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Talent management perspectives in a South African provincial department

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Introduction: Talent management continues to evolve rapidly in various industries, due to factors such as constantly advancing technology, remote and hybrid working arrangements, and the consequently changing nature of work and expectations of both employers and employees. This research particularly aimed to understand the employee perspectives regarding talent management in a South African provincial Department.

Methods: A mixed-method case study was employed, with an initial qualitative component and a subsequent quantitative component. A combination of manual and computer assisted qualitative data analysis techniques were used to thematically analyze the views of 14 participants, while the Statistical Package for Social Sciences was used to generate descriptive statistics depicting the views of the 135 respondents consulted in this research.

Results: *Talent management practices* and *leadership approach to talent management* were the two main themes developed from the qualitative research findings; where participants highlighted the importance of adopting practices which enable the maximization and continuous improvement of their human capital, supported by proactive and exemplary institutional leadership. The quantitative results revealed the current state of strategic talent management practices in the department, emphasizing various needs including a more inclusive workplace culture, enhanced employee work-life balance, as well as the skills development of current employees and future institutional leadership.

Discussion: The research results may enhance the implementation of effective talent management practices by leaders and human resource practitioners within the selected provincial Department and potentially offer related guidelines for those in the broader South African government context.

KEYWORDS

talent management, talent development, human capital, psychological contract, provincial government, South Africa

1 Introduction

Despite being only a little under three decades old since its coining by McKinsey & Company in 1997, the concept of talent management has gained much traction over the years and its conceptualization has continued to evolve with time (de Lestrangle, 2019). Although numerous organizations in various sectors across the globe are increasingly appreciating and emphasizing the need for talent management (Irfan et al., 2023; Kang and Mok, 2022; Liao et al., 2022; Naidu et al., 2025; Nesindande et al., 2024; Ngobeni et al., 2022; Saurombe et al., 2017; Supi et al., 2023), when it comes to the public sector, talent management seemingly remains a lesser priority (Barkhuizen and Masale, 2022) and even more so, within the South African context (Cloete, 2023; Mthintso et al., 2024). Although it is evident that government entities appreciate the importance of talent management—

whether at a national or provincial level—the corruption and poor governance that often characterize the South African public sector are somewhat responsible for talent management being treated as an afterthought, where these public institutions are often reactive rather than proactive in managing their greatest resource, which is human capital (Mashaba and Saurombe, 2023).

Extant literature corroborates how the professional experience of government employees in South Africa is often characterized by low-drive, complacency and stagnancy, particularly due to the structures and systems within these entities, which do not favor more ambitious and zealous employees unlike in the private sector (Maake and Harmse, 2023; Sibonde and Dassah, 2021). Thus, employees who enter the South African public sector with the hopes of transforming the status-quo and making a difference are often confronted by resistance—be it from their leaders, or from colleagues who have since acclimated to the status-quo, having once been zealous too—which stifles these employees' potential to make substantive contributions to their institutions (Sibonde and Dassah, 2021). Various authors argue that no matter the caliber of an organization's human capital or talent, the lack of leadership buy-in concerning the talent management agenda has dire implications for the implementation and sustainability thereof (Gandi and Saurombe, 2025; Shingenge and Saurombe, 2022).

Meanwhile, many talent management studies have thus far focused on factors such as rapid technological advancements, employee wellbeing, evolving employee and employer expectations, the state of the job market and talent pools (including graduate readiness and employability), women empowerment, as well as jurisdictional legislation, among others (Magagula et al., 2020; Nesindande et al., 2025; Ngobeni et al., 2022; Oosthuizen et al., 2019; Saurombe and Zinatsa, 2023; Shekhar et al., 2025). Notwithstanding, despite consensus regarding the important role of talent management in ultimate organizational success, a noteworthy gap remains in empirical studies. Such gap is particularly visible in research comparing management and employee perspectives regarding talent management in South Africa's public sector with the intention of reconciling the two, as studies often either only focus on management's perspectives or only that of employees, while only few interrogate both concurrently (see Mthintso et al., 2024; Musakuro, 2022; Swanepoel and Saurombe, 2022). Hence the author of the current research resolved to help address this gap by recommending suitable strategies for enhancing talent management practice and policy in the South African public sector from both the view of management and employees.

Global scholars assert that when talent management aligns well with organizational strategy, optimum outcomes are achieved, but when management vs. employee perceptions regarding talent management are irreconcilable, the imperatives of employee engagement, retention and overall equitable people management practices are undermined (Collings et al., 2019; Sugiono et al., 2023; Zada et al., 2024). Meanwhile, research also alludes that employees' views regarding talent management inform their overall behaviors and disposition (Andreeva et al., 2022). In the public sector, where the successful implementation of talent management practices substantially relies on managerial and organizational buy-in, incessant differences between employee and management

expectations relating to talent management often have dire consequences concerning organizational performance (Kravariti et al., 2022; Supi et al., 2023). This identified research problem thus made it incumbent for the author of this paper to gain insight into the dissonance between employee and management perspectives regarding talent management imperatives in a South African public sector organization, as this can worsen the fate of organizations operating within a sector already struggling due to challenges such as lack of resources, maladministration, and stiff competition for talent with the private sector, among others.

1.1 Research aim and objectives

The aim of this research was to understand the perspectives regarding talent management in a South African provincial department. Meanwhile, the research objectives were to: explore the existing talent management practices in the South African provincial department; explore the management's perceptions regarding the implementation of talent management in the South African provincial department; and examine employee perceptions regarding the implementation of talent management in the South African provincial department.

2 A brief literature review

Human Capital Theory was employed to better understand the research topic and interpret the research findings. According to Rezaei et al. (2021), human capital is the training, knowledge, and capabilities that distinguish an employee in relation to the value they add to an entity or organization. Kang and Mok (2022) particularly explain how Human Capital Theory offers various strategies and techniques for talent development, empowerment, and utilization at all levels of the company. The Human capital theory additionally highlights how employees in an organization offer their expertise, talents, and abilities to augment the organization's overall performance (Aman-Ullah et al., 2022). The goal is to establish an internal fit of capabilities so that human resources (talent) are attracted, developed, managed and retained (for the sake of containing employee turnover) to improve longterm organizational effectiveness (Cloete, 2023; Irfan et al., 2023). Olabiyi (2023) argues that businesses must commit resources to building a diversified and adaptable human resource management (HRM) strategy and provide equal opportunities for employee training and development at all levels to accomplish their organizational goals. Since Human Capital Theory buttresses the notion that without a talent mindset among organizational leaders, talent management may prove either futile or much less effective (Shingenge and Saurombe, 2022), this theory is further befitting to underpin this research.

Psychological contract theory was further employed in this research to provide a more robust theoretical underpinning concerning the often-stark discrepancy between managers' and employees' perspectives regarding talent management, especially in the public sector. Originally coined by Denise Rousseau in 1989 and further articulated in contemporary

literature, psychological contract theory helps understand how misalignment between the intentions of management concerning talent management and the actual lived experiences of employees in this regard occurs, in efforts to try and remedy such discrepancy accordingly (Conway and Clinton, 2024; Pyhäjärvi and Söderberg, 2024; Ronnie and du Plessis, 2022). The psychological contract fundamentally denotes peoples' beliefs concerning the dualpronged obligations within the employment relationship. Regarding talent management, such perceived obligations (particularly from the employees' view) encompass aspects pertaining to development, recognition, equitable treatment, and secure employment, among others; hence the psychological contract is also well suited to underpinning this research alongside the Human Capital Theory. Recent research shows that when the perceived contractual obligations purported by the psychological contract are congruent and fulfilled, the consequence is likely to be enhanced employee commitment as well as performance; with the contrary being applicable in the case of perceived psychological contract breach (Rodwell and Gulyas, 2015; Ronnie and du Plessis, 2022). Thus, psychological contract theory enabled the author of this research to substantiate the practical recommendations for reconciling employee vs. management perspectives regarding talent management in a more compelling manner.

This research interrogated perceptions regarding talent management within a South African provincial department, and the Human Capital Theory offers an underpinning framework to provide sound recommendations concerning the long-term attraction, development and utilization of the talent in the South African department explored in this research, to ensure sustainable organizational performance. Meanwhile, the psychological contract theoretical component enabled the careful formulation of more robust recommendations for reconciling employee and management perspectives regarding talent management, to stimulate better organizational outcomes.

2.1 Talent management practices in government institutions

Talent management practices broadly denote the coordinated activities employed by organizations (including the public sector) in attracting, developing, retaining, and effectively utilizing their talent to achieve strategic outcomes (Kang and Mok, 2022). These practices fundamentally entail workforce planning, recruitment, training and development, performance management, succession planning, diversity management, as well as employee engagement activities (Almashyakh, 2024; Irfan et al., 2023). When such practices are implemented effectively, this enhances both employee and organizational performance by promoting alignment between talent strategies and employee, as well as business goals (Kang and Mok, 2022).

Some scholars argue that the term talent is inclusive of all employees within an organization who possess specific skills and competencies that enable them to perform specified duties and responsibilities (Dries and Kaše, 2023; Graham et al.,

2024). Meanwhile, others believe it is especially important for organizations—including in the public sector—to effectively harness the often irreplicable abilities and strengths of their more exceptionally gifted employees (denoting an exclusive approach to talent management), who are often considered the greatest source of these organizations' competitive advantage (Holck and Stjerne, 2020; Mousa et al., 2022). The author of the current paper believes a customized combination of both inclusive and exclusive approaches to talent management would maximize each their benefits, particularly in the public sector. For instance, an inclusive approach to managing general employees would enhance overall organizational effectiveness and productivity through each individual's contributions, while an exclusive approach to managing talent exhibiting the best leadership potential would help organizations capitalize on irreplicable leadership traits and abilities of these individuals, as similarly suggested by Mousa et al. (2022). Effectively practicing talent management entails organizations being intentional about the employment experience from start to finish, including the pre-employment (recruitment) stage. Research has revealed that public sector institutions that manage their employee life cycle meticulously are most likely to both attract and retain some of the highest caliber of talent (Lee and van der Walddt, 2020; Theys and Barkhuizen, 2022). Increased intentionality regarding the practice of talent management within local and provincial government would likely improve the performance standards of their employees, who are often characterized as having less zeal, drive and ambition than employees in the private sector, especially in the South African context (Sibonde and Dassah, 2021).

2.2 The importance of a leadership talent mindset in government institutions

While it is important for employees to view themselves as talent, pivotal to the success of their organization, it is equally important for organizational leaders and managers to appreciate their employees as one of their greatest assets for ensuring productivity, profitability and sustainability (Schutte et al., 2019). Selesho and Matjie (2024) argue that the talent mindset of public organization leaders is what determines the organization's approach to and implementation of talent management practices and strategies, as well as their constant improvement over time. Shingenge and Saurombe (2022) found that when highly talented employees within a certain municipality felt underutilized, they were more likely to leave the organization. The importance of leaders actively distinguishing between the needs of different categories of organizational talent also featured as critical to talent mindset in the previously cited research. Barkhuizen and Masale (2022) further highlighted how the talent mindset of a local government entity's leadership determined their approach to performance management, while effective performance management enhanced employees' talent mindset and consequently, their service delivery within the local government entity they explored. It is therefore crucial for government institutions to emphasize the importance of both leaders and employees having a talent mindset.

2.3 The importance of strategic talent management in government institutions

Some of the best performing public organizations both globally and locally are those that have embraced their human resource management (HRM) function as being a part of and pivotal to their overall business strategy (Kravariti et al., 2022; SPICA, 2024; Theys and Barkhuizen, 2022). While it is recommended for organizations to devise their own talent management strategy, unique to their specific context and performance needs, there are certain fundamental strategies commonly accepted as being essential in today's highly competitive employment market, especially for government institutions which are often outperformed by corporate institutions (Nyanhongo et al., 2023). SPICA (2024) outlines nine crucial strategies for organizational talent management including: enhancing the organizational brand, continually improving the talent recruitment process, leveraging the onboarding process, prioritizing training and development, effectively managing employee performance, encouraging skills-based roles (where employees are assigned tasks based on their skills), enhancing the employment experience of employees, maximizing and customizing remuneration and benefits, as well as promoting flexible working environments. Selesho and Matjie (2024) fundamentally agree with the above key talent management strategies, specifically regarding the South African public sector. If South African government entities are to successfully improve their talent mindset and enhance their performance, it is crucial that they revamp their organizational strategy by incorporating talent management at the core of their strategy (Gandi and Saurombe, 2025; Selesho and Matjie, 2024).

2.4 Leveraging the talent value proposition in government institutions

A key strategy by which public sector institutions could get the most out of their employees, is through enabling human resources or talent management practitioners to strengthen the talent value proposition (TVP) of these entities, thus encouraging a more competitive and reciprocal workplace environment that comprehensively rewards employees for their efforts toward achieving the institutional mandate (Theys and Barkhuizen, 2022). More commonly known as employee value proposition (EVP), the TVP of an organization would likely enhance both employee and organizational performance, if designed correctly and implemented effectively (Swanepoel and Saurombe, 2022). The author of this paper opines that to be effective, government organizations' TVP should preferably be customized to the needs of its employees, and more specifically, to the needs of its individual or categorically similar employees. This notion is substantiated by scholars such as Shingenge and Saurombe (2022) and Theys and Barkhuizen (2022) who argue that both the personal and professional needs of employees may vary at individual level or at different sub-sects of the broader organizational population, based on various factors. For instance, employees are likely to value certain benefits differently based on their age, gender and historical background; like how a female employee may typically appreciate a longer than

usual paid parental (maternity) leave, while this (paternity leave) may not be priority for the typical male employee.

Further, a more senior employee in age may be more concerned with augmenting their pension fund, while a younger employee may appreciate more vacation time to pursue other personal interests and hobbies such as traveling (Chennells, 2024). An effective TVP offers employees the best possible employment experience in a manner that ignites their creative prowess and keeps them striving to continue performing at their best (Ngobeni et al., 2022; Saurombe and Barkhuizen, 2020; Swanepoel and Saurombe, 2022). If government institutions are to re-position themselves as employers of choice, they need to re-think their TVP, which is often currently ambiguous or inexistent.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework of this research proposed by the author, highlighting how when management buy-in to the talent management agenda—and in so doing, effectively implement talent management practices—this bridges the gap between employee and management perceptions concerning the imperatives of talent management, consequently resulting in psychological contract fulfillment and positive organizational outcomes.

3 Methodology

This research employed aspects of Saunders's et al. (2016) research onion such as elucidating the philosophy of the research, the theory development approach (in this case, deductive reasoning), the different methodological decisions, the research strategy, as well as the data gathering and analysis techniques.

3.1 Research philosophy

The ontological stance sought to understand and interpret the realities of 14 participants employed at various management levels within the provincial government department, specifically focusing on their perceptions regarding talent management, based on their lived experiences. A combination of interpretivist and positivist epistemologies were employed, with both subjective and measurable perspectives regarding talent management being explored and examined, leading to the befitting adoption of a pragmatic research paradigm which is particularly considered appropriate for mixed methods research (Kaushik and Walsh, 2019).

3.2 Research approach

A mixed method approach involving the use of both qualitative and quantitative research techniques was adopted in this research. Firstly, a qualitative approach was employed to obtain rich insights from the research participants. As opposed to the quantitative research approach, the qualitative narrative research approach

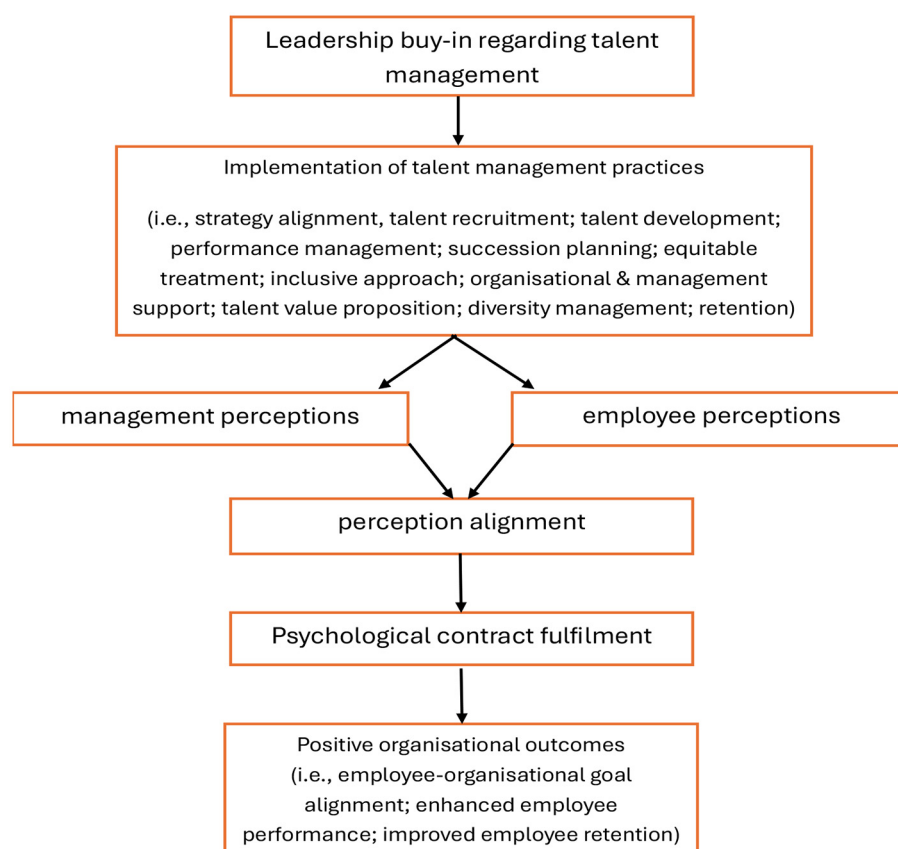


FIGURE 1
Conceptual framework of the research (author's own illustration).

is often praised for its ability to reveal more profound, non-numerically based insights (Tenny et al., 2022). Secondly, a quantitative approach was incorporated, to numerically interrogate the qualitative insights, using a broader target sample (135 general/non-managerial employees). The 20-item self-developed questionnaire used in the quantitative research component was substantially developed from the key themes revealed in the qualitative research component, as well as other aspects relating to the third research objective as identified in the literature. An exploratory research design was employed to garner profound employee perspectives regarding talent management within the provincial department. A descriptive research design involving the delineation of the measured perspectives of the provincial department's employees regarding talent management was further employed for the quantitative aspect of this research.

3.3 Research strategy

In line with research by Priya (2021), a case study research strategy was utilized as the author sought to understand the talent management phenomenon within a selected South African provincial department where this phenomenon was identified as problematic at the time of the study.

3.4 Research methods

3.4.1 Research participants and sampling

At the time when this research was conducted, the provincial department consisted of 451 employees, of which 18 of them were in various management level positions. Furthermore, the participants held managerial positions in the human resource management, core business, corporate, as well as import and export units. Although all 18 managers were invited to participate, only 14 were willing and had the time to do so. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2021a) sample size recommendations, the 14 consenting individuals were considered sufficient to substantially represent the views of the managerial employees within the provincial department and data saturation was carefully observed, although the author's focus remained to garner rich insights regarding the research topic. A total of 135 respondents were included in the research, bringing the quantitative research sample to approximately 30% of the total population. In their research, White (2023) found that about 25% of quantitative studies included 100–124 respondents, which was sufficient to provide statistically reliable data analyses. This research achieved an 84% response rate for the quantitative component, as 160 surveys were initially distributed but only 135 respondents acquiesced. Since the quantitative research component only revealed descriptive statistics rather than testing

relationships, the achieved sample size was further appropriate (White, 2023).

A purposive sample was adopted for the qualitative component of this research. Although purposive sampling limits the generalizability of a study's findings (Campbell et al., 2020), the adoption of a mixed methods approach mitigated this drawback. A stratified random sample was employed to the quantitative research component, with participation in the survey being limited to non-managerial employees only. Elfil and Negida (2017) state that one of the benefits of stratified random sampling is that it permits researchers to zone in on underrepresented populations. In this research, the examined selected organization's management was considered notorious for overlooking employees' views regarding effective talent management, thus, the researcher sought to ensure these employees' views were distinctly represented, especially since the qualitative component of the research already solely relied on the organization's management perceptions. Simple random sampling was then applied to the stratified random sample, with all non-managerial employees having equal odds of being selected. The basic inclusion criteria for the qualitative research were employees in various management positions within the provincial department, and non-managerial employees for the quantitative research. Additionally, considering the potential epistemic limits of employee perception, a minimum educational requirement of higher certificate was imposed on the survey respondents. The author of the current paper based this criterion on the premise that formal education structurally exposes individuals to profound knowledge systems, enhances analytical reasoning, and stimulates metacognitive abilities, consequently enhancing human perception and the ability to dissect intricate realities (Lövdén et al., 2020). Specific to this criterion, 16 respondents were higher certificate holders, 36 were diploma holders, 49 were bachelor's degree holders, 23 were honors degree holders, 7 were master's degree holders and 4 were PhD holders. Participants and respondents were also expected to be 18 and above, as well as 65 and below, for both the qualitative and quantitative research components.

3.4.2 Data collection

The qualitative data in this research were collected using both in-person and Zoom-online interviews. Prior to the interviews, the author advised participants regarding the pros and cons of both in-person and online interviews. The pros and cons of either interview format were delineated in the informed consent forms, which were shared with participants 2 weeks before the scheduling of interviews.

Ultimately, 11 participants opted for the in-person interview format, while three opted for the Zoom format. The in-person interviews all took place at the premises of the provincial department, specifically in the offices of the managerial employees, which were generally more secluded from the other offices within their division. This ensured the privacy of the conversations occurring between the author and the participants. To ensure the content validity of the interview guide, a pilot interview was conducted, which allowed the author to rephrase a few questions which came across as unclear to the pilot participant. The pilot interview was ultimately included in the qualitative

sample, as the refinements required to the interview questions were few and insignificant to alter the validity of the research instrument. The interviews focused on obtaining insights into the talent management practices employed within the South African provincial department, as well as the organizational management's approach in this regard. The following are examples of questions that were asked: what practices does your organization have in place regarding the recruitment, development and retention of employees; what do you believe your organization does well concerning talent management; what talent management practices do you think your organization could improve on; what is the role of your organization's leadership in effectively implementing talent management practices? Upon obtaining consent before each interview and again on record following each participant's approval, the author recorded the conversations on an external recording device and additionally took handwritten notes throughout each interview. All interviews were conducted within 3 weeks and each one lasted for 60 min on average, which was sufficient to obtain substantive insights. The author stored the recordings on a password protected folder in their Google Drive.

The quantitative data were collected through self-administered surveys (see Tetali et al., 2015). The questionnaire was developed primarily based on the key aspects that stood out regarding talent management practices during the qualitative discourse among the managerial participants within the South African provincial department. The intention was to interrogate management's perceptions regarding talent management practices (qualitative research component), against that of general employees (quantitative research component) to ascertain the extent to which the two were reconcilable. The questionnaire statements that were used to gather the pertinent quantitative insights are depicted in [Supplementary Table 1](#). To enhance the validity and contextual appropriateness of the questionnaire, a pilot survey including six willing respondents was conducted. The author asked the respondents to comment on the difficulty level of the items, as well as suggest any items not initially included in the questionnaire. The pilot respondents collectively added four items to the 16 items initially included by the author, bringing the total items to 20. The pilot survey responses were not included in the final data analysis due to the inconsistency between the initial questionnaire and the one with added items.

The surveys were personally distributed to the respondents by the author, which was helpful in achieving a substantial response rate, as several respondents only remembered to complete the survey each time the author visited their offices every week to follow up on their completion. In total, the post-pilot survey was conducted over a duration of 6 weeks, and the author visited the participants' offices at the end of each week for 5 weeks after the initial distribution of the questionnaires. Each week, the author collected several completed questionnaires and at the end of the 6th week, they collected the remaining completed surveys of the 135 which were ultimately used in the statistical analysis. The author then excluded 25 incomplete surveys after these respondents cited hectic schedules which prevented them from completing the surveys. The incomplete surveys were, therefore, collected but not used in the statistical analysis. After entering the survey responses in a Microsoft Excell spreadsheet, all of them were

stored in a tamper proof plastic folder and kept in the author's office. The spreadsheet with the raw data was stored in the same password protected Google Drive folder used for the qualitative data. In line with the data management stipulations communicated to participants and respondents, the raw and analyzed data documentation (both hard and softcopy) will be stored for a minimum of 10 years.

3.4.3 Data trustworthiness

Various techniques can be employed to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative research data. In this research, the author employed triangulation, self-reflection, peer-debriefing, thick description and prolonged engagement to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings as subsequently explained (Hadi and Closs, 2016). Researcher triangulation was adopted as the author requested two independent researchers within their network (who signed non-disclosure agreements) to perform a broad manual analysis on the research transcripts and advise on key codes and themes identified. These were then aligned with the author's own analysis, considering the similarities and differences in interpretation, of which most were similar. Where minor differences were noted, the author further discussed the codes or themes in question with the two colleagues until consensus was reached, guided by the research objectives. This enhanced the credibility and conformability of the findings. Regarding self-reflection, the author clearly outlined their role in the study and remained mindful of any bias that could have been influenced by personal or subjective viewpoints (hence the utilization of independent data analysts). Peer-debriefing was particularly achieved through consulting researchers who were not directly involved in the research. This enhanced the reliability and validity of the research. The detailed description provided regarding the field research procedure and what was encountered by the researcher enhances the transferability of this research as readers are in a better position to determine how applicable the research is to alternative contexts. Through prolonged engagement during data collection and after analysis (where participants were asked to go through their interview transcripts and eventually, the narrative report), the researcher also gained participants' trust by interacting with them for a substantial period (Forero et al., 2018; Hadi and Closs, 2016).

3.4.4 Data analysis

The author personally transcribed the audio-recorded interviews. The author had already began engaging with the data during the interviews, forming initial coding ideas as each interview progressed (Braun and Clarke, 2021b). During transcription, the initially pondered codes were further refined and additional codes developed from the in-depth analysis of the transcripts. The transcripts were then input to the ATLAS.ti platform which enabled a more organized and systematic analysis, and contrasts were made across each interview. The analysis was done in conjunction with two independent researchers who were asked to manually identify codes in the research data. These individuals signed non-disclosure agreements before conducting the analysis, and to prevent any potential leakages of information,

the author requested to meet with them for a few hours in a common location, providing them with hardcopy transcripts to work on, which they submitted to the author upon conclusion. This prevented them from keeping any hard or soft copy materials that could possibly have been leaked externally. The author read the interview transcripts twice before themes and subthemes were generated through deductive reasoning in line with the research objectives. Finally, the author selected relevant participant quotes which substantiated the various themes and subthemes. These quotes were used to delineate the narrative of the qualitative findings in this research.

Upon obtaining the hardcopy surveys, the author input the data into a Microsoft Excel workbook. The spreadsheet was then input to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for further analysis. Descriptive statistics were generated to interpret the quantitative insights including the biographical data of the respondents and their measured perspectives regarding various talent management aspects within the selected provincial department. Only complete surveys were included in the analysis.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct the research was sought from the selected South African provincial department and the grant letter was submitted as part of an ethical clearance application submitted to the relevant STADIO Higher Education research ethics committee and the application was successfully awarded clearance. The author further adhered to fundamental ethical considerations such as obtaining informed consent from the participants, informing them of their right to participate voluntarily and withdraw from the study at any time before data analysis without adverse consequences, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity as applicable, protecting participants from any anticipated form of harm, as well as ensuring their views would be represented in an unbiased and impartial manner (Nii Laryeafio and Ogbewe, 2023). All the secondary data sources employed in the literature review were also duly acknowledged and cited in the relevant text of this research, including the reference list.

4 Findings

The findings and results of this research depict the various talent management perceptions within the South African provincial department. As a mixed method research approach was employed, the qualitative data was obtained from 14 participants, and the quantitative data was acquired from 135 respondents ($n = 135$).

4.1 Qualitative findings

Two themes emerged from the qualitative data, namely, talent management practices and leadership approach to talent management. The participants' perspectives were substantiated using verbatim quotes extracted from the interview transcripts. The qualitative research sample consisted of 6 males and 8 females, which ensured a nearly balanced representation of the perspectives

in terms of gender. 100% of the participants were black Africans, suggesting a lack of racial diversity and representation in the Department's management. 7.2% of the research participants were characterized as Gen Z, 71.4% were Gen Y (Millennials), and 21.4% were Gen X, suggesting a stronger reliance of middle aged employees in management positions and a lack of representation of younger and nearing retirement managerial employees.

4.1.1 Theme: talent management practices

The participants generally agreed that effective talent management practices were inadequately prioritized and implemented in the provincial department, which generally affected the institutions effectiveness and productivity.

"In my opinion, talent management is not adequately executed in this department and management does not implement the structures correctly" (Participant 3, female, Gen X, black African).

Despite the prevailing participant views regarding the insufficient prioritization and implementation of talent management practices in the provincial department, a few participants believed the department was doing their best to provide employees with skills development and general advancement opportunities, even citing that there was not much need for improvement.

"You need to remember that in government, we experience many challenges such as limited resources, infrastructure and so forth, so we may not meet the standards of other supposedly more privileged sectors, but we value talent management and continue to do the best we can. For a government entity, I can even argue that there is not much need for improvement" (Participant 2, female, Gen X, black African).

"The department is future oriented and develops its employees and leaders in the scarce skills in order to make sure they remain in the department" (Participant 1, male, Gen Z, black African).

The difference in perspectives as outlined above, highlights the need for management to sincerely introspect their approach to talent management and find ways to bridge the current perception discrepancies identified.

The subthemes developed regarding talent management practices include trust and cohesion between management and employees, teamwork and cohesion among employees, as well as talent recruitment and utilization practices. Various quotes substantiating the subthemes developed as well as their interpretation are subsequently outlined.

4.1.1.1 Subtheme: trust and cohesion between management and employees

It was particularly highlighted that employees often felt unheard and disregarded by management, thus creating discord and miscommunication between the two parties (management and employees).

"Although it is typical for management not to want to admit the flaws pertaining to workforce management as this makes us feel like the blame is shifted to us but I will be the first to admit that in the South African government sector, we are much behind compared to our private counterparts when it comes to managing and appeasing our employees for their efforts" (Participant 6, male, Gen Y, black African).

"I think the main problem in this department is that we [managers and employees] miss each other on a lot of things. It's as if we have completely different views in terms of what constitutes the effective management of talent. Also, employees constantly feel unheard and never seem satisfied with management's efforts. I guess there is a lot we can improve" (Participant 13, female, Gen Y, black African).

4.1.1.2 Subtheme: teamwork and cohesion among employees

The findings also revealed that a lack of employee cohesion and teamwork is currently stifling the department's productivity, as employees often withhold information from each other, thinking that having exclusive knowledge on certain institutional and job processes will render them more indispensable. This is considered to create silos and an unhealthy workplace environment.

"The department does not have direction and there is no sharing of information among employees. It seems everyone just does what they must to safeguard their own job and there is an element of toxic competition rather than effective teamwork" (Participant 5, male, Gen X, black African).

"I do not think there is a proper workflow among the employees in this department and there seems to be a lot of suspicion and conspiracy among employees instead of working together to advance the department's goals" (Participant 5, female, Gen Y, black African).

Considering that the contemporary workplace is increasingly characterized by teamwork and synergy, this research finding regarding inefficient teamwork necessitates the overhauling of the departments team structures within various divisions to enhance the flow of information and ultimately, the efficiency of task completion and organizational productivity.

4.1.1.3 Subtheme: talent recruitment and utilization practices

The participants in this research further indicated the need for proper onboarding and assimilation upon hiring new employees, citing that insufficient on-the-job training, particularly at the onset of employment, results in performance deficiencies which could be eliminated or minimized by the provision of relevant initial training.

"The organization should consider training people [coming from] outside the department so that when they enter the department, they are already able to hit the ground running as soon as possible after joining" (Participant 12, male, Gen Y, black African).

"The thing is, even experienced employees need to be inducted well into a new organization because they [organizations] have their own unique cultures and ways of

doing things. This [induction] helps employees understand how things are done more specifically in our organization” (Participant 10, female, Gen Y, black African).

Another participant expressed how the department often neglects the talent management of prospective employees—namely interns—who end up leaving the organization after being paid a salary for up to 2 years for menial and mundane work, instead of being groomed for possible permanent appointment after the internship period elapses.

“The department should stop hiring interns who are merely underutilized and made to do tasks which do not really improve their practical skills and knowledge. The department must appreciate that effective talent management also includes prospective employees like interns, who given the fair chance, can eventually grow to become key talent in the organization” (Participant 4, female, Gen Y, black African).

The above participant insights demonstrate the gap that exists regarding the talent management of both newly appointed and prospective employees in the department. To improve the talent life cycle of employees, it is essential for the department to prioritize the effective management of their employees right from the onset of their employment experience and where applicable, even prior to the possible permanent employment of prospective employees (e.g., interns).

4.1.2 Theme: leadership approach to talent management

To get buy-in from general employees regarding any aspect of an organization’s strategic functioning, it is important for the organization’s leadership to convincingly take the lead. The subthemes developed under this theme are: leadership talent mindset, talent value proposition, as well as change and diversity management.

4.1.2.1 Subtheme: leadership talent mindset

The findings exposed the need for a talent mindset and exemplary behavior among the department’s leadership. The participants particularly highlighted how management sets the tone for how employees will ultimately behave and contribute toward the organization.

“Unfortunately, if we as management do not set the pace for effective talent management by showing that we prioritize our employees and their development, then they themselves will unlikely be forthcoming when it comes to performing to their best ability” (Participant 14, female, Gen Y, black African).

“There is favoritism within the department and some top executives are practicing corruption, yet not being expelled from government, but rather being transferred to other departments. This is a serious concern as many employees are aware of these shenanigans and often paint all of us [management] with the same brush. We [management] must lead by example” (Participant 8, male, Gen Y, black African).

The participants’ admission of a lack of exemplary behavior in the department as outlined above is potentially a step in the right direction toward improving their mindset and approach toward talent management as well as modeling general traits and characteristics that employees in the department can follow. If carefully addressed, this may establish a more thriving environment within the department when it comes to talent management.

Other participants suggested that the department lacks an inclusive approach, as it generally adopts a more elitist mindset to talent management. This is seen in how those in lower levels of employment are often disregarded and neglected when it comes to the consideration of their views, as well as the development of their skills.

“I honestly feel employees at ground level within the department are often not considered. Even when it comes to consultation on important things, we [management] often incline to seeking the opinions of team leaders within the department but the problem is they do not always represent the views of the lower level employees, even though we encourage them [team leaders] to consult them [other subordinates] before sharing ideas with us” (Participant 11, male, Gen Y, black African).

“Employees [in the department] sometimes complain about talent management initiatives like skills development being reserved for an elite few who will have been earmarked for promotion on other leadership roles” (Participant 14, female, Gen Y, black African).

Since this research supports a combination of inclusive and exclusive approaches to talent management, depending on the need and context at any given point in time, the author asserts the importance of ensuring that all employees—including those employed at lower operational levels within the organization—are appropriately involved in the strategic functioning of the department (based on their knowledge and experience levels). The author further believes that this would also enhance the probability of talent identification among lower ranking employees, thus creating opportunities for the maximization of their skills and abilities.

4.1.2.2 Subtheme: talent value proposition

An effective talent value proposition promotes a healthy and reciprocal relationship between employers and their employees, particularly ensuring that employees get maximum output for maximum input. The findings of this research further emphasized the importance of establishing a compelling talent value proposition which enhances prospective and current employees’ choice to commit to the department. The participants argued that a healthy workplace culture and management that is inclusive and supportive of employees and their growth are essential to a successful talent value proposition.

“For me, one of the aspects prospective employees consider before joining an organization, is whether they have a workplace culture that is both conducive and inclusive, and management that values their employees by investing in them and their growth” (Participant 7, female, Gen Y, black African).

The participants further asserted that employees who are duly recognized and feel they can get the most out of their employment experience due to superior performance are likely to contribute more and exhibit greater loyalty and commitment to their employer.

“Employees will generally be committed to an organization that reciprocates their commitment by offering them opportunities for advancement and a healthy balance between their personal and professional endeavors. When employees are recognized and rewarded for their work, they are likely to want to do even more” (Participant 3, female, Gen X, black African).

“I think employees gravitate toward organizations that implement fair employment practices such as opportunities for promotion. If they know their efforts will be recognized internally when promotion opportunities arise rather than [these opportunities] being given to external candidates, then they will be inspired to do more” (Participant 1, male, Gen Z, black African).

The above outlined participant views substantiate the benefits of organizations cementing themselves as employers of choice by offering a distinguishable employment experience for superior performance. If the department expects to maximize the contributions of their employees, they should also be prepared to offer them comprehensive value for their exceptional performance.

4.1.2.3 Subtheme: change and diversity management

The findings additionally suggested that the management of the department must be more open to change and hone their change management strategy regarding talent management. Participants specifically emphasized that the departmental management should keep abreast with the current prevailing successful talent management trends in both the public and private sectors as this encourages employee attraction and retention.

“I think change is generally something that is hard to embrace, however, if the department wants to compete with other government and even with private sector institutions when it comes to talent attraction and retention, then we need to consider the current best practices regarding talent management and adjust accordingly in our own environment” (Participant 2, female, Gen X, black African).

“Something I think needs to change in our organization is regarding employee representation as I think this is one of the pressing issues in terms of talent management. I mean, ensuring that people of different genders, races, cultures and from different walks of life are attracted to our department is important in my opinion. I think we [in provincial government] can learn a lot from the private sector in this regard as employees are more

likely to be attracted to an organization that encourages diversity and are also less likely to leave” (Participant 12, male, Gen Y, black African).

The above participant perspectives highlight the urgent need for change in the department, if they are to achieve the desired improvement regarding talent management and ultimately, organizational effectiveness and productivity. Aspects such as increased employee inclusivity and the adoption of external talent management best practice are pivotal to the effective and successful implementation of talent management in the department.

4.2 Quantitative results

The biographical data of the quantitative sample is depicted in Figures 2–6. The views of the respondents on the 20 questionnaire items, which were primarily related to the qualitative research findings, are then delineated after the biographical data.

4.3 Biographical data

Figure 2 depicts the gender ratios in the department, clearly showing that females dominate in the Department at 57.78%, while the males stand at 42.22% within the organization. From a talent management perspective, this suggests that the Department has prioritized equal gender representation, which is an ongoing pressing agenda regarding labor legislation in the South African context.

Figure 3 represents the race classification at the Department. The statistics show that there are more African employees as compared to mixed race employees, and no white employees are represented in the sample. The African population dominates with 93.33%, while the mixed-race population stands at 6.67% in the organization. The statistics demonstrate an imbalance of racial distribution, which further depicts that the department is not complying with the employment equity expectations, since only two racial denominations are represented in the organization.

Figure 4 shows different groups of age within the department, which range from 18–56 years and above. Respondents ranging between 18–25 years are 15.56%, and those falling under the 26–35 age group are 40%. Meanwhile, respondents within the 36–45 age group are 26.67%, those between 46–55 years are at 13.33%, while the remaining 4.44% of the sample size constitutes those over 56–65 years of age. From a talent management perspective, the sample shows relatively good representation of the different generations mainly represented in the current workforce, including Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y (millennials) and Generation Z. The greatest generation representation in the sample is millennials.

Figure 5 demonstrates that most employees within the Department, 53.33%, have served the department for 0–5 years, 13.33% have served in the department for 16–20 years and those who have served for 6–10 years, 11–15 years as well as 21 years and above, each stand at 11.11% in the organization. From a talent management perspective, the Department having more than half

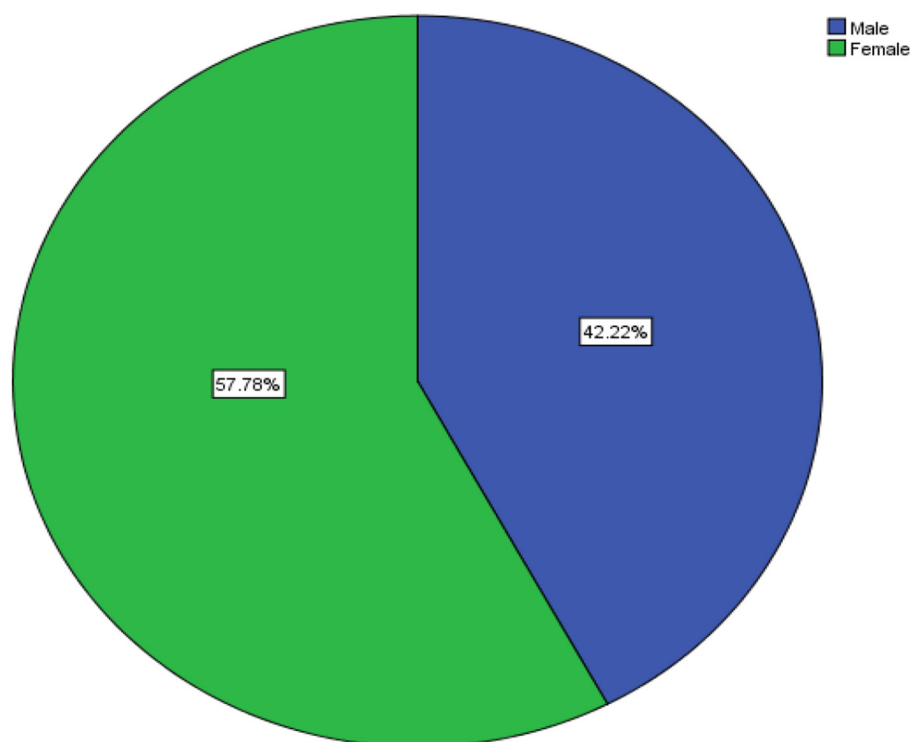


FIGURE 2
Gender (author's own illustration).

its employees being employed for 5 years and under implies low retention rates of long-serving employees.

Figure 6 displays that those in administrative roles are 26.67%, those working under Human Resources are 24.44%, employees working under Logistics/Transport are 20%, employees working under Finance and Other, each are 13.33%, while those working under Registry are 2.22%. The statistics show that employees in administration dominate within the Department.

4.4 Questionnaire items

4.4.1 Due importance is ascribed to talent management activities

This item displays the views of the employees on whether due importance is ascribed toward talent management activities. The results show that the majority of 35.56% agree, 31.11% are neutral, 22.22% disagree, 8.89% strongly agree, and 2.22% strongly disagree. The results imply that the Department ascribes noteworthy attention to talent management, however, concerns in this regard are noted as implied by respondents who were either neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed.

4.4.2 Sufficient funding is allocated in the organization to carry out talent management activities

This item demonstrates the views of employees on whether sufficient funding is allocated in the organization to carry out talent

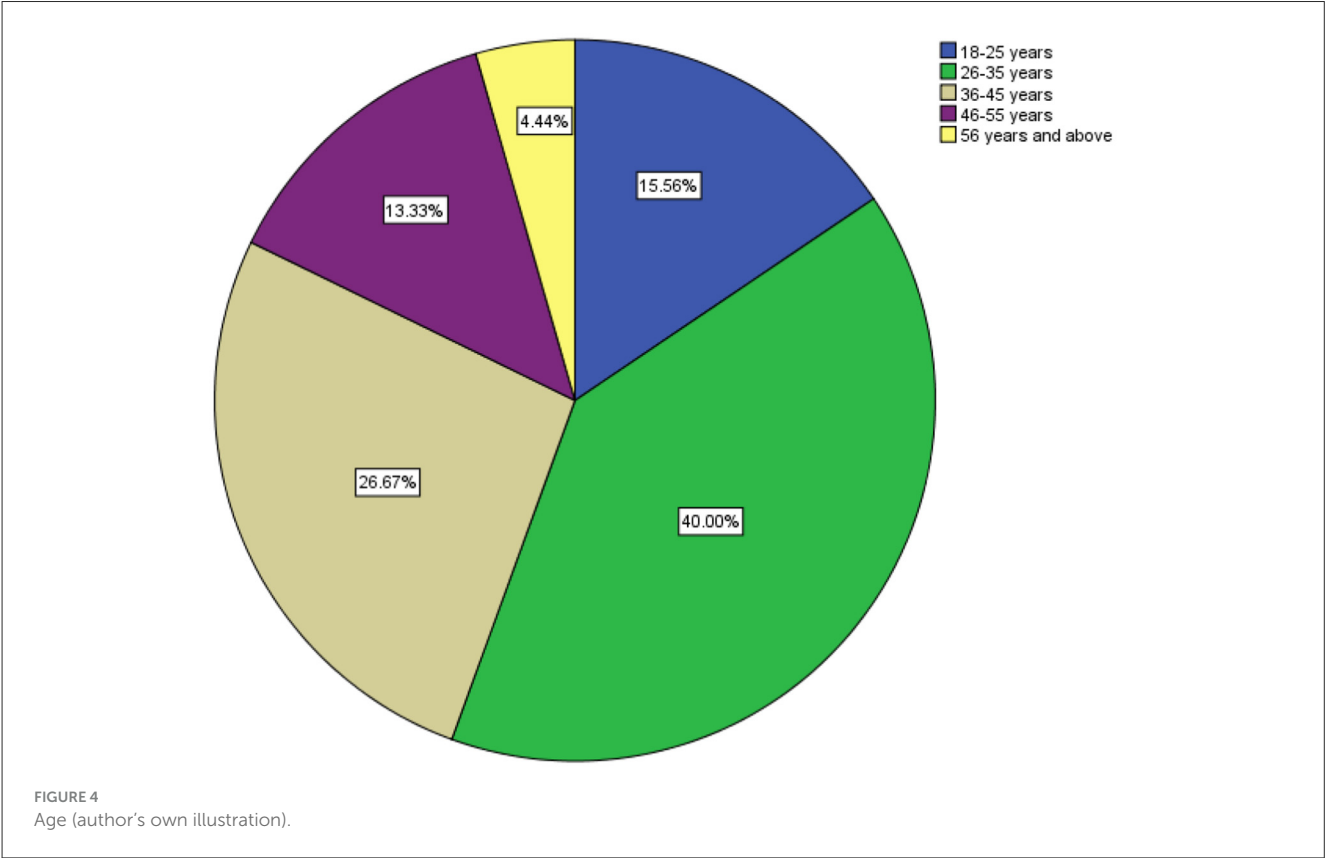
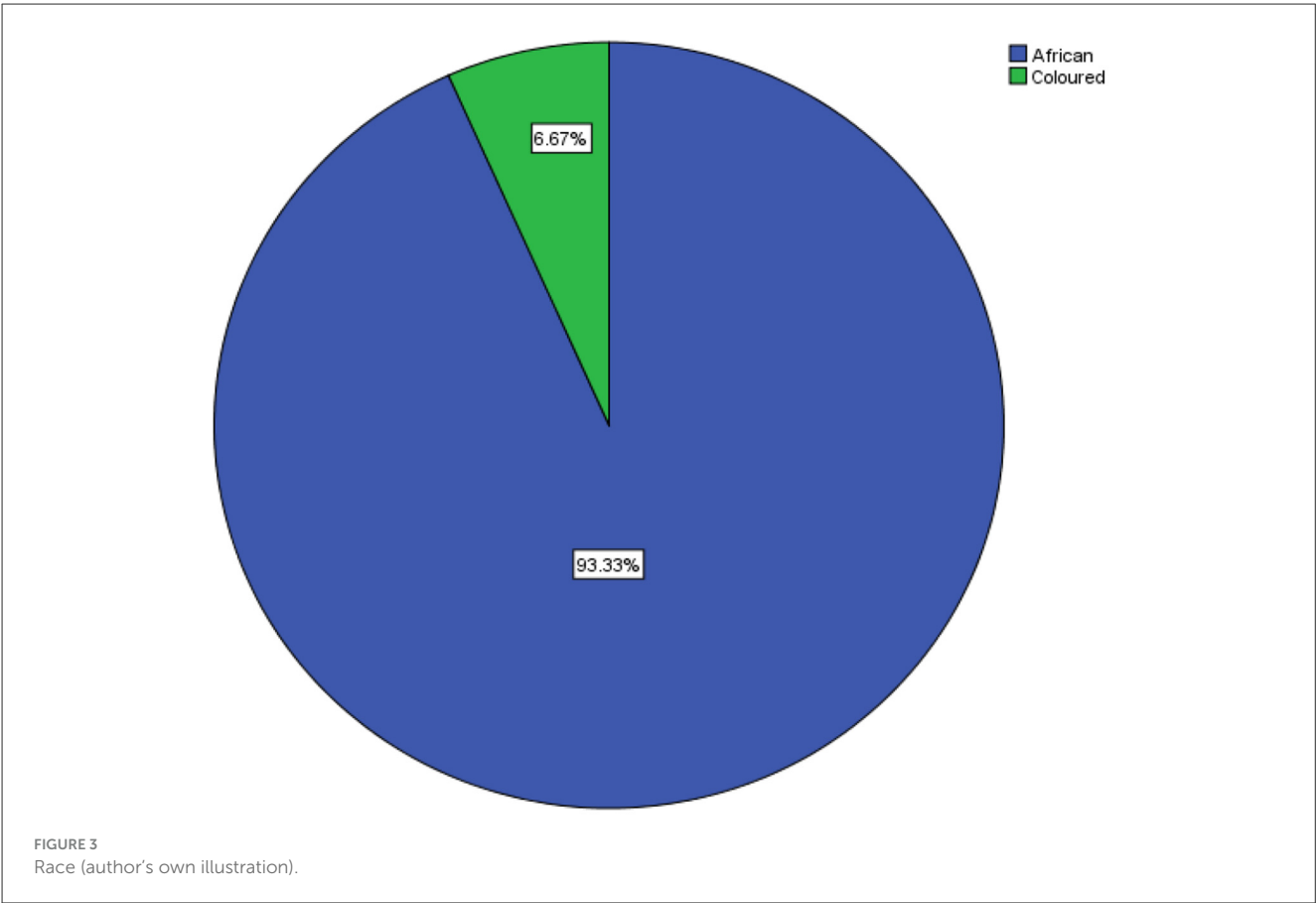
management activities. Statistics show that most employees, which are 37.78%, agree, 26.67% are neutral, another 26.67% disagree and 8.89% strongly agree. While a substantial number of respondents agreed that the Department allocates sufficient financial resources toward talent management, the ratio of participants who were either neutral or disagreed is also a cause for concern.

4.4.3 Talent management is part of the broader organizational strategy

This item represents the employees' views on whether talent management is part of the greater organizational strategy. The results show that most of the employees, which are 46.67%, were neutral on this statement, 17.78% disagreed, 15.56% strongly agreed, another 15.56% agreed, and then the minority of employees, being 4.44% strongly disagreed. The statistics reveal that talent management is generally not well embedded in the Department's overall strategy.

4.4.4 The organization allows people to set their career goals and provides them with the tools to reach those goals

This item revealed the views of the employees on whether the organization allows people to set their career goals, as well as provide them with the tools and support to reach those goals. The results show that 31.11% felt neutrally about this statement, 28.89% agreed, 22.22% strongly agreed and 17.78% disagreed with the statement. The results suggest that the Department mostly



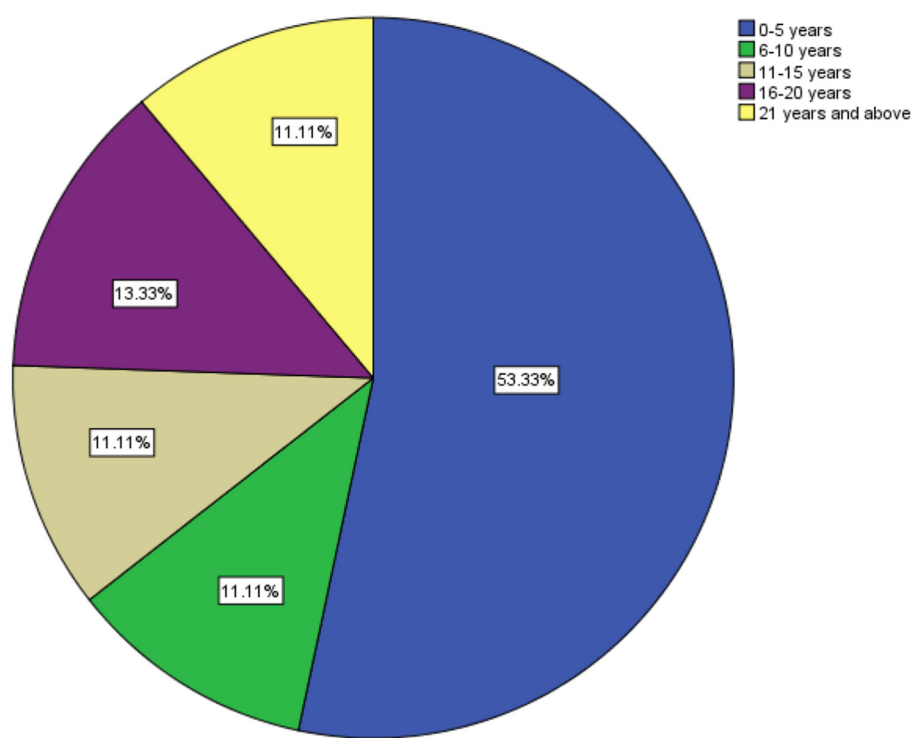


FIGURE 5
Years of service (author's own illustration).

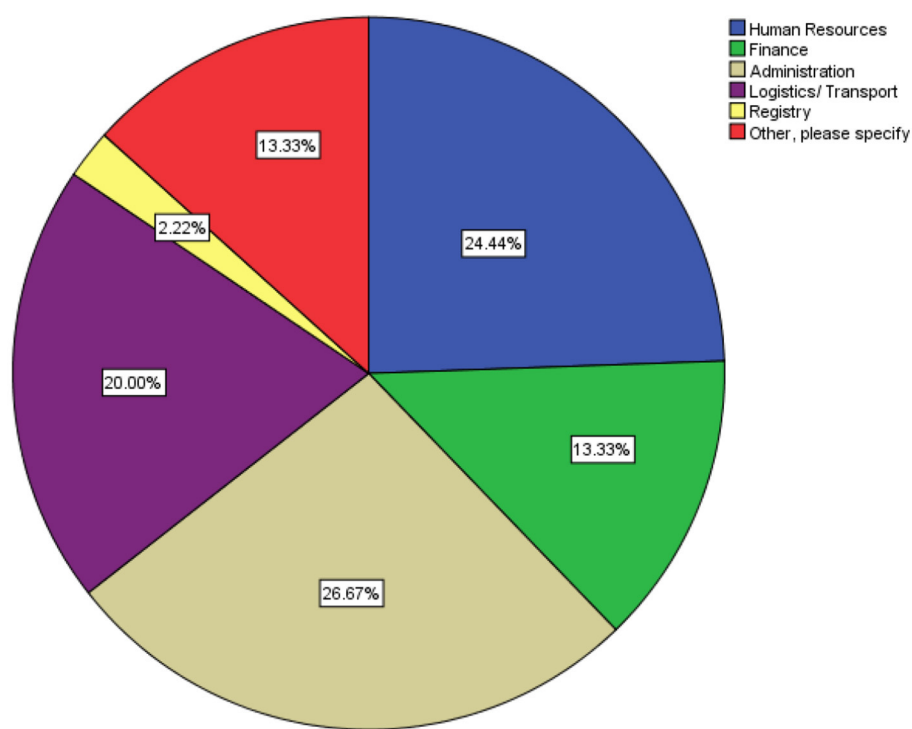


FIGURE 6
Employment division (author's own illustration).

empowers its employees toward career growth and development, which is fundamental to talent management.

However, the number of respondents (48.89%) who were either neutral or disagreed, is concerning.

4.4.5 Work-life balance is considered to be important by the organization's management

This item exposed the views of the employees at the Department on whether work-life balance is prioritized. The statistics show that 40% agreed with the statement, 33.33% were neutral, 13.33% strongly agreed, and 13.33% also disagreed with the statement. Overall, the Department appears to be doing well at enabling their employees to live holistically by allowing them room to enjoy their personal lives outside of work.

4.4.6 Employees can relate to the values in the organization

This item revealed the views of employees on whether they are able to link their everyday tasks and responsibilities to the values in the organization. The statistics show that 53.33% agreed with this statement, 24.44% were neutral, while 22.22% strongly agreed with the above statement. The results imply that the Department's vision resonates with employees' personal and professional goals and values.

4.4.7 The organization comprehensively supports employee skills development

This item revealed the views of employees on whether the organization helps individuals identify their strengths and growth areas, plan development strategies, and acquire and apply new, or enhanced knowledge, skills, and experience. The majority being 48.89% agreed with the above statement. 26.67% were neutral on the matter, 22.22% strongly agreed, while 2.22% disagreed with the statement. The results imply that the Department largely supports their employees to advance their skills.

4.4.8 Recruiting, selecting, or promoting is based on the competencies required for success

This item revealed the views of employees on whether recruiting, selecting, or promoting is based on the competencies required for success within the Department. The statistics show that 42.22% agreed with this statement, 26.67% remained neutral, 20% strongly agreed, and 11.11% disagreed. The results suggest that the Department promotes equitable hiring and promotion practices, in line with the required skills and competencies of the organization's positions.

4.4.9 The organization has a forward-looking focus that helps it realize the needs of their future talent

This item displays the opinions of employees on whether the organization has adopted a forward looking focus that helps it realize the needs of their future talent. 44.44%, which is the

majority, were neutral with this statement, 26.67% agreed, 17.78% strongly agreed, while 11.11% disagreed with the statement. The results suggest that succession planning is unlikely well catered for in the Department.

4.4.10 Employees are recognized for their efforts and rewarded for the results of their work

This item shows the views of employees on whether employees are recognized for their efforts and for the results of their work. The statistics show that 53.33%, which is most of the employees, agreed with the statement, 24.44% were neutral, 11.11% strongly agreed, and another 11.11% disagreed. The results imply that the Department mostly does well at rewarding and recognizing its employees for good performance.

4.4.11 Employees' skills are utilized to the greatest extent possible

This item depicts the opinions of employees on whether they have the chance for them to do what they have been educated and trained to do at the highest level of success possible. The statistics show that 53.33% agreed with the statement, 26.67% were neutral, 13.33% strongly agreed, and 6.67% disagreed. The results suggest that the Department mostly utilizes their talent, however, there is also implied room for improved talent utilization within the Department, as demonstrated by those who were either neutral or disagreed.

4.4.12 The training and development initiatives in the organization are effective

This item demonstrates the outlook of employees on whether the training and development initiatives in the organization are yielding positive outcomes. The results show that 42.22% agreed with this statement, 31.11% were neutral, 13.33% strongly agreed, and a further 13.33% disagreed with the statement. While the results suggest that the Department generally administers effective training and development initiatives, there is room for improvement in this regard as implied by those who were neutral or disagreed.

4.4.13 The more talent is developed in the organization is the more goals are achieved

This item demonstrates the perceptions of employees regarding whether talent development enhances the achievement of organizational goals. The results show that 24.44% strongly agreed with this statement, 57.8% agreed with this statement, 11.11% were neutral, and 6.7% disagreed with the statement. Respondents largely agreed that talent development enhances the achievement of objectives in the Department.

4.4.14 Lack of adequate training is a major reason for employee underperformance in the organization

This item illustrates employees' views on whether insufficiently trained employees find difficulty in performing their respective tasks. According to the figures, 44.44% agreed, followed by 26.67% who were neutral, 22.22% strongly agreed, then 4.44% disagreed, and another 2.22% strongly disagreed. The results imply that the lack of adequate training and development breeds underperformance in the Department.

4.4.15 The organization encourages teamwork and employee cohesion

This item illustrates the views of employees concerning whether the organization encourages teamwork for certain responsibilities and job tasks. Statistics display that 26.67% agreed with this statement, 42.22% were neutral, 15.56% strongly agreed, while the other 15.56% disagreed. The results imply that the Department currently lacks an environment that enables employees to collaborate effectively.

4.4.16 The organization puts emphasis on building skills and capabilities and not just finding them

This item exhibits the opinions of employees based on whether the organization puts emphasis on building capabilities and not just finding them. The statistics illustrate that the majority, being 37.78%, were neutral, followed by 33.33% who agreed, 17.78% who disagreed, 8.89% who strongly agreed, and then a smaller percentage of 2.22% who strongly disagreed. Not more than half of the respondents agreed that the Department prioritizes talent development over talent sourcing. This implies that employees believe the Department relies too much on external talent for specific tasks, rather than training their own.

4.4.17 The organization focuses on developing future leadership

This item depicts the views of employees concerning whether the organization focuses on developing future leadership. The statistics showed the following: 42.22% agreed, 24.44% were neutral, 17.78% strongly agreed, 13.33% disagreed, while the smaller population of employees, which is 2.22%, strongly disagreed with the statement. The results suggest that the Department invests more in developing its future leadership.

4.4.18 The current organizational culture accepts differences in others and promotes diversity

This item revealed the different views on whether the current organizational culture in the Department accepts differences in others. According to statistics, 51.11% agreed to the above statement, 24.44% strongly agreed, 20% were neutral, and 4.44% disagreed with the statement. The results imply that the Department prioritizes the diversity and inclusion agenda, although the racial representation statistics somewhat contradict this implication. Nonetheless, the different age groups and gender

representations support the diversity and inclusion agenda to a reasonable extent.

4.4.19 The organization adapts its talent management according to various internal and external changes

This item illustrates the views of employees concerning whether the organization is welcoming to change regarding talent management trends. According to statistics, 44.44% agreed, 26.67% chose to remain neutral, 17.78% strongly agreed, 8.89% disagreed, while a smaller employee percentage of 2.22% strongly disagreed with the statement. The results suggest that the Department is generally receptive to change.

4.4.20 Employee turnover is kept under control within the organization

This item represents the views of employees on whether employee turnover is well contained within the organization. The statistics show that 37.78%, being the majority, were neutral with this statement, 28.89% of the employees agreed with this statement, 22.22% disagreed, 8.89% strongly agreed, and we see a minority of 2.22% who strongly disagreed with the statement. The results suggest that the Department may be struggling with talent retention. This is again corroborated by the years of service statistics shown earlier in [Figure 4](#).

5 Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand the perspectives regarding talent management in a South African provincial department. The first theme: talent management practices addressed the first research objective and the second theme: leadership approach to talent management addressed the second research objective. The third objective was addressed by the quantitative research results. The research findings and results fundamentally revealed differences in perspective between management and employees regarding talent management. This corroborates what ([Slebarska and Soucek, 2020](#)) found regarding the often-prevailing differences between employers and employees in terms of expectations and interpretations regarding talent management and its imperatives, which minimizes synergy between the two parties and further minimizes the optimization of employees' contributions toward organizational productivity. [Conway and Clinton \(2024\)](#) and [Pyhäjärvi and Söderberg \(2024\)](#) particularly emphasize that such incongruence between management and employee perceptions in organizations often leads to psychological contract breaches which have adverse effects on overall employee performance.

The research further revealed that there is insufficient prioritization and implementation of talent management in the provincial department, with participants citing encumbrances such as limited financial resources as well as incongruence between employers' and employees' perceptions regarding what constitutes effective talent management. These views support what [Musakuro and De Klerk \(2021\)](#) found regarding how public sector institutions often lack the necessary financial resources to implement the

best practices pertaining to the recruitment, development and retention of key talent. Other participants, however, praised the department's efforts regarding talent management, citing the opportunities available for internal advancement and the identification of potential leaders. These alternative views align with research which implies the more recent ongoing improvement of talent management initiatives in public institutions (Mmatabane et al., 2023). Musakuro and De Klerk (2021) express how the often unclear and unfair recognition and rewarding of top performing employees encourage a lack of team cohesion and effective communication between and among employees as they increasingly feel the need to exclusively retain knowledge and expertise to increase their chances of being distinguished for superior performance. The findings of this research are aligned with this view. The participants further opined that an unfocused approach to the onboarding of new employees and the development of interns who may potentially assume permanent roles stifles the department's potential to implement a more effective approach to talent management. This supports the views of Liao et al. (2022) and Mseleku and Nyawo (2024) who assert that the potential of new employees is often not maximized due to a lack of proper assimilation into the organization and the potential of interns is often untapped due to them being reduced to oversimplified and non-strategic tasks. The Human Capital Theory, which insists on the maximum development and utilization of human resources, further supports these views (Cloete, 2023; Irfan et al., 2023).

Exploring the leadership approach to talent management in the provincial department exposed that the lack of a talent mindset and exemplary behavior among organizational leaders limits employees' overall buy-in regarding talent management. This supports Kravariti et al. (2022) and Nyanhongo et al.'s (2023) views that when public sector management does not prioritize talent management nor exhibit behaviors worth emulating, this demoralizes employees from exerting themselves fully, thus resulting in the organization's forfeiture of the associated positive outcomes of a fully committed workforce such as exceptional performance and organizational citizenship behaviors. The participants in this research additionally emphasized the importance of considering all employees—regardless of their organizational ranking—as having the potential to contribute to the organization's goals and overall strategy. This corroborates extant literature which supports the adoption of an egalitarian (inclusive) approach to talent management rather than an elitist (exclusive) approach (Dries and Kaše, 2023; Graham et al., 2024). The research participants further highlighted the benefits of management establishing a compelling talent value proposition that resonates with employees. These views support research results which promote aspects like work-life balance, the alignment of employees' professional goals with overall organizational objectives, as well as equitable recognition and rewards for superior performance as constituting a distinguishable and preferable talent value proposition (Theys and Barkhuizen, 2022; Selesho and Matjie, 2024). This research's participants also opined that a willingness by management to adopt currently prevailing best talent management practices will positively affect employees' productivity and ultimately, organizational effectiveness. Barkhuizen and

Masale (2022), Kravariti et al. (2022), and Saurombe (2025) similarly found that government institutions that are willing to adapt to the ever-changing terrain of workforce management are more likely to position themselves for effective service delivery and establish themselves as employers of choice. Meanwhile, Ngobeni et al. (2022) allude that organizations' agility and adaptation to change help minimize psychological contract breaches while enhancing employee engagement.

Examining the perceptions regarding the implementation of talent management in the provincial department revealed the need for talent management to be embedded in the organization's core strategy, which respondents reported to currently not be the case. The Dullah Omar Institute (2020) found that public institutions that do not adopt a strategic approach to talent management by ensuring alignment between employees' goals and organizational objectives tend to be less intentional about their hiring and development practices, which increases the likelihood of employee-role mismatching, resulting in frustration between both employees and employers. Theys and Barkhuizen (2022) further found that when employees' aspirations and their organizations' objectives align, supporting these employees' career goals becomes easier. This is particularly important since the results of this research implied that employees' career goals are inadequately supported. The respondents mostly agreed that the department encourages and supports the skills development and overall growth of their employees, despite some disagreement, to a lesser extent. Research suggests that empowering employees for growth and advancement in the public sector enhances their ability to contribute to the strategic operations of the organization (Sibonde and Dassah, 2021; Theys and Barkhuizen, 2022). The respondents in this research further suggested that the department practices equitable recruitment, selection and promotion practices. This is important as Mthintso et al. (2024) and Saurombe and Barkhuizen (2020) assert that a reputation associated with fair hiring and promotion practices builds confidence and rapport among both prospective and current employees, concerning the organization.

This research's results also suggested that the department relies more on external human resources than internal talent, which relates to Lee and van der Waldt's (2020) warning that public institutions that do not prioritize the development of existing employees and sufficient succession planning will continue to forfeit the associated benefits (such as reduced *ad-hoc* expenditure and increased workforce expertise and capacity) of these strategic talent management practices. This view especially aligns with the Human Capital Theory which underpins the importance of investing in a pipeline of talent to occupy critical future positions (Kang and Mok, 2022). Kaliannan et al. (2023) further alluded to the importance of talent development of existing employees being aligned to the overall organization's objectives. While this research's respondents implied overall inclusivity and an appreciation for workforce diversity, the biographical depiction of respondents' racial profile suggests otherwise. Meanwhile, research evidences the strategic benefits of employing a diverse workforce in public institutions, such as wider available solutions to various organizational challenges, compliance with legislative labor equity requirements, as well as enhanced distinguishability in diversely populated countries like South Africa and the United States of

America (Oosthuizen et al., 2019; The Manufacturing Institute, 2021). Considering that respondents in this research alluded to the department's struggle with employee retention, it becomes more imperative for the department to adopt a more strategic approach to talent management, specifically focusing on the areas for improvement identified in the research. Extant literature similarly encourages public sector organizations to strategically employ talent management to foster a positive workplace setting, enhance employee growth, provide supportive leadership and ultimately reduce employee turnover (Selesho and Matjie, 2024).

6 Practical implications

As per observation, this research proves that the Department needs to improve certain aspects regarding talent management. For example, there is an evident gender imbalance according to the statistics which illustrate females to be dominating over males in the department, thus employment equity policies require amendment or reviewing. Employment equity policies must also be considered in combatting the issue of discrepancies in the racial distribution within the Department. Additionally, an inclusive approach to talent management must be prioritized to promote maximum development and utilization of the department's talent, with the exception of critical functioning positions where an exclusive approach may be more appropriate.

The research findings show a large percentage of disgruntled employees who are not content with the way talent management is handled in the organization. Furthermore, management needs to communicate more with employees at lower levels to gain a better understanding of what is taking place within the entire organization. Concerns were raised that the views of those who hold lower ranks in the organization are often not considered. This calls for the implementation of policies regarding effective communication and feedback between employees and management to help address such gaps. Policies regarding the utilization of external talent to perform specific tasks should be implemented in the Department, limiting the use thereof to exceptional circumstances where no internal talent is available or could be trained within a reasonable timeframe. The Department should further be more intentional about their retention strategy, leveraging tools and techniques such as rewards and recognition, work-life balance and targeted skills development. All policies that are implemented in the provincial department must also be monitored, evaluated, and revised as necessary after stipulated periods of time.

7 Limitations and recommendations

This research presented different limitations. The adoption of a case study approach meant that the findings are largely specific to the South African provincial Department. The purposive sampling further limited the generalizability of the qualitative findings, although this was mitigated by the complementary quantitative component. The stratified sampling during the quantitative research component limited the insights gained to a specific subset of the overall population. Furthermore, the descriptive design

adopted for the quantitative research component deprived the research of the ability to potentially test relationships between specific research constructs. The dropouts experienced during the survey availed a smaller sample for quantitative data analysis. Time constraints and a lack of more willing and available participants at the time when the research was conducted also resulted in the qualitative sample size being limited to 14, although it was sufficient to draw meaningful insights. Using hardcopy surveys made the data capturing process (prior to analysis) tedious.

Recommendations for future research include broadening the research population beyond a single institution, using alternative sampling techniques which will allow the participation of a wider and more randomly selected sample, as well as allowing a longer timeframe for respondents to participate in the survey to hopefully improve response rates. Additionally, subsequent studies may consider adopting a quantitative research design that would enable the understanding of relationships between research variables. Future research should also aim for a larger and more representative qualitative sample, possibly including both management and employees to compare the in-depth insights obtained from both these key parties. Future researchers should further make use of more modern survey techniques and platforms such as SurveyMonkey, Google Forms or similar, to enhance efficiency in data analysis.

8 Conclusion

Despite the improved strides that have generally been achieved regarding talent management in the public sector, due to gradually increasing research interest in this context, the public sector still lags when it comes to effective talent management practices compared to its private sector counterpart. To achieve a more productive workforce and overall organizational effectiveness, public sector institutions such as the provincial department in this research must prioritize talent management and appropriately invest in its enhancement through concerted efforts led by institutional management. Strategic approaches to employee skills development, succession planning, creating an inclusive and conducive organizational culture, as well as a perpetual commitment to adjusting to current best talent management practices are some ways the provincial department and other South African government institutions can ensure a thriving workforce that contributes to the enhanced productivity of the organization. This research contributes to relatively limited research on strategic talent management within the South African provincial government sector.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the relevant STADIO Higher Education Research Ethics Committee.

The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

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