

The Role of Human Resource Management in Building Knowledge Management Capacity in South African Public Sector Enterprises

Malefetjane Phineas Phaladi

Department of Information Systems, Durban University of Technology, South Africa

malefetjanep@dut.ac.za

Abstract. The study investigated the role of Human Resource Management (HRM) in building Knowledge Management (KM) capacity in South African public sector enterprises. Research shows that HRM divisions' role in building knowledge management capacity in Public Sector Enterprises (PSEs) is underdeveloped and they face common challenges such as tacit knowledge loss risks, leading to criticism of HRM for not effectively fostering knowledge-driven organisational practices and cultures. In order to address this gap, this paper explored the perception of HRM's role in building knowledge management capabilities; the extent to which HRM supports Knowledge Management in PSEs; the close collaboration between HR managers and knowledge management practitioners; and key practices that enhance knowledge management capabilities in these enterprises. The study utilised a qualitative research design, conducting in-depth interviews with 20 human resource (HR) managers from 9 public sector enterprises in South Africa. The interview data was analysed for its thematic content using Atlas.ti. Human Resource Management plays a crucial role in knowledge management, particularly in public sector enterprises in the South African economy, albeit with some serious shortcomings. However, it is often considered last in the process due to a lack of understanding of the philosophy behind knowledge management, as well as a lack of synergy between HRM and KM functions. Nevertheless, on a positive note, HR managers believe that their practices can enhance knowledge management capability in public sector enterprises by facilitating critical processes like knowledge acquisition, application, sharing, and retention, regardless of whether they have a Knowledge Management function. The researcher recommends implementing knowledge-oriented HRM methods in South African public sector enterprises to improve knowledge management efficiency and capacity development. This paper may pave the way for future research in the field of knowledge management on a more thorough examination of the connections between HRM and KM in PSEs in South Africa and, more generally, in developing economies, since the impact or function of HRM on KM capacity has not been extensively empirically studied in the South African public sector.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Knowledge-oriented HRM practices, Human resource management, State-owned enterprises, South Africa

1. Introduction

The efficient management, protection and retention of firm-specific tangible and intangible resources are crucial for success in modern knowledge-intensive business enterprises. Private and publicly-owned enterprises currently utilise various human resource management (HRM) and knowledge management (KM) strategies to enhance their work and business operations in response to intense knowledge-based competition and evolving knowledge economies (Le, 2024; Naqshbandi et al. 2023). Extant literature emphasizes the importance of a robust connection between HRM and KM for business enterprises to effectively utilize their organisation's intangible assets for superior business value, performance and innovation (Murali and Kumar 2014). Public sector enterprises (PSEs) are state-owned instruments that drive economic development in developing and developed nations, including South Africa, where they are seen as catalysts for economic growth, employment and sustainability. The effective management of organisational knowledge in knowledge-intensive enterprises such as PSEs relies heavily on human resources and related practices (Gürlek 2020). In order to ensure the growth and placement of the South African economy in the global knowledge economy, HRM, its managers and its practices should ideally play a critical role in knowledge management, especially in public sector firms. However, research indicates that the role of HRM divisions and their practices in building KM capacity in PSEs is underdeveloped (Phaladi 2024). Further complicating the landscape of knowledge management in PSEs is that they face common challenges in tacit knowledge loss risks. Consequently, HRM has been criticised for not effectively fostering knowledge-driven organisational practices, cultures and structures (Islam, Jasimuddin and Hasan 2015), with South African PSEs exemplifying this trend (Phaladi 2022).

The literature presents complex research issues regarding KM problems, including enterprise knowledge loss and related risks (Durst et al. 2023). Many organisations' performance and sustainability are negatively impacted by these knowledge loss concerns (Zieba et al. 2022). According to Dalkir (2023), knowledge management is greatly aided by HRM techniques, which tackle issues such as knowledge retention and loss. It is imperative that HRM and KM complement one other in order to manage businesses' tacit knowledge vulnerabilities. Nonetheless, some scholars (Dalkir 2020; Gope et al. 2018) bemoan the dearth of case studies and empirical research on the connections between HRM and KM. Given the increasingly crucial role of HRM and KM in key

business outcomes, sustainability and innovation capabilities of public and commercial enterprises, this paper aims to investigate the role of human resource management in enabling the knowledge management capability of public sector enterprises in South Africa. It explores the extent to which HRM supports knowledge management in PSEs; the perception of HRM's role in building knowledge management capabilities; the close collaboration between HR managers and knowledge management practitioners; and key practices that enhance the knowledge management capabilities in these enterprises. Both HRM and KM practices have a positive impact on organisational performance, knowledge driven-culture, innovation and sustainability. However, recent research emerging out of South Africa laments the fact that HRM portfolios in PSEs do not facilitate knowledge sharing and retention despite facing some serious knowledge loss risks (Mthunzi 2024; Phaladi 2024). Furthermore, these authors also point to a lack of empirical research linking HRM to organisational tacit management. Knowledge management (KM) practices as a moderator in the relationship between HRM practices and organisational performance have been minimally empirically explored in public sector enterprises. Much of the focus of extant literature has been largely conceptual or theoretical in nature. Mthunzi (2024) and Phaladi (2023) attest that HRM strategies play a crucial role in facilitating and building organisational culture and capabilities that are knowledge-driven. These firm-specific intangible capabilities assist organisations to minimize potential knowledge risks.

In order to explore the role of HRM in building KM capacity in the public sector enterprises of South Africa, the following research questions are pursued:

RQ1: Is there a role for HRM in the knowledge management processes of public sector enterprises?

RQ2: To what extent does HRM facilitate or support the management of knowledge in PSEs?

RQ3: Do human resource managers see their role in building knowledge management capabilities in South African PSEs?

RQ4: How closely are HR Managers working with knowledge management practitioners in managing organisational knowledge?

RQ5: What do HR managers consider as key practices that enhance knowledge management capabilities in public sector enterprises?

RQ6: Why do they think that these practices or systems enhance knowledge management capability in PSEs?

As the influence or role of HRM in KM capacity has not been widely empirically researched in the South African public sector, this paper may open the KM field for further studies on a deeper investigation of the relationships existing between HRM and KM in PSEs in South Africa and, more generally, in developing economies.

2. The Role of Human Resource Management in Knowledge Management

Sarfraz et al. (2023) and Farr and Hosseingholizadeh (2019) suggest that HRM departments within organisations have the potential to create a knowledge-driven organisational culture and gather the most useful expertise through its numerous practices, such as hiring, rewards and compensation, training and development, performance and retention. However, scholars suggest that effective HRM practices must be knowledge-oriented in their approach, strategy and tactics in order to successfully build KM capacities and related behaviours (Le 2024; Gürlek and Çemberci 2020). Human resources are empowered by the knowledge-based methods of the company, which encourage creativity within the organisation. It is true that knowledge-based HRM practices foster business process innovation and have an impact on organisations' knowledge cultures. The acquisition, development, sharing and retention of important business knowledge may be facilitated directly or indirectly by traditional HRM practices like hiring and selection, learning and development, compensation and rewards systems, organisational design, performance management, and retention systems. For example, knowledge acquisition and absorptive ability are directly linked to HRM recruiting practices through the identification and sourcing of knowledge workers with the necessary knowledge, competences and skillsets (Phaladi 2023). Naturally, one of the key organisational soft infrastructures for the creation of firm-specific knowledge assets is human resource development (HRD), including training and development. Since they help organisations develop a knowledge-oriented culture, knowledge management and innovation capabilities, such activities are regarded as knowledge-driven (Mthunzi 2024; Donate and Guadamillas 2015). Scholars concur that companies that provide learning and development opportunities to their human resources are thought to have a higher retention rate for human capital assets, mostly due to the fact that these chances foster dedication and motivation (Delery and Roumpi 2017). Furthermore, these HRD practices help to support knowledge acquisition and development, as well as building employee commitment and loyalty (Gope et al. 2018).

Additionally, KM benefits greatly from HRM-aligned retention strategies. Retaining human resources will unavoidably result in the preservation and protection of their invaluable knowledge, opening up opportunities for companies such as PSEs to incorporate and retain their expertise. From the aforementioned research, it becomes apparent that through hiring (recruitment and selection), training, compensation and rewards, and performance management, HRM could facilitate knowledge exchange and retention by ensuring that the proper people are in the right places or positions, as well as fostering a learning culture, all of which are critical components of KM capability. Few empirical studies have been conducted to explain the potential effects of HRM on building knowledge capability to mitigate against potential knowledge loss risks, particularly in relation to its impacts on knowledge management and its key processes, even though HRM practices are thought to be the main solutions for firms to foster knowledge-oriented activities, behaviours, processes and key outcomes like productivity, sustainability and organisational performance (Kianto et al. 2017; Singh et al. 2021; Phaladi 2024). Furthermore, current research emphasises the value of HRM practices in knowledge management, but states nothing about how these practices might be integrated into public sector business knowledge management. The existing empirical literature integrating HRM strategies, which primarily comes from South Africa, indicates that future research in public enterprises worldwide is necessary to examine knowledge loss risks from strategic HRM and KM perspectives, even though the picture of such integration points is unclear in the current review and reality (Phaladi et al. 2024). Retaining human resources through various HRM practices will unavoidably result in the preservation and protection of their invaluable knowledge, opening up the opportunity for PSEs to incorporate and retain their expertise. However, further empirical study is needed to determine whether HRM-driven strategies support KM in PSEs worldwide and may be regarded as knowledge-oriented.

3. Methodology

The study used a qualitative research methodology, interviewing HR managers at South African public sector enterprises to get detailed qualitative data through non-structured interviews. Twenty (20) managers from the HRM departments of nine PSEs, who were purposively sampled to respond to the study questions, were interviewed by the researcher. In order to assure ethical concerns, the researcher used the interview technique in selected PSEs, obtained informed consent, maintained anonymity and privacy, and obtained approvals. It was determined that the sample size of 20 HRM managers was sufficient for obtaining detailed information and creating a comprehensive picture of the issue being studied. Creswell (2014) states that a small number of instances or interview subjects between one to forty are seen to be sufficient for qualitative research in order for researchers to provide a complete picture of the phenomenon under study. Atlas.ti software was used to conduct a thematic analysis of the qualitative data gathered from the interviews.

4. Research Findings

With regard to the research question: *do human resource managers see their role in building knowledge management capabilities in the South African PSEs?* Human Resource managers did in fact recognise their part in developing knowledge management skills. HR managers realized that in order to develop skills, they needed to work with partners in knowledge management. The HR managers who participated in the interviews all agreed that their job is inextricably linked to the organisation's knowledge management initiatives. Human resource management is responsible for maintaining the human element of knowledge management. This job was described by a PSE5 interviewee as follows:

I think we are human resource; we are mostly in the cold front dealing with people on a daily basis. Whether you like it or not, humans will always be part of you. You cannot divorce yourself from dealing with people (HR Manager#20, PSE5).

This is in line with the opinions of a large proportion (12) of the twenty HR managers who were interviewed. They emphasized that part of their job was to raise awareness of the value of organisational knowledge and its management. The following is how one SOE4 interviewee who works in the compliance and regulatory field described the awareness issue:

I think yes. The first thing is that HR needs to be able to bring awareness, because HR and IT are the most important people in this space; IT from a point of view of giving the systems we need, like a repository, but HR must bring that awareness to say when we lose people, sometimes it can impact on the operations. How do we make sure that we keep that repository? Therefore, that is awareness from us (HR Manager#11, PSE4).

However, the difficulty is that even though they are in charge of people management procedures, some HR managers continue to view IT systems as a way to address knowledge management problems in their companies. Whether or not there is a formalized knowledge management framework, human resource management will always play a part in knowledge management. From three PSEs that had KM formalised through structures, it was intriguing that the KM function was only found in human resources in one specific PSE, suggesting a strong bond between the two disciplines. There was no similar synergy for the other two PSEs, whose KM was situated in the Information Technology division.

Regarding the study topic of *whether HRM plays a part in the organisation's knowledge management procedures*, every HR manager stated that they believe HRM plays a part in assisting KM initiatives. This is true whether or not knowledge management is a function of their organisations. From talent acquisition to talent retention, capacity development in terms of learning and development (training and development), workplace skills gap analysis, coaching and mentoring programs, succession planning, conducting exit interviews, raising awareness of knowledge management, advancing talent management strategy, performance management to organisational culture, they see their role in influencing KM behaviours as beginning with these processes. The following is how an HR manager at PSE1 who has a specialized KM function described that role:

Yes, I think it's how we are going to make sure these things are in leadership roles, so we can hold them accountable for their capabilities in their teams, so if I am drawing up a profile for a line manager, that line manager profile should build capabilities in their areas and must build succession and shadowing within the areas. You will see it in my performance contract. I have each line manager has their perspectives in terms of critical staff. The line management needs to build up recruitment and retention plans for critical staff in areas of responsibility. They need to implement and monitor values of the staff in terms of making sure that they are the right culture. I need to identify strategic skills gaps within the operations including succession planning and interim training for all my staff. I need to track and monitor their performance and this is cascaded down for line managers (HR Manager #3, PSE1).

Currently, certain PSEs that have not institutionalized knowledge management in their procedures and frameworks appear to be at the margins when it comes to HRM's involvement in developing knowledge management skills. It is noteworthy that only three of the nine PSEs that took part in the study had a fully functional Knowledge Management unit within their organisational structure. Without a specific KM unit within the organisational framework, one of the PSE9 interviewees hinted that:

I do, but it is not central but more on the periphery and in a supportive way, but like I said: we have not really articulated how we will support and respond (HR Manager#16, PSE9).

The following question had a mixed response: As an HR manager, how closely do you collaborate with knowledge managers or other practitioners in the field of managing organisational knowledge? The results showed that there was some degree of close contact and collaboration in the instance of three PSEs where the management of knowledge was explicitly institutionalized, even if there was still space for development. According to one interviewee, it was as follows:

We do not work with them that much because they extract the knowledge from the business. They have their processes in place and we have our processes in place. It integrates more along the line, for example if we are doing an operating line review, the operational line review was to take the bank to a higher level of performance in terms of what they are going to deliver, they will then come to us and say "okay, what are the lessons learned?" What are the skills we need to retain? And so on, so where HR is involved they will come and work with us (HR Manager #3, PSE1).

The following is how another respondent described the cooperation between the KM unit and human resource managers:

We work with in collaboration with the knowledge management unit. When they do brown bag sessions, we are part of those brown bag sessions. Some of them they lead and some of them we work together. However, we are there because that is part of the knowledge management (HR Manager#2, PSE1).

Visible frustrations were on the 'bad' side of the mixed bag. This was especially true in one organisation where the KM role was poorly conceived within the organisational structure, leading to misunderstandings on matters pertaining to the management of organisational knowledge. For example, there used to be a post called General Manager, IT and Knowledge Management, but not many knowledge management initiatives emanated from

there. However, one of the group's executives was assigned the responsibility of promoting KM. The following is how the two PSE5 HR managers conveyed their frustrations:

According to me, I do not see it, I do not feel it. We have individuals; I know that we have a GM, IT and Knowledge Management. What that means, for me that is a library and records. Therefore, it ends there. That is why I am saying that for him to be called GM: IT and Knowledge Management, for me it is very confusing. Hence, I want to clarify on that. And I even think that it is situated at the wrong place. Maybe if we can partner capacity building and knowledge management to be in one area, to be within the strategic human capital (HR Manager#18, PSE5).

To these frustrations, another HR manager responded as follows:

I know that there is somebody at the group strategy level who is dealing with knowledge management [but] he does not even engage with us in terms of whatever initiatives or whatever objectives he needs to do in his line of thoughts so that, maybe, we can assist and form a value chain. I even think that knowledge management is situated at the wrong place. Maybe, if we can partner capacity building and knowledge management to be in one area, to be within the strategic human capital (HR Manager#19, PSE5).

The aforementioned assertions point to the fact that in some PSEs, KM is poorly conceptualised structurally and those in charge do not understand the science behind KM. Strong relationships between the pertinent role-players are necessary for knowledge management to succeed within the organisation. However, according to two HR managers from two distinct organisations with KM units within their organisational structures, there is no synergy. One area of concern was a lack of cohesion. One human resource manager from a separate PSE using a knowledge management system highlighted a lack of coordination in the following ways:

We are far. We are far. Like I said, that we come in at the tail end, and it is just a tick-box exercise, which I do not think does much justice to the process (HR Manager#8, PSE2).

In order to assist Knowledge Management initiatives in the PSEs, this section lists particular HRM strategies that may be applied to influence people's attitudes and behaviours. The following question was posed to HR practitioners: *What important HRM practices do you think improve the organisation's knowledge management capabilities?* HR managers identified several key practices that enhance an organization's knowledge management capabilities, including hiring, learning and development, talent management, culture management, organizational design, succession planning, compensation, retention, on-job boarding, job rotation and performance management. These practices are central to the HRM system across public sector enterprises, and understanding how people develop knowledge management behaviours and competencies is crucial.

Regarding the research question: *why do HR managers think that these practices or systems enhance knowledge management capability in public sector enterprises?* All participants agreed that these practices are crucial for facilitating critical KM processes like knowledge acquisition, application, sharing and retention, regardless of whether they have a Knowledge Management function.

5. Discussion of the Findings

The findings of the study showed an empirical confirmation relating to the connection and role of HRM in building, influencing and shaping KM capacities, processes and behaviours. Data revealed that human resource management played a key strategic and operational partnering role in public enterprises' establishment of knowledge capacities and the management of organisational knowledge. Nonetheless, this research offered factual data regarding the connection and function of HRM practices in creating and moulding KM behaviours and procedures, thus enhancing the capability of knowledge management. In the qualitative interviews, every human resource manager emphasised how important it is for HRM to support knowledge management initiatives within their companies. A large portion of the data also revealed that many PSEs' use of HRM to develop knowledge management capabilities is mostly peripheral. This is particularly true for PSEs whose organisational structures have not institutionalised knowledge management and procedures. Remarkably, of the nine PSEs that participated in the study, only three had an operational knowledge management unit within their organisational structure. One of the PSE9 interviewees intimated that in the absence of a dedicated KM unit within the organisational structure, PSE9 has not really stated how they will assist and respond. Where they do have KM, it is more peripheral and supporting than core.

Human Resources managers recognize their role in enhancing knowledge management capabilities and collaborate with KM partners. They understand that their role is integral to organisational knowledge management activities as HRM is responsible for people and the process of knowledge management. The study also discovered that knowledge management and human resource management go hand-in-hand. People's knowledge is the foundation of Knowledge Management, whilst individuals and the guardianship of those individuals are the focus of Human Resource Management. This illustrates that HRM and Knowledge Management are inevitably inter-dependent, if not inseparable. However, it is interesting to note that the role of HRM in facilitating KM capability was constrained by the non-existence of a close nexus or synergy between HRM and KM in most of PSEs which did not have KM roles and functions within their organisational structural configurations. In other words, those PSEs needed to have fully institutionalised KM in order to have a full appraisal of the role of HRM in such practices. Hence, much of the role that HRM played in the management of enterprise knowledge was mainly limited due to a lack of appreciation of the science behind KM. It is interesting that even in the few (three) PSEs that had KM institutionalised, the absence of synergy between KM and HRM remains a problematic area. The study found that the KM function was only structurally located in Human Resources in one PSE, indicating a strong bond, unlike the two other PSEs with KM in the Information Technology division. This explains why KM capabilities and capacities are underdeveloped in many PSEs in South Africa. The insufficient capacity for KM, particularly in terms of knowledge sharing and retention, exposes organisations to the potential risk of knowledge loss.

Indications are that HRM's contribution to the creation and enhancement of knowledge management skills was mostly restricted to hiring procedures and employee training and development programmes. Positively, human resource managers in public sector enterprises recognized and viewed their responsibility to mould employees' attitudes toward knowledge management. From recruitment to talent retention, capacity building, workplace skills gap analysis, coaching and mentoring, succession planning, conducting exit interviews, career development, KM awareness, driving human capital strategy, performance management, and organisational culture and design are all part of their role in forming KM behaviours, according to them. However, because they lacked retention strategies, HR departments' ability to assist KM was restricted vis a vis human retention policies.

The study also shown that hiring and training procedures have an impact on the ability to absorb new information and improve existing expertise. The PSEs provided excellent facilitation for the following activities: The process of finding candidates who possess the necessary expertise and abilities, then preparing them with pertinent knowledge-based training interventions and knowledge absorption abilities. The fact that a large number of public sector enterprises had problems retaining employees indicates that they were ineffective in creating and maintaining knowledge protection capability.

Regarding HRM strategies that improve KM capacity in PSEs, HR managers identified hiring, learning and development, talent management, succession planning, culture management, organisational design, remuneration, retention and performance management as key HRM practices to improve an organisation's knowledge management capabilities. Regardless of whether they have a Knowledge Management function or not, all participants concurred that these practices are essential for supporting important knowledge management activities such as knowledge acquisition, application, sharing and retention. They also highlighted the importance of understanding how people develop knowledge management behaviours and competencies.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research Studies

The qualitative study conducted in nine South African public enterprises highlights the importance of HRM in Management and Organisational Knowledge research. However, its findings may not be universally applicable to other PSEs. Future research could explore these issues from various perspectives, including interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and mixed methods, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, it would also benefit future research and praxis if the research findings could be quantitatively tested in other similar public enterprises.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The researcher concludes that Knowledge Management critically depends on Human Resource Management. The study's conclusions provided empirical support for the hypothesis that human resource management plays a crucial role in establishing and modifying knowledge management practices. While KM primarily focuses on managing the knowledge that is ingrained in people, HRM is involved in all facets of human resource oversight since HR departments are the guardians of People Management techniques. As such, human resources are the source of information and knowledge. As a result, the researcher draws the conclusion that KM and HRM are

intertwined. In the few public sector enterprises where knowledge management was institutionalized, it is evident that HRM was crucial in enhancing knowledge management capabilities, despite some shortcomings. The results of the study make it abundantly evident that HRM in public sector enterprises plays a part in creating and modifying knowledge management practices and cultures. It is impossible to overstate this role. Knowledge management skills within organisations may be improved by human resource management developing, moulding and enforcing the appropriate KM behaviours. In public sector enterprises, there should be a synergy between KM and human resource management. During exit interviews, HRM should not be the last step in the knowledge management process. According to the research, knowledge retention should begin at the outset of the process of finding qualified candidates to close the gaps in knowledge and skills that have been discovered, and should continue all the way through employee engagement, capacity development and knowledge worker retention (Le 2024; Mthunzi 2024). Therefore, the researcher suggests that the organisation's HRM practices, including hiring, training and development, organisational design, management of organisational culture, remuneration, retention, career management and performance management, should all have a knowledge-based bent. In summary, the researcher suggests that knowledge-oriented HRM methods be implemented in South African PSEs with the aim of enhancing their ability to facilitate the efficient and effective management of organisation tacit knowledge. Knowledge-oriented HRM strategies enhance knowledge capacity, culture, sharing and retention, thus acting as a buffer against potential knowledge loss vulnerabilities.

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