

Understanding How Recruitment Practices Shape Municipal Performance: A Perspective From South Africa

Comprender cómo las prácticas de reclutamiento moldean el desempeño municipal: una perspectiva desde Sudáfrica

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ABSTRACT

Municipal staff are often compared to the engine of a car, which is essential for its operation. Similarly, a municipality relies on its staff to function effectively and deliver services efficiently. This analogy indicates the critical importance of recruiting the right staff, as municipal staff play a central role in ensuring the efficient and effective delivery of services in South Africa. Prior studies have shown that many municipalities in the country suffer from irregular recruitment practices. This has led to the appointment of individuals who may not have the qualifications, skills, and experience necessary to play their role effectively. However, how this affects municipal performance has not been sufficiently addressed. The novelty of this study lies in its focused qualitative exploration of the direct and systemic effects of irregular recruitment practices on municipal performance, an area that has received limited attention in existing literature. To address this gap, the paper employed a qualitative approach and utilised secondary data sources. The paper found that irregular recruitment in South African municipalities leads to high staff turnover, low morale, poor service delivery, and reduced public trust. Low performance results from unqualified individuals filling

roles ineffectively. The Person-Environment Fit Theory (PEFT) supports these findings, indicating the critical role of aligning individual skills and values with the work environment. Politically influenced or non-merit-based hiring misaligns skills with organizational needs, harming performance. The paper advocates for merit-based recruitment, aligning with the National Development Plan's goal of a professional public service. To address these issues, the paper recommends that municipalities adopt merit-based recruitment practices, curtail political involvement, and improve human resource training and recruitment technologies. These measures will improve municipal performance, stability, and governance.

Keywords: Recruitment Practices, personnel Management, South African Municipalities, Municipal Government, Municipal Services, Municipal Government, Performance, Personnel Management

RESUMEN

El personal municipal se compara a menudo con el motor de un automóvil, que es esencial para su funcionamiento. Del mismo modo, un municipio depende de su personal para funcionar eficazmente y prestar servicios con eficiencia. Esta analogía indica la importancia crítica de contratar al personal adecuado, ya que el personal municipal desempeña un papel fundamental para garantizar la prestación eficiente y eficaz de servicios en Sudáfrica. Estudios previos han demostrado que muchas municipalidades del país sufren de prácticas irregulares de reclutamiento. Esto ha llevado al nombramiento de personas que pueden no tener las cualificaciones, habilidades y experiencia necesarias para desempeñar su papel con eficacia. Sin embargo, no se ha abordado suficientemente la forma en que esto afecta al rendimiento municipal. La novedad de este estudio radica en su exploración cualitativa enfocada de los efectos directos y sistémicos de las prácticas irregulares de reclutamiento sobre el desempeño municipal, área que ha recibido poca atención en la literatura existente. Para abordar esta carencia, el documento empleó un enfoque cualitativo y utilizó fuentes de datos secundarios. El documento encontró que la contratación irregular en las municipalidades sudafricanas conduce a una alta rotación del personal, baja moral, mala prestación de servicios y disminución de la confianza pública. El bajo rendimiento se debe a que las personas no calificadas desempeñan sus funciones de manera ineficaz. La teoría del ajuste persona-medio ambiente (PEFT) apoya estos hallazgos, indicando el papel crítico de alinear las habilidades y los valores individuales con el entorno laboral. La contratación influida políticamente o no basada en el mérito desequilibra las aptitudes con las necesidades de la organización, lo que perjudica el rendimiento. El documento aboga por la contratación basada en el mérito, alineándose con el objetivo del Plan Nacional de Desarrollo de una función pública profesional. Para abordar estas cuestiones, el documento recomienda que los municipios adopten prácticas de contratación basadas en el mérito, reduzcan la participación política y mejoren la capacitación de recursos humanos y las tecnologías de contratación. Estas medidas mejorarán el rendimiento, la estabilidad y la gobernanza municipal.

Palabras clave: Prácticas de contratación, gestión del personal, municipios sudafricanos, gobierno municipal, servicios municipales, gobierno municipal, rendimiento, gestión del personal

JEL CODES:

J45: Public Sector Labor Markets

H83: Public Administration; Public Sector Accounting and Audits

M51: Personnel Economics: Firm Employment Decisions; Promotions

1. Introduction

In the debate over ensuring outstanding municipal performance, municipal staff cannot be left out, especially in emerging countries such as Zimbabwe, Kenya, and South Africa (Hakim, 2021; Wolniak & Jonek-Kowalska, 2021; Munzhedzi, 2020). This is because of the critical role that municipal staff

play in driving the overall performance and service delivery outcomes of municipalities. Musopero and Lee (2021) state that in many countries, the recruitment of public servants is guided by principles of transparency, merit, and fairness, aimed at ensuring that only the most qualified individuals are appointed to key positions. This is also the case in South

Africa. Chapter 10 of the Constitution sets out the fundamental values and principles of public administration.

These principles are the cornerstones of public administration, including the recruitment practices of municipalities. They are designed to ensure that municipalities recruit not only qualified individuals but also individuals who can support these values, which contributes to the overall performance and integrity of local governments. Section 67 of Act 32 of the Municipal System of 2000 further strengthened the importance of ethical and effective recruitment practices. This section states that the municipal authorities must establish recruitment, selection, and appointment policies in accordance with the Constitution, national legislation, and applicable regulations. Furthermore, this policy must promote the objectives of the Constitution, including those stipulated in Chapter 10. In fact, the above-mentioned laws are not respected by the municipalities of South Africa.

This is seen through municipal recruitment practices affected by factors such as nepotism, political interference, or lack of compliance with established norms (Onchari, Iravo & Elijah, 2014). This is a problem because municipalities in South Africa are

often at the forefront of service delivery but face considerable challenges due to flawed recruitment practices (Vettraino & Neal, 2023). It is important to note that flawed recruitment practices in municipalities result in poor service delivery. Many previous studies focused on municipal recruitment practices, but less focus has been given to municipalities in South Africa and how this affects municipal performance. This current paper, therefore, critically explores how recruitment practices affect municipal performance in South Africa and explores reform strategies that can align these practices with legal standards and the needs of the communities they serve.

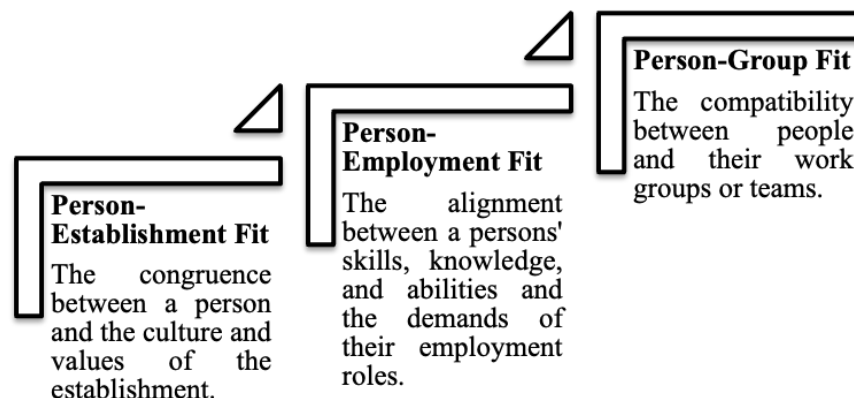
2. Literature review

Theoretical Literature

Person-Environment Fit Theory (PEFT)

The Person-Environment Fit Theory (PEFT) serves as an important theoretical framework for understanding how recruitment practices influence municipal performance. Rooted in Lewin's (1935) foundational work and further developed by scholars such as Van Vianen (2018), PEFT emphasizes that the compatibility between an individual and their work environment significantly impacts their attitudes, behaviours, and outcomes. In the municipal environment,

Figure 1: Dimensions of Person-Environment Fit Theory



this alignment is important, as municipalities depend on staff who not only possess the requisite skills but also share the institution's values and goals. This theory is relevant to this paper as it portrays the importance of selecting individuals whose competencies, motivations, and personal attributes align with the demands and culture of the municipal environment. According to Armitage and Amar (2021), this theory is based on the following dimensions:

The figure illustrates the PEFT dimensions, indicating that candidates should be selected based on their alignment of values, skills, and abilities with the job requirements to ensure they fulfill their roles effectively for institutional success. In the case of South African municipalities, where recruitment has often been compromised by political interference, cadre deployment, and nepotism, PEFT provides a strong argument for the adoption of merit-based recruitment systems. Such systems ensure that individuals are appointed based on their alignment with the needs and values of the municipality, as opposed to political or personal affiliations.

By applying PEFT, this paper argues that effective recruitment practices that prioritize fit can result in a more motivated, competent, and stable workforce. This, in turn, can lead to better municipal performance, enhanced public trust, and greater success in achieving the developmental goals set out in the National Development Plan (NDP) and the South African Constitution. Thus, PEFT improves the paper's theoretical base and provides practical information on how recruitment reforms can impact municipal effectiveness.

Empirical Literature

Evidenced by the literature, recruitment practices in South African municipalities

influence their performance as well as service delivery (Dzansi & Dzansi, 2010; Masiya, Davids & Mangai, 2021). The above is not only evidenced by the above scholars, but it is further supported by other scholars who indicate that there is a nexus between the recruitment practices and municipal performance metrics, such as service quality, financial management, and public satisfaction (Sibonde & Dassah, 2021; Kalonda & Govender, 2021). According to the South African Constitution and the Municipal Systems Act of 2000, recruitment practices ought to be ethical and based on merit. But, in reality, evidence shows that many South African municipalities are often faced with politically motivated appointments under the ANC Cadre Deployment Policy (Mlambo, Zubane & Thusi, 2022; Thusi, Matyana & Jili, 2023; Mlambo & Thusi, 2023; Takalani & Lavhelani, 2024).

This indicates that current recruitment practices deviate from the standards set out in the relevant legislative frameworks, such as the South African Constitution and the Municipal Systems Act of 2000. As such, this has resulted in the South Africans protesting for better municipal services (Kaizer, 2022). This is directly linked to municipal performance, showing the need for sound recruitment practices. Poor recruitment not only undermines municipal effectiveness but can also contribute to increased service delivery strikes and unrest. It must be noted that irregular and not merit-based recruitment practices, such as the likes of political interference, detract from municipal performance (Takalani & Lavhelani, 2024). This raises the question of whether the merit-recruitment provisions within the South African legislative framework are actively enforced or merely exist on paper, akin to a museum exhibit.

It is shown in the paper of Mofokeng, Nkgapele and Kgobe (2025) that hiring decisions based on political connections or personal relationships often lead to the selection of individuals lacking the required skills or experience. The repercussion of this is that it leads to inefficiencies and reduced effectiveness in municipal operations and performance. Other public administration and human resource management scholars further allude that political patronage in recruitment contributes to high turnover rates and diminished employee morale, further exacerbating performance issues within municipalities (Koketso, 2011; Dzansi, 2014; Mnukwa, 2016; Sibonde & Dassah, 2021; Mashashane, 2022; Moloto, 2023).

It must be noted that municipalities that use open and merit-focused hiring practices typically achieve better performance results than those where hiring is affected by political factors and favoritism (Chipunza, Monnapula-Mapesela & Dzansi, 2014). Scholars such as Mjilwa (2023) mentioned that high-quality recruitment processes contribute to a skilled and capable workforce, which is essential for efficient service delivery. Especially in South African municipalities, which are known for yielding poor service delivery (Ramatsoma & Mazhazha-Nyandoro, 2023; Ragolane

& Malatji, 2024; Ragolane, Govender & Nomzaza, 2025) and poor performance (Thusi *et al.*, 2022), where people continuously strike for improved service delivery. This has also been said recently by Mazorodze (2025), stating that South African municipalities have faced scrutiny in recent decades for inadequate service delivery. The review of literature indicates that although numerous past studies have examined municipal recruitment practices, there has been limited attention given to municipalities in South Africa. Consequently, this paper thoroughly investigates how recruitment practices affect municipal performance in South Africa and examines reform strategies to align these practices with legal standards and the community's needs.

3. Research methodology

This paper used a qualitative methodology as it heavily relied on secondary data to collect relevant information. The authors of this paper have examined existing literature on how recruitment practices affect municipal performance in South Africa. The authors were able to reach a significant conclusion from this study with the help of the qualitative research method. **Table 1** below presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria used in this study:

Table 1: Research Publications Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Date of publications	Articles published from 2016 to 2025, which enabled rich data collection on the repercussions of recruitment practices on the performance of municipalities in South Africa.	Articles published before 2016 and articles not addressing the research problem and topic.
Article type	Peer-reviewed articles, government documents, and dissertations.	Unpublished articles, books, and dissertations.
Languages	English articles.	Other languages articles.
Article Relevance	Articles that address recruitment practices and performance of municipalities in South Africa.	Articles not addressing the recruitment practices and municipal performance in South Africa.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Sample Number of Publications	The paper considered seventy-three (n=73) publications as the target sample, but only sixteen (n=16) were included in this paper because they were more relevant.	Twenty-four (n=49) were not included as they were not addressing the research problem and topic.

Table 1 displays the inclusion and exclusion criteria utilized to examine how recruitment practices affect municipal performance in South Africa. The authors performed a thorough electronic search on a range of databases, such as Google Scholar, university libraries, and government legislation. The search took place over a three-month period spanning from December 2024 to February 2025. The paper contained sources released between the years 2016 and 2025, all in English, to maintain consistent quality throughout all the investigations. The authors examined a total of seventy-three (n=73) papers for their study, but only sixteen (n=16) were deemed sufficiently relevant for inclusion in the final analysis. The study employed a purposive sampling method to eliminate irrelevant articles selectively and select more relevant ones to ensure data quality and reliability. This paper utilized qualitative content analysis because it was considered appropriate for the methods employed in the study. Nkoana *et al.*, (2023) suggest that qualitative content analysis is a technique used to analyse textual or literary information. This approach enabled the authors to methodically create, clarify, depict, and provide significant perspectives on the themes utilized.

4. Results And Discussions

High Employee Turnover and Low Morale

The issues of high staff turnover and low morale are deeply embedded in inadequate recruitment practices, which result in

various obstacles, such as subpar municipal performance and disrupted service delivery (Wooten, 2020). These challenges are a clear demonstration that fair-based recruitments are the fundamental foundation to making municipalities function like well-oiled machines that deliver services exceptionally. Undesirably, poor recruitment processes lead to unqualified labourers without the required skills and qualifications dominating the municipalities, which has led to the rarity of collective expertise to execute several municipal mandates (Aguila, 2023). Consequently, this leads to a multiplicity of challenges, one of them being that few workers are supposed to cover all the work, as the majority do not possess the motivation or the skills to do so. Over time, working in such an environment fuels dissatisfaction, and it leads to those few dedicated labourers feeling demotivated.

In the long run, it leads to employee turnover (Wooten, 2020), where workers depart from the company, similar to a relationship where one person exits when they are unhappy and unsatisfied. The paper discovered that these challenges give rise to low employee morale as problems like absenteeism, decreased productivity, and neglect of effective service delivery come to the forefront. Concurrently, this leads to some workers migrating to the private sector, given how efficient the private sector recruitment process and work environment are compared to the public sector. The internal challenges of municipalities perpetuate the frequent departure of qualified

employees, and the hiring of unfit candidates, coupled with the frequent departure of credible employees, derail institutional memory and project continuity (Wooten, 2020). For instance, when an employee leaves in the middle of a project due to low employee morale, the project they were busy on comes to a halt. The frequent issue of high employee turnover rate is associated with various costs and processes of always advertising posts and always losing credible employees who add value. Consequently, the new employees must have time to adapt and become familiar with the municipality's functions.

Furthermore, as they encounter these institutional facets that are caused by poor recruitment processes, they also become susceptible to low employee morale. In addition to demotivating competent workers, the practice of filling municipal positions through patronage networks rather than based on qualifications and experience seriously impairs the municipality's ability to draw and keep skilled experts (Sibonde & Dassah, 2021). This issue is particularly evident in the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, as it has consequently faced issues of low staff morale and the compromise of meritocratic hiring (Rulashe & Ijeoma, 2022). Conversely, the municipality has faced various allegations of political meddling and corruption in the recruiting process; consequently, this has brought unfit employees to oversee intricate municipal responsibilities. This has resulted in underperformance, especially in the waste management and housing sectors, where projects have either stalled or failed to satisfy community demands.

Merit-Based Recruitment

This current paper discloses that political patronage has consistently obstructed

recruitment processes based on merit in numerous South African municipalities. Handpicked cadres have been a direct impediment to merit-based recruitment. The securing of positions has been altered to prioritize personal interests rather than addressing the socioeconomic needs of the populace through efficient service delivery (Oyelana *et al.*, 2024). In South African municipalities, this means that political parties have their loyal followers acquire strategic and important positions to consolidate their power, prioritizing political interference and favoritism over the public interest and efficient service provision (Mlambo, 2022). Furthermore, this is enabled by the policy of cadre deployment, whereby political leaders are tasked with the administrative functions of governance and management, which poses direct challenges to merit-based recruitments.

Corrupt and fraudulent activities are almost inseparable from ineffective recruitment processes (Mamokhere & Kgobe, 2023), this manifests itself in a way municipal operations are captured by public officials during the scramble for municipal resources. Some of the challenges obstructing meritocratic recruitment emanate from the internal instabilities within the department of human resources in respective municipalities (Aguila, 2023). The human resource department is like a referee that fairly officiates a game by affording all players equitable outcomes; however, when the referee is captured or not capacitated to perform the duties at hand, countless catastrophes would emerge. In reality, various human resources departments in South African municipalities are impeded by several challenges such as nepotism and cronyism in the recruitment practices such as officials bring their people, which creates an environment that is susceptible to various

issues such as unqualified people entrusted with the duty to execute service delivery.

In some instances, the same challenge manifests itself in a manner that the public servants responsible for recruitment processes do not have the required expertise, qualifications, and merits to preside over matters of human resources and recruitment processes. Cronyism is different from nepotism yet leads to comparable negative impacts due to their many similarities. These two practices temper the possibility of fair and meritocratic recruitment, as public officials prioritize family, friends, personal associations, and favouritism (Moloto, 2023). Despite there being other candidates more viable to acquire the jobs and provide public service. The lack of effective regulatory processes for recruitment processes has created a hostile environment that encapsulates all sorts of barriers and challenges, such as sexual harassment and sexual coercion, wherein recruitment processes exhibit both explicit and implicit connotations to have contingent sexual cooperation (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). For instance, it includes promises of professional rewards in exchange for sexual favours to acquire a position contingent on a sex act. According to Matotoka (2021), gender discrimination remains a huge barrier to meritocratic recruitment processes, as previous attempts, such as the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998, have not successfully alleviated its prevalence. In essence, as much as there is a plethora of challenges that block meritocratic processes, the most stifling and apparent challenge toward fair recruitment practices is the political interference largely emanating from the ANC Cadre Deployment Policy.

Erosion of Public Trust and Accountability

One of the most important repercussions of the inadequacy of recruitment practices within the municipalities of South Africa is

the erosion of public trust and accountability. Pretorius (2017) believes that recruitment in municipalities is driven by nepotism, political favouritism, or other forms of prejudice rather than merit or qualifications, which undermines the public's confidence in the municipality's ability to govern effectively and justly. Furthermore, residents who perceive that municipal officials are appointed on the basis of personal or political connections are more likely to perceive that the municipality is corrupt or incompetent. This perception is particularly damaging in communities where residents already face challenges such as insufficient services, high unemployment, and social inequality. The result of such is a lack of trust in municipal leadership, which leads to a reduction in societal participation and fewer citizens participating in the community's decision-making process, attending public meetings, or collaborating with the local government on development projects (Matloga, Mahole & Nekhavhambe, 2024).

This is contrary to Section 152 (1) of the Constitution of South Africa, which encourages community participation in local government administration issues. Furthermore, if the accountability mechanism is weak or ineffective, officials who are not properly trained may feel compelled to act in the interests of the public leading to problems of corruption and inefficiency. The work of Xolani, Mkhize, and Mlambo (2022) showed that, over time, the erosion of public trust has caused social disturbances, and citizens have expressed their dissatisfaction with municipal administrations by using protests and other forms of civil disobedience. Consequently, mistakes in recruitment practices not only reduce municipal effectiveness but also destabilize the relationship between local governments and the communities in which

they serve. Therefore, this gives a clear indication that errors in the acquisition of talent within municipalities should be avoided at all costs.

Inefficiencies in Service Delivery

Inefficiency in the provision of services is another significant result of poor recruitment practices in the communities of South Africa. When recruitment processes do not give priority to the selection of qualified and skilled individuals, municipalities often struggle to provide basic services (Magagula *et al.*, 2022) such as water supply, sanitation, waste management, and infrastructure maintenance. Appointing unqualified or inexperienced staff to key positions can delay project implementation, prevent the provision of services, and reduce the overall quality of public services. This is mainly due to the staff will not be able to thrive under the municipal environment as they are not fully suitable for municipal positions which has a goal to attain a successful delivery of municipal services. This is further supported by PEFT, which advocates that poor person-employment fit results in inefficiency, errors, and increased supervision requirements, strains the resources of the municipality, and delays the effective provision of services.

Furthermore, municipalities that do not attract and retain competent talent may experience high turnover rates, further affecting the provision of services (Sibonde & Dassah, 2021). On the other hand, constant changes in staff may lead to the loss of municipal knowledge, and new staff may lack the context or experience needed to manage current projects. This further leads to a cycle of inefficiency in which services are repeatedly delayed or abused and contributes to the frustration of residents who depend on the city for essential services. It is very

imperative to take note that inefficient service delivery has a broad impact not only on the daily lives of the society but also on social and economic development. In addition, the lack of consistent and high-quality services can exacerbate social inequalities, as the most affected marginalized communities are the municipal failures. Therefore, the inefficiency of service delivery caused by poor recruitment practices highlights the need for municipalities to adopt more rigorous and merit-based hiring processes.

5. Conclusion

The paper concludes that ineffective recruitment practices in South African municipalities have far-reaching consequences, including high employee turnover, low staff morale, service delivery inefficiencies, and the erosion of public trust. The prevalence of political patronage, nepotism, and cadre deployment has resulted in unqualified individuals occupying critical roles, hindering municipal performance and contributing to widespread dissatisfaction. Consequently, municipalities struggle to retain skilled professionals, leading to institutional instability and disrupted service provision. Recruitment practices are crucial but not the sole issue. Financial mismanagement, limited revenue, non-compliance, and social unrest also impair performance. These interconnected factors weaken institutions and hinder development. Municipalities must align human resource practices with the South African Constitution and the NDP, which advocates for professional, accountable, and ethical public administration through merit-based recruitment. In this regard, the Person-Environment Fit Theory reinforces the importance of recruiting individuals whose skills, values, and motivations align with the institutional environment. Applying this theory can improve employee satisfaction,

reduce turnover, and ultimately enhance municipal performance and service delivery.

6. Recommendations

The paper recommends key measures to address poor municipal recruitment practices. Municipalities must strictly enforce merit-based employment in line with the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 and the Municipal Financial Management Act of 2003, supported by stricter supervisory mechanisms. Reducing political interference is crucial, aligning with the Person-Environment Fit Theory, and can be achieved through independent recruitment agencies and psychometric testing. Strengthening the training and development of municipal HR departments is essential for fair and effective hiring. Adding to the above, adopting modern recruitment technologies, such as online application systems, can enhance transparency. The arguments presented by Mofokeng, Ramolobe, and Bogopa (2025) bolster this perspective, as they highlight the necessity for governmental practices and procedures to transition to digital platforms to ensure seamless operations. A culture of accountability, with regular reviews and public reporting on recruitment outcomes, will help restore public confidence in local governance. Implementing these recommendations will enhance municipal performance and support South Africa's broader goals of good governance and sustainable development.

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Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest in this study

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