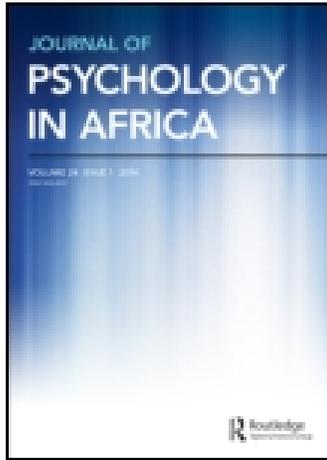


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The State of the Skills Development Expectations and Obligations of Municipal Employees

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In this study the psychological contract effects of skills development expectations and obligations of municipal employees in the South African province of the North West were explored. The participants were 547 municipal employees (females = 46%) of all levels. Data were collected on their expectations regarding skills development and training, capacity building, education, policies and procedures and infrastructure to be provided by the employer. Data were analysed through a data reduction process (exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation) and descriptive statistics (means, standard deviation). The results reflected that participants perceived their psychological contract with the employer as unfulfilled and unbalanced.

Keywords: Psychological contract, skills development and training, change, municipalities.

Organisational changes have an impact on the expectations and obligations of employees. Shore and Barksdale (1998) found that employees experienced higher levels of perceived organisational support, organisational commitment and lower levels of turnover intentions when their employment relationship was characterised by mutual high fulfilment experiences of expectations. Herriot and Pemberton (1996) indicate that organisational change can comprise the psychological contract of employees. It can thus be said that if perceived expectations are not fulfilled, the employees experience lower organisational support and commitment towards the organisation, and in turn, negative behaviours and high turnover intentions may occur. These results might have a direct impact on service delivery in local governments.

Referring to the South African setting, Lobelo (2007) further argues that local government is one of the economic sectors that are currently faced with a challenge of skills shortages in the fields of technical services, as well as financial and project management. By enhancing skills development and training strategies, the local government will become more efficient agencies, especially by the upliftment of communities through the delivery of basic services (Lobelo, 2007). Ndevu, Ile and Ile (2007) add that municipal employees need training that would equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to perform in their work and enable them to deliver a municipal service to the community. Hence, a shortage of training is presumed to be the source of poor service delivery and an obstacle that hinders transformation in local government.

Municipal employees have had to adapt to immense changes that occurred during the restructuring of municipal units. Other than the restructuring process, they also experienced a change in policies, procedures and legislation that presides over the functions of municipalities. Due to the transformation that emerged from changed policies and legislation, as well as the restructuring process, municipal employees have had to enter into a new employment relationship and adapt to new structures, organisational culture and perform new func-

tions, all requiring the improvement of current skills and the development of new skills. These changes underlie a psychological contract to be realised.

Goals of the Study

This study sought to determine the perceived psychological contract effects on North West province municipal employees' expectations and obligations. The specific research question was: How do employees' expectations of the management of their skills development and training opportunities align with their subjective psychological contract with the employer?

Method

Participants and Setting

Participants were 547 municipal employees (females = 46%) of 12 districts in the North West province.

Data Collection

Survey data were collected on employee expectations and obligations, regarding their subjective contract in five areas of work participation and support: skills/training, education, capacity building, policies and procedures and infrastructure.

Questions on skills development and training expectations included "Has your organisation promised or committed itself to identify your skills needs and address it through training and development?"

"Have you promised or committed yourself to take ownership of your work-related skills development?" A five-point scale was used, ranging from 1 ('Yes, but promise not kept at all') to 5 ('Yes, promise fully kept'). Both employee and employer psychological contract surveys show acceptable Cronbach's alpha coefficients when compared with the guideline of $\alpha > 0.70$ (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Table 1 shows the items of this questionnaire.

Table 1
Skills Development Expectations and Obligations Items

Employee expectations	Employee obligations
Skills /Training	
1. Identification of skill needs.	1. Taking ownership of skills development.
2. Providing training opportunities.	2. Commitment to be a team player?
3. Ensuring employees have sufficient skills.	3. Providing suggestions for skills development.
Capacity building	
1. Enhancement of current skills.	1. Meeting performance expectations.
2. Improving future develop prospects.	2. Uplifting skills.
3. Having training support systems in place.	3. Performing well in job.
Education	
1. Providing educational opportunities.	1. Engaging in life-long learning.
2. Improving level of education.	2. Participating in educational initiatives.
1. Providing career-path progression opportunities.	3. Taking responsibility of career development?
Policies and Procedures	
1. Providing policies/procedures.	1. Respecting the skills development policies and procedures.
2. Providing a learning framework.	2. Ascertaining with the skills-related policies and procedures.
3. Communicating training and development plans.	3. Participating in the implementation of policies and procedures.
Infrastructure	
1. Providing the necessary infrastructure to receive training and skills development?	1. Staying updated on the latest technology and infrastructure.
2. Creating a conducive environment.	2. Using available infrastructure.
3. Providing infrastructure to use the skills obtained through training.	3. Maintaining the available infrastructure.

Procedure

Permission for the study was granted by the municipal managers of the 12 districts' municipalities, and each participant consented to the study. The questionnaires that were completed were done so anonymously and therefore no specific details of the population can be presented.

Data Analysis

Data were descriptively analysed using the SPSS program (SPSS 17.0). Data reduction was also performed through exploratory factor analyses of both employee expectations and obligations with Varimax rotation. The descriptive statistics of the identified factors were also presented.

Results

Perceived Psychological Contract Adherence in Skills Training and Education

Table 2 presents data on the extent to which the employees perceived the psychological contract in a number of areas.

An average of 88.7% of promises was perceived as made by the employer and 95.08% by the employees and mostly regarding providing education (employee expectations = 90.72%; employee obligations = 96.08%) and innovativeness (employee expectations = 89.45%; employee obligations = 95.85%). There is evidence to suggest fewer promises made on skills training (employee expectations = 87.15%; employee obligations = 94.96%), performance in their current positions (employee expectations = 86.87%; employee obligations = 95.12%) and

career path progression (employee expectations = 87.17%; employee obligations = 93.78%).

The data reduction analysis produced two factors, being Employee expectations and Employee obligations. Table 3 shows the loadings of these two factors.

The descriptive statistics in Table 4 indicate that there is a difference between the experience of employee expectations (mean = 2.31, SD = 0.66) and employee obligations (mean = 3.99, SD = 0.57).

Discussion

The aim of this paper was firstly to establish what expectations, with regards to skills development and training, were made to municipal employees that constituted a psychological contract.

From the data analysis, it is evident that municipal employees perceive their municipality to have made promises to them, but only fulfilled these promises to a lesser degree. This clearly indicates that the employees have an unfulfilled psychological contract. Municipal employees however made promises to their municipality, and perceive that these promises were fulfilled to a high level. This clearly indicates an unbalanced psychological contract. According to the social exchange theory, a productive employment relationship exists where there is a degree of balance in perceived employee-employee expectations (Shore & Barksdale, 1998). In a balanced and mutually supporting relationship, employees freely exchange their skills, effort and commitment in return for desired monetary and socio-emotional rewards provided by the organisation (Meyer & Allen, 1997).

Table 2
Contents of the Perceived Expectations and Obligations

	No	Yes
Employee expectations		
Identify your skills needs and address it through training	18 (3.3%)	529 (96.7%)
Uplift and enhance current skills through training	37 (6.8%)	510 (93.2%)
Provide educational opportunities	90 (16.5%)	457 (83.5%)
Provide policies and procedures on skills development	47 (8.6%)	500 (91.4%)
Provide infrastructure to receive skills and training	33 (6.0%)	514 (94.0%)
Provide training opportunities	33 (6.0%)	514 (94.0%)
Improve future development prospects	58 (10.6%)	489 (89.4%)
Improve level of education	132 (24.1%)	415 (75.9%)
Provide a learning framework to ensure skills development	67 (12.2%)	480 (87.8%)
Create an environment conducive to skills development	82 (15.0%)	465 (85.0%)
Ensure sufficient skills to perform well	48 (8.8%)	499 (91.2%)
Have a workplace training support system in place	51 (9.3%)	496 (90.7%)
Provide individual career path progression opportunities	104 (19.0%)	443 (81.0%)
Communicate the workplace skills plan	86 (15.7%)	461 (84.3%)
Provide infrastructure to implement and use skills	39 (7.1%)	508 (92.2%)
Employee obligations		
Take ownership of work-related skills development	26 (4.8%)	521 (95.2%)
Meet performance expectations	6 (1.1%)	541 (98.9%)
Engage in life-long learning	32 (5.9%)	515 (94.1%)
Respect the skills development policies and procedures	27 (4.9%)	520 (95.1%)
Stay updated on technology and infrastructure	22 (4.0%)	525 (96.0%)
Uplift skills by means of further development	6 (1.1%)	541 (98.9%)
Be a good team player	16 (2.9%)	531 (97.1%)
Participate in the educational initiatives available	11 (2.0%)	536 (98.0%)
Ascertain with the skills-related policies and procedures	17 (3.1%)	530 (96.9%)
Use available infrastructure effectively	2 (0.4%)	545 (99.6%)
Perform well in position	1 (0.2%)	546 (99.8%)
Innovative suggestions for improvement on skills	77 (14.1%)	470 (85.9%)
Take responsibility of career development	61 (11.2%)	486 (88.8%)
Implementation of policies and procedures	54 (9.9%)	493 (90.1%)
Maintain infrastructure that is available	45 (8.2%)	502 (91.8%)

Employees who react positively to training benefits and who are afforded opportunities to partake in training initiatives are more likely to be committed to the organisation. This statement is consistent with the literature that explained the relationship between employee training and organisational commitment (Bartlett, 2001; Meyer & Smith, 2000).

Conclusion

Our study showed that the participants did not experience that the training and development promises made to them were kept. Literature shows that such an experience of contract breach leads to a violation experience that influence job satisfaction and security levels of the employees, as well as their well-being. In a service delivery sector with changing expectations, such a state of the psychological contract also influence the performance of the employees in reaching the necessary levels of services. Furthermore, these participants perceived that they kept their promises to the employer. This creates an unbalanced psychological contract, where the employee perceives that only on party in the relationship is keeping their

promises. Such a state of the contract reacts on the turnover intention of the employee and creates job insecurity.

Skills development is a necessary component of the workplace, especially in a setting where organisational changes creates new expectations and obligations. The employer should prioritise the expectations of the employees and fulfil these expectations to enhance the performance and wellbeing of the workforce.

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Table 3

Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation for the Items of Employee Expectations and Obligations

Items	F1	F2	h ²
Identify skills needs	0.74	-0.02	0.54
Enhance current skills	0.62	-0.22	0.43
Educational opportunities	0.77	-0.10	0.60
Policies and procedures	0.64	0.05	0.41
Provide infrastructure	0.72	0.13	0.54
Training opportunities	0.82	-0.04	0.68
Improve future development	0.77	0.15	0.62
Improve level of education	0.69	0.10	0.49
Provide learning framework	0.65	0.14	0.44
Environment conducive	0.61	0.23	0.43
Sufficient skills	0.76	0.06	0.59
Workplace training support	0.65	-0.03	0.43
Individual career path	0.59	0.09	0.36
Communicate WSP	0.65	0.08	0.43
Implement and use skills	0.67	0.18	0.48
Take ownership	0.10	0.70	0.49
Performance expectations	0.03	0.65	0.43
Life-long learning	-0.01	0.72	0.51
Respect skills development	0.17	0.67	0.48
Latest technology	0.30	0.61	0.46
Uplift yourself	-0.04	0.75	0.56
Good team player	-0.04	0.68	0.47
Participate in education	0.16	0.54	0.32
Skills related policies	0.10	0.52	0.28
Use infrastructure	-0.15	0.56	0.34
Perform well	-0.03	0.49	0.24
Suggestion for improvement	0.13	0.53	0.29
Take responsibility	0.01	0.70	0.49
Participate in implementation	0.06	0.63	0.40
Maintain infrastructure	0.05	0.64	0.41
Total squared loadings	8.42	6.19	
Percentage variance	24.73	20.63	
Cumulative percentage	24.73	45.37	

Note. F1 = Employee expectations; F2 = Employee obligations; h² = Communalities

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics and Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients of the Measuring Instrument for Employees Working in North West Municipalities

Test and subscales	N	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	α
Employee expectations	547	2.31 (46%)	0.66	0.47	0.17	0.94
Employee obligations	547	3.99 (80%)	0.57	-0.75	0.30	0.91

Note. SD = standard deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha coefficient

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Author's Notes

Both authors were affiliated with the WorkWell Research Unit of the North-West University, South Africa, at the development of this article.