced to transform South African society by reorganising politics, the economy and society through democratic and highly participatory modes of governance, as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), which serves as a mandate for ensuring transparency, accountability, and citizen-oriented public service. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) was adopted in 1994 as the basis for bringing about this transformation through government-funded infrastructure development. According to the Public Service Commission (PSC, 2008), a human resource (HR) management framework was introduced within the South African Public Service in 1999, where government departments were given the responsibility to develop and implement effective HR policies, practices, and procedures.

However, the passage of time even within the South African public services, which was established with altruistic motive, depicts that the institution's HR policies are having negative impacts on individual staff, which in turn has impacted its quality of service delivery. The premise of the study assumes that staff dissatisfaction does exist in the public service because of limited opportunity and scope for fair promotion, which in turn is having a negative impact on the service delivery and overall culture of the institution. The objective of the study is to understand how problems such as staff promotion and retention are discussed in the existing secondary literature and thereby to critically analyse the standpoint

and views so as to develop a line of inquiry for further research to be conducted for more context-sensitive HR policies.

The study will explore the issues of talent retention and promotion in South Africa from two different standpoints:

- To answer the question of what the major threats to talent retention and promotion are in the context of South Africa's Public Service.
- To analyse promotion as a concept as practised in diverse geopolitical global locations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study has adopted a qualitative approach to analyse the issues of staff promotion and retention in the context of the South African public service. The study follows the method of critical discourse analysis of existing secondary texts to explore the multi-layered truth regarding promotion and employee retention strategies so as to capture how this debate has unfolded in the secondary literature. Further, the study follows the techniques of text analysis to analyse the global standpoints of staff retention and promotion. Qualitative research methodology helps in deriving insights regarding how promotion as a concept has been interpreted and re-interpreted in the literature from diverse geopolitical standpoints.

This study has focused on the issue of human resource management, recruitment, and promotion, which are very important for talented staff retention for better service delivery and national development. The

study begins from the premise that in South Africa, human resource management and fair promotion procedure to retain talented employees are a problem. This issue has been discussed thoroughly in the secondary literature, which has already identified such gaps and has discussed the problems. In this study, a logical frame is developed to analyse the arguments and insights that have emerged from South African publications and to capture global and local standpoints regarding promotion and staff management as practised in different national contexts. The study has followed the logical flow of inquiry as depicted in Figure 1 below.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

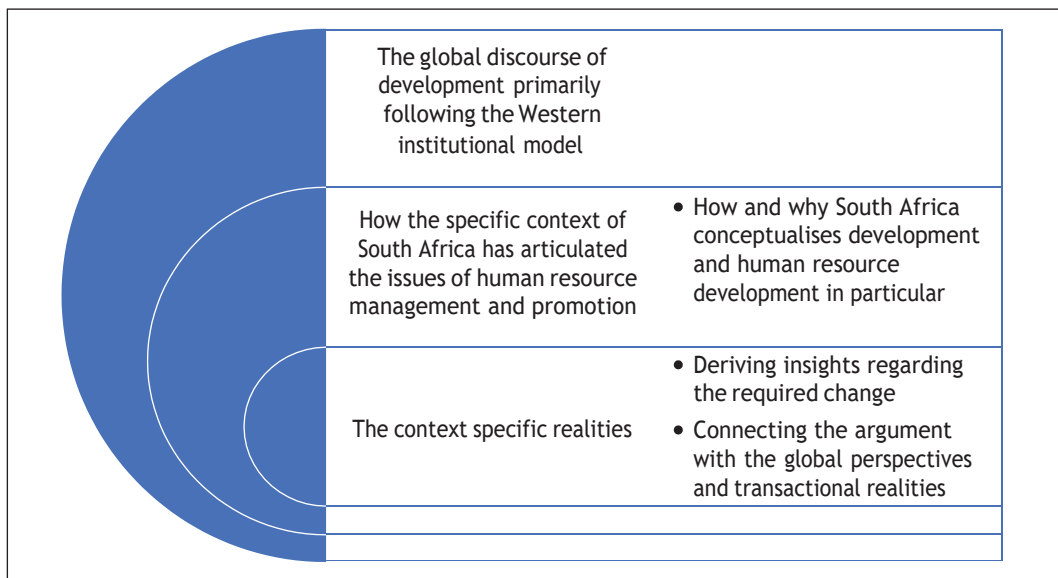
This section has combined the review and analysis of secondary literature to explore

the concept of promotion, following the qualitative method of critical discourse analysis. Further, the discussion has provided a comparative framework to capture different standpoints and the nature of practices prevailing globally to answer why and how South African human resource policies are different.

Promotion as a Concept in Literature

Promotion, in simple terms, means an upgrade to a higher level, responsibility, rank or duty within an organisation's hierarchy, coupled with increased responsibilities, accountabilities, prestige, and amplified salary (Pergamit & Veum, 1999). An upgrade can involve other benefits, such as a higher status, respect, honour, and allowances. Kaplan and Ferris (2001) share the view

FIGURE 1: Logic of Inquiry



Source: Author

that promotion is a way to retain the best, most talented, and efficient persons in the public service. In a seminal article by Scott, Clothier and Spriegel (1954), a promotion is described as "the transfer of an employee to a job which pays more money or one that carries some preferred status". The notion is supported by Pigors and Myers (1981) who explicate that "promotion is the advancement of an employee to a better job – better in terms of greater responsibility, prestige or status, greater skill and especially increased rate of pay or salary".

Kaplan and Ferris (2001:12) argue that "every organization must have a promotion policy which is fair, transparent, and clear to ensure compliance within the norm of natural justice". Promotion ensures employee satisfaction as a valued member of an organisation. All organisations endeavour to develop a suitable promotion policy to reward meritorious, hard, and sincere work (Kaplan & Ferris, 2001). This view is also supported by Steven, Phelan and Zhiang (2001), who expound that in other countries, organisations rely on some form of merit or rank-order system, where those receiving the highest performance evaluations in each

cohort are promoted while those who do not, remain at their current level. Furthermore, imitativensness, energy, and hard work are rewarded by the merit principle.

Types of Promotions

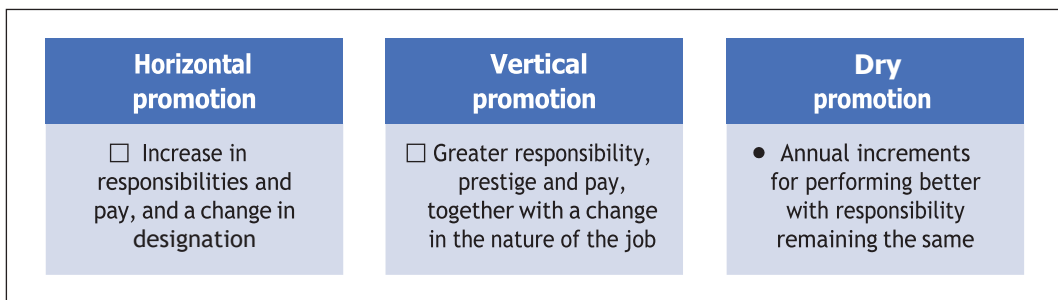
According to HR Core Word Press (2013), promotions may be classified as the following types, as depicted in Figure 2 below.

Thus, promotion normally accompanies higher pay and can either be temporary or permanent depending on the organisational needs and employee performance (HR Core Word Press, 2013). Other important types of promotion are illustrated below.

Merit Promotion

Wilson (1994) explains merit as a technique to motivate and encourage employees for better performance. Merit denotes an individual employee's skill, knowledge, ability, efficiency and aptitude. The rewards range from incentives to recognition, and all these depend on the length of service, academic qualifications, skills, etc. According to Alice, Garashi, Ogodu, Odhiambo & Masinde (2012),

FIGURE 2: The Classification of Promotion



Source: Author

promotion on merit is seen as a fair method of rewarding those whose performance is considered exemplary. Alice *et al.* (2012) further explicate during their research in the Kenya public service that the respondents indicated a positive attitude towards promotion on merit based on the notion that it increases motivation and teamwork. Although Ziegler (2014) states that well-administered feedback and reward mechanisms can guide, teach and motivate people in the direction of positive change, these lack of reliability in determining merit criteria objectively and might become an obstacle in becoming the sole basis for promotion.

The seniority-cum-merit promotion, which is a sub-set of merit promotion, takes into consideration the length of service in a particular post or scale or grade. It is viewed as being simple to operate, fair, and easily acceptable to employees, giving them a feeling of security. It also has the potential to remove bias from the selection process. Seniority-cum-merit is believed to result in low turn-over of employees, creating better interpersonal relationships, has considerations for respect of age and experience, and gives a chance of promotion to everyone, irrespective of merit. Merit promotion uplifts the morale of civil servants and motivates teamwork (Drago & Gavey, 1998). Quite importantly, the negative aspects of merit promotion, caused by bias and unfair management, which can demoralise, and demotivate employees and lead to concurrent conflicts, have also been codified.

Performance Appraisals

The performance management system provides a system for making selection and promotion decisions and determining

salary increases, and is a feedback mechanism between supervisors and employees (Gyorgy, 2004; McCourt & Foon, 2001). According to Alice *et al.* (2012) performance evaluation enables organisations to adjust to improve services (Boyne, Farrell, Law, Powell & Walker, 2003).

Recruitment of Talented Employees

Recruitment is an important step in human resource management. Recruitment plays a critical role in developing and building competitive human capital. Systematically designed recruitment processes help to identify people with the right set of knowledge, skills and abilities for individual jobs (Liu, Combs, Ketchen & Ireland, 2007). Recruitment is complex because it matches the suitability of a person to a job, as well as of a person and company's culture and values. Employees may feel dissatisfied with the organisation and tend to exit if their job does not fit with their knowledge, skill and ability (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman & Johnson, 2005).

THE NATURE OF PROMOTION IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

Practical Evidence From South Africa

Promotion in the South African context means the movement of an employee from his or her current post to an advertised vacant and funded post on the next higher level, or band, or rank, with increased responsibilities or complexity of duties (Public Service Regulations, 2016). The post is advertised, and applicants are then selected following the relevant guidelines within the Public Service Regulations.

Another promotion system eminent in South Africa is cadre deployment. The fact is that cadre deployment has been misused to reward undeserving, unqualified, and inexperienced and untalented cadres. Equally, the Public Service Commission (2013) elucidates that cadre deployment has assumed a negative connotation. Gumede (2015) adds that appointments are based purely on political considerations and the patronage of persons who are not suitably qualified for the posts concerned.

Malan and Smit (2001) refer to these political appointments as having a bearing on the ineffectiveness and disjuncture of the state administration. This is underscored by Gumede (2015), who adds that the ANC has established a policy on deployment whereby the party decides who should be appointed to key positions in the public service. The cadre deployment, according to Naidoo's (2010) underpinnings, is one area that complicates the system, particularly at senior levels. Furthermore, the top positions in government are not filled through an open process but through political deployments, and the selection is not based on professional merit (Naidoo, 2009).

One of the practices and processes that are tantamount to promotion in the South African public sector is the performance management system (PMS). During a performance cycle, supervisors monitor, supervise and assess employees' performance. Individual performance reviews are conducted every quarter to assess the level of performance by the individual employees, as well as the divisions. The performance management system serves to acknowledge and recognise an employee

for the achievement of tasks planned for the financial year. The PMS cannot be viewed as a promotion but should be seen as an encouragement or incentive towards appreciating the contribution of an individual to the employer. Alice *et al.* (2012) state that self-evaluation or the scoring technique as one of the first steps within a performance cycle encourages the workforce to measure their work and gives them the opportunity to reflect and learn from it. The final assessment takes place at the end of the financial year, where the final scores are sent to the moderation committees for final evaluation and decision. The moderation committee matches the performance of an individual against the divisional performance. Alice *et al.* (2012) reveal that during their research, the higher and middle cadre employees remained undecided about performance appraisal as it cannot be relied upon since it does not capture the actual performance; it measures items not related to performance and does not give room for an explanation of performance.

The United States of America's (USA) administration defines the promotion of public servants as a change of an employee while continuously employed from a general schedule or grade to a higher grade (Ryadh, 2014). The advancement to a higher grade involves a pay increase. Ryadh (2014) further indicates that promotion is in terms of meritorious achievement to those who meet the minimum qualifications standards prescribed by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). The evaluation for promotion and placement is guided by performance appraisals. The US administration effectively applies two promotion systems, one based on merit and performance appraisals and the other

based on seniority. Mills (1985) explains that "seniority has also been widely used as a basis for promotion particularly in public administration in the United States of America (USA) but has fallen from favour in recent years". Steven, Phelan and Zhiang (2001) categorise the following five types of promotion systems:

- **Up-or-out:** This is a strict type of promotion that can be referred to as combined discipline and triumph. This is popular in the corporate sector. The performers are promoted, while the under-performers are dismissed.
- **Absolute merit-based:** This theory recognises that the better performance of an employee should be considered for promotion in the case of a vacancy at a higher level.
- **Relative merit-based:** This is a blanket approach system and not a one-on-one system, which applies to all employees when it is time, and after monitoring. It can either be negative or positive, because, in line with the up-or-out theory, the employees may either be elevated, dismissed, or stay in the same position.
- **Seniority-based:** This is a first-in, first-up system depending on the years of service. In the South African government, this only applies through awards and gifts, such as a long service award.
- **Random system:** This is a random system, not taking cognisance of performance or seniority. This system, according to the study, can be subjective and can increase corruption and bias.

Steven, Phelan and Zhiang (2001) state that "a promotion system serves two fundamental purposes: It selects able individuals for positions of greater responsibility (the job assignment or matching function of the promotion system) and, secondly, it motivates employees at one level to strive harder to reach the next one". In line with the principle of competition as a practice in the South African context, an employee is promoted only if he or she applies and is eligible for a vacant position to a senior level to compete with others.

India

The Government of India's Ministry of Personnel (2013) defines promotion in their context as a method of recruitment from feeder grade posts to higher posts in the hierarchy as per the provisions of the recruitment rules. The number of years for civil servants to qualify for promotion is determined by a period of service. The seniority-cum-merit is the governing principle of promotion in India. The recommendations for promotion are made by the departmental promotion committee. The assessment is based on the work and conduct during the probationary period to determine the suitability for retention in service. The promotion is also based on merit determined by hard work, good conduct, and result-oriented performance as reflected in the annual appraisal report. The assessment is also based on service records concerning the five preceding years, irrespective of the qualifying service prescribed in the service or recruitment rules. The relative weight of the two factors varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but overall, the seniority basis is firmly entrenched and departures from it are made but rarely, unless the senior person is declared unfit.

Saiyadain (2013) provides evidence from research on the promotion system by stating that the Central Pay Commission recommends that considerations of fitness must have precedence over the claim of seniority. There is also a promotion-making authority in India where promotions to higher posts are generally cleared, being the rule even in case of promotions to Group or Class II, while in others the matter is decided by official heads. A two-pronged promotion system is also used in India, being recruitment and merit.

Australia

In Australia, promotion is defined as the escalation of an employee's duties to a higher classification than the employee's current classification on an ongoing basis (Australian Public Service Commission, 1999). Employees can be promoted from one agency to another. Australia also follows a competitive merit selection process that has to be published in the Australian public services' *Employment Gazette*. A competitive merit selection process requires an assessment be made of the candidate's duties using a competitive selection process. The assessment is based on the relationship between the candidate's work qualities, the relative capacity of the candidates to achieve outcomes related to duties, and the assessment of primary considerations in making decisions (Australian Human Rights Commission, no year). The employment opportunity is also gazetted for 12 months before a final decision can be taken. The review is made by the Promotion Review Committee and the decision is made by an independent selection advisory committee established by the Merit Protection Commission. A consideration of

qualifications for the committee is made before members can be appointed. The Australian government employs a merit promotion system that is highly organised, regulated, and monitored. The promotion of employees is taken seriously and not done haphazardly. The emphasis is based on work quality, outcomes and qualifications.

According to Ryadh (2014), in the French administration, each civil servant belongs to one of the three existing hierarchical categories A, B and C. During their careers, civil servants change their hierarchical category either by internal promotion or by passing a selection test. An internal promotion considers civil servants who satisfy certain conditions such as age, qualification, and seniority conditions. Internal promotion can happen by either selection based on professional value or experience. The decision is validated by the Administrative Commission on Promotion. The Commission examines individual situations and has a consultative opinion. The candidates are then commissioned to write exams to test them, which equals a trial period in the new position before being officially nominated. A grade promotion is associated with a salary increase but not a change of professional duties. 'A' class promotion is associated with an increase in responsibilities, qualifications, and salary and is also based on seniority acquired during or before enrolment. Others are subject to a national examination. All the internal promotions are based on a legal ruling that prescribes the steps to be followed. This seems an efficient way to provide an unbiased approach (Ryadh, 2014).

If an opening is available, suitable candidates from existing employees are selected. The

merits of selected employees are assessed using available sources of information, such as the annual appraisals. A committee is created to select the appropriate candidate to be promoted. Finally, an appeal process is made available for the selected candidates if they believe some irregularities took place during the selection process. For quality assurance, the final say of the Commission is usually sought. The Commission is created at a statutory level to delegate its powers to the administration of a department. An intensive promotion system is utilised in the French government, taking aspects such as exams into consideration. Other factors such as age, qualifications, and seniority conditions are considered during assessment. The merit promotion is supported and validated by the annual performance appraisals. The promotion environment is legalised and is also statutory. Ryadh (2014) elucidates that a trial test is also used to validate and certify the decision before final appointment to a new class grade is made.

ANALYSIS

South Africa gained independence during a critical historical time when global structural adjustments were taking place. The dominant discourse at the time was the colonies' profit generation systems that were emerging through the open and independent market. This process of the liberal market has impacted public sectors across the world in terms of their capacity and willingness to retain a formal workforce, and aspects of social security have been greatly devalued. In theory these aspects of staff security and staff promotion have received wide attention, but under the umbrella of neo-liberal economic growth, local experiences remain

something different. Similarly, in South Africa since independence, the public sector has been centralised, following the western model of institutional delivery, with greater hope of better service delivery and infrastructure development. However, with time it has been realised that the public sector in South Africa has been thought to have the objective of basic service delivery and with a higher focus on human resource development, it cannot perform and is rather facing complications and challenges in terms of inefficient service delivery and poor staff management. Considering this historical background, the present study has critically explored the concept of promotion as reflected in the secondary literature following the method of critical discourse analysis. The major insights derived about the challenges of South Africa's Public Service are depicted in Figure 3 on the next page.

The quality of the public sector depends on its employees' ability to respond to the needs of the citizens throughout the nation-state, as the responsibility of providing quality service to its citizens is bestowed on them. For the smooth realisation of this objective, the South African Government has implemented a recruitment and selection system. The primary goal of this system is to transform the national public service delivery mechanisms. Therefore, it is imperative for the state to lead the way towards implementing employment equity. Otherwise, in a globalised world, there is a higher possibility that the private sector will take up the responsibility. Therefore, the public sector's affirmative action policies should move in the direction of promoting employment equity.

Talent retention and promotion have been discussed in recent literature. A study of the

FIGURE 3: A Flow Chart of the Challenges of Public Services in South Africa



Source: Author

statements of HR personnel of 39 companies, conducted by Peter Banerjea and published by Greg Diegno in November 2020, identified components of talent retention and how the modern development discourse has valued various of these components, namely, work-life balance, flexibility at work, work environment, diversity in the workplace, great leadership and teams, employee benefits, skills development, a challenging work environment that motivates people to work harder, innovation expansion, transparency and open communication, a collaborative environment, high trust approaches, recognition of individual contributions towards a common goal, organisational culture, employee engagement, and employee feedback.

Further, from the analysis it became obvious that words such as organisational culture, employee engagement, employee feedback, flexibility in work and movement are being used with higher frequencies. There has been limited attention paid to the issues of trust, skills development, recognising individual contributions towards common goals, benefits to employees, work-life balance, a challenging work environment that motivates people to work harder, etc. Thus, it is argued that within the modern discourse of human resource management the issues of trust, employee benefits and training are being less emphasised with institutional structures and controlling mechanisms being more emphasised.

Another study that illustrates issues of employee satisfaction on promotion, conducted by Mohajane (2017) in the South African Police Service, depicts that in the opinion of 79% of the respondents, the efforts that they put into their work are not being recognised by the employer. About 79% of respondents think that promotion decisions are not rules-compliant or following competence drives, as the promotions panels often transgress the official policies. In the SAPS, most of the respondents (78%) expressed their belief that some of their colleagues enjoyed certain perks and privileges that were denied to others among them.

In one more example, it has been observed in Kenya Airways that several human resource retention problems exist due to an overall lack of personnel in key areas. This is worsened by the fact that there are a high number of trained personnel leaving Kenya Airways to work elsewhere (Wabala & Wilson, 1994).

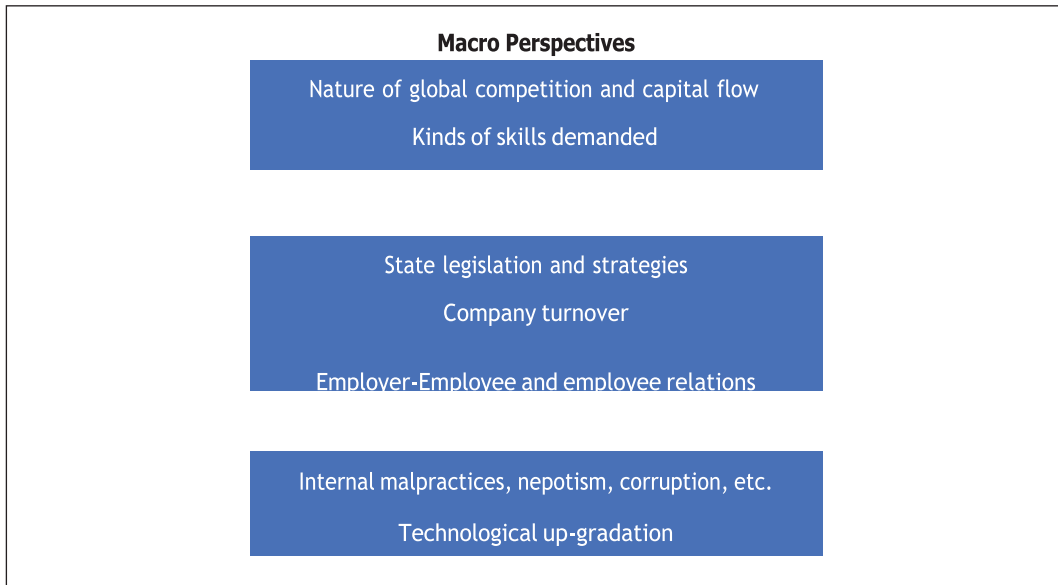
Thus, the analysis of the secondary literature depicts the fact that talented employees need to be retained for better infrastructure, service delivery, and a country's growth, and in turn, such talent needs to be nurtured with decent payment structures, future security, and a fair scope for promotion. Moreover, in the secondary literature, promotion is depicted as a process of retention of the best 'employees' (Kaplan & Ferris, 2001). However, the nature of staff retention has changed significantly, and staff training and promotion, and recruitment depends on the global and local financial flow, political decisions regarding social development, and individuals' levels of skills. Additionally, the nature of employees has also changed globally, as employees have become more mobile.

Global trends have highlighted a difference between skilled and unskilled workers, and therefore promotion depends not only on experience but also on the kind of knowledge demanded by the global economy (technical and analytical) and with those who can deliver services and are technologically more efficient. Thus, it can be argued that promotion as a concept should not be a theoretical deadlock but depend on various other factors in understanding what the major challenges of a fair promotion system are. Promotion needs to be analysed from different perspectives and standpoints that can be conceptualised from macro to meta to micro perspectives of human resource management, as illustrated in Figure 4 on the following page.

Thus, the concept of promotion as defined a decade ago as elevation to a higher position has changed somewhat in meaning. With the advent of global liberal economics, the competition among companies to hire the best talent is also becoming a reality. Globally over time, the nature of employee engagement is changing with mobility and informalisation increasing at the same rate. Similarly, the myth that the market could deliver the maximum resources to the maximum number of employees has been greatly curbed. Informalisation across the globe, including in developing nations, has compromised the basic social securities that are essential for life.

Coming to the context-specific challenges of South Africa, although the South African Government opted for a welfare state and quality service delivery to its citizens through the development of a strong public sector, the establishment of a non-discriminatory labour market remains a challenge. The

FIGURE 4: Macro, Meta and Micro Perspectives Regarding the Challenges of Human Resource Management



Source: Author

past differences between average annual spending on Black and White education respectively stand out as a good example of lack of social equity. Additionally, the experience of poverty, insufficient pay, debt and influences of moneylenders continues even today. This situation is an indication that employees' basic needs have not been dealt with properly, resulting in internal conflict continuing with negative work cultures. Issues of talent retention or promotion cannot be solved without addressing the existing conflicts and subjugations.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Promotion as a concept is dynamic and has been practised differently in different geopolitical locations. From the literature it can be

argued that in South Africa talent retention and promotion, in general, are a problem, and, specific to the public service, the problems in talent retention and promotion have not only led to employee dissatisfaction but have also created a degraded work culture, impacted employee relations, and compromised the basic service delivery mechanisms. In the specific context of South Africa, the phenomenon of promotion is mostly influenced by cadre deployment and political patronage, which to a great extent has compromised HR policies and failed to nurture talent and has promoted mediocracy. This problem has been widely reflected in the secondary literature review.

Moreover, from the insights derived from India, the USA and Australia, it seems that promotion policies depend on history and

political standpoints, as India has followed its tradition of restoring wisdom that grows with age, although merit and performance appraisal have gradually become components of talent retention (Saiyadain, 2013). American promotion policies are about competitive performance and are merit-based rather than seniority-based (Ryadh, 2014). The Australian government follows a merit-based promotion system that is organised, regulated, and monitored (Australian Public Service Commission, 1999).

However, the debates emerging from South Africa depict the fact that the public sector work ethic has been greatly polluted with unethical behaviour and managerial incompetence, such as inefficient service delivery, corruption, insufficient payment, a debt trap among employees, poor promotional assessment and opportunities, resulting in dissatisfaction among employees and problems in talent retention (Mazibuko-Madalani, 2016).

Further, the decentralisation of job evaluation to departments with nominal accountability and monitoring mechanisms has induced abuse, corruption, and favouritism, among others (Public Service Commission, 2013).

Another problem is that the recruitment system through advertising posts is slow at national departmental level, and the procedure for advertisement and recruitment does not abide by human resource legislation (A National Implementation Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Service 2012).

CONCLUSION

The South African Government needs to take a firm stand regarding the reformation of HR laws and policies as per the context-sensitive challenges. Along with talent retention, it should also focus on talent management. In a globalised world, talent retention and promotion continue to be a problem. A reflection on three other countries is given in this article in the hope that South Africa will draw lessons from these countries. Further, the universal standardised legal and developmental perspectives dominate the discourse of HR policies. A paradigm shift in deriving context-sensitive strategies is needed today. The objectives of HR policies and legislation must be to reduce employee concerns and should be sensitive towards the existing implementation challenges.

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