

HRM Alignment and Integration in Knowledge Risk Management in South African State-Owned Enterprises

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Abstract: Most state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in South Africa face serious challenges with tacit knowledge loss risks, largely due to a lack of alignment and integration points for human resource management (HRM) practices in knowledge management to effectively manage such knowledge loss risks. This study was interdisciplinary in nature, presenting empirical evidence of a strong connection between HRM and knowledge management (KM), especially its knowledge risk management (KRM) sub-domain. The research paper employed a qualitative research design, which involved collecting in-depth qualitative data through interviews with 20 human resource (HR) managers in 9 SOEs. The qualitative data extracted through the interviews were analyzed thematically using Atlas.ti software. The research results revealed that HRM practices are not aligned, integrated and focused on mitigating enterprise tacit knowledge loss risks in most South African SOEs. A lack of HRM alignment and integration was a serious issue across the board, irrespective of whether the participating SOEs had knowledge management structures, roles and strategies in place. However, on a positive note, HR managers acknowledged the need for the integration and alignment of HRM strategies regarding effective knowledge loss risk management. The study highlights a deficiency in HRM alignment and integration for effective knowledge loss risk management. The researcher finds that HRM alignment and integration in KRM has a critical strategic and operational role to play in the mitigation of enterprise knowledge risks, as well as in developing the required knowledge management capabilities. The study sought to close a knowledge gap in the existing body of knowledge by presenting empirical evidence identifying alignment and integration points of HRM strategies into KRM for SOEs to effectively reduce knowledge loss risks. Furthermore, the study presents a strong link between HRM and KRM in building KM capacity for the reduction of the risks associated with tacit knowledge loss.

Keywords: Tacit Knowledge Loss; Human Resource Management; Knowledge Risk Management; Knowledge-Based View; Resource-Based View; State-Owned Enterprises; South Africa.

1. Introduction

Human resources and knowledge assets are key drivers of organisational performance, innovation and sustainability in the current global knowledge economy. State-owned enterprises (SOEs) are key instruments wholly or partially owned by the state to drive the economic development agenda in many developing and developed nations across the globe. In South Africa, SOEs are considered as catalysts for economic growth, employment and the sustainability of the economy. Phaladi (2023a) observed that SOEs are facing a number of knowledge loss-related risks due to voluntary, involuntary and the absence of knowledge-driven human resource management practices (HRMPs) that are aligned and integrated to mitigate knowledge risks. The Resource-Based View Theory (RBVT) of the business considers knowledge workers as drivers of competition, organisational effectiveness, innovation and productivity (Barney 2001). Similarly, the Knowledge-Based Theory (KBT) of the firm prioritizes organisational intangible assets such as knowledge, expertise and skills as drivers of organisational performance, innovation and sustainable competitive advantage (Grant 1996). Extant research demonstrates that the role of human resource management (HRM) in knowledge management (KM) is certainly unavoidable (Gürlek 2020). SOEs across the globe, including South Africa, are experiencing some serious tacit knowledge risks as a result of a lack of high employee attrition, knowledge-driven HRMPs and retention strategies. Such tacit knowledge risks threaten the economic development, innovation capacity and sustainability of these SOEs. The situation is worse in most developing countries because their economic performance and viability are much dependent on well-run SOEs. However, it remains unknown as to whether HRMPs in South African SOEs are well-aligned and integrated in knowledge risk management (KRM) strategies. In an organisational context, knowledge, competencies and skillsets are enterprise-specific intangible assets that are strategically linked or contingent on human resources. However, the extant corpus of research observes that these organisational intangible knowledge assets could place companies at risk as and when carriers of such knowledge decide to terminate their relationships with their employers (Phaladi and Ngulube 2024). KM research characterises such potential risks as knowledge loss risks that require management interventions (Durst and Zieba 2019).

Emerging research characterizes such a required management approach as knowledge risk management (Durst, Lindvall and Bruns 2020). KRM is a novel research niche area within the broad KM field of practice that seeks to

assist companies to predict and respond to knowledge-related risk occurrences. Phaladi (2023a) opines that HRMPs could play a crucial role in mitigating such knowledge-related risks. This is largely due to the fact that the effective management of organisational knowledge-related risks are contingent on firm-specific knowledge workers (Phaladi and Ngulube 2024). Nevertheless, extant literature points to the significant role of HRMPs for organisations such as state-owned enterprises to mitigate such knowledge-related risks. The role of HRMPs in the management of enterprise-specific knowledge assets is undisputable. Phaladi, Mhlongo, Omarsaib and Mpungose (2024) point to very limited empirical research in the global literature directly linking, aligning and integrating HRM practices for the effective management of knowledge loss risks and knowledge risk management. These authors lament the dearth of literature linking HRM systems to KRM in SOEs globally. This is despite the fact that the role of HRM and its practices in the mitigation of enterprise knowledge risks is inevitable. Phaladi et al (2024) indicate that such a relationship remains blurred in the current body of KRM research and practice. Much of the extant research on tacit knowledge loss risks is silent on the alignment and integration of knowledge-driven HRM systems with the management of such risks in both private and public enterprises. The study explores the alignment and integration of HRMPs in managing organisational tacit knowledge loss in SOEs. It also explores the need for such integration, its implementation, and the effectiveness of HRMPs in managing and mitigating knowledge loss risks. The research also proffers strategies for implementing such alignment and integration in the organization.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Human Resource Management Practices

Researchers have argued that tacit knowledge is heavily dependent on firm-specific workers, and that HRMPs such as recruitment, career management, learning and development, performance management, compensation and rewards, as well as the facilitation of a knowledge-driven organisational culture and behaviours, are crucial for managing knowledge and mitigating its potential loss within organisations (Le 2024; Phaladi et al. 2024). Proponents of the RBVT argue that HRMPs are key drivers of a sustainable competitive edge, innovation capacity and superior enterprise performance in knowledge-based competition (Murali and Kumar 2014). Recruitment as an HRM practice is considered an important activity within organisations and provides a direct link between KM and HRM. Phaladi (2023a) argues that the HRM recruitment process is by nature knowledge-driven, largely because it is tasked with the responsibility of sourcing much-needed firm-specific human resources. Thus, recruitment practices serve as a facilitator for the acquisition of required knowledge, competencies and skillsets. As such, it is the genesis of the nexus between HRM and KM in organisations. Learning and development is also an important knowledge-driven HRM practice that facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and absorptive capacities in organisations (Sarfraz et al. 2023). Kianto et al (2017) assert that retention practices such as compensation, rewards and incentives could be playing an important role in ensuring that organisations retain and protect firm-specific employees and their much-needed knowledge, competencies and skillsets to survive in knowledge-based competitive markets. Scholars have established that retaining highly experienced workers who are at the top of their performance and productivity levels remains a serious problem area for the HRM establishment and executives (Allen and Vardaman 2021). Phaladi (2023b) posits that knowledge-driven retention practices help to facilitate the retention and protective capacity of company-specific knowledge assets and, as result, such practices serve to enhance knowledge sharing, retention and protective capacities. Scholars concur that HRMPs that are knowledge-driven in character will serve to facilitate and develop knowledge-driven cultures, activities and behaviours (Le 2024; Phaladi 2023a). Consequently, such knowledge-driven practices will directly or indirectly facilitate the effective mitigation of knowledge loss risks in state-owned enterprises.

2.2 Knowledge Management

The knowledge-based view of the firm argues that knowledge assets such as knowledge, skillsets and abilities to perform organisational duties will provide companies with sources of superior performance and a sustainable competitive edge over their competitors (Grant 1996). Knowledge management involves the use of resources to create an environment where knowledge is easily accessible, thereby enabling firm-specific employees to develop their own knowledge and apply it for the benefit of the organization, encouraging the sharing and utilization of knowledge (Murali and Kumar 2014). Knowledge-intensive companies such as SOEs require a strong nexus between HRM and KM, which can enhance performance and lead to its success (Phaladi 2021). Within SOEs, individual employees are sources of organisational knowledge. Ideally, in order for knowledge to be acquired, created, shared and retained, HRM establishments should develop their practices in such a way that

they help facilitate the effective management of knowledge in order to lessen the risks of losing organisational tacit knowledge to their competitors. Phaladi (2023a) opines that a majority of the SOEs in South Africa are lacking key knowledge-driven HRMPs, which adversely affects the management, sharing and retention of organisational tacit knowledge. El-Farr and Hosseingholizadeh (2019) assert that HRM plays a significant role in supporting and facilitating the management of knowledge within organisations. It is for this reason that HRMPs should be aligned and integrated into knowledge management processes. Ideally, beyond this alignment and integration point, HRMPs should be knowledge-driven and integrated enough to effectively play a meaningful role in the management of tacit knowledge loss risks in SOEs.

2.3 Knowledge Risk Management in SOEs

In relation to KRM, extant literature defines it as the application of a set of tools and techniques used to identify, measure, prevent and lessen the risks related to the creation, use, sharing and retention of enterprise knowledge (Durst and Henschel 2020). In other words, KRM presents researchers, practitioners and business executives with the strategic tactics to use knowledge as a valuable firm-specific resource so that they are in a better management position to predict, measure and mitigate the risks associated with organisational knowledge. However, scholars lament the fact that conceptual and empirical research on the topic of knowledge risk management in private and public enterprises is still very rare (Durst et al. 2023). Phaladi (2023a) further notes that this also applies to empirical papers linking HRMPs to knowledge risks and its management in SOEs. Phaladi et al. (2024), in their global systematic literature review linking and integrating the role of HRM in KRM in SOEs, illustrate the scarcity of scholarly contributions in this research strand, despite the fact that knowledge risks are considered serious enterprise risks affecting knowledge-intensive business enterprises such as SOEs (Kumar 2020). The few existing studies in this research strand, especially in SOEs, indicate that these enterprises are quite vulnerable to serious knowledge loss risks given the fact that they are resource-intensive, knowledge-intensive learning organisations (Kumar 2020; Phaladi 2023a). Internationally, SOEs are key instruments in driving and shaping the economies of the world, in both developed and developing nations. Scholars observe that they are no exception to the great resignation and knowledge exodus affecting private and public companies in the current knowledge economy (Serenko 2023). High turnover (voluntary and involuntary) and the lack of strategies to retain knowledge workers and their much-needed intangible assets (knowledge, competencies and skills) threaten SOEs' ability to deliver on their developmental mandate, especially those operating in the developing economies of the world (Phaladi and Ngulube 2024). Nevertheless, it remains unclear as to whether the HRMPs in these public enterprises can be considered to be knowledge-driven, aligned and integrated to identify, predict, measure, respond to and mitigate such tacit knowledge risks associate with resignations and retirements.

3. Methodology

The research paper deployed a qualitative research approach which involved collecting in-depth qualitative data through interviews in South African state-owned enterprises. The researcher conducted interviews with twenty managers (20) in the human resource management departments of nine SOEs that were purposively selected for the purpose of gathering answers to the research questions, as illustrated in Figure 1 below. The researcher ensured ethical considerations, including obtaining permissions, maintaining anonymity and confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, and using the interview method in selected SOEs. The sample size of 20 managers in HRM was deemed adequate for the purpose of gathering in-depth data and developing a rich picture about the phenomenon under study. According to Creswell (2014), a few cases or interviewees, ranging from 1 to 40, are considered adequate for qualitative research for scholars to formulate a rich picture of the research phenomenon. The qualitative data collected through the interviews were analyzed thematically using Atlas.ti software.

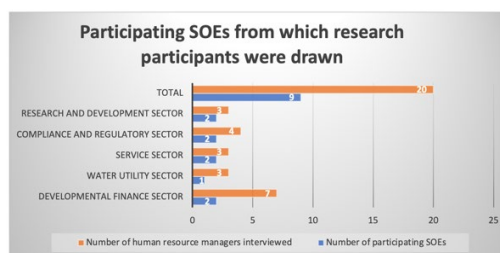


Figure 1: Participating SOEs from which research participants were drawn

4. Research Findings

Regarding the research question on whether HRMPs are aligned and focused on lessening tacit knowledge loss in SOEs, the research shows that 50% of participants think that their processes are aligned, while 50% disagree, indicating a lack of focus on managing organisational knowledge loss. Pertaining to whether there was a need for the integration of HRMPs in KRM, all the participants agreed that there was indeed such a need. Similarly, they articulated the need for a better understanding of KM vocabulary and tools in order to better reflect on their processes. Such an understanding would help HR managers to align themselves and their practices effectively in dealing with knowledge loss risks. In three cases, where KM structures and roles were well-defined, the participants postulated that they work in harmony with the KM practitioners in the SOEs to identify and mitigate knowledge-related loss risks. Nevertheless, their functions were not aligned and integrated to ensure the better management of such risks.

The issue of alignment and integration, regardless of the presence of KM roles and processes, was identified as significant. The HR manager in SOE1 put into words the lack of synergy in the following manner:

At the moment, the knowledge management people are there and we are here as the HR people, we still live like that, that is one of the things we need to bring together. We work together with knowledge management unit, but I cannot claim it to be an integration. It is not an integration that happens automatically (HR Manager #1).

Regarding the follow-up research question on how such integration should be approached and implemented, HR managers in SOEs without knowledge management strategies, systems, structures and processes suggest that strategies, structures, roles or resources for knowledge management should be a starting point for the integration process, as there was no existing integration at the time of the study. One HR manager explained the state of affairs as follows:

What more can be done is for us to realise the value of knowledge management in an organisation, and not for our own good as individuals, but for the company good. In the same manner, that we are seeing that need to formal processes on knowledge management. We actually see the significance of strategy on that (HR Manager #17).

Finding the gaps in one's knowledge is the first step towards developing a plan and procedures to close them. In those state-owned businesses with established KM strategies, structures, rules and procedures, the alignment scenario was different. In order to mitigate the effects of voluntary turnover and the loss of enterprise knowledge, their HR strategy places a high priority on the management and retention of mission critical skills. One participant narrated the science behind their HR strategy as follows:

Yes, we are implementing talent management; it was there but we are making it more formal. Therefore, that talent management is all-inclusive, including retaining critical knowledge it will include making sure that we keep our critical resources (HR Manager #1).

Based on the data analysis, it is evident that HRM departments were, in certain instances, re-aligning themselves to address the intricacies of knowledge in a knowledge-driven economy by using integrated people management approaches that consider talent holistically. More of such will help to reduce possible knowledge loss in these state-owned firms by promoting enterprise knowledge-driven activities and behaviours.

Regarding the overall effectiveness of HRM processes in enabling or easing the management and minimization of tacit knowledge loss in SOEs, in response to this study question, all the participants expressed concern about the gaps and areas in which their procedures for ensuring retention and minimizing organisational knowledge loss needed improvement. They articulated their opinions on this study issue as follows:

4.1 Effectiveness of HRMPs

Thirty percent of the participants indicated that their practices work well for helping their SOEs to effectively manage and retain much of their organisational tacit knowledge. Their answers did, however, also highlight shortcomings and potential areas for improvement. An SOE1 respondent, who discussed how KM is integrated into organisational life, stated the following:

Very effective. I think we are holding our space. However, there are areas for further development. On a scale of one is to five. I will give us four. As I said, we have systems, we have structures and we have policies that are highly effective (HR Manager #1).

Even if, in some instances, the retention of human resources and their knowledge was achieved through deliberate acts of management and efforts aimed at minimising potential enterprise-specific tacit knowledge loss, there was also a need to continuously identify integration points for alignment and further improvements.

4.2 Partial or Average Effectiveness of HRMPs

Thirty percent of the HR managers found their practices to be neither effective nor ineffective, with some being partially effective but not very effective in reducing involuntary turnover and knowledge loss. They identified gaps and areas for further alignment and integration points between their HRMPs and KM strategies to ensure the proper management of knowledge loss risks in their SOEs.

The participant in SOE9, where the KRM and KM philosophy was not institutionalised, explained the situation as follows:

I think we have not been deliberate enough to be effective. In some cases, we have done well, in some cases we have not done well. Those pockets of excellence are here and there, but not necessarily calibrated well to a point where we can say we are effective. Therefore, there is still lots of gaps from one practice to the other (HR Manager #17).

The aforementioned case highlights the lack of coordinated strategies and practices in knowledge management, and gaps in HRMPs for employee recruitment and retention. HR managers were not intentional in managing enterprise-specific knowledge, mainly because of the informal nature of how it manifested in their public enterprises. Therefore, in some instances where KM was not institutionalised as part of the organisational processes, there was a gap. On the other hand, there was also a need to perfect the science and embrace certain KM principles.

4.3 Ineffectiveness of HRMPs

This study established that 40% of HR managers found their practices in retaining and managing organisational knowledge ineffective. Even HR managers who had institutionalized knowledge management in their SOEs admitted that their processes were not yet effective. This situation was exemplified by the participant from SOE2, who stated:

I am tempted not to say that we are not there yet, we are not very effective, as we would like to be because of those gaps and then the loss of opportunities for those synergies for us to be able to work together. You know, they started harvesting knowledge many years ago, I think as early as 2013 or so, but we started becoming very involved and get to know what they are doing in recent times. That is why I am saying there has been that lack of working in silos, yet we are trying to achieve as a common goal (HR Manager #9).

In certain SOEs, HR managers struggled with working in silos due to a lack of collaboration with relevant units for knowledge management. Many SOEs (67%) had not formalized knowledge management, resulting in ineffective HRMPs in managing and retaining company-specific knowledge. Their practices were not designed to support knowledge management and, therefore, the mitigation of inherent firm-specific knowledge loss risks.

5. Discussion of the Findings

This research explored the alignment and integration of HRM practices in managing and lessening tacit knowledge loss in selected SOEs in South Africa. Extant research highlights the significance of the interface, alignment and integration of HRMPs into KM for ensuring the mitigation of tacit knowledge loss (Murali and Kumar 2014; El-Farr and Hosseingholizadeh 2019; Gürlek 2020). However, the research findings point to a lack of alignment and integration as a serious issue facing a majority of South African SOEs. Regardless of whether SOEs have KM roles, functions or processes in place, this remains the case. The research suggests that streamlined HRMPs can improve knowledge absorptive capacity, KM capability and retentive capacity by supporting knowledge management. Moreover, HR recruitment and staff training practices are crucial for developing knowledge absorptive capacity in SOEs.

Furthermore, the study argues that if companies can invest in staff retention interventions such as retention strategies; rewards and recognition systems; and in other knowledge-based practices such as coaching and mentoring, job rotation and job shadowing, then knowledge protective capacity will be enhanced. The research also suggests that investing in staff retention interventions, rewards and recognition systems, as well as

knowledge-based practices like coaching, mentoring, job rotation and job shadowing, can enhance knowledge protective capacity.

All twenty HR managers in this qualitative study concurred that there was a need for the alignment and integration of HRM systems in KM for the successful mitigation of firm-specific knowledge loss. Furthermore, HR managers need to have a better understanding of knowledge management vocabulary and the tools to better use these techniques. In those SOEs where KM functions, practices, structures and resources were not institutionalised, the research found that there was nothing much to align and integrate as such. However, in order for these public enterprises to align and integrate their KM and HRM practices, the best starting point is to develop an understanding of the science behind knowledge management, strategy, function, roles and resources. A lack of awareness and education on the philosophy behind KM is a significant challenge. Hence, creating awareness of what is missing in terms of the strategies and procedures to close the gap will serve to advance the discourse. Consequent to this lack of awareness and education, the retention of critical skills and expertise will remain a challenge.

An overwhelming majority of HR managers concurred that their practices were ineffective in mitigating and managing tacit organisational knowledge loss, largely due to a lack of alignment and integration in support of KM. The majority of the HR managers concur that the loss of enterprise tacit knowledge is due to a lack of knowledge-driven retention strategies, which can decrease the survival chances of many SOEs. Recent studies have shown that knowledge loss in SOEs leads to knowledge risks negatively impacting organisational performance, innovation and sustainability (Durst and Zieba 2020; Kumar 2020; Phaladi and Ngulube 2024). Their practices were not designed to support KM, and consequently the mitigation of inherent firm-specific knowledge loss risks.

5.1 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study is an empirical contribution qualitatively exploring the alignment and integration points of HRM systems into KRM in South African SOEs. Future studies will benefit from quantitative surveys testing the alignment and integration of HRMPs to mitigate knowledge loss risks in organisations. On a global scale, whilst using South African SOEs as a case, the paper points to the scarcity of scholarly contributions linking, aligning and integrating HRM strategies into knowledge loss risk management. The picture of such alignment and integration points remains blurred in the extant research, both conceptually and empirically. Large portions of the current research dedicated their efforts to establishing the inevitable role of HRM and its practices broadly in facilitating KM processes and capacities, but with limited focus on KRM in research and practice. Furthermore, current research in KRM still dedicates such efforts to exploring KM practices to mitigate knowledge loss risks, not paying much attention to integrating HRM systems into KRM research. Therefore, future research will benefit the research community and practitioners by exploring this distinct area further, both in private and public enterprises. The current study also points to a need for future scientific explorations in SOEs on a global scale, investigating the role of various HRMPs in knowledge risk management for the effective mitigation of knowledge loss risks interdependently from HRM and KM standpoints.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is apparent that there is a need to close the gaps to ensure a better alignment and integration of HRMPs to support the management of organisational knowledge and to mitigate against its potential loss. SOEs without a knowledge management strategy should develop one and implement it. The strategy should then be followed by structure. HRMPs should be streamlined to KM processes in order to enhance knowledge creation, absorptive and protective capacity, whilst reducing knowledge stickiness and knowledge loss-related incidents. HR managers and leadership within SOEs should enhance their understanding of KM vocabulary, strategies and tools to bridge gaps in knowledge management. In addition, knowledge managers in SOEs should also focus on understanding HRMPs, as this directly impacts their strategies and helps manage and mitigate tacit knowledge loss risks. Understanding the science behind these two management disciplines is crucial for their success in managing organisational knowledge loss. KM practices alone cannot create significant success in reducing and mitigating knowledge loss unless they are in alignment with and supported by HRMPs. For KRM strategies to be effective, it is important that HRMPs are integrated into KM strategies and processes. Leadership, management, HRM and KM practitioners should establish strategic partnerships; raise awareness of the importance of their relationship; and urgently address the removal of existing silos between these fields, as the success of these practices depends on their joint collaborative efforts.

A more integrated approach to management and retention is needed, with HR managers playing a central role in all KM processes. The findings suggest that KM practices can be better managed if they are structurally incorporated within HR organisational structures. Moreover, SOEs should embed KM into their organisational culture, with HR leading practices. HR managers should also reflect on their practices in the context of organisational knowledge loss, whilst knowledge managers should do the same. Collaboration between HR managers and KM is crucial to manage the knowledge risks associated with the loss of firm-specific human and knowledge resources. Regular interactions and reporting on key knowledge management issues can help avoid such loss.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Collecting Data From HR Managers in the SOEs

Do you consider HRM practices to be aligned and focused on managing organisational knowledge loss?

Is there a need for such an integration of human resource management practices in knowledge risk management?

How should such integration be approached, facilitated and implemented in the organisation?

Overall, how effective are HRM practices in facilitating the management and reduction of organisational knowledge loss?