





# Anchoring human resource management to sustain employee performance at Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality



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## Dates:

Received: 15 Mar. 2021  
 Accepted: 14 June 2021  
 Published: 10 Sept. 2021

## How to cite this article:

Sixpence, S., De Braine, R., Bussin, M., & Mthombeni, M. (2021). Anchoring human resource management to sustain employee performance at Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronnbestuur*, 19(0), a1611. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v19i0.1611>

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**Orientation:** Practices employed to manage the human resources at Johannesburg (JHB) Metropolitan Municipality were explored to unearth their impact on employee performance.

**Research purpose:** The study sought to reveal the human resource management (HRM) practices that could support employee performance at local government.

**The motivation for the study:** The achievement of organisational goals depends on HRM practices that enhance employee competencies. Employee performance in municipalities is often considered to be substandard. This study aimed to strengthen HRM practices to enhance performance at JHB Metropolitan Municipality.

**Research approach/design and method:** The qualitative inquiry adopted an interpretive stance to reveal participants' experiences that relate to employee performance. Ten participants were identified purposively and the obtained data were analysed with the assistance of the Atlas.ti software.

**Main findings:** Whilst the organisation's employee-attraction practices were strong, its retention practices were weak. Employees generally felt undervalued, which negatively affected their morale and the organisation's goal attainment.

**Practical/managerial implications:** The organisation should introduce effective employee-retention strategies, focussing on thorough needs analyses, skills development and rewards linked to performance. Building employee commitment should be prioritised.

**Study contribution:** Human resource management effectiveness in the Johannesburg Municipality would be enhanced by appropriate soft HRM investment in senior management either through recruitment or development or both. Furthermore, the municipal culture should change from HRM practices that are influenced by tradition to an adaptive approach that responds to public-sector dynamics and varying employee expectations.

**Keywords:** human resource management; employee performance; organisational goals; public-sector dynamics; soft HRM.

## Introduction

Human resource management (HRM) is strategically positioned to drive employee performance (Gopinath, 2020). It is even more crucial within municipalities which, although facing serious financial constraints, still need to deliver services to citizens (Jacobson & Sowa, 2016). The municipal context requires HRM solutions that are peculiar to the public-sector environment (Blom, Kruijven, Van der Heijden, & Van Thiel, 2020; Govender, 2017; Knies, Boselie, Gould-Williams, & Vandenabeele, 2015). In-depth knowledge of contextual challenges is faced by employees in the municipal sector (Blom et al., 2020). Therefore, the municipal contextual differences form the basis of an effective HRM policy shift (Els, Brouwers, & Lodewyk, 2021; Marshall & Stephenson, 2020; Nanjundeswaraswamy, Swamy, & Nagesh, 2019). The knowledge of contextual challenges thus enlightens practitioners on existing gaps and motivates them to take remedial action by developing relevant policies.

Human resource management is about managing the employee life cycle in a manner that addresses both organisational and employee goals (Collins, 2020). It has been established that the effectiveness of the HRM function influences the quality of employees' contribution to the achievement of strategic goals (Potgieter & Mokomane, 2020). Furthermore, services provided by an organisation depend on the quality of its inherent talent pool and skills repertoire (Els et al., 2021). Therefore, poor talent management practices by employers may

negatively affect employee performance. When setting out to enhance talent management, Ryazanova, McNamara and Aguinis (2017) argued that the link between HRM and employee performance is crucial.

Ndevu and Muller (2018) partially attributed poor employee performance in South African municipalities to weak HRM systems. This study provides in-depth insights into how HRM practices within the municipal context contribute to effective (or ineffective) service delivery. Informed by the work of scholars who have focussed on HRM in the public sector (Blom et al., 2020), this study reveals the strong link between HRM and employee performance at JHB Metropolitan Municipality. By achieving an in-depth comprehension of the existing dynamics in employee performance, the study offers lessons on the potentially critical issues that may inform future HRM reforms in other municipalities, especially in South Africa. The two questions that will guide the achievement of the research purpose are: (1) What are the HRM practices that affect performance outcomes at JHB Metropolitan Municipality? (2) What are the consequences of poor HRM at JHB Metropolitan Municipality?

## Literature review

Human resource management has been described as a set of activities that strategically position human assets to work towards the achievement of organisational goals (Armstrong, 2014; Ryazanova et al., 2017). Employee performance, in turn, is concerned with activities associated with operational improvements (Adler et al., 2016; Gopinath, 2020; Howard, Gagné, Morin, & Van Den Broeck, 2016). Therefore, employee performance is a part of HRM that relies on a healthy human resource (HR) culture and supporting processes.

Guest (2017) asserted that HRM has both soft and hard dimensions. Similarly, and at an earlier time, Storey (1989) acknowledged that the views on HRM could be hard or soft. The soft view is aligned to the Harvard model (Beer, Spector, Lawrence, & Mills, 1984) and the hard view is aligned to the Michigan model (Cregan, Kulik, Johnston, & Bartram, 2021; Fombrun, Tichy, & Devanna, 1984). Although these constitute two extremes and sound opposed to each other, they form the basic theoretical foundation on which HR practice has been built. In this literature review, attention is given to those scholars who used both the soft and hard approaches, as opposed to one or the other, to argue the HRM case and its impact on employee performance.

In the various definitions of HRM, the major distinction between the soft and the hard approaches is where the emphasis is placed: on the 'human' element or the 'resource' element (Katou, 2017). The soft approach focusses on the human element by encouraging employee commitment and performance. This is closely related to McGregor's Theory Y of employee motivation. In terms of this theory, McGregor (1960) argued that employees'

desire to perform is stimulated from within rather than forced on them from the external environment. The soft approach is associated with flexibility and adaptability and anchored on high trust and effective communication (Boxall, Guthrie, & Paauwe, 2016).

The soft approach is also embedded in the Harvard analytical framework of HRM (Beer et al., 1984). The Harvard framework views HRM policies and practices as outcomes related to stakeholder interests and situational factors. Human resource management policies in turn determine the quality of HR outcomes, such as employee collaboration, commitment, competence, congruence and effectiveness (Boxall et al., 2016; Cregen et al., 2021). The human element is thus a key consideration in the development of HRM policies as it ultimately impacts performance outcomes.

According to Beer et al. (1984), top managers need to develop HR policies that inspire employees to perform. Employee performance goals should be informed by the organisational vision (Suzuki & Hur, 2020). The observations, therefore, could imply that people are a strategic resource in the performance value chain. Cregen et al. (2021) argued that line managers must align HRM activities with the overall business strategy and ensure coherence between the HR and the other organisational functions. To this end, the soft approach emphasises elements such as mutual respect, cooperation, commitment, responsibility and teamwork (Guest, 2017).

Looking through a different lens, the hard approach focusses on advancing business interests, with little regard for human issues. The hard approach, also known as the matching model, recognises the major functions of HRM (Boxall et al., 2016) and stresses the importance of careful employee selection and rewards that are based on employee contribution (Sharma & Taneja, 2018). The hard approach or the matching model is closely associated with McGregor's Theory X (Guest, 2017). The latter assumes that human beings hate work, avoid responsibility and should be controlled to perform (Armstrong, 2014). Human beings, therefore, need to be treated like tools, similar to other resources in the organisation (Ryazanova et al., 2017). Given the descriptions for hard HRM proffered in the literature, this study probed the effects of hard HRM on employee performance at JHB Metropolitan Municipality.

## Human resource management practices

The HRM challenge is to identify the actual practices that stimulate employee performance and improve human capacities within an organisation. In this regard, Jouda, Ahmad and Dahleez (2016) conducted a study in Palestine to identify the key practices that determine superior employee performance and identified four practices that top the list, as shown (Figure 1).



Source: Jouda, A.A., Ahmad, U.N.U., & Dahleez, K.A. (2016). The impact of human resource management practices on employees performance: The case of Islamic University of Gaza. *International Review of Management and Marketing*, 6(4), 1084.

**FIGURE 1:** Human resource management practices that are positively related to employee performance.

## Recruitment and selection

Whilst recruitment is a process of generating a pool of potential employees, selection is the process of identifying employees with the necessary qualities to competently discharge their duties in a given position (Bazana & Reddy, 2021). The quality of skills attracted and retained determines the quality of outputs because an organisation can only be as good as its people (Metin & Asli, 2018; Paltu & Brouwers, 2020). The focus of talent acquisition should therefore be on acquiring and retaining the best talent.

The hard approach to HRM ensures the acquisition of the right numbers necessary to achieve the business goals (Potgieter & Mokomane, 2020). In contrast, the soft approach ensures the availability of HR with the right attitude, motivation and commitment to work (Armstrong, 2014). Soft HRM, therefore, shapes the organisation's culture by identifying employees who have the right value system to sustain the desired organisational performance levels. Skills turnover is affected by push and pull factors in the organisation (Hooi & Zahari, 2020). Human nature is sensitive to both push and pulls factors (Guest, 2017). This infers that organisations should maintain a high level of pull factors to retain talent and minimise push factors that repel top achievers.

This study set out to establish the recruitment and selection practices that support effective employee performance at JHB Metropolitan Municipality. Similarly, Rezaei, Zare, Akbarzadeh and Zare (2014) found that organisations that are techno-savvy attract young and innovative employees. This view is reinforced by Govender (2017) who argued that municipalities that leverage the virtues of the digital era are more efficient in service delivery. Therefore, the employee-acquisition strategy should identify technologically astute employees.

## Capacity development

Human capacity development is largely concerned with training and development. Although training and development are different concepts, they both aim to improve

people's skill sets so that they can meet performance-related goals (Sharma & Taneja, 2018). Training enhances employee performance capacities (Al Barwani, 2019). Furthermore, it is learner-based (or participant-based) (Sharma & Taneja, 2018). A typical training cycle involves the identification of training needs, structuring of the training, execution of the training and appraisal of the completed training (Al Barwani, 2019). In contrast, development is futuristic in outlook as it progressively equips employees with competencies to meet future challenges. Development is an unfolding process and not specifically focussed on the present job (Katou, 2017). Development incorporates a plan with a series of components, namely analysis of the current situation, goal setting, preparation of an action plan and execution of the plan (Senge, 2017).

Successful training and development depend on effective employee selection, as poorly selected employees are difficult to train and develop (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009). The hard approach ensures that training and development programmes are cost-effective and achieve a strategic fit with the organisational goals (Armstrong & Landers, 2018). The soft approach, in turn, promotes effective communication to motivate employees to adopt attitudes that contribute towards the achievement of organisational goals. Furthermore, training and development should inspire employees to willingly adopt the culture and value system of the organisation (Sharma & Taneja, 2018). In a study conducted by Mauerhoefer, Strese and Brettel (2017), it was discovered that the use of information technology helps to facilitate the transfer and acquisition of skills.

From another perspective, Cafferkey, Hefferman, Harney, Dundon and Townsend (2019) argued that HR bundling can be useful in achieving effective employee performance. Similarly, Jouda et al. (2016) posited that training and development are tools for motivating top achievers. At the same time, it enriches the organisation's skills repertoire, thereby bundling HR practices to attain high performance levels. The link between employee capacity development and performance is thus supported from many angles in the literature.

## Rewards management

Rewards management is a process of determining what employees receive in recognition of their contribution towards the achievement of organisational goals (Ajmal, Bashir, Abrar, Mahroof Khan, & Saqib, 2015; Salah, 2016). The hard approach to HRM ensures that employees are rewarded in line with their adherence to prescribed cost structures within the organisation (Salah, 2016). However, the soft approach ensures that rewards motivate employees to willingly deliver a high level of service (Armstrong, 2014). An organisation's reward structure is a reflection of the behaviours that are valued. Hence, rewards can be used to reinforce a performance culture by recognising top achievers (Kumari & Singh, 2018).

Rewards can effectively sustain employee performance if adopted as part of a total rewards system (Armstrong, 2014). The total rewards approach combines both transactional and relational rewards to sustain employee performance (Pregolato, Bussin, & Schlechter, 2017). The independent existence of transactional and relational rewards has its pros and cons. Transactional rewards are provided as a contractual obligation and are viewed as the key factor that attracts talent (Kumari & Singh, 2018). However, they have been criticised for having only a temporary effect on motivation (Pregolato et al., 2017). Furthermore, employers sometimes use them to bribe employees to work endlessly, with minimum regard for their safety and health (Adler et al., 2016).

In contrast, relational rewards are not tangible and are difficult to use as a tool for attracting talent. However, employees accept them as an ethical way of enhancing employee commitment (Salah, 2016). Adler et al. (2016) reinforced the assertion and argued that they are a useful tool for talent retention. Given the pros and cons of transactional and relational rewards, HR professionals could adopt the total rewards approach to ensure a sound balance between the two for optimal performance. From another perspective, Maslow (1954) argued that rewards are effective if they address individual employee needs. Therefore, HR professionals must develop a reward structure that is informed by identified employee needs.

## Performance appraisal

Adler et al. (2016) reasoned that appraisals of performance involve measuring the actual contribution made by individual employees towards the organisational goals. The idea of measuring performance fosters a performance culture which is important for organisational success (Boxall et al., 2016; Cafferkey et al., 2019). The performance appraisal is thus broadly accepted as an essential component in employee performance.

The hard approach to HRM is important for ensuring strict concordance between performance goals, the recruitment and selection criteria, the training objectives and the rewards management system. Similarly, the soft approach to HRM ensures that employees are motivated and maintain the correct attitude towards their work. If employees lack the motivation to work, their efficiency diminishes (Gopinath, 2020). A performance appraisal should thus be designed to stimulate positive attitudes. Many studies featuring in the literature have looked at the effects of performance appraisals on employee performance. One such study, by Sanders and Yang (2016), concluded that performance appraisals provide critical support to other activities in the HRM value chain, such as selection, training, rewards management and employee development. Unfortunately, some organisations have failed to take advantage of the gains from the performance appraisal process by disregarding the feedback obtained in their HR planning (Adler et al., 2016). This study, therefore, seeks ways to

leverage an effective appraisal that enhances employee performance at JHB Metropolitan Municipality.

## Research design

This section describes the research approach, strategy and method from the beginning of the research period to the reporting of findings.

### Research approach

The ontological stance adopted in the study assumed that the truth exists in multiple realities and can be socially constructed (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). The epistemological stance, in turn, assumed that reality can be discovered by engaging those who have experience acquired from the natural context (Yazan & De Vasconcelos, 2016). Consequently, the employees at JHB Metropolitan Municipality were engaged. All responses were accepted as valuable.

The interpretive approach was accepted as being most relevant for the study. Such an approach accepts subjectivity in creating reality and acknowledges the importance of the respective world views and social livelihoods of the research participants (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Therefore, interactions between individuals are critical for arriving at the meaning of a social phenomenon (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). In this study, the researchers were not a disconnected actor but actively interacted with participants to solicit and expose meaning. Some well-articulated arguments came to the fore in the process. However, the researchers did not give preference to any particular interpretation but rather gave equal weight to all views, thereby acknowledging that diversity would enrich the study. The goal was not to reveal one universally acceptable reality but to understand the diverse angles from which different people perceived reality.

Notwithstanding its benefits, the interpretive approach has at times been perceived by other researchers as being too 'soft', lacking the capacity to yield theories that can be applied in other contexts. Another criticism is that the over-involvement of the researchers reduces objectivity (Stake, 2005). However, the researchers in this study deflected these perceived weaknesses by being rigorous, systematic and precise and paying close attention to detail (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

### Research setting and strategy

The study was performed at JHB Metropolitan Municipality and sought to build on other studies that have focussed on similar settings. The objectives of the current inquiry resonated well with the case study strategy, centring on unearthing the factors that could anchor HRM to sustain employee performance.

The study was conducted in the natural habitat (Blom et al., 2020). As HRM was failing to sustain employee performance, the study sought to identify those practices that should be transformed to enhance employee performance. The affected

employees and their managers were interviewed to understand the specific challenges faced, which would then inform the proposed solutions.

## Research method

The qualitative research method was used to develop an in-depth understanding of the HRM dynamics affecting employee performance in the given context. This research method allowed hitherto unknown explanations to be uncovered, thereby giving rise to new views. Unlike the more rigid quantitative research method, which confines a study's scope to predetermined options, the qualitative method allows flexibility to delve into the unknown (Antwi & Hamza, 2015). This study therefore embraced the inductive approach, which allows the theory to be derived from the data instead of controlling the path of the research (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

## Entrée and establishing roles of researchers

The study was conducted at JHB Metropolitan Municipality in South Africa. The employees who were interviewed were identified as participants in the study. An agreement was drafted with relevant terms to ensure that the study would be conducted ethically and without any prejudice to the participants or the organisation (Sussman & DeJong, 2018). After conducting the study, the findings were submitted, along with recommendations, to the municipality.

## Research participants and sampling methods

Whilst the JHB Metropolitan Municipality has approximately 10 000 employees (Profile: city of JHB Metro, 2020), a total population of 10 participants was canvassed for the study. The participants were five females and five males, of which five were managers and five were non-managers. They were identified through purposive sampling. A senior official from the performance management unit assisted with identifying potential participants with knowledge of employee performance issues. This method was considered ideal, as the study targeted a small sample comprising participants with rich knowledge of HRM and employee performance. A small sample was considered adequate after reaching a point of saturation (Crozier, Denzin, & Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, the focus was to obtain and analyse individual participants' experiences in detail, which would not be achievable from a large sample.

Although the sample structure was deliberately designed to obtain equally representative views from both female and male employees, the selection criteria did not consider any link between gender and performance. Therefore, no inferences were drawn from the gender differences between the participants.

## Data collection methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. All participants were asked similar questions and

responses were probed further where necessary, to clarify 'grey areas'. This permitted participants to share diverse views in line with qualitative research standards.

## Data recording

Interviews were conducted online using Skype. The interviews were recorded electronically and saved onto Google Drive for easy retrieval. Notes were also taken during the interviews and all the data records were password-protected to avoid unauthorised access.

## Safeguarding the quality and integrity of data

The issue of maintaining integrity and quality of qualitative data has been a subject of debate for decades. Unfortunately, there are no universally accepted criteria (Begbie, Bussin, & Schurink, 2011). However, every situation is unique and requires an approach that is relevant to it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In the present study, the researcher took a long time to become completely familiar with the participants and observed their behaviour with minimum interference. Furthermore, interviews were held with participants from various departments and results were shared with them to confirm or disconfirm both the accuracy of obtained data and interpretations made. A clear trail of procedures followed was maintained in documentary form to allow easy validation by other, future researchers.

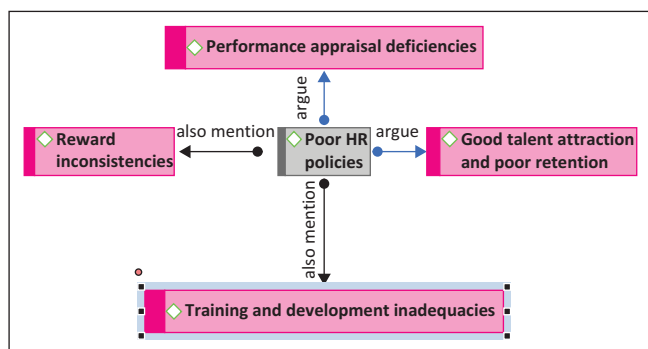
## Data analysis

The collected data were then analysed using Atlas.ti software package. All the transcribed data were reviewed and grouped according to the research questions. Data that were aligned with the research objectives were coded and later classified into sub-categories of common characters, showing the link to the different objectives. The sub-categories were later merged into themes where data reflected common positions. The themes were analysed in the light of similar studies conducted in the past, which appeared in the relevant parts of the literature. The revealed trends helped to explain the current behaviour and also challenge certain practices that were affecting employee performance. This made it possible to arrive at conclusions about how to improve the HRM status quo in the organisation concerned.

## Findings

### Human resource management practices affecting municipal employee performance

This section presents the findings relating to the first research objective, which was to identify practices that affect employee performance. The practices were revealed under the 'Poor HR policies' theme and supporting codes (or elements), as shown (Figure 2).



**FIGURE 2:** Poor human resource policies theme and supporting codes or elements.

## Good talent attraction but poor retention

The participants observed that the organisation offered an excellent employee value proposition which encouraged graduates to join. However, the working atmosphere deteriorated as time went by:

'I was attracted to this organisation because they offer very good benefits at the entry point. However, my supervisor is very cruel and we have a bad relationship; yet he expects me to perform well at work.' (Female, non-managerial, 2)

'I joined the organisation because it is comparatively one of the best-paying employers at entry-level. However, I was frustrated to later discover that the organisation does not pay the senior executives well if you compare it with the private sector. I think it is because low-level employees have strong labour unions that lobby for better conditions for them but senior managers negotiate their conditions on an individual basis, which gives them poor bargaining power.' (Male, senior manager, 8)

'When I was a junior employee, things were a lot better but as I rose on the organisational ladder of promotion, things became worse. I am not as happy as I was when I was a non-managerial employee. This organisation does not give us a platform to negotiate our benefits as a team. If you try to be too vocal about it, the politicians will accuse you of being greedy over public funds.' (Male, senior manager, 10)

The employees interviewed were happy with the employee-attraction policies but expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of good retention policies. Some non-managerial employees indicated that they needed to leave the organisation to escape from their supervisors, whilst senior managers felt that their expertise was not adequately recognised as they were treated like junior employees. The senior managers passed on their frustration to junior employees by ill-treating them, resulting in acrimonious industrial relations. Frustrated employees would end up leaving the organisation, resulting in a loss of talent and institutional memory that in turn affected employee performance.

## Reward inconsistencies

Certain employees expressed satisfaction with their rewards. However, some felt that the industrial relations

were not healthy:

'I am so happy with my salary and benefits. However, our managers are the spoilers. They overload us with work and frustrate us because they feel that we are unfairly rewarded ... Our unions represent us well so we have greater bargaining power, hence our benefits are very good ... Senior managers negotiate their benefits as individuals so their bargaining power is weak.' (Female, non-managerial, 1)

'We are under pressure from the policymakers and citizens to ensure that we perform and if you are poorly rated, you get a low-performance bonus and you risk losing your job, so we have no option but to push our juniors to work.' (Male, senior manager, 9)

'The junior employees in this organisation are very lazy because their remuneration is not performance-based. Their salaries are paid on the grading structure without any recognition of their contribution. There is no motivation for any employee to perform beyond what they are paid for and the desire to be innovative is very low. However, for us, our remuneration is based on performance, so we have to ensure that these people work; otherwise, if you leave them, their performance will reflect badly on me.' (Male, senior manager, 6)

'There is no motivation to work because there is no difference in rewards between top performers and poor performers. We are all paid similar rewards as long as we are in the same grade. I think this kind of approach stifles organisational innovation as employees always work enough to avoid retribution, even if you excel nobody recognises your effort. I work as a trench digger and during my first days, I used to dig longer lengths than everyone but I later realised that I am suffering for nothing because I am not rewarded for working hard.' (Female, non-managerial, 1)

Some non-managerial employees were happy with the transactional rewards but dissatisfied with the poor relationships they had with their superiors. The rewards for non-managerial employees did not recognise employee creativity and value addition which meant that innovation was neither being promoted nor committed. However, senior managers' performance was reviewed regularly and linked to their pay. The dichotomy in the rewards systems applied to non-managerial and managerial staff contributed to tense interpersonal relationships.

## Performance appraisal deficiencies

Some managerial employees complained that the expectations from stakeholders and the community at large regarding their performance were too high and that their work-related targets were unrealistic:

'The expectations from our stakeholders are just too high and some targets that they set for us are not achievable because we do not have the necessary resources and we also need time to develop our capabilities to match other developed nations. Unfortunately, our masters are not patient; they expect us to perform miracles and change things immediately.' (Male, senior manager, 8)

'The performance measurement system is very weak because supervisors wait until the financial period is about to end, then they give you ratings with no clear basis ... It looks like those

who are friends and relatives of supervisors get better ratings because there is no objectivity.’ (Female, non-managerial, 7).

‘There are so many errors made in completing the balanced scorecard forms, most supervisors are not competent enough to use the tool. As a result, employee performance is not evaluated objectively. This results in many of them criticising the system. In some cases, we have recorded some complaints on disputes emanating from appraisal interviews. This has caused industrial disharmony in the workplace.’ (Male, senior manager, 6)

The performance expectations of senior managers are in some cases too high, which frustrates them. Moreover, the failure to link rewards to performance demotivates employees who see that ratings are frequently awarded arbitrarily. Supervisors’ competence levels in using the performance tool are weak, which negatively affects employee performance.

### Training and development inadequacies

All participants concurred that the organisation was failing to introduce appropriate training and development initiatives:

‘The training budget is always low and some of our managers perceive investment in training as a waste of resources. They prefer channelling resources towards activities that have a direct impact on organisational performance, such as the purchase of services delivery equipment ... I think it is because the impact of poor training is not immediately felt in the organisation ... The organisation does not prioritise training; as a result, employees are not eager to learn new things because the training policy does not promote learning.’ (Male, non-managerial, 5)

‘I do not know how to use computers in my trade as a civil engineer ... I think if the organisation can promote the use of computers, I will be able to perform my duties with improved efficiency.’ (Male, senior manager, 9)

‘As a young and recent graduate, I think the organisation is lacking not utilising technology as it has the potential to transform municipal work from paper-based to chip, which improves efficiency and enhances the impetus for knowledge creation and sharing amongst colleagues.’ (Female, non-managerial, 3)

‘Some of the training programmes offered have lost relevance, we now require training and development that is biased towards digitalisation of our operations ... Further, the organisation is no longer conducting effective training needs analysis; this is why they continue to waste money on courses that have lost steam... Employees are not incentivised to share knowledge. As a result, some experienced employees go away with their knowledge when they leave the organisation and this affects the level of employee competencies within the organisation.’ (Male, managerial, 4)

The training budget was low because the training was viewed as a cost and not an investment. Some employees expressed concern that training programmes were not in line with current organisational needs. In particular, there was a need to prioritise the training of employees

in digital technologies to promote knowledge sharing, productivity and innovation.

### Effects of poor human resource management on municipal employee performance

The findings on the effects of poor HRM on municipal employee performance were revealed under the theme, ‘Resultant employee behaviour’ with supporting codes (or elements), as shown (Figure 3).

### High turnover

The turnover of employees across the organisation was high, although participants’ reasons for this varied, depending on their position in the organisation. The high turnover creates skills and knowledge gaps that negatively affect employee performance:

‘I am currently job hunting because my relationship with my supervisor is so bad ... I should go to a new place where I can breathe fresh air.’ (Male, non-managerial, 4)

‘The organisation does not seem to care about our welfare because we are forced to come to work without sufficient protective clothing, which exposes us to contract deadly diseases such as coronavirus and this affects my morale to work.’ (Female, non-managerial, 1)

‘I am job hunting because the organisation does not sufficiently recognise my knowledge and skill... I do not care even if they lose institutional memory because their reward structure does not recognise my superior knowledge ... In this organisation, we are treated the same as low-level employees because managers have weak bargaining power.’ (Female, senior manager, 7)

The turnover of knowledge workers was high because of generally poor working conditions. This high turnover rate also negatively affected the morale of those who remained at the organisation and hurt employee performance overall.

### Poor commitment

Participants revealed that they lacked commitment and only reported for duty to avoid losing their jobs:

‘I do not care even when the clients complain against our organisation because this organisation does not care for me ... Yes, take bribes to survive. At the same time, I fear dismissal so I do not do it openly.’ (Male, non-managerial employee, 5)

‘If a client offers me part-time work during my off days I can take it on condition that my supervisors do not know because if they know they will take disciplinary action against me. So I always keep the work tools at my house in case I find a client

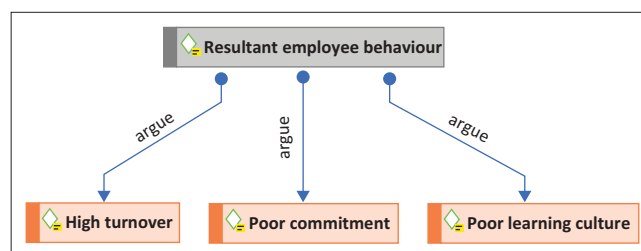


FIGURE 3: Resultant employee behaviour theme and supporting codes or elements.

who requires my services as a plumber. I find more satisfaction in doing my thing than working for this organisation ... Because I am not happy.' (Female, non-managerial, 2)

Employees' level of commitment towards the organisation was low. Employees were even prepared to moonlight or steal from the organisation. Their presence at work was because of fear of dismissal and not a commitment to carry out their duties.

### Poor learning culture

There was a poor learning culture at the organisation because the latter did not provide an environment that encouraged employees to learn:

'The organisation hardly sends employees for training to enhance skills ... In these hard times, it is difficult to commit part of my income to go to school when I have children whose fees I should pay... so I end up not learning.' (Female, non-managerial, 1)

'Performance reviews are conducted but the performance development plans are never implemented, so we continue to have similar performance deficiencies every year.' (Female, non-managerial, 2)

The learning culture was poor and employees were not keen to learn because the environment was not a supportive one. As a result, skill deficiencies were perpetuated and employee performance did not improve.

## Discussion

The main findings from the study were generally concerning. Firstly, the organisation attracted the right skills at the outset but then failed to retain them. Secondly, the employees were dissatisfied with the rewards they received. Thirdly, the performance appraisal system did not act as an incentive for good performance. Finally, the employee training and development system did not support or add value to the organisational goals. Taken together, the under-emphasis of soft HRM at the JHB Municipality negatively impacts their talent management capability.

Talent attraction and retention can be explained by push and pull factors (Bazana & Reddy, 2021). Push factors compel existing employees to consider leaving their place of employment because their commitment wanes (Els et al., 2021), whilst pull factors attract potential employees to an organisation (Hooi & Zahari, 2020). The study confirmed that the organisation offered attractive extrinsic rewards and acquired strong talent. The hard approach to HRM was critical for ensuring a good fit between the required competencies and the person specifications. The soft approach to HRM complemented the hard approach by creating an environment that attracted high-calibre employees (Potgieter & Mokomane, 2020). Human resource management interventions should therefore be bundled to appeal to different types of candidates with varying inclinations and drivers (Rioux, Bernthal, & Wellins, 2006).

Regarding the first research question, although the municipality was able to attract the right talent, a key weakness was its inability to retain the employees in question. This is consistent with reported challenges in HRM in the public sector context, especially the limited power enjoyed by public sector managers (Blom et al., 2020). The findings provided evidence that the organisation did not recognise top performers, rewards were not performance-related, training programmes were not responsive to organisational needs and the industrial relations atmosphere between some employees and their supervisors was acrimonious. When employees' expectations were not met, they became frustrated and their commitment towards the organisation declined (Nanjundeswaraswamy et al., 2019). The study also revealed that some frustrated employees were engaging in unethical practices such as moonlighting and accepting bribes.

If HRM is not in good shape, employees become detached from the organisational value system (Marshall & Stephenson, 2020). Employee performance can, however, be enhanced through the development of strong employee value propositions. Employees should be motivated to work and training programmes should address prevailing performance deficiencies in the workplace (Sharma & Taneja, 2018). In line with the view of Klinck and Swanepoel (2019) and Munzhedzi (2017) regarding inadequate training in the workplace, the study revealed that some of the training programmes conducted were no longer relevant as they were not tied to specific training needs. Human resource management in the organisation should be more proactive and include the development of interventions in collaboration with other departments, such as internal marketing, to boost employee commitment (Yu, Yen, Barnes, & Huang, 2019).

Regarding the second research question, the study found that poor HRM practices resulted in high employee turnover, reduced commitment and weak learning culture (Klinck & Swanepoel, 2019). The high employee turnover caused a loss of institutional memory, which resulted in an inevitable erosion of human-centred competitive advantage (Els et al., 2021). Marshall and Stephenson (2020) found that high turnover creates a sense of insecurity within employees, which negatively affects performance. This was borne out in some of the interviews.

The study revealed that most employees felt insecure, their level of commitment had dropped and hence their work was of poor quality. There is a direct correlation between employee morale and commitment (Klinck & Swanepoel, 2019; Paltu & Brouwers, 2020). When employees are not committed, unethical behaviours start manifesting in the organisation (Gopinath, 2020). Commitment is not forced; it is a natural feeling that develops when employees have a sense of belonging (Metin & Asli, 2018). Salah (2016) insisted that relational rewards are more effective than transactional rewards in fostering commitment.



Training and development help to build an organisation's capacity to meet the demands of the ever-changing business environment (Munzhedzi, 2017; Sharma & Taneja, 2018). Furthermore, they widen the organisation's skills repertoire and stimulate innovation (Garg & Dhar, 2017). However, employee skills development should be aligned with organisational goals and address contemporary challenges (Nxumalo, Goudge, Gilson, & Eyles, 2018). This study revealed that the organisation was conducting outdated training programmes and there was limited use of technology because of insufficient skills. As a result, there was limited capacity for innovation.

In the literature, talent management is often viewed generically, inclusive of all management levels. Consequently, studies on talent management focus on symptoms such as poor commitment and high turnover (Makapela & Mtshelwane, 2021). This aggregation of talent management contributes little to our understanding of HRM in municipalities. The findings from this study deviate from prior studies by suggesting that talent management should be distinguished by level of seniority, such that entry-level jobs and senior-level jobs are attractive for different reasons in the municipality in question. The comparatively good conditions at lower levels are attributed to the role of collective bargaining structures, which is consistent with the literature elsewhere in the world (Beszter, Ackers, & Hislop, 2015). Therefore, it can be concluded that talent attraction at lower levels of the municipality is driven by the hard features of collective bargaining.

The findings, in turn, indicate that top-team talent management in a municipal context is a higher-order causal mechanism. A view often expressed in the literature is that, given that senior administrative positions in South Africa are tied to political appointments (Ndevu, 2019), the decoupling of such appointments from the political leadership of the day would be an important first step towards creating a safe space for talent. However, this is not sufficient to ensure that suitable talent is attracted and sustained in municipal contexts. The findings make a contribution by establishing a sufficiency condition, positing that investment in soft HRM alongside hard HRM, is even more crucial amongst top management teams. Investing in soft HRM amongst top management is required to compensate for the hard and conflict-based municipal context, which is characterised by politicisation and collective bargaining. Therefore, the two-fold contribution underscores the nuanced character of HRM in the public sector (Blom et al., 2020; Knies et al., 2015).

## Practical implications

The organisation should emphasise soft HRM mechanisms aimed at addressing low management commitment and a poor learning culture – both factors being further

exacerbated by managers relying on poor HR practices. To this end, the organisation's managers should explore various employee-retention strategies for top performers and create an environment that stimulates employee innovation. The skills and capacity of top performers should be developed in line with identified training needs, not an outdated training calendar (Sharma & Taneja, 2018). The failure to provide relevant training weakens an employee's capacity to perform and tackle contemporary challenges in the workplace. Garg and Dhar (2017) argued that training improves innovation by sharpening employee skills and stimulating the desire to learn new things. The reward strategy, in turn, should motivate employees to work beyond their pay cheque (Salah, 2016). The study showed that employees were reluctant to be innovative because they were poorly rewarded.

As human needs are insatiable, the organisation should recast the HR value proposition in line with changing employee needs (Nxumalo et al., 2018). Furthermore, human goals are moving targets so an employer needs to meet employee expectations if it is to withstand competition for talent (Rioux et al., 2006). Human resource management is constantly evolving and should be continuously reviewed throughout an employee's life cycle to avoid losing that talent too early and wasting resources (Potgieter & Mokomane, 2020).

Managers should focus on fostering employee commitment instead of enforcing compliance (Metin & Asli, 2018). Committed employees are better performers. Herzberg (1968) argued that employees who have intrinsic motivation perform their duties well. In contrast, employees who simply work to comply with the law are poor performers. This view is in line with this study's finding that employee performance was poor because most of the participants were frustrated.

Managers should develop a performance appraisal system that recognises employees' contribution to organisational goals (Sattigeri, 2016). This is because goal ambiguity is the enemy of effective performance in public sector performance management (Blom et al., 2020). This study revealed that some knowledge workers were not performing as expected because the reward management criteria did not recognise their expertise. Other employees were not motivated to improve their performance in support of their good salary because they viewed this as the employer's obligation in terms of the employment contract. Rather, additional, merit-based incentives would have inspired them to put in more effort because this would have been a gesture of goodwill from the employer.

In sum, and generalising our findings to a limited extent (Payne & Williams, 2005), our contribution is that HRM effectiveness in municipal contexts may be enhanced by focussing on soft HRM alongside hard HRM through investment in senior management, either through recruitment or development, or both.

## Limitations and recommendations

The study used purposive sampling, which targeted individuals who were thought to be more knowledgeable than others. Consequently, the population was not fairly represented. It is recommended that future studies consider a sampling method that is more representative of the greater population. The number of interviewed participants were small, so the findings were restricted to this study. Future studies could consider a methodology that captures the views of a larger sample to facilitate generalisation. In addition, there was a direct engagement between the interviewed participants, which increased the risk of researcher bias. To minimise researcher bias, it is recommended that future studies use anonymous questionnaires.

## Conclusion

Employee performance is not automatic; it is largely guided by the principles underpinning the hard approach to HRM. However, people are not machines; they are motivated to perform when the soft approach to HRM is applied. Employee performance, therefore, is the result of the combined contribution of the hard and soft approaches to HRM.

The municipal context is different from the private sector context, which has informed much of the HRM practice literature to date. However, in terms of the hard and soft HRM approaches, the differences between the municipal and private sector contexts are insignificant. Enhancing employee performance in municipalities is a critical priority in South Africa and deserves more in-depth research and strategic analysis.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

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

### Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Johannesburg (Ethical clearance code: IPPM-2018-169[D]).

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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