




Employee perceptions of organisational design interventions in the public sector



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Orientation: Public Sector Departments (PSD) play an essential role in rendering services for public welfare. Unfortunately, PSDs are slow to adapt to change and apply the required interventions to ensure sustainable service delivery and performance to the broader society.

Research purpose: The objective of this study was to explore employee perceptions of organisational development interventions in a selected public sector organisation.

Motivation for the study: Research on Organisation Design (OD) interventions in the public sector remains scarce despite its strategic importance.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative approach was utilised to obtain semi-structured interview data from a purposive sample of management ($N = 15$) from a selected Public Sector Institution. Theme analyses were applied to illicit themes for the data gathered.

Main findings: The findings showed that employees had negative experiences of OD in the department. The participants highlighted various factors constraining the effective implementation of OD interventions, such as a lack of consultation, communication and role clarity, poor change management, planning and time management.

Practical/managerial implications: The findings highlighted the importance of management creating inclusive workplace cultures with opportunities for proper dialogue with subordinates to prevent resistance against change. Organisation design stakeholders can further benefit from role clarification and training to ensure that change initiatives are properly assembled in support of organisational strategies.

Contribution/value-add: This research adds to the limited body of empirical knowledge on OD interventions within the public sector.

Keywords: change management; consultation; organisational development; interventions; public sector.

Introduction

Public Sector Departments (PSDs) play a vital role in improving society's general welfare through the delivery of public goods and services (Fourie & Poggenpoel, 2017; Linna et al., 2010) in the local and global economy (Linna et al., 2010). Blum et al. (2012, pp. 1–2) note that the public sector has the potential to be 'a major contributor to the growth and social welfare', by delivering quality outputs for citizens, managing infrastructure, regulating social and economic behaviour and ensuring fiscal and institutional sustainability. As stated by Arnaboldi et al. (2015, p. 2), the public sector is faced with high expectations in terms of 'delivery of social justice, social responsibility, equity in society, democratic entitlements and pressures for social change.'

The public sector is thus a complex environment (Arnaboldi et al. 2015). Lapsley and Skærbaek (2012) describe the complexity as a function of the interface between a new post-apartheid managerial culture alongside political interference, which creates tensions for management discretions in the levels of accountability within and beyond public service institutions. In addition, the hybrid nature of PSDs adds to their complexity (De Waele et al., 2021). The hybrid nature of these organisations refers to aspects such as the multiple, diverse stakeholders of PSDs, the (often conflicting) demands of these different stakeholders, as well as the role of politics in these organisations in terms of serving the elected government and serving all citizens of a country. Against this backdrop of a highly complex environment, the importance of organisational performance in the public sector cannot be disputed.

Various studies have shown that South Africa has, for a number of years, been subjected to poor PSD performance in delivering public services (Fourie & Poggenpoel, 2017; Janse Van Rensburg, 2014; Nengwekhulu, 2009; Shava & Mazenda, 2021). Factors contributing to poor performance are poor financial management; inadequate procurement practices; the politicisation of appointments; public servants' lack of skills, knowledge, and experience; nepotism; corruption; lack of accountability; lack of performance management; tolerance of unethical behaviour and practices; and a lack of leadership (Akinboade et al., 2012; Fourie, 2015; Fourie & Poggenpoel, 2017; Francis, 2013; Janse Van Rensburg, 2014; Magadzire et al., 2017; Malila, 2020; Muthien, 2014).

The existence and sustainability of organisations and, in this context, public sector institutions depend, amongst various other factors, on organisational development (OD) interventions to maximise profitability (Brijball, 2012). Shukla et al. (2015) refer to OD as a purposeful process for the survival of organisations, and state that it is a long-term effort that contributes to the performance of an organisation. Cilliers and Henning (2021, p. 1) describe OD as 'an established function in organisations tasked to optimise organisational functioning and relationship building'. Several studies indicate that public sector performance is a priority for governments worldwide (Kealesitse et al., 2013), and that an efficient public service, in most cases, enhances or improves the social conditions of the citizens. Moreover, Smith and Mackinnon (2019) argue for more OD interventions to drive radical change in South African public sector institutions. Therefore, research on employee perceptions of OD interventions in a public sector institution is imperative. More specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- What are employee perceptions of OD interventions in a selected public sector institution?
- What factors constrain the effective implementation of OD interventions in the public sector?

In what follows, the literature review is presented covering some of the essential aspects of OD in the government context. Thereafter, the research design adopted for the study is described followed by the presentation of the findings. Finally, this paper concludes with a discussion of the findings, management implications and further avenues for OD research within the public sector.

Literature review

Defining organisation design

Organisation design is a multidimensional and multi-level process covering an organisation's breadth and depth. Given this complex nature of OD and its interdisciplinary foundation, there is no single definition of OD (Vosoughi's, 2014). As such, the descriptions of OD by different authors range from it being a process, a theory, and a field of study, to its being a profession (Burke, 1994; French & Bell, 1999, Rothwell et al. 1995; Schein, 2006; Vaill, 1989). Egan (2002)

conducted a study of 27 definitions of OD published since 1969, and found that there were as many as 60 different variables related to OD in these definitions.

According to Karakas (2009) and French and Bell (1984), OD as a profession and field of study has existed since the 1950s. Karakas (2009) further contextualises OD as a discipline that emerged to enhance organisational effectiveness through problem-solving initiatives and renewal processes using collective practices, guided by theories of human and organisational behaviour. An early scholar in the field of OD, Beckhard (1969), provided one of the most-cited definitions of OD:

Organisation development is an effort (1) planned, (2) organisation-wide, and (3) managed from the top, to (4) increase organisation effectiveness and health through (5) planned interventions in the organisation's 'processes' using behavioural-science knowledge. (p. 3)

According to Anderson (2019), this definition has stood the test of time, as most of the elements incorporated in Beckhard's (1969) definition are present in many definitions of OD. There has, however, been some criticism regarding two aspects of Beckhard's (1969) definition. Firstly, some scholars disagree that OD is always planned, as OD interventions are often developed and implemented in response to what is happening inside and outside of an organisation (Anderson, 2019). Secondly, given that many organisations are becoming less and less hierarchical, many OD interventions are not necessarily managed from the top.

Rothwell et al. (2010) define OD as a mechanism to help people in organisations to identify and plan how to deal with changes. They further regard OD as a planned initiative involving processes in the whole organisation, with the requirement that it be managed from the top, using behavioural science knowledge.

Organisation design is often referred to as a practice that uses systematic, planned and shared processes and the understanding of human values to advance the organisation's functioning. These planned events affect the strategies, design, structures, processes, people, groups and cultures that impact the organisation (Gasser, 2015). Shukla et al. (2015) refer to OD as a purposeful process for the survival of organisations, and state that it is a long-term effort that contributes to the performance of an organisation. As such, the existence and sustainability of organisations depend, amongst various other factors, on OD interventions to maximise profitability (Brijball, 2012). Cilliers and Henning (2021, p. 1) include OD's relational and task dimensions in their description of OD as 'an established function in organisations tasked to optimise organisational functioning and relationship building'.

In the context of the present study, OD is defined as a planned, holistic process that is applied across the systemic complexity of an organisation to create alignment of strategy, structure, people, processes, leadership and rewards (Khan, 2015), to

improve efficiency and productivity in the workplace and to ensure organisational profitability and sustainability through enhanced organisational performance.

Organisation design models

Various OD models denote best practices for implementing OD in the workplace. According to Asumeng and Osae-Larbi (2015), OD models are primarily influenced by the change process or implementation theory. The following section presents some of the most relevant and enduring models for OD.

The Star Model

The Star Model was developed by Galbraith (1995) to guide leadership in aligning organisational processes through five distinct categories, namely strategy, structure, processes, rewards and people. There are various aspects to consider with this model. Firstly, this model's architecture makes it evident that structure is just one component of organisational design. Organisations frequently focus too much on structure because it affects status and power. For example, OD interventions that follow too much of a top-down approach may make employees feel that their voices are not heard or important (Bussu & Marshall, 2020). The strong relationship between strategy and organisational design is a second significant aspect. Galbraith (1995) asserts that the strategic criteria are essential to the selected design(s). Secondly, the Star Model suggests that for policies to communicate a consistent message to employees effectively, they must be in harmony and align with one another. This idea relates to the significance of designing policies that influence behaviour as a tool for managers to influence organisational performance and culture (Galbraith, 1995). Finally, effective communication is essential during the change process to fill the gaps and prevent rumours that can harm how employees perceive future organisational change (Smet et al., 2016).

Three-step model of change

Reviewing various definitions of OD, the change aspect of OD clearly plays a central role in OD interventions. According to Sangka et al. (2019):

[C]hange refers to the ability of a manager to transition individuals, teams and organisations to a desired future organisational state through understanding the current state of the organisation and implementing appropriate strategies for change. (p. 1058)

Change management is a necessity in all organisations, as the organisation and the environment around which it operates evolve continuously.

The Three-step Model of Change was developed by Kurt Lewin in 1947, and is one of the most well-known and influential approaches to organisational change (Burnes, 2020). This model focuses on the conditions or forces that drive human behaviour (i.e. unfreeze, change and refreeze),

and the assumption is that specific driving forces promote certain behaviour, whilst restraining forces hinder certain behaviours (Asumeng & Osae-Larbi, 2015). The first stage involves unfreezing, whereby the forces that direct employee behaviour towards change should be promoted and the restraining forces decreased to move away from the status quo. DeGhetto et al. (2017, p. 121), for example, state that unequal access to information about organisational change often leads to 'increased uncertainty as well as negative perceptions and expectations about the pending change'. Consequently, individuals will resist change.

The second stage of this model emphasises the human element, where leaders encourage employees to view the situation from a new perspective and search together for new and relevant information that will support the change (Asumeng & Osae-Larbi, 2015). Employees, therefore, become part of the decision-making process and can share knowledge that can assist the organisation in solving problems and improving planning (Austin & Bartunek, 2012). Finally, the refreezing stage involves incorporating new values and practices to avoid relapse to the original state and stabilise the new equilibrium by balancing both the driving and restraining forces (Kritsonis, 2005). Changes to organisational culture, policies, and practices are the main characteristics of this stage (Asumeng & Osae-Larbi, 2015).

The general model of planned change: The General Model of Planned Change is a general framework that provides a road map for the OD consulting process (Asumeng & Osae-Larbi, 2015). The planned change is achieved in four stages: entering and contracting, diagnosis and feedback, planning and implementation, and evaluation and institutionalisation. Entering and contracting involves defining the first set of events that change practitioners and the organisation need to employ. This includes data gathering to identify the problems or opportunities for change, joint discussions about the information gathered, undertakings to engage in the planned change, setting expectations around time, remuneration for the change agent, and the resources required (Asumeng & Osae-Larbi, 2015). Eriksson et al. (2016) further emphasise that securing participation among different organisational actors in the different implementation steps is essential. Bartunek and Jones (2017) stress the importance of consultation and refer to an unsuccessful OD intervention as a situation whereby a change intervention was done in secret and on the sideline of the organisation. Consequently, change will be rejected by organisational members.

The diagnosis and feedback stage is when the planned activities to address causes and consequences are undertaken to understand the current state and clarify the necessary interventions to improve organisational effectiveness. This is regarded as the most important stage in the planned change process, such as choosing an appropriate diagnostic model, collecting important key data, analysing data, and communicating conclusions to organisational members (Asumeng & Osae-Larbi, 2015). In addition, communication

ensures that employees are informed about the reasoning behind an intervention, how it will take place, how it will affect employees, and the expected results (Ibarra, 2019; Jamieson et al., 2000; Tanner & Otto, 2016).

The planning and implementation stage involves stakeholders in the change process in designing action plans or required interventions guided by the diagnosis. The type and magnitude of interventions identified and agreed upon will also be guided by organisational factors like readiness for change, change capability, organisational culture, and power base. The change agent plays a critical role in determining the nature and scope of the interventions developed. The change agent's impact on the process is related to the change agent's motivation, commitment, skills, and abilities. The change agent would also need to engage in the implementation of activities (Asumeng & Osae-Larbi, 2015). Kuna and Nadiv (2018) state that employers do not always recognise the role of Human Resources (HR) in managing the human aspect of organisational processes. There has, however, been a change in terms of the functioning of HR managers in some organisations: 'HR managers work closely with other managers whom they help to develop management skills and advise them how to deal with different situations that demand understanding of human aspects' (Kuna & Nadiv, 2018, p. 854). Cummings and Worley (2008) also observe that managers do not always have the necessary knowledge and skills to manage change. They, therefore, need guidance on how to manage the change process.

Evaluating and institutionalising change are the last steps in the change process. During this stage, the change agent collects information on the situation following the implementation of the change intervention. This action will assess how well the intervention addressed needs and achieved the planned objectives. Communication for feedback on the effect of the intervention is also critical at this stage to allow members and leadership to assess the need to advance the planned change intervention, make revisions to the change intervention, or terminate the intervention (Asumeng & Osae-Larbi, 2015). Communication does not only flow in one direction, from executive and managerial levels to lower levels in the organisation, but should be two-directional or dialogic (Bushe & Marshak, 2015; Preget, 2013).

Phases of the organisation design process

Despite the various approaches and models followed in OD, scholars generally agree with the five generic phases that usually form part of the OD interventions: initiation, screening or diagnosis, action planning, implementation, and evaluation (Nielsen & Abildgaard, 2013). The initiation phase involves communicating the anticipated intervention and clarifying why the intervention is required. As Russ (2009, p. 5) states: 'frontline individuals are the true cogs in the implementation process; without them, change is

merely an implementer's idea'. Russ (2009) further advocates that a lack of decision-making authority will challenge organisational change. Role clarification of stakeholders is finalised during this stage but can be adjusted as the intervention progresses. Gasser (2015) advises that OD practitioners should be rigorous in integrating theory and practice and ensure that each OD intervention is relevant to the context within which it takes place. This demands business acumen and a thorough understanding of the business landscape and its stakeholders. Kundu et al. (2019, p. 458) state that 'perceived role clarity was found to be an important antecedent for various employee outcomes such as job performance, efficiency, organisational commitment, organisational citizenship behaviour and job satisfaction'. In service organisations, such as the department under study, role clarity is critical to delivering high-quality service (Mukherjee & Malhotra, 2005).

Screening involves a diagnosis of the context and forms the foundation of the type of intervention. Firstly, Nielsen and Abildgaard (2013) emphasise the importance of collaboration and regular communication and feedback between the stakeholders (i.e. management, staff and OD practitioner). Secondly, and related to the theme of consultation, communication does not only flow in one direction, from executive and managerial level to lower levels in the organisation but should be two-directional or dialogic (Bushe & Marshak, 2015; Marshak & Bushe, 2009; Preget, 2013).

The action planning phase involves the development of the interventions in consultation with the stakeholders. According to Chabke and Haddad (2018, p. 102), a lack of accountability is often the result of 'several changes in positions, role ambiguity, unclear reporting lines and other irregularities in HR management, and it can cause delays in projects and a loss of money'. Irfan et al. (2020) emphasise the duty of management to prevent unnecessary delays: 'If top management is involved in the project with a supportive and positive attitude then unnecessary delays can be eliminated during the course of project initiation till its closure'.

Finally, the implementation of the intervention focuses on various organisational levels, such as individuals, groups, and leadership, as well as organisational processes, procedures, structures, and rewards (Khan, 2015; Nielsen & Abildgaard, 2013). Finally, the evaluation phase involves collecting data to verify the effectiveness of the change intervention on single or multiple levels (Cady & Kim, 2017). Nielsen and Abildgaard (2013) advise that changes in attitudes, values, and knowledge, the development of individual resources, procedures, working conditions, employees' general health and well-being, performance, and organisational health and safety practices should be studied and monitored. Cooperrider (2017, p. 122) also stresses the importance of 'analysis, diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up evaluation' to enable effective problem-solving.

Research design

Research approach

A qualitative research was followed for this study. Bryman and Bell (2011) describe qualitative research as sensitive to how the participants view and experience the problem. Duke and Mallette (2011) characterise qualitative research as a set of practices to respond to research questions in the field of knowledge that requires collecting, analysing and interpreting non-numeric data. The way in which the nature of reality is understood also has implications for the relationship between the researcher and what is being researched. Within an interpretivist paradigm, the assumption is that the researcher is not an objective observer, but is and becomes part of the experienced world of participants. Interpretivists 'attempt to minimise the distance between the researcher and that which is researched' (Collis & Hussey, 2009, p. 59). This research, therefore, falls within the interpretivist paradigm.

Sampling

The target population for this study was individuals with sufficient lived experience of the phenomenon under study, in this case, OD interventions in a PSD as either a manager or a subordinate. There are 40 departments in the National Government in South Africa and one of these departments was conveniently selected for this research. Two selection criteria were applied to select participants in this department: experience (i.e. participation in) of the phenomena as either a manager or a subordinate. It is important to clarify that, within the context of PSDs, director generals (DG), deputy director generals, and chief directors (CDs) are regarded as managerial levels, whilst directors, deputy directors (DDs), and assistant directors (Ads) are regarded as subordinates. In this study, 10 participants were male, and five were female. The age distribution for males was between 32 and 54 years, and for female participants, between 31 and 49 years. Most participants were representative of the African ethnic groups ($N = 14$) with the highest educational qualification ranging between bachelor's and doctoral degree ($N = 14$). All participants were employees in management positions ranging from assistance director to deputy director general. Most of the participants in this study were employees as deputy directors ($N = 6$), followed by directors ($N = 3$). All participants had more than 15 years of work experience.

Entrée and establishing research roles

Permission to do the study at the department was submitted to the DG. The purpose and nature of the research were explained to the DG. The research outline addressed the practical relevance of the research, the type of information required from participants, and what the researcher would do to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. An orientation session was planned for all the individuals identified to participate in the study to ensure they understood the full scope of the research and their rights before participating. Ethical clearance was obtained before the execution of the study.

Data collection method

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data in this study. Semi-structured interviews are conducted based upon a broad framework of open-ended, pre-formulated questions, but the researcher strictly does not have to adhere to these questions (Myers, 2013). Semi-structured interviews allow for a process in which the open nature of the questions is designed to encourage participants to explore their own experiences and to enable new concepts to emerge through the interview process (Dearnley, 2005). In addition, semi-structured interviews allow for deeper and broader exploration during the interview, as the researcher may ask probing questions and obtain clarity where needed (Bryman, 2015; Creswell & Clark, 2007). Thus, the participants' responses shape the order and content of further questions. The researcher could, therefore, also ask additional questions as the interview unfolded while at the same time providing some structure to the interview to ensure that the overall interview remained focused on the research questions.

Data analyses

Theme analyses were applied in this study. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 9) state, 'a theme captures something important about the data concerning the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set'. This means the researcher needs to continuously reflect on the data to decide the important aspects of the data and whether these aspects constitute themes. This applies to the data set as a whole and individual data items. For example, the decision can be made based on the prevalence of a theme or the apparent importance of a single idea, possibly only mentioned a few times across the data set but significant enough in terms of the research question to constitute a theme. In this study, both prevalence and importance were considered in selecting themes.

Data recording and storage

The data were captured through audio recordings and note-taking to ensure that credible accounts of the interviews were recorded. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 17), there is not a single set of prescriptive guidelines to follow when transcribing, but the minimum requirement is 'a rigorous and thorough transcript'. The transcripts were returned to the participants to verify the accuracy thereof. The recorded data and transcripts are password-protected and will be kept for 5 years.

Findings

This section presents the sub-themes relating to the department's employee perceptions of OD interventions. The data analyses resulted in 16 different themes relating to OD interventions in the departments. As shown in Figure 1, 14 themes were viewed as negative and two as positive. Most participants reported a negative experience with OD interventions being planned, articulated, implemented and managed. These perceptions were analysed to determine

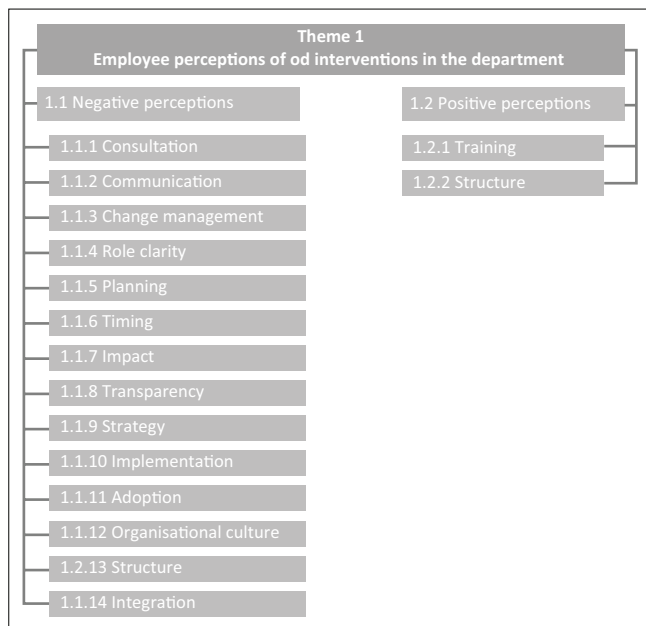


FIGURE 1: Employee perceptions of organisation design interventions in the department.

which aspect of OD interventions was related and then categorised as either negative or positive. The most important themes are presented in the following section and supported by direct quotes from the participants. The participants are coded (i.e. Participant F) to ensure their confidentiality.

Sub-theme: Consultation

This theme relates to employees' experience that there is insufficient consultation and involvement of all staff members in OD interventions. It also includes the experience of being excluded and the impact of this experience, as well as a sense that input that is provided regarding OD interventions is not valued. As mentioned by some of the participants:

'A top-down approach is used in our department. I would strongly urge the organisation to ensure that employees share and be part of organisational development in the department. Decisions are taken by executives and senior management, with minimal inclusion of other levels ... People feel marginalised and get angry and personal.' (Participant B, Female, Generation Y, Assistant Director, eight years in current job)

And:

'In the department, my experiences have not been positive. I was part of a number of OD processes, but not all stakeholders that were affected were consulted on the need to restructure. They were not taken through of what was planned, how it would be done, and how the decision was arrived at of the new structure.' (Participant N, Female, Generation X, Assistant Director, five years in current job)

In support, Participant B mentions:

'Consultations are ... not done adequately, and this is the area that could be approached differently. Executives take decisions without consultation, and this poses a huge problem. Mistakes happen in the process and in the implementation of those decisions. Management do not consider views on serious issues,

and this leads to negative outcomes. Problems arise when change is forced.' (Participant B, Female, Generation Y, Assistant Director, eight years in current job)

Participant K highlights the importance of including individuals in change initiatives and having a strategy in place:

'Consultation is key to not lose people. Inclusivity of stakeholders or people affected by any change to be initiated is very important. People need to be consulted to understand why the change [*is necessary*]. Inputs need to be taken from people. A road map of an OD project to be initiated has to be provided to the affected people, so they are not lost in the process.' (Participant K, Male, Generation X, Director, seven years in current job)

Participant K is supported by Participant I, who mentioned that:

'People want to get involved, but have lost hope in the system, because, where they want to review, say, their microstructures, they are mostly not supported, as there are financial implications.' (Participant I, Male, Generation X, Deputy Director General, five years in current job)

Sub-theme: Communication

This theme relates to issues experienced by employees in terms of communication around OD interventions and the resultant lack of understanding of OD interventions and related aspects. Participant M emphasises the importance of communication and consultation to provide clarity for the change process:

'Communication and consultation ensure that people understand processes. To me, it becomes key, as, at least people would have questions such as 'Why?', 'How?', and 'When?' answered. In that case, it promotes buy-in from people who become key to the performance of the organisation.' (Participant M, Male, Generation Y, Deputy Director, three years in current job)

Participant G, highlights the challenges of ineffective communication and the consequences thereof for OD implementation:

'The challenges are in the effectiveness of communication and the actual implementation process of OD interventions. There are gaps, for example, things communicated via emails in the department, but little communication from line managers. Workshops are done, but there are no staff meetings to direct and provide leadership. What are prioritised are managers' and EXCO meetings.' (Participant G, Male, Generation Y, Deputy Director, six years in current job)

Sub-theme: Change management

This theme relates to how employees experience the way in which transitions or transformations are implemented in the department. The findings indicate that change management processes are experienced as disruptive and inefficient. Participant B mentioned the importance of taking change management processes seriously:

'Change management should be taken seriously. People are suffering because of not taking this intervention seriously. The management and co-ordination of this process from Human Resources and management needs serious attention. This will,

in turn, have a positive impact on employee relations.' (Participant B, Female, Generation Y, Assistant Director, eight years in current job)

In support, Participant F highlights the consequences of imposed change processes:

'You have a demotivated workforce that believes change is imposed and is lost as to exactly where the organisation is heading or wants to achieve.' (Participant F, Male, Generation Y, Deputy Director, three years in current job)

Similar observations are made by Participant I, who indicates:

'Elements of change can affect performance negatively if there are no proper ways of soliciting buy-in from people in the organisation.' (Participant I, Male, Generation X, Deputy Director General, five years in current job)

And:

'There has not been much change to accommodate the changes that are taking place globally. Efforts are made, but not to the scale of the economic, industrial, and technological revolution that is currently taking place. Hence, we find most employees frustrated in their workplace.' (Participant N, Female, Generation X, Deputy Director, five years in current job)

Sub-theme: Role clarity

This theme refers to the extent to which individual employees and teams understand what is expected of them in terms of their scope, input, required deliverables, processes, level of authorisation, and function within the organisation. The findings indicate that there is a lack of role clarity. According to Participant C:

'Subordinates do not fully comprehend what their roles as subordinates are. Managers, as well, may be challenged in this regard; for example, they may think all they need to do is just pass work to subordinates, which is a problem, because they need to give direction in the work that subordinates are involved in. They may put all responsibilities on the shoulders of subordinates.' (Participant C, Female, Generation X, Chief Director, seven years in current job)

and:

'Some employees do not understand job profiles and contract things that are not within their job profiles. Others would insist on changing job profiles when they want to contract, which shows a big gap in terms of understanding the role played by OD ... There has to be a role clarification and a clear distinction of who delivers what and for which role. Most juniors in the department run with complex matters while the managers are relaxed.' (Participant I, Male, Generation X, Deputy Director General, five years in current job)

Participant B further highlights the importance of understanding roles to ensure the effectiveness of OD interventions:

'[The impact of OD interventions is] limited to people's understanding of their roles. There is confusion or a level of resistance as to roles that HR, managers, and incumbents play in, for example, redesign of a job. There could be exaggerated

interference from managers in the process, or total isolation from the process, wanting HR to do all the work.' (Participant B, Female, Generation Y, Assistant Director, eight years in current job)

Sub-theme: Planning

This theme refers to employees' perspectives regarding the extent to which focused, deliberate thought is invested before implementing OD interventions and the extent to which the implicit demands and potential consequences of interventions are deliberated and planned for. It emerged from the data that sufficient planning does not take place. Participant K mentioned:

'The transition took place in a haphazard manner ... Poor planning of initiating OD interventions results in hampered relations, unsatisfied staff, low staff morale, which has a negative impact on performance ... Before initiation of realignment projects, there has to be work done to make sure that, at the conclusion of the project, there are resources. Infrastructure and finances have to be in place to allow a smooth transition and continuity of work.' (Participant K, Male, Generation X, Deputy Director General, five years in current job)

And:

'[OD interventions] feel more like a touch and go. Some processes are beginning to take shape and become effective; however, there does not seem to be willingness to improve much, or it takes a long while for changes to take place.' (Participant N, Female, Generation X, Deputy Director, five years in current job)

And:

'[OD systems can be improved] by synchronising some of the planning and reporting information to complement information required in a standardised format for reporting internally and externally.' (Participant G, Male, Generation Y, Deputy Director, six years in current job)

Sub-theme: Timing

This theme refers to how participants experience the pace at which OD interventions are implemented. The findings that emerged from the data suggest that these interventions are not implemented continuously and are characterised by either delays and disruptions or hasty implementation. As mentioned by some of the participants:

'The OD interventions exist, but are not implemented accordingly. The people involved in driving the process are delayed with decisions that take a long time or are not prioritised, for reasons unknown.' (Participant F, Male, Generation Y, Deputy Director, three years in current job)

and:

'Some processes are beginning to take shape and become effective; however, there does not seem to be willingness to improve much, or it takes a long while for changes to take place.' (Participant F, Male, Generation Y, Deputy Director, three years in current job)

and:

'Like I had indicated, we just pushed around. We are not given enough time to reflect appropriately on these plans and where we have capacity, financially or with human resources, to deliver on them. They are pushed for approval, and we are expected to do miracles.' (Participant F, Male, Generation Y, Deputy Director, three years in current job)

Other sub-themes

Other themes to emerge to a lesser extent but worth mentioning relate to Impact, Strategy, Structure and Integration. The theme, Impact, relates to the extent to which OD interventions influence the performance of the department. The delays in implementation of OD interventions, the skills, attitudes, and capabilities in the department, lack of proper consultation, and confusion in placements give rise to negative morale that, in turn, affects performance. As mentioned by participant J:

'The OD interventions that we spend money, time, and other resources on should give us value for money. We cannot spend, say, for example, 60% of our HR budget on OD interventions and we have performance equating to 70% of achievement of targets. Then it means we wasted resources in a way ... We find there is a need to create positions to deliver on our strategies, but you have the Central Policy Department limiting this exercise but allowing unnecessary positions at ministerial level, positions that could be merged to save on costs that could assist, in a way, at the operational levels.' (Participant J, Female, Generation Y, Assistant Director, eight years in current job)

The theme strategy relates to the extent to which employees regard the actions and decisions associated with OD interventions as geared towards achieving organisational goals and objectives whilst considering business realities. The findings indicate that employees feel a disconnect between OD interventions and organisational strategy. As mentioned by Participant F:

'OD cannot be done in a haphazard way. What we did in our department was merely movement of people. It then makes it difficult to even try to link it to performance in this context, because the foundation was not set properly.' (Participant F, Male, Generation Y, Deputy Director, three years in current job)

In support, Participant O indicates:

'It sometimes feels like [OD interventions] are non-existent. As a result, there is sometimes a misfit when it comes to skills, attitudes, and capabilities in implementing strategy.' (Participant O, Male, Generation X, Deputy Director General, seven years in current job)

The theme structure relates to how employees perceive how successfully OD interventions impact the way the department is organised and the extent to which the existing structures are taken into consideration in planning OD interventions. The data indicated that OD interventions are missing the mark regarding their impact and the extent to which existing structures are reviewed during OD interventions' planning and implementation stages. Participant I mentions:

'Structural interventions are supposed to match the way the department operates. If the structure is not reviewed, then the

department misses out on external trends and benchmarks. Services and the image of the department may be compromised.' (Participant I, Male, Generation X, Deputy Director General, five years in current job)

Participant B further emphasises:

'The structure should be leading in giving direction that will provide [*more proactive behaviour*] of digging into the problems and managing them to eradicate subjectivity that may lead to bigger problems in the organisation.' (Participant B, Female, Generation Y, Assistant Director, eight years in current job)

Integration relates to linking different functions, structures, and processes in OD interventions and the role of OD interventions to ensure that this linking takes place within the department. The data indicate that OD interventions are not well integrated and do not play the necessary role in ensuring sufficient integration of functions, structures, and processes within the department. Participant A observes that:

'There is still more work to be done in line with the integration and synergy in terms of multiskilling and managing silos, which, in the end, create problems in understanding how own work feeds into another. For example, when bursaries are awarded, there are no discussions as to whether they address portfolio requirements and the required development.' (Participant A, Male, Generation X, Chief Director, six years in current job)

And:

'[The] OD function [*should be elevated*] to a strategic role with a strong link with both HR and Strategic Planning & Governance. Based on the hierarchical structure of the department, it will gain a strategic influence in the different committees.' (Participant L, Male, Generation X, Director, four years in current job)

Discussion

The main objective of this research was to determine employee perceptions of OD interventions within a selected government institution. The initial analyses resulted in an exhaustive list of themes which mostly depicted negative employee perceptions regarding OD interventions. The most prominent themes to emerge are discussed next.

The participants' perceptions of OD interventions in terms of consultation are negative. There is insufficient consultation and involvement of all staff members in OD interventions, and participants have a sense that input provided in terms of OD interventions is not valued. The General model of planned change provides for consultation and information sharing with staff throughout the process (see Asumeng & Osaë-Larbi, 2015). However, as evidenced in the present study and support of Bartunek and Jones (2017), a lack of consultation for interventions and perceived irregular application of change initiatives are likely to result in employees rejecting the change. The study's findings further revealed that employees believe their input is important in shaping the outcomes of interventions. Still, they are not included at a stage or in a way that they can influence OD interventions. Participants' experiences also indicate that executives make decisions, and managers then drive

decisions without the input of employees on lower organisational levels. This leads to dissatisfaction and a lack of trust within the department. These findings support Bussu and Marshall, (2020) who indicated that top-down approaches to OD interventions might result in employees feeling that their voices are not being heard or important (Bussu & Marshall, 2020). Russ (2009) argues that frontline individuals are the key components in the effective implementation of change. Employee participation in the change process is valuable as they can share knowledge to solve problems and improve the planning for change initiatives (Austin & Bartunek, 2012).

Participants in the present study indicated that there is not sufficient communication around OD interventions. For example, employees were not informed of what was planned and how it would be done. A lack of communication also leads to a disconnect between strategy and operations. Based on the present study's findings, it seems that the need for dialogic OD is not yet recognised in the department, and communication is still seen as a one-directional process. One of the central tenets of the Star Model of OD (see Galbraith, 1995) is to ensure harmony and alignment between policies and strategies to communicate a consistent message to employees during the change process. The study's findings contradict the notion that communication flow should be two-directional and dialogic from executive and managerial levels to ensure effective OD implementation (Bushe & Marshak, 2015; Preget, 2013).

The present study's findings indicate a general absence of change management processes and a lack of awareness that such processes should be approached with sensitivity, caution and inclusivity of all affected parties. The participants indicated that they view consultation, communication and participation as essential to positive experiences of change in the department. Lewin's change model (see Asumeng & Osa-Larbi, 2015; Burnes, 2020) emphasises the important role of leaders in encouraging and systematically navigating employees through the change process by including them in the search for new and relevant information in support of the change. In support of DeGhetto et al. (2017), unequal access to information about the organisational change process results in uncertainty and negativity about forthcoming changes.

In the present study, it was specifically noted that there is a lack of clarity in terms of the role of managers versus the role of subordinates. Junior employees see themselves as being overworked, because managers assign complex work that should be done by the managers themselves to junior team members. The managers are consequently seen as not working, since there is no clear distinction between managerial and subordinate roles. It was also highlighted that managers, in particular, do not understand their role in OD. Managers often interfere with OD processes or totally disregard the OD processes and do not take part where they are required to do so. In addition, the HR

department does not educate staff on OD interventions, while employees expressed the need for increased awareness of OD processes. According to Kuna and Nativ (2018), employers do not always recognise the role of HR in managing the human aspect of organisational processes. Kundu et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of role clarity for positive individual and organisational outcomes. Consequently, there is a need for a greater understanding of OD interventions complemented by business acumen and rigorous practice to ensure the success of change initiatives (Gasser, 2015).

Planning for OD is another theme that emerged in this study. From the data, it appears that sufficient planning does not take place. Employees feel that the lack of planning leads to an absence of integration, with processes taking place in isolation. The lack of planning further leads to disorganisation, which impacts relations, job satisfaction, staff morale and performance. The findings contradict the suggestion of Rothwell et al. (2010) that OD should be a planned intervention driven by management across the entire organisation to assist employees in dealing with changes. Moreover, as mentioned by Gasser (2015), the findings show the spill-over effect of a lack of OD planning of the entire organisation ranging from structures, processes and people to the cultures that impact the organisation.

The theme timing refers to how participants experience the pace at which OD interventions are implemented. The findings that emerged from the present study's data suggest that these interventions are not implemented in a flowing way and are characterised by either delays and disruptions, or are too hastily implemented. Some participants also noted concern that the delays might indicate that decision-makers are not taking OD interventions seriously. The importance of a well-planned OD process is well-documented (Nielsen & Abildgaard, 2013). Irfan et al. (2020) further mention the duty of management to ensure the timely execution of change projects.

Lastly, other themes worth highlighting in this study include Impact, Strategy, Structure and Integration. From the findings, it was evident that OD interventions do not meet its intended purpose and adversely affect the department's performance. OD interventions are required to promote the change required in public sector institutions (Smith & McKinnon, 2019) and ensure sustainable service delivery and social responsibility (Arnaboldi et al., 2015; De Waele et al., 2021). Very few government institutions can therefore afford OD interventions to fail. The findings further revealed a disconnect between OD interventions and the organisational strategy. As Shukla et al. (2015) mentioned, OD involves a purposeful process and long-term effort to contribute to the organisation's performance. Therefore it is not surprising that the structure and integration of OD functions are lacking in this study. The STAR model of Galbraith (1995) posits the importance of designing policies that could influence organisational performance and culture. Clarity on structure

and integration is essential as the type and magnitude of OD interventions depend on organisational readiness to change, change capability, organisational culture and power base (Asumeng & Osae-Larbi, 2015).

Management implications

Through analysis of the themes, it became apparent that there is a perceived lack of managerial transparency, which is associated with a lack of trust in OD interventions and an unwillingness to engage in and take ownership of OD interventions on the operational level. In addition, it was highlighted that a significant amount of role confusion exists, which is related to and associated with structural issues, misalignment and a lack of integration, workload imbalances, planning and timing issues, and duplication, which tend to cause wasteful expenditure. Each of these issues contributes to challenges experienced during implementing OD interventions in the department, which subsequently lead to either no effect or a negative impact on organisational performance.

The need for leadership and managerial approach that values inclusivity, consultation and communication is highlighted. Furthermore, the authors argued that inclusivity, consultation and communication should not only be core principles in the manager–subordinate relationship but also in the relationships between management and the OD team, OD managers and the HR department, as well as between the departmental management (including OD management) and the Department of Public Service and Administration. This will ensure that all processes and procedures are conducive to aligning departmental strategy, operations and objectives to governmental strategy and goals and fulfilling the government's public service duty.

Limitations and recommendations

As this study was qualitative in nature, a small sample from one PSD was used. This means that the findings are limited to the context within which the research was conducted. However, the research process was conducted in a manner that would allow for transferability. A detailed account of all aspects of the research process was provided, and the research process was described comprehensively and systematically. Extensive methodological explanations were provided for key research decisions. The study can therefore be transferred to another setting based on the comprehensive discussion of the research design, the participant demographics, as well as the context in which the research was conducted. The authors are satisfied that the limitations of the study were managed appropriately and did not affect the trustworthiness of the study.

The limitation in terms of the very specific research setting could be addressed through replicative research. The study could be conducted following the same methodology but in a different PSD. This would allow a deepened understanding of which issues might be systemic to South African PSDs,

and could consider the applicability of the framework presented in this study across PSDs. In addition, quantitative triangulation could be applied by using different quantitative methods to collect and analyse data relating to employees' perception of OD interventions in the public sector. This could be done by using the findings of this study to design a qualitative questionnaire that could be sent to a large sample across different PSDs.

Conclusion

This research explored the current perceived state of OD interventions in a selected public sector institution. Although the use of OD in the government sector seems promising from a theoretical point of view, the findings of this study highlighted various factors that constrain the effective implementation of change interventions. The study's findings should motivate public sector managers to create an inclusive work culture and operational models that will allow for the effective roll-out of OD initiatives that will benefit employees, institutions and the broader society. Therefore, this study encourages PSDs to proactively address the factors that constrain the much-needed change interventions that drive superior public sector service delivery.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

M.M. compiled the initial draft. M.B. and N.B. provided editorial inputs. M.B. was the promoter of the study and N.B. the co-promotor.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Faculty Ethics Committee (FEC) (no. IPPM 2017-005[D]).

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, E.B.

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