

A Performance Management System, Employment Relationships and Work Engagement Framework for the Public Sector in South Africa

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Abstract

Purpose: This study sought to establish a performance management system, employment relationships and work engagement framework for the public sector in South Africa.

Methodology: The study used a survey research design and a quantitative approach in which a structured questionnaire was employed to obtain information from respondents. The data were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Four hundred employees who were permanently employed, who were at job levels 1–12 and had been employed for more than five years from the population of 10 660 employees took part in this study. The study utilised a non-probability, purposive sampling method.

Findings: Empirical findings proved that there is a strong relationship between performance management systems, employment relationships and work engagement.

Research limitations: This study was conducted within the public sector; therefore, the results may not apply to other institutions, such as those in the private sector and government-private entities.

Practical implications: This paper provides good insight into the relationship between performance management systems, employment relationships and work engagement and the way they impact each other. The study advocated that public sector managers are required to ensure that passion for employment



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relationships and work engagement is high and employee performance can be optimal.

Originality/value: There is still a gap in the literature concerning the relationship between a performance management system, employment relationships and work engagement framework for the public sector in South Africa. Therefore, this study makes a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge already available.

Keywords: South Africa; public sector; performance management system; employment relationships; work engagement

Introduction

The South African public sector faces difficulties that significantly influence employees' performance. As a result, working in this sector comes with challenges (Mathibe and Chinyamurindi 2021). On the other hand, this sector has been characterised by providing poor service delivery to its citizens, which results in unrest (Moodley, Ackers, and Odendaal 2022). An effort to improve the public sector is noted to be the priority of the South African government (Tirivanhu, Olaleye, and Bester 2017). The root cause of these changes has to do with poor employee performance. In today's competitive working environment, employee performance is a crucial asset of any successful organisation; mainly because employees are the backbone of every successful organisation (Mburu, Koome, and Gichuhi 2020). It is argued that in today's competitive world, the success of an organisation depends on employees (Arimie 2019). The most effective resource that organisations own, is their employees (Wahyudi et al. 2022). Therefore, satisfactory employee performance is expected to assist the organisation in achieving the organisational goal. Every organisation will constantly work to boost employee performance in the hopes that the objectives of the organisation will be met (Prihadini et al. 2021). It is suggested that employee performance is divided into two elements, namely task performance and performance behaviour. This behaviour involves aspects associated with work (Riyanto, Endri, and Herlisha 2021). The existence of performance management systems (PMSs), work engagement and employment relationships has been considered essential for the overall performance of most organisations. According to Mphahlele and Dachapalli (2022), a PMS is viewed as an invaluable instrument that provides the framework for the structure of a specified work, when carefully applied.

On the other hand, it is essential to note that work engagement is a concept that has received attention due to its impact on employee performance and well-being in the workplace (Rana, Pant, and Chopra 2019). In practice, work engagement is seen as a crucial factor to address public sector challenges in terms of employee performance (Szilvassy and Širok 2021). Within the competitive environment in the public sector, employees are required to maintain a high level of engagement in their tasks (Yongxing et al. 2017). Other opinions from Pieters, Van Zyl, and Nel (2019) formulate that when there is work engagement, employees tend to be dedicated to the organisation. In

general, employment relationships are another aspect that influences employee performance because an employer relies on the employees to perform their jobs to maintain the smooth operation of the organisation (Arimie 2019). Employment relationships serve as a core responsibility of management (Ansah et al. 2020). Employment relationships can be defined as a connection between employees and employers through employees selling their work (Budd and Bhawe 2020). An organisation needs to acknowledge that unhealthy employment relationships may lead to poor performance, inefficiency and unproductivity (Ansah et al. 2020).

This study sought to develop a PMS, employment relationships and work engagement framework for the public sector in South Africa. The paper is arranged as follows: literature review, study objectives, methodology, validity and reliability, ethical considerations, study results, discussion of results, adoption of the framework, limitations, recommendations, management implications, contribution and value of the study, and lastly, conclusions.

Literature Review

The main focus of this section is on the theoretical deliberation of the concept of PMS, work engagement and employment relationships.

Human Resource Management Approach to PMS, Work Engagement and Employment Relationships

Davidescu et al. (2020) point out that employees are one of the most valuable resources in an organisation, and the entire organisation is a resource in human resource management (HRM). The study of Sailaja, Vaishnavi, and Sai Krishna (2022) underlines one mutual message indicating that HRM practices have a crucial influence on employee performance. The researchers further indicate that the performance of the employee is influenced by different aspects such as training and development, remuneration, job stability, and promotion. It is rightly said that proper HRM practices are required to improve employees' performance (Rodjam et al. 2021).

PMS is believed to be a serious HRM responsibility (Alshaikhi 2020). To improve the PMS, as pointed out by Riyanto et al. (2021), HR policies and practices require to be in line with the organisation's strategy and employee expectations. This is important because performance management (PM) is increasingly viewed as a strategic initiative to enhance employee and organisation performance (Alshaikhi 2020). Important developments in the field of employment relationships relate specifically to the importance of HRM (Harney, Dundon, and Wilkinson 2018). In conclusion, the South African public sector is required to provide proper resource management practices that can enhance performance (Rodjam et al. 2021).

Concepts of the PMS

Ideally, the survival and growth of the organisation rely on an active PMS. Efforts are put in place to assess, manage, reward and direct the work performance of employees (Murphy 2019). This is done through a PMS to ensure that employees work ambitiously to contribute to the achievement of the organisation's main goals (Said, Khan, and Hameed 2021). The PMS serves as a core procedure to get the work completed (Riyanto et al. 2021). One way in which organisations can improve the performance of their employee is through an operative PMS (Alshaikhi 2020). The PMS within the organisation can be used to assess and improve the effectiveness of employees in the workplace (Alshaikhi 2020).

In this situation, it is, therefore, important that the key components of the PMS and goals remain known and understood by employees. A PMS benefits organisations to simplify goals and strategic guidelines and subsequently explains the definitions and responsibilities of each task (Aguinis and Burgi-Tian 2021). Unclear goals and a lack of understanding of key elements of PM are the main reasons why many PMSs fail to meet expectations and lead to employee dissatisfaction (Alshaikhi 2020). On the other hand, the PMS has been described as pivotal to a sense of accomplishment by communicating goals that are considered valuable to the organisation and evaluating employee performance (Mphahlele and Dachapalli 2022). The main focus of a PMS is to ensure that organisational goals are achieved through appropriate responsibilities (Alshaikhi 2020).

Concepts of Work Engagement

Work engagement is characterised by a positive motivational state of well-being that includes high levels of energy, enthusiasm and dedication to one's work (Andy and Antonio 2022). Work engagement is defined as the state in which a person can contribute emotionally and intellectually to an organisation (Hendrik, Fanggidae, and Timuneno 2021). The presence of essential work resources enables employees to become engaged in their jobs, and similarly improves their work performance (Pieters et al. 2019). Engaged employees invest their energy into their jobs and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally (Ntseke, Mitonga-Monga, and Hoole 2022). When employees experience engagement, they experience power, dedication and acceptance in their job (Pieters et al. 2019). The study conducted by Sittar (2020) pointed out that all components of work engagement, namely vigour, dedication and absorption are significantly correlated with job performance. Vigour is characterised by high energy at work and mental resilience. Dedication refers to being deeply involved in your work and experiencing meaning and excitement. Absorption is characterised by full concentration and joyful immersion in work (Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova 2010).

Work engagement is an employee's psychological state, which involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioural elements, and includes mainly motivation (strength),

devotion (commitment), and absorption (attachment) to the work they do (Hendrik et al. 2021). Organisations are increasingly dependent on their employees to sustain their success. They need employees who are energetic, enthusiastic, and committed to their work (Listau, Christensen, and Innstrand 2021). Engaged employees typically have high levels of energy and are passionate about their work (Yongxing et al. 2017). Maintaining and ensuring high work engagement not only contributes to better employee performance but also to better organisational performance and competitive advantage overall (Rana et al. 2019). The several studies described above show that work engagement is necessary for employees (Hendrik et al. 2021).

Concepts of the Employment Relationships

In today's highly sensitive and competitive working environment, employee association with their jobs and organisations is considered paramount (Rana et al. 2019). Healthy relationships are essential to the smooth running of any business (Pandian and Saranraj 2017). Good employment relationships do not come easy. They are the outcomes of activities and practices that include the crucial components in designing employee relationship management to enhance relationships between employees and management (Akpan, Okwudu, and Imagha 2021). An organisation with sound employment relationship opportunities provides fair and constant treatment to all employees and fosters dedication to work and loyalty to the organisation (Pandian and Saranraj 2017). More often, employees are the ones who are in direct contact with customers; they can build and maintain healthy or unhealthy relationships that may lead to customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Ansah et al. 2020). Most importantly, industrial relations are designed to ensure that the employment relationship is managed well within established guidelines (Arimie and Oronsaye 2020). The importance of the employment relationship cannot be overstated, as it plays a role in the growth of both the company and the employee (Tartsea-Anshase and Odeba 2020).

Employment relationships are concerned with providing a work environment conducive to pleasant interpersonal relationships within an organisation to effectively advance the organisation's goals and objectives (Arimie and Oronsaye 2020). It is argued that employment relationships are considered an organisation's efforts to manage the relationship between an employer and an employee (Pandian and Saranraj 2017). The employment relationship is the existence of a link between an employer and an employee within an organisation (Arimie 2019). Managers and supervisors have come to be seen as servant leaders who provide a comfortable working environment for their employees, instead of the "bosses" of the past (Mburu et al. 2020).

Study Objectives

- To establish a PMS, employment relationships and work engagement framework for the public sector in South Africa.
- To determine if there are significant relationships between PMS, work engagement and employment relationships.

- To develop a framework for a performance management system, work engagement, and employment relationships in the public sector in SA.

Methodology

To achieve the research objectives, a survey research design and a quantitative approach were adopted in which a questionnaire was employed to obtain data from respondents.

Population and Sample

The sampling method employed in this study was non-probability, purposive sampling. This method involved selecting 400 employees who were permanently employed, who were at job levels 1–12 and had been employed for more than five years, from the population of 10 660 employees. In addition, the questionnaire was distributed by a non-probability, purposive sampling method. The questionnaire results returned were 355 valid responses, which were sufficiently completed to be included in the analysis and constituted a response rate of 88.75%.

Research Instrument

A structured questionnaire was employed to collect data from the respondents. The questionnaire was adapted from the performance management system questionnaire (consisting of 32 items) of De Waal (2004), the work engagement questionnaire (consisting of 17 items) of Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2006, 714), and the employment relationship scale (consisting of 20 items) of Ehlers (2016). Section A was used to determine the background of participants' demographics concerning gender, race, marital status, age and educational level, whereas sections B, C and D consisted of the PMS, employment relationships and work engagement.

Data Analysis

After data had been collected, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilised to compile the descriptive and inferential statistics. In addition, data were analysed quantitatively. Structural equation modelling was employed to evaluate the structure and relationships between the PMS, employment relationships and work engagement in the hypothesised model. Descriptive statistics were used to present the data to draw conclusions.

Validity and Reliability

According to Creswell (2014, 161), piloting the questionnaire is important to introduce the validity of the content of the instrument scores. A questionnaire survey should be pilot-tested to limit the potential difficulty for respondents to answer questions and to avoid problems with the data recording (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2016, 473). Additionally, pilot testing provides some measure of the effectiveness of the questions and the reliability of the data collected. A pilot test was performed to assess the effectiveness and validity of the survey instrument. To further determine the validity of

the instrument, it was offered to a statistician to determine if the measurement tool was suitable for answering the survey questions. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was utilised to determine the reliability of the measuring instrument. All three variables, namely performance management system, employment relationships, and work engagement, showed a Cronbach's alpha result above 0.7 points. It was concluded that the measuring instrument was reliable and acceptable.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance (reference no: FCRE2018/FR/05/008-MS) for this research was attained from the Faculty Committee for Research Ethics and the formal study proposal was approved by the Faculty Committee for Postgraduate Studies of the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). All respondents who participated in the study were free to choose whether or not to participate in the study and were made aware that taking part was completely optional. To ensure the confidentiality of this study, respondents were guaranteed that the information they provided would be kept strictly confidential. Respondents were not asked to provide their names. A box was provided in which respondents could submit their completed questionnaires.

Results

This section presents and interprets the data collected in the study.

Profile of the Respondents

The study focused on four elements of the demographic profile of participants, namely gender, race, marital status, and educational level. More than half of the participants were female (57.2) and 42.5% were male. Respondents' races were divided into four groups: Asian, Black, Coloured and White, of which the percentages were 1.7%, 75.5%, 8.2% and 13.5%, respectively. Of the 355 respondents, 27.3% were never married, 54.4% were married, 10.7% were living together, 3.9% were divorced/separated and 0.6% were widowed. Concerning education, the following were reported: lower than grade 12 (3.7%), grade 12 (7.9%), certificate (7.6%), diploma (27.9%), bachelor's degree (29.3%), honours degree (14.6%), and doctoral degree (6.5%).

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha was performed to test the reliability of the measuring instrument. The results of Cronbach's alpha values for the 12 sub-scales of the PMS, employment relationships and work engagement are illustrated in table 1.

Table 1: The results of Cronbach's alpha values for the 12 sub-scales

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	N of items
Vigour	0.789	6
Dedication	0.848	5
Absorption	0.811	6
Compliance	0.873	4
Fairness	0.827	3
Good faith	0.814	3
Trust	0.944	10
Understanding of PMS	0.828	4
Attitude towards a PMS	0.786	6
Performance management alignment	0.872	9
Performance management culture	0.803	5
Performance management focus	0.726	5

Source: Authors' compilation

Results indicate that Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all 12 sub-scales range from 0.726 to 0.944, which indicates that the internal consistency of the measuring instrument met the desired criteria and that the instrument could be used.

Structural Equation Modelling

In this section, structural equation modelling (SEM) was performed to assess the structure as well as relationships between the PMS, employment relationships and work engagement in the hypothesised model. Analyses were conducted in Amos version 23 (Arbuckle 2014), using the maximum likelihood estimation method. SEM is an advanced graphical and statistical technique that combines elements of factor analysis and regression analysis (Streiner 2006, 323).

The measurement model component of the SEM mapped the facet-level scores as manifest variables to the relevant latent variables. The measurement model can be considered to be a set of confirmatory factor analyses examining the relationships between the latent and manifest variables and verifying the proposed factor structures (Kline 1998, 82).

It must be noted that these facet-level scores are not technically manifest variables, but rather are made up of the associated items used to measure each facet. However, the researcher decided not to pursue a full SEM including these items, due to the resulting complexity of the model. In addition, the factor structure of these measures and the associated facet-level scores are well-established.

The structural model analysed the impact of the two independent variables (work engagement and employment relationships) on the dependent variable (PMS). The standardised model output is depicted in figure 1, while tables 2 and 3 present the associated model fit indices and goodness of fit thresholds.

Table 2: Model fit indices and goodness of fit thresholds

	χ^2	df	p-value	RMSEA	TLI	CFI
Model	142.683	51	0.000	0.071	0.963	0.976
Thresholds			≥ 0.05	≤ 0.08	≥ 0.90	≥ 0.90

Source: Authors' compilation

The fit of the model was reviewed based on the following indices: the chi-square statistic, degrees of freedom and associated p-value, the root mean squared error of approximation, the Tucker-Lewis index, and the comparative fit index. Thresholds of interpretation have been included in table 2 above from Hair et al. (2010) as well as Bagozzi and Yi (1988, 76).

Based on table 2 above, the chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 142.683$) was significant at $p < 0.001$. While this was not in line with the threshold, χ^2 can be considered a sensitive measure of model fit that is affected by factors such as sample size (Hooper, Coughlan, and Mullen 2008, 54). The root mean squared error of the approximation value fell within the good-fit range. Additionally, both the Tucker-Lewis index (0.963) and comparative fit index (0.976) values were well within the threshold for strong model fit. Overall, the model demonstrated a convincingly acceptable fit to the observed data.

Table 3: Unstandardised and standardised regression weights for the SEM

			Estimate	Standard error	p	β
Measurement model						
Absorption	<---	WE	1			0.928
Dedication	<---	WE	1.012	0.039	<0.001	0.885
Vigour	<---	WE	0.94	0.033	<0.001	0.920
Compliance	<---	ER	1		<0.001	0.895
Fairness	<---	ER	1.118	0.041	<0.001	0.907
Good faith	<---	ER	1.102	0.04	<0.001	0.911
Trust	<---	ER	1.068	0.033	<0.001	0.975
Performance management focus	<---	PM	1			0.874
Performance management culture	<---	PM	1.042	0.053	<0.001	0.829
Performance management alignment	<---	PM	0.958	0.045	<0.001	0.864
Attitude towards a performance management system	<---	PM	0.865	0.048	<0.001	0.779
Understanding of performance management system	<---	PM	0.567	0.067	<0.001	0.442
Structural model						
PM	<---	WE	0.128	0.025	<0.001	0.267
PM	<---	ER	0.392	0.047	<0.001	0.450

Note: WE = work engagement; ER = employment relationship, PM = performance management; PMS = performance management system; β = standardised regression estimate

Source: Authors' compilation

The results of the structural model output are shown in table 2. The results in table 3 show that there were strong relationships between each manifest variable and the associated latent variable, with standardised estimates of 0.799 and up, except for understanding the PMS. This variable had a slightly lower regression estimate on the PMS ($\beta = 0.422$). All estimates within the measurement model were significant at $p < 0.001$. In addition, all estimates, except for understanding the PMS, were above the threshold of 0.50 suggested by Hair et al. (2010). All variables in the measurement model can be said to have contributed strongly to their respective latent variable.

Based on table 3, the results of the analysis show that there was a statistically significant relationship between work engagement and the PMS ($\beta = 0.267$, $p < 0.001$), as per

objective 2. An important observation from SEM is that there was a strongly significant relationship between employment relationships and the PMS ($\beta = 0.450, p < 0.001$) as per objective 2. More importantly, an examination of the structural model results revealed that employment relationships had a larger impact on the PMS than work engagement. According to the structural model output in table 3, there was a correlation coefficient of 0.41 between work engagement and employment relationships. Based on the results, it can be concluded that there was a strong relationship between PMS, employment relationships and work engagement (see figure 1).

Adoption of PMS, Employment Relationships and Work Engagement Framework

After careful consideration of the study results, the PMS, employment relationships and work engagement framework were formulated to illustrate the relationship between three variables: PMS, employment relationships and work engagement. The framework of the study is practically defined in figure 1.

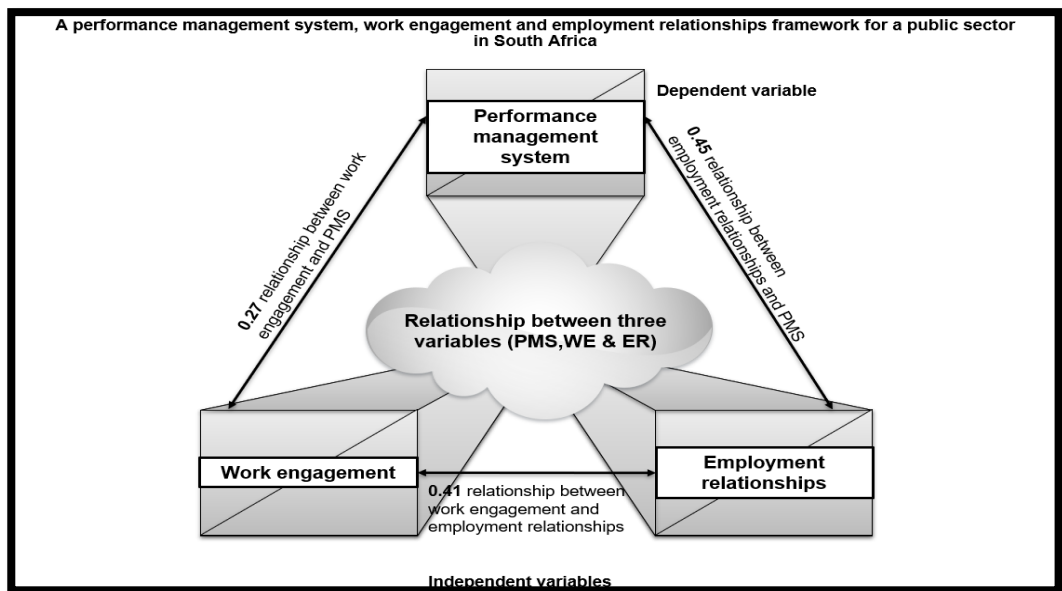


Figure 1: A performance management system, work engagement and employment relationships framework

Source: Authors' compilation

As shown in figure 1, the proposed framework was developed based on the findings presented in table 2 and table 3 to public sector managers to address issues related to PMS, work engagement and employment relationships. Based on the research framework, there is enough evidence that there is a significant relationship between PMS, work engagement and employment relationships. The PMS is expected to ensure quality employment relationships and work engagement as they directly influence each other. This framework may help managers identify appropriate interventions to improve the PMS, increase work engagement and build positive employment relationships, which are the main drivers of the public sector.

Discussion

The public sector faces many challenges, leading to more complex job demands that require employee innovation (Audenaert et al. 2019). Improving employee performance in the South African public sector requires effective PMS, good employment relationships and strong work engagement. The study aimed to formulate a PMS, employment relationships and work engagement framework. The results of the study established that there is a significant correlation between PMS, employment relationships and work engagement. Public sector managers need to pay more attention to using effective PMS to improve employment relationships and work engagement.

According to the results obtained by this study, it became clear that employment relationships have a larger impact on the PMS than work engagement. These results indicated that there was a high degree of connection between the PMS and employment relationships. In light of this, public sector managers are under pressure to do their part to support employee development and performance and to create a positive work environment and employment relationships (Riyanto et al. 2021). It has been suggested that PMSs must be perceived as fair by employees to maintain good employment relationships. Aguinis and Burgi-Tian (2021) argue that a PMS provides organisations with a unique channel to communicate the strategic direction of the organisation to employees and help them understand why and how roles need to be aligned. According to the study conducted by Akpan et al. (2021), managers are required to build healthy relationships with their employees and guide them appropriately to their benefit. These advantages include employees who are more productive and efficient, less conflicted, and more loyal.

Another notable finding was that work engagement has an impact on employment relationships, as depicted in the framework. Similarly, the framework further shows that there is a significant correlation between work engagement and employment relationships. As stated in the results, employees are more engaged when they have better working conditions. Unhealthy employment relationships have multiple effects, resulting in poorer performance and less engagement in work (Ntseke et al. 2022). Shaheen, Bin, and Abdul (2017) opine that employment relationships focus on the level of involvement employees have with the organisation. According to Arimie (2019), employees are engaged by managers who encourage, respect, value, and create a

pleasant work environment and truly care about their employees' well-being. Since the results show that all three aspects of engagement are significantly related to employee job performance, this suggests that highly engaged employees can perform their jobs more competently and successfully (Rana et al. 2019). The quality of the employer-employee relationship determines how committed employees are to their work (Mburu et al. 2020).

The above findings, as presented in figure 1, seem to suggest that there is a fairly low relationship between work engagement and PMS. This means that increasing or decreasing work engagement may not have a significant impact on the PMS. In addition, an effective PMS has been suggested to improve the work engagement of employees who feel more comfortable at work (Awan et al. 2020). A PMS and work engagement fall within the scope of HR practices. Also, employees who are dissatisfied with their work directly have a negative state of mind.

Limitations

Despite the important findings of the study, we acknowledge the shortcomings of this study. The study was performed in the public sector in South Africa. Therefore, the results of the study may not apply to other institutions, such as those in the private sector and public-private entities, as organisational culture, values and strategic goals are not the same for all organisations or countries (Govender and Bussin 2020).

Recommendations

This study, therefore, concludes that there is a significant relationship between PMS, work engagement and employment relationships. From the results, the study recommends that the South African public sector should adopt effective PMS policies that may assist them to enhance work engagement and employment relationships. To create a healthy working environment, a PMS must be perceived as fair, relevant, transparent and impartial to avoid negative attitudes towards the system. Additionally, it is important to have a clear process in place to determine the effectiveness of the PMS for work engagement and employment relationships.

Management Implications

The relationship between PMS, work engagement and employment relationships requires serious attention from the management. Management should ensure that PMS policies and approaches are applied in such a way that it encourages healthy employment relationships and promotes a high level of work engagement. The implication is that a PMS must be initiated by top management and championed at all levels of the organisation to lead to better performance and positive outcomes.

Contribution and Value Add of the Study

The findings of the study established a good understanding of the relationship between PMS, work engagement and employment relationships. The results of this study could be used by the management within the South African public sector to enhance work engagement and employment relationships based on effective PMSs. This study provides a valuable contribution to the limited body of knowledge and understanding about what constitutes an effective PMS, work engagement and healthy employment relationships and their impact on the employees' performance within the public sector.

Conclusions

The study confirmed that there is a strong relationship between PMS, work engagement and employment relationships. This indicates that employees in the South African public sector associate a PMS with work engagement and employment relationships. In other words, management in the public sector is expected to pay attention to the PMS, work engagement and employment relationships, wherever required. This can lead to healthy employment relationships and a high level of work engagement. In practice, one common challenge in the public sector is that employees often work in unhealthy employment relationships and low levels of work engagement environments, leading to poor employee performance, eventually offering poor service delivery as their only option. Therefore, the task of management is very important in finding appropriate initiatives and strategies that will meet employees' expectations in terms of PMS, work engagement and employment relationships, which are problems that public sector employees must face daily.

Disclosure Statement

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

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