

Retaining Tacit Knowledge Through Performance Management Systems in South African Public Sector Enterprises

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Abstract: Public Sector Enterprises (PSEs) are at risk of knowledge loss, which hampers their capacity to fulfill their developmental roles in fostering economic growth and addressing socio-economic challenges, particularly in developing economies like South Africa. Extant research indicates that tacit knowledge sharing and retention present significant challenges for many organisations, both private and public, largely due to inadequate knowledge-driven performance management systems that fail to mitigate the inherent stickiness of this type of knowledge. This paper aimed to explore the role of performance management systems in rewarding knowledge sharing behaviours and their effectiveness in retaining tacit knowledge within PSEs. It focused on understanding how these systems align with the expectations for knowledge sharing and assess their impact on the retention of critical tacit knowledge. The researcher interviewed twenty managers across the human resource management departments of nine purposively selected PSEs to obtain responses relevant to the research questions. The study found that only 33% of the nine public sector enterprises assessed implemented performance management system rewards for the necessary knowledge sharing and retention behaviour. Conversely, 67% of these companies did not incentivise their employees for such knowledge management practices. Integrating knowledge management (KM) into performance management contracts has been recognised by a few PSEs as an effective strategy to encourage knowledge sharing behaviours amongst employees. This approach not only incentivises individuals to share their knowledge but also contributes to the retention of that knowledge within the organisation. The study infers that retaining tacit knowledge in South African public sector enterprises can be effectively achieved through incorporating such behaviours and activities into performance management systems, which facilitates the sharing and preservation of valuable, non-codified knowledge, ensuring that expertise is not lost amidst workforce changes. The paper emphasises a crucial link between performance management systems, reward mechanisms, and the retention of tacit knowledge, proposing that clearer rewards in knowledge-driven systems can reduce knowledge stickiness and improve knowledge retention in public sector enterprises.

Keywords: Knowledge transfer, Knowledge retention, Knowledge stickiness, Performance management systems, Human resource management, State-owned enterprises, South Africa

1. Introduction

The tacit knowledge held by knowledge workers is seen as a critical asset that can give organisations a sustainable competitive edge, enhance innovation, and improve performance in today's knowledge-based economy. However, the inherent difficulty in sharing and retaining tacit knowledge poses challenges for many organisations, particularly in the public sector worldwide (Li 2023, Ensslin et al. 2020, Kumar 2020). South African public sector enterprises (PSEs) are currently encountering significant risks associated with the knowledge loss inherent in human resource attrition (Maphanga and Olivier 2025). According to Phaladi and Ngulube (2024), this jeopardises PSEs' capacity to fulfil their developmental roles as catalysts for economic growth and advancements in socio-economic conditions, particularly within the context of developing economies. The loss of knowledge within PSEs undermines their effectiveness in addressing critical challenges and executing their mandates for development.

Stickiness in tacit knowledge creates difficulties for public sector enterprises in effectively transferring and retaining knowledge. Tacit knowledge is a type of knowledge noted for being very challenging to capture or articulate (Nonaka, 1994). This view by Nonaka (1994) is aligned with Gabriel Szulanski's theory of Knowledge Stickiness. Difficulties in transferring tacit knowledge, referred to as "knowledge stickiness" by Szulanski (2000), involve obstacles that hinder effective knowledge sharing and utilisation between individuals or organisations. Despite ongoing discussions, the impact of human resource management (HRM) performance management systems on alleviating knowledge stickiness and improving the transfer and retention of tacit knowledge in PSEs remains ambiguous. Ideally, removing knowledge stickiness by incentivizing knowledge-sharing behaviours through human resource performance management systems can help organisations mitigate risks related to knowledge loss. Public sector enterprises (also commonly known as state-owned enterprises) are particularly vulnerable due to high attrition rates, an ageing workforce, and inadequate retention strategies. The effectiveness of performance management systems in promoting knowledge-sharing expectations and ensuring retention to diminish the risks associated with tacit knowledge remains uncertain. Research highlights the importance of performance assessment for employees and the significance of rewarding them for sharing, creating and applying knowledge in practice (Le 2024). El-Far (2019) advocates for knowledge-oriented

performance appraisals that emphasise intrinsic needs, teamwork and collaboration. Some researchers suggest that assessments should also reflect an employee's acquisition of new skills, involvement in projects, contributions to teams or communities, and efforts in developing others.

The research questions focus on three main areas related to knowledge sharing and retention in South African Public Sector Enterprises. Firstly, the study investigates how performance management systems incentivise the desired knowledge sharing behaviours. Secondly, it examines the effectiveness of these incentives in fostering knowledge management (KM) activities, specifically targeting knowledge sharing and retention. Lastly, the research seeks to identify strategies to enhance rewards for knowledge sharing and retention behaviours within the framework of performance management systems. To achieve its objectives, the study aims to pursue specific research questions, namely:

RQ1: How does the performance management system reward the required knowledge sharing behavioural expectations in South African Public Sector Enterprises?

RQ2: How effective are these rewards in promoting knowledge management activities such as knowledge sharing and retention in South African PSEs?

RQ3: What can be done to reward knowledge sharing and retention behaviours through performance management systems in South African PSEs?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Knowledge Sharing and Retention in South African Public Sector Enterprises

The literature indicates that knowledge transfer and retention remain persistent issues in public sector enterprises, requiring further understanding (Mthunzi 2024, Azaki and Rivett 2022). The relationship between knowledge transfer and knowledge retention is intrinsic, as retention cannot occur without the prior sharing of that knowledge. Phaladi (2025) and Mthunzi (2024) highlight the significant risks of tacit knowledge loss in South African public sector enterprises, primarily attributed to inadequate human resource retention and performance management practices that fail to promote knowledge sharing and retention amidst high employee turnover and an ageing workforce. Maphoto and Matlala (2022) note that knowledge loss risks and retention efforts in South African public sector organisations stem from a deficiency in knowledge management practices and discipline.

Knowledge sharing is pivotal for organisations it fosters the acquisition of competitive knowledge and enhances productivity (Mkhize 2015). Ideally, this transfer of knowledge should occur effectively amongst individuals and teams within the organisational settings. Nonetheless, public sector enterprises face significant challenges in sharing tacit knowledge, primarily due to its inherent stickiness and the ineffective role of human resource management practices in facilitating knowledge sharing and retention (Phaladi 2025). Szulanski's concept of 'stickiness' highlights the challenges involved in transferring tacit knowledge, which can be costly and time-consuming (Szulanski 1995, 2000). However, tacit knowledge is often transferred within organisations by individuals and teams, although the ease of this process can vary. A central question of this paper explores how performance management systems in PSEs recognise and encourage individuals or teams in sharing and retaining knowledge. Knowledge retention is a crucial aspect of knowledge management, emphasising the importance of protecting essential skills, abilities, experiences and knowledge within an organisation, particularly in the event that employees with these attributes depart the organisation (Ensslin et al. 2020). Knowledge retention, addresses specific challenges that classical knowledge management methodologies have largely overlooked. A significant issue within knowledge management, particularly in the public sector, is the lack of suitable models for effectively managing knowledge retention (Kumar 2020, Dewah and Mutula 2016). However, existing frameworks for retaining tacit knowledge in organisations do not adequately recognise the vital role of human resource performance management systems in mitigating the organisational risks associated with tacit knowledge. Previous studies highlight the negative impacts of knowledge loss on organisations, including increased costs, lost productivity and reduced customer satisfaction. Daghfous et al. (2013) emphasise its widespread implications for performance, whilst Lin et al. (2016) found a link between knowledge loss and decreased absorptive capacity affecting overall performance. Massingham (2018) notes that knowledge loss results in various organisational issues, such as low productivity, workforce misalignment, longer learning times, and diminished risk management capabilities.

2.2 Role of Performance Management Systems in Knowledge Sharing and Retention

Performance management is an essential HRM practice utilised by organisations to assess and direct employee performance, encompassing a more or less integrated system designed to evaluate and manage how effectively employees meet their roles (Tweedie et al. 2019). Key components of PM include objective setting, performance appraisal, reward and incentive strategies, and career planning. These elements collectively aim to ensure optimal teamwork and the achievement of organisational goals (Biron et al. 2011). Extant literature emphasises the crucial role of HRM practices in enhancing knowledge sharing and retention within organisations (Le 2024, Kianto et al. 2017). Knowledge-based HRM practices significantly enhance a firm's performance by fostering knowledge processes, including knowledge creation, sharing, utilisation and retention. Additionally, they boost the organisation's intellectual capital and promote higher levels of organisational learning and innovation performance (Evangelista et al. 2023, Kianto et al. 2017). Nonetheless, there is a lack of explicit insight into how performance management systems can aid in the sharing and retention of tacit knowledge, thereby reducing the risks associated with its stickiness amongst employees. Performance management is shown to significantly influence knowledge sharing activities in organisations compared to other HRM practices (Evangelista et al. 2023, El-Farr 2019). According to El-Farr and Hosseingholizadeh (2019), performance management influences KM activities such as knowledge sharing and retention by signalling to employees what the organisation values. A study by Arunprasad (2016) found that performance evaluation, alongside other HRM practices, plays a significant role in organisational learning and knowledge sharing dynamics. Performance evaluation enhances knowledge sharing at both individual and team levels, supporting previous research findings (Arunprasad 2016). Moreover, performance management systems that encourage KM behaviours, including the sharing, application and retention of knowledge, are deemed knowledge-oriented (El-Farr and Hosseingholizadeh 2019). Equally, performance management systems that fail to incorporate and acknowledge knowledge sharing and retention activities might not be classified as knowledge-oriented systems. This raises the question of whether performance management systems in PSEs assist in developing strategies for knowledge sharing and retention. This paper seeks to address a gap in the limited literature on knowledge management related to the research question posed. Human resource performance management systems may influence the conditions affecting knowledge stickiness and the transfer and retention of tacit knowledge in public sector enterprises, although their specific role remains unclear. Alshanbri et al. (2015) assert that performance appraisals should be innovative and flexible to enhance KM processes and reduce employee attrition rates. This approach aids organisations in retaining knowledge and minimizing the risks of knowledge loss linked to human resource turnover.

3. Methodology

The study utilised a qualitative research methodology to gather in-depth data from interviews conducted with twenty managers in the human resource management departments of nine purposively selected South African public sector enterprises across five sectors of the economy as illustrated in figure 1 below. The sectors represented include the water utility sector, development financial corporations, research and development sector, service sector, as well as compliance and regulatory industries. Ethical considerations were prioritised, including obtaining permissions, maintaining anonymity and confidentiality, and ensuring informed consent. The chosen sample size of 20 managers was considered sufficient for generating comprehensive insights into the research topic, aligning with Creswell's (2014) assertion that a sample size ranging from 1 to 40 is adequate in qualitative research to develop a rich understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The qualitative data gathered were thematically analysed using Atlas.ti software.

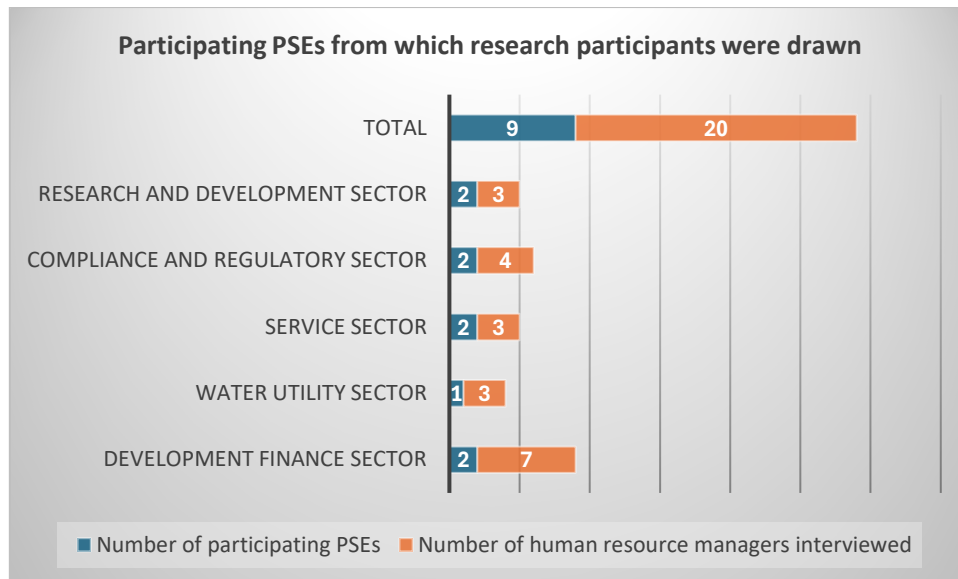


Figure 1: Participating PSEs from which human resource managers were drawn

4. Presentation of the Research Results

This section outlines the qualitative findings related to the following research questions posed:

- RQ1: How does the performance management system reward the required knowledge sharing behavioural expectations in South African Public Sector Enterprises?

Performance management systems that reward knowledge sharing behaviour are present in only three out of the nine PSEs that participated in the study, indicating that 33% of these public sector enterprises incentivise such behaviours, whilst the remaining 67% do not provide rewards for the required knowledge management practices.

In South Africa, many PSEs lack essential knowledge management structures, strategies, resources and processes, despite being part of the knowledge economy. Only a handful of PSEs reported having specific Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that employees must meet, with a bonus scheme in place to reward over-achievement. This financial incentive has facilitated the development of the necessary knowledge management behaviours, helping to implement knowledge management initiatives and processes in those few companies that have adopted such practices. Of the Public Sector Enterprises, 33% acknowledged having mentors who assist other employees via performance appraisals and short-term incentives. Notably, one PSE implemented a learning and development KPI for each employee, which fostered a culture of expertise recognition. This recognition motivated experts to continue their tenure within the organisation and share their knowledge with others. One participant from PSE02 that had knowledge sharing expectations as part of their KPIs expressed this view as follows:

Yes, it does, because if somebody gets rewards, being recognised for their expertise. They become more of a go-to-person or a role model for the advice. They are good, because people understand that, you know. For them to score well, they need to would have shared and enhance their colleagues' knowledge. Yes, it is. Hence, I was saying it is part of the performance contract. Therefore, when they do the performance review, it is part of that, yeah. (Participant#5)

Another participant from PSE03 agreed as follows:

We reward accordingly either through performance bonus or a promotion where appropriate. where additional responsibilities have been assumed, obviously it's a more complexed assignment in some instances that requires the development of certain skills, so we would enable the person through affording them to attend a particular training opportunity or we have the mentoring, where a person assumes an assignment that is short term but we have the expertise in-house, we assign a mentor. (Participant#7)

Recognising individuals for their expertise fosters their role as go-to persons or role-models, encouraging knowledge sharing amongst colleagues. This recognition is integral to performance contracts and reviews,

emphasising its importance in evaluating performance. However, this occurs only in a limited number of Public Sector Entities that have incorporated knowledge management roles and functions into their organisational structures. A human resource manager from one of the PSEs that did not have KM institutionalised with their structures expressed her views as follows:

I think when it says knowledge sharing behavioural expectations, that's something that we are now looking at, which we have never done before. Our rewards system is not geared towards targeting and recognising and rewarding knowledge sharing. It's like I said, it's very output driven. one of the dimensions on our performance contract is competent and empowered employees. It's a focus, but I guess it's in practically how we execute, that we're failing a bit, that we're not targeting it properly. (Participant#15)

- RQ2: How effective are these rewards in promoting knowledge management activities such as knowledge sharing and retention in South African PSEs?

Approximately 33% of public sector enterprises that integrated knowledge management into their performance management systems reported increased effectiveness in their knowledge retention strategies. A majority of the PSEs (67%) did not have KM institutionalised within their structures, and therefore had some difficulty reflecting on the effectiveness of their performance rewards in promoting knowledge sharing and retention. Of the nine PSEs that partook in the study, knowledge management plays a key role in performance management within three public sector enterprises. HR managers attribute this to the presence of a dedicated knowledge management function, along with an appropriate structure, strategy and leadership.

They are effective, because it's integrated to their performance. The behavioural competencies on performance management will have knowledge management. (Participant#3)

The integration of Knowledge Management in performance contracts rewards knowledge sharing behaviours. HR managers from two PSEs operating in the Research and Development sector noted that they incentivise employees for publications and conference presentations, even if not explicitly categorised as KM in their contracts. This performance contracting effectively institutionalised a knowledge-centric organisational culture and sharing leading to knowledge retention. Performance contracting in knowledge management effectively institutionalises a knowledge-centric culture and enhances organisational capabilities for learning, thus facilitating organisational learning. One human resource manager expressed their views as follows:

No, we don't have that KPI on knowledge sharing and retention or knowledge management per se. We should have a KPI like that, and we don't even on the supervisor performance management contract, the KPI that support training and development. It only resides on the HRM. I must say they are not effective. (Participant#19)

- RQ3: What can be done to reward knowledge sharing and retention behaviours through performance management systems in South African PSEs?

For knowledge sharing and retention to succeed in public sector organisations, it is essential to have adequate resources and clearly defined roles to formulate and implement knowledge management strategies. A Human Resource manager from PSE5 stated:

No, they are not successful. They will only be successful if the organisation can commit by having the KPA for knowledge management. Because if people see that this is in my performance contract, you continuously look at your performance and say, I need to make sure, you know. Nevertheless, because it is not there why should I be sharing? (Participant#18)

Another human resource manager concurred:

KM activities must be incorporated into managers' performance contract as the KPAs. They should form generic KPAs (Participant#19).

Knowledge sharing and retention activities are largely absent from the human resource performance management systems in most public sector entities in South Africa. Key performance areas in knowledge management must be integrated within performance management systems to mitigate knowledge loss. Such an integration approach will help eliminate barriers that lead to stickiness in tacit knowledge and improve organisational capabilities for knowledge retention and protection. Whilst all functions bear the responsibility for this, many PSEs face challenges due to the lack of a driving force for KM processes. Majority of human

resource managers interviewed blamed a lack of organisational knowledge management strategy and structures to assist in driving the required knowledge sharing and retention behaviours activities. Another human resource manager summed up their views as follows:

Once we have a strategy, remember structure is preceded by strategy. So, we will need a KM strategy, then you put warm bodies there, then definitely, it will take shape because you will see and feel those people because their KPI will be, for example, how do you harvest this information and knowledge. (Participant#18).

Many PSEs in this study exhibited a deficiency in KM strategies and structures. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that human resource managers within these PSEs articulated a strong need for a structured KM strategy. Such a strategy would enable them to incentivise knowledge sharing and retention behaviours, integrating these practices within their performance management systems.

5. Discussion of the Research Findings

Performance management systems that incentivize knowledge sharing and retention behaviours are found in only 33% of public sector enterprises in South Africa, indicating a lack of rewards for knowledge sharing and retention practices in 67% of cases. Many PSEs lack essential knowledge management structures and resources, with only a few implementing specific Key Performance Indicators and bonus schemes that promote the necessary behaviours for knowledge management. Additionally, 33% of PSEs acknowledge the role of mentors in assisting employees to share and retain knowledge internally through performance appraisals and incentives. This finding aligns with El-Farr and Hosseingholizadeh (2019), highlighting the need for organisations and managers to offer coaching and mentoring whilst incorporating knowledge sharing into performance appraisals systems to ensure knowledge sharing and retention. These coaching and mentoring knowledge sharing processes contribute to enhancing organisational knowledge and competence development, as noted by Caputo et al. (2019). Malik et al. (2020) emphasise that essential HRM practices aimed at boosting motivation include competency-based performance management, measurement and rewards. Furthermore, existing literature indicates that knowledge sharing incentive systems aligned with a company's objectives positively affect both operational performance and employees' commitment to the organisation. Hence, PSEs should focus on investing in and implementing knowledge-based motivation practices. The study by Evangelista et al. (2023) demonstrates that knowledge-based motivation incentivizes employees in knowledge-intensive business enterprises to create, share and utilise their professional knowledge, thereby enhancing the company's knowledge retention capability and overall organisational performance. One enterprise (a developmental finance institution) notably adopted a learning and development KPI for each employee, promoting a culture that values knowledge sharing and mentor expertise recognition. This recognition encouraged experts to remain and share knowledge within the organisation. Furthermore, the findings highlighted that rewards and recognition for expertise made individuals role-models, emphasising that knowledge sharing is integral to their performance evaluations. However, these performance incentives are present in a limited number of Public Sector Enterprises where Knowledge Management is integrated into their organisational structures, systems, and processes.

Regarding the effectiveness of performance management systems, 33% of PSEs that incorporated KM into their performance management systems reported improvements in knowledge retention effectiveness. Conversely, 67% of PSEs lacked institutionalised KM, thus hindering their ability to assess the effectiveness of performance management systems and rewards on knowledge sharing and retention. Amongst the nine PSEs studied, three recognised KM's critical role in performance management, largely due to having dedicated KM functions and supportive structures, strategies and leadership. This finding supports earlier research (Maphoto and Matlala 2022, Dewah and Mutula 2016) indicating that Knowledge Management is underdeveloped in many public sector organisations in Southern Africa, revealing a lack of knowledge-based performance management systems that promote knowledge sharing and retention in the majority of public sector entities. A lack of knowledge-based knowledge management and motivation systems contributes to knowledge stickiness, leading employees to hoard their knowledge and tacit knowledge loss when experts exit public sector organisations (Phaladi 2025). The loss of tacit organisational knowledge due to human attrition negatively impacts the organisation's knowledge base and its learning, absorptive and protective capacities (Phaladi and Mamorobela 2026). Therefore, investment in knowledge-oriented motivation practices is vital for PSEs to eliminate conditions that create knowledge stickiness, facilitating easier knowledge flow within organisations, reducing potential losses, and enhancing absorptive and retentive capabilities.

Pertaining the research question on what can be done to reward knowledge sharing and retention behaviours through performance management systems in South African PSEs, for effective knowledge sharing and retention in public sector organisations, adequate resources and defined roles are crucial for formulating and implementing knowledge management strategies. Human resource managers noted that success hinges on the commitment of PSEs to integrate key performance areas for knowledge management into performance contracts. Without this integration, individuals lack the motivation to share knowledge as they do not perceive it as part of their responsibilities. Consequently, whilst all organisational functions share the responsibility for knowledge sharing and retention, many public sector enterprises struggle due to insufficient driving forces for these processes, leading to significant knowledge loss. Li (2023) advises that organisational tacit knowledge retention can be enhanced by performance management systems that both inhibit and reward knowledge sharing behaviours. Therefore, it is crucial for PSEs to implement performance management systems that actively discourage or eliminate barriers to knowledge sharing. This includes addressing the challenges that lead to stickiness in the processes of knowledge transfer. The paper highlights a significant connection between performance management systems, reward mechanisms, and the retention of tacit knowledge to minimise its loss in organisations. It suggests that implementing clearer rewards within knowledge-driven performance systems can decrease knowledge stickiness and enhance knowledge retention in public sector enterprises.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This qualitative exploration conducted in nine South African public sector enterprises emphasises the critical role of human resource performance management systems in KM research and practice. However, the findings may not be relevant to public sector enterprises in developed economies where KM is more established. Future research could approach this topic from interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and mixed methods perspectives to gain a holistic understanding. Additionally, it would enhance future studies and practices if the findings could be quantitatively validated in comparable public sector enterprises.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study findings infer that the retention of tacit knowledge in public sector enterprises poses a significant challenge. This issue is primarily attributed to the absence of knowledge-based human resource performance management systems that target the reduction of knowledge stickiness and promote incentives for knowledge-sharing behavioural competencies and activities. Additionally, the majority of PSEs lacked institutionalised knowledge management, thus hindering their ability to assess the effectiveness of performance management systems and their rewards in promoting knowledge sharing and retention. To effectively address tacit knowledge loss and stickiness within organisations, it is crucial to implement human resource management strategies that encourage knowledge sharing. This should involve establishing behavioural expectations and integrating them into performance management systems. Incentives can play a significant role in fostering a culture of collaboration and openness, ultimately reducing barriers and stickiness to knowledge flow. By aligning individual and organisational knowledge sharing and retention efforts through targeted HRM practices, organisations such as PSEs can enhance knowledge retention, thereby improving their overall performance, sustainability and innovation. The strategic deployment of these systems can transform workplace dynamics, making knowledge transfer a shared responsibility and a recognised achievement within the public sector organisations' performance metrics. Furthermore, it is crucial for PSEs to invest in knowledge-oriented motivation practices that are formalised and driven through performance management systems and contracting. Such investment should aim to eliminate conditions that contribute to knowledge stickiness, thus facilitating smoother knowledge flows within organisations, ultimately leading to enhanced knowledge retention. Such measures can help mitigate potential knowledge loss risks and enhance both the absorptive and retentive capabilities related to knowledge management in PSEs. Therefore, PSEs are encouraged to adopt automated AI-powered systems and methodologies for knowledge-based performance management to institutionalise knowledge sharing and retention.

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