





An investigation of a nexus between employee skills development and competence in the Eastern Cape Department of Education



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Background: In South Africa, it has become essential to have better access to high-quality and relevant skills development to achieve the goal of the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030. Therefore, employee capacity building has become a strategic priority for the national growth and development of all emerging countries.

Aim: This article seeks to investigate a nexus between employee skills development and competence.

Setting: The study was carried out in the Eastern Cape Department of Education.

Methods: The article employed an inductive research approach and an explanatory research design to achieve its desired objectives. Moreover, structured questionnaires were used as the data collection tool, and thematic analysis was used to analyse the findings.

Results: The results of the article confirmed that skills training and development ensure that staff is empowered, informed and trained, which results in improved efficiency in the workplace. In this situation, spin-offs will benefit public organisations, since employees' increased abilities open new opportunities for long-term employment growth and organisational effectiveness. Furthermore, the knowledgeable and well-trained individual would make sound organisational decisions while competently providing a public service.

Conclusion: The article revealed that the Department of Education has a wider skill learning system that is informed by the *Skills Development Act 97 of 1998* and perhaps the most critical problem that has hindered the development of employee skills in the public sector. The Department of Education does not do enough to incorporate the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) learning relationships, and the system becomes highly suboptimal without doing this. Such problems have cascaded down to affect the competence of many public employees. This article on the effect of training and development on employee performance has emerged as a tool for obtaining valuable knowledge on the issue.

Contribution: This article contributed to the broader knowledge as a tool for obtaining valuable knowledge on the issues and on the effect of training and development on employee performance which has emerged.

Keywords: capacity building; competencies; education; employee; National Development Plan; skills development.

Introduction

One of the hallmarks of South Africa's new democratic regime was the development of public servants' skills (Mavunga & Cross 2017). This was based on the perception that most black people lacked the necessary competencies in many public institutions (Tembe & Sehume 2016). To overcome this perception, several programmes and frameworks were put in place to chart the path of skills development in the public sector. According to Tshilongamulenzhe and Coetzee (eds. 2013), the adoption of numerous statutes that relate to employee skills development was intended to capacitate employees so that they can carry out their duties effectively and efficiently. Notably, the shortage of skills has a devastating impact on organisational performance and the delivery of services to citizens, and employee job competence is jeopardised when employees are not adequately equipped to perform their day-to-day tasks.

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According to Freeman (2015), even though many programmes and measures have been put in place to transform labour force skills and government service levels, the public sector is still plagued by enormous barriers in terms of matching theory and practice. Similarly, Mavunga and Cross (2017) argued that several programmes have overlooked the importance of developing a culture that encourages public sector employees to view skills development as a continuous process. Employees in such a situation are often not equipped with the necessary competencies to deal with constant changes in technology. This, among other things, has contributed to ongoing issues such as employee underperformance.

Nkosi (2015) reported that the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) scheme was implemented to improve employee skills development in the public sector. It is prudent to note that the scheme was launched in 2000 as part of the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) with the goal of broadening the skill base through training and capacity building. However, the SETA scheme has fallen short of expectations because of a persistent gap between available skills and job requirements (Letsoalo & Mkhonza 2017). As a result, many people regard the system as a waste of resources. Similarly, Tembe and Sehume (2016) argued that the sector's constant changes in policies and strategies have not aided employee competence in the public sector. As a result, the administrative system is to blame for '... schizophrenic policy choices' (Tembe & Sehume 2016). Such policy decisions had a negative impact on employee skills development. Based on the Human Research Development Council of South Africa (HRDC) (2013), low levels of skills and education are evident in numerous South African government departments, including the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE).

One of the most serious threats to the public sector is its employees' complete formal education without the necessary skills required by the labour market. The implication here is that those who are absorbed into the labour market are perceived by employers as lacking in necessary skills and training (HRDC 2013). Employers complain that qualified graduates are unemployed because of mismatches between their skills and basic requirements. This is largely attributed to the education system, which appears to prioritise the 'paper chase' for qualifications (Tembe & Sehume 2016). This misalignment has had a negative impact on employee competence in a variety of government institutions, and the ECDoE has not been immune to these challenges.

Considering this, the present article investigates the relationship between employee skills development and employee competence. Furthermore, using the ECDoE as a case study, the article discusses perceptions about the extent to which employee skills development programmes and initiatives have contributed to employee competence and performance in the public sector.

Delimitations

The article did not consider every departmental employee, instead relying on a representative sample using the snowball sampling technique. It is imperative to take into consideration that the research only focused on one departmental office (the ECDoE). This may be insufficient to present a clear picture of how employee skills development influences employee performance in the province. Middle and senior managers were frequently unavailable for data collection purposes. Furthermore, because of limited finances, time and mobility, the study was limited and did not manage to collect data from every available source.

Conceptualising employee skills development

Employee skills development is an old concept that has piqued the interest of many academics around the world (Fletcher, Alfes & Robinson 2018). Several academics have described and conceptualised the concept in various ways. In this regard, it is critical to delve into its definition and meaning to arrive at a definition that will serve as a guide for this study. According to Hickey (2018), skills development can be seen as 'the process of inspiring workers so that they have the opportunity to carry out new responsibilities and assignments in order to accomplish appropriate performance outcomes'. This is supported further by Fletcher et al. (2018), who stated that employee skills development is defined as a systematic approach aimed at advancing workers' skills, knowledge and abilities to achieve organisational or institutional goals.

Employee development, according to Hameed and Waheed (2011), is an organisational imperative that concerns the overall growth of employees in terms of gaining new knowledge that is compatible with the changing work environment. A number of empirical studies have found a direct relationship between skills development and employee competence and performance (Hameed & Waheed 2011). The argument presented in their work was that when employee skills are transformed, employees are more likely to be satisfied and committed to their jobs, which has a knock-on effect on employee competence. Felstead et al. (2019) reported that the concept of skills development is frequently viewed as a result of a conglomeration or collection of numerous activities relating to continued learning as well as job or career-related skills. There appears to be agreement among architects and scholars of organisational human resource management (Dong et al. 2016; Fletcher et al. 2018; Hickey 2018; Halvarsson Lundkvist & Gustavsson 2018) that the following elements are central to employee skills development:

- **Training:** Legislation establishes procedures to ensure that all public servants, from the highest to the lowest ranks, have access to ongoing training as part of their professional development.
- **Mentorship or guidance:** This mentorship is done to ensure that employees are mentored, which is necessary for skills development and the establishment of relevant experiential knowledge. It will also provide staff with instructions on how to do their jobs correctly. A career

management policy, a career pathway (or personal development plan) and a continuous professional development plan will provide a roadmap for progressing through a learning band required for a specific career.

- **Performance management:** Employee performance is monitored and evaluated as part of the staff development process. Staff will always be aware of their level of competence to improve on their weaknesses and contribute to institutional goals.
- **Information sharing:** Employees must be given information that will help them advance in their careers and improve their service delivery. This can be accomplished by providing employees with access to relevant databases, research and opportunities and resources to conduct their research. This also implies that offices must have information and communication technology systems (Felstead et al. 2019).
- **Consultation:** This emphasises the creation of an open environment in the workplace in which employees can consult with supervisors and other colleagues. Such transparency should exist between the organisation and the community, as well as other institutions relevant to officials' professional and career development.

These indicators play an essential role in determining the extent to which public servants are equipped with the necessary skills to meet the demands of their jobs. As a result, these indicators for skills development will be considered in the creation of the conceptual model that will guide this study.

Employee competence conceptual framework

Employee competence is the next critical component that forms the foundation of this study. It is noteworthy that the concept of employee performance has been around since the dawn of time. Because of the varying degrees of work, employee competence has been conceptualised differently in the literature. Puteh, Kaliannan and Alam (2016) alluded that employee competence is an organisational human resource concept that aims to improve performance, efficiency and effectiveness on the job. Bi, Zhou and Cai (2014), Puteh et al. (2016) and Ochioiu and Varnelyte (2013) supported that employee competence refers to a collection of factors, including intellectual skills and theoretical knowledge, that are used to advance job performance.

Yang, Lee and Cheng (2016) outlined that employee competence is used in institutions and organisations to represent employee skill adequacy, essentially to provide ability and knowledge that would enable an employee to execute job tasks assigned. Competence, according to Jackson (2021), is defined as an individual's ability and capability to perform a role through sharing of knowledge, expertise and abilities, which leads to the actions needed to complete a task as per prescribed and expected performance levels.

Furthermore, the concept is viewed as denoting an employee's ability to perform specific knowledge and skill to perform the task that has been assigned to him or her in an expected and

professional manner (Alsabbah & Ibrahim 2014). As a result, for organisational employees to demonstrate competency at work, institutions must develop long-term mechanisms for fast-tracking employee skills development if they are to improve overall performance.

Based on the conceptualisation of the two main building blocks guiding this study, it is critical to investigate the type of relationship that exists between the identified indicators. Figure 1 presents a proposed framework for enhancing employee skills and competence within organisations and institutions.

The notion presented in the framework above is that employee skills development indicators play an influential role (positive or negative) in the elements of employee competence. A correlation among these indicators will be tested using quantitative methods.

Practical approaches to employee skills development and employee competence

Even though most developing countries have made progress in matching skills and required day-to-day tasks, most South African public sector departments continue to face challenges related to mismatches between employee skills and skills required to perform. According to Du Plessis (2006), employee skills development is a critical component that must be prioritised in both developed and developing countries as part of efforts to increase employment, economic growth and competitiveness. At this point, it is important to note that this field of study has piqued the interest of several renowned scholars who have conducted empirical studies to investigate how countries around the world have navigated the terrain of skills development in relation to employee competence. As a result, it is critical to delve into these studies and analyse their potential applications in the current study. The study analyses the path taken by Australia and the United Kingdom in developing and institutionalising mechanisms to align skills development and employee competence through case studies. This subsection also extends to South Africa and provides an assessment of employee skills development and competence in the public sector.

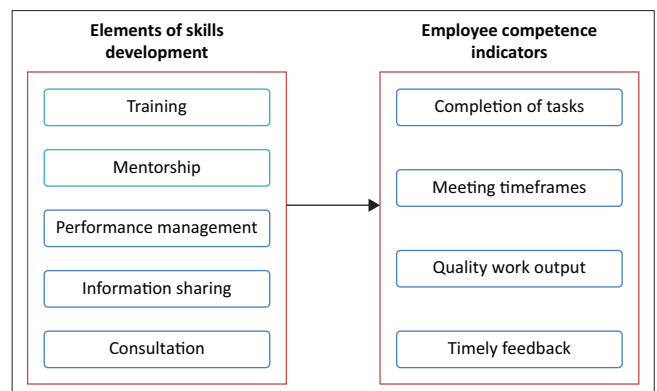


FIGURE 1: A proposed framework for skills development and employee competence for public sector institutions.

Employee skills development and competences in the Department of Education

Following the first democratic elections and the country's independence in 1994, South Africa's new administration was determined to face a slew of challenges in public administration and management (Tembe & Sehume 2016). One of the major legacies of apartheid that continues to impede effective and efficient service delivery today is a severe shortage of skills. The performance of various government departments and public sector institutions is directly related to skill shortages. Mavunga and Cross (2017) alluded that the South African context's skills gap is demonstrated by the Department of Higher Education's (DHET) continued existence and publication of a critical skills list (DHET):

[T]he South African labour force consisted of 15 million employed and 7.5 million unemployed people. Three-quarters of the working and 90% of the unemployed are Africans. Approximately half of the workers do not even have a grade 12 certificate, while 20% of the working population has a higher education certificate, and 32% have completed senior secondary education. Almost two-thirds of the unemployed have less than a matric certificate. This equates to 11.75 million people in the labour force who do not have a high school diploma. (Powell, Reddy & Paterson 2014:4)

This is a clear indication of the countrywide skills gap.

Based on Chelechele (2009), apartheid policies regarding human resource growth also created a trail of a poorly skilled foundation and gross inequality in terms of workforce development in South Africa. The government of South Africa adopted a series of laws and measures aimed at improving the expertise of officials to remedy past injustices and disparities and standardise the situation (Nkosi 2015). This is further elucidated by Mavunga and Cross (2017), who argued that the country's development agenda will fail if public servants lack the necessary skills to do their jobs.

Marock (2010) confirmed that skills shortage in the South African public sector has become one of the most important issues in debates about service delivery,

economic growth and productivity. Apart from the fact that labour shortages are at the core of several policy decisions, the press refuses to focus on how severe such deficiencies are becoming and how they are affecting growth and innovation (Marock 2010). As a result, the country has put in place several frameworks intended to capacitate public servants to improve the way they carry out assigned tasks while also improving organisational performance (Felstead et al. 2019).

One of the hallmarks of South Africa's new democratic regime was the development of public servants' skills. This was based on the perception that most black people lacked the competencies required in many public institutions. According to Tshilongamulenzhe and Coetzee (eds. 2013), the adoption of legal statutes such as the *Skills Development Act* of 1998; the *Skills Development Levies Act* of 1999; a series of National Skills Development Strategies; Adult Basic Education (ABET) programs, and the establishment of structures such as SETA's was intended to capacitate the public sector.

Institutional framework for employee skills development in South Africa

South Africa currently has a transforming employee skills development management framework (Reddy et al. 2018). Notably, the country has made efforts to ensure the institutions establish employee skills development framework that would improve employee competence in various sectors and government departments. Since 1994, various institutions and authorities have been responsible for the development of employee skills in South Africa. Mummenthey (2010) focused on the 'institutionalisation' and organisation of the core agencies tasked with implementing the new skills development legal statutes. Table 1 summarises the functions of various institutions in South Africa tasked with skills development.

The establishment of skills development agencies in the country has aided in the formulation and implementation of several initiatives and programmes aimed at improving employee skills in both the public and private sectors. Several

TABLE 1: Skills implementation agencies and their functions.

Agency	Functions and authority
Department of Labour and Department of Education	These are the key departments that oversee and drive skills development, education and employee training in South Africa. The responsibility of the DoL is training and implementing all the initiatives for the labour market. Conversely, formal education lies within the jurisdiction of the DoE.
South African Qualifications Authority	This is South Africa's main 'standard authority' for both education and training. The South African Qualifications Authority's primary mission is to provide high standards for training and education by ensuring that the National Qualification Framework is developed and implemented successfully.
Education and Training Quality Assurance	The responsibility for ensuring important reforms has been assigned to ETQA entities that have been authorised and certified by the SAQA for a specific field (i.e. economic sector, educational institutions and bodies, social sector). Sector Education and Training Authorities have also been given the status of an ETQA for all sectors of the economy and thus for quality control in skills development.
Sector Education and Training Authorities	Sector Education and Training Authorities are the major planning bodies for developing and maintaining quality workplace education and development and are regulated by the regulations of the <i>Skills Development Act</i> and the <i>Skills Development Levies Act</i> No. 9 of 1999.
National Skills Authority	The NSA is a primary stakeholder that informs the DoL on nationwide capacity-building policy and strategy execution, NSF allocations and SETA Sector Skills Plans approval.
National Skills Fund	All training is funded by a levy-based system governed by the <i>Skills Development Levies Act</i> (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 1996). The sum that can be levied is 1% of the total employee salary. The levy raised goes to the NSF, which is supervised by the Treasury Department (NSA)

Source: Author's illustration of Mummenthey, C., 2010, *Skills development in South Africa: A reader on the South African skills development arena*, German Development Service DoE, Department of Education; SAQA, South African Qualifications Authority; ETQA, Education and Training Quality Assurance; SETA, Sector Education and Training Authority; NSF, National Skills Fund; NSA, National Skills Authority; DoL, Department of Labour.

initiatives, including the NSDS II (for the period 2005 to 2010) and the Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition Elliot (2009), have been implemented with varying degrees of success in this regard. The most intriguing aspect, however, is that there appears to be a consensus among various scholars (Chelechele 2009; Mavunga & Cross 2017; Mopeli 2014) that the majority of South African skills development initiatives have failed to live up to expectations in terms of improving employee competence in the public sector. Literature evidence indicates that South Africa's path to employee skills development and competence has never been easy. This means that a variety of factors have hampered the efficient and effective implementation of skills development and training. As such, it is imperative to analyse the challenges that have hampered the development of skills and competence.

Research methodology

Research paradigm

The two commonly used paradigms are positivism and interpretivism. The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm. Saunders and Bezzina (2015) purported that the study of social phenomena in their natural environment relates to interpretivism. The theory of analysis adopted in a study involves imperative assumptions regarding how the researcher sees the world. The goal here is that the analysis should apply to the questions of the report. To this end, this study warrants the adoption of an interpretative paradigm to provide an interpretation of the nexus between employee skills development and competence in the ECDoE. In this regard, the nexus between employee skills development and competence in the ECDoE was examined based on the interpretative model that seeks to gather the perspectives of respondents based on their experiences.

Research approach

The research is focused on an inductive approach consistent with the interpretivist paradigm. The inductive approach, according to Bryman and Bell (2015), involves the creation of a theory by which data collection is first carried out by different methods such as interviews, and then new hypotheses are developed based on the results. The gathering of practical knowledge required for the creation of new ideas is encouraged by interviews. Bryman and Bell (2015) continued to argue that this kind of method helps researchers to evaluate different things that happen concerning the subject of study. In this regard, abduction merges these weaknesses by adopting a pragmatist view in evaluating the significant contribution of skills development to employee competence in the ECDoE.

Research methods

In this article, a phenomenological qualitative research method was used to get an in-depth understanding of the factors that hinder employee skills development in the Eastern Cape region and strategies that could be put in place to align skills development and employee competence.

Research strategy

The selection of a research strategy is usually driven by study objectives and goals, the degree of established expertise, the length of time and other resources available and the theoretical frameworks, according to Saunders et al. (2015:135). This research adopted a case study approach because the research questions were rooted in qualitative methods.

Population and sampling methodology

Target population

The findings of the article were derived from a mixed population of 90 respondents involving people of all races, age groups and educational statuses in the ECDoE. In this regard, the study target population was represented as follows: departmental line managers (2) and general departmental employees (10). It is imperative to note that the selection of these units of analysis was because they have experienced the processes that are involved in employee skills development and their contribution to employee competence. It is noteworthy that this study did not consider every employee of the ECDoE, and therefore a representative sample was used to generalise the findings to the entire department.

Sampling techniques

This research used purposive and random sampling techniques to ensure that the sample was representative of the study population. These are briefly explained below.

Data collection procedures and methods

At the core of the research onion presented by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) are data collection procedures and techniques essential in gathering credible data. In consideration of the pragmatic paradigm, this study made use of abductive approaches and mixed research. Primary and secondary data were collected. In-depth interviews were used to collect information from the employees of the ECDoE. Open-ended questionnaires were asked face to face with the study respondents. To support the findings from primary sources, secondary sources such as published books and journals were also used.

In-depth interviews

Face-to-face interviews were done with the selected employees, and the study utilised open-ended questions to solicit a wide range of responses. This allowed the respondents to share their views, attitudes, beliefs, experiences and perceptions on employee skills development and its contribution to employee performance.

Documents

The research used secondary or precollected data to gather information to cross-check the validity and reliability of primary sources. Information from Internet sources

(which mostly constituted electronic material) was carefully selected according to its relevance in the study. Archival data played a cardinal role in providing a review of previously researched data on employee skills development in South Africa. This information provided the baseline for literature review and offered an opportunity of learning from others.

Firstly, the data were carefully scrutinised for reliability and accuracy, since enumerators were used for data collection. Secondly, the study selected sources relevant to and considerate of the period (timeline) of the undertaking of the research to avoid obsolete, old and irrelevant data. Finally, the study had to reduce bias by employing special care in amending and modifying the collected secondary data (Johnston 2014) to serve the purpose of the study from the vast voluminous archival data. Table 2 summarises the study population, size of the sample and methods for data collection relating to this article.

Data analysis technique

The research used thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data. Based on Clarke and Braun (2013), the method of finding trends or themes within qualitative data is thematic analysis. In this regard, thematic analysis proved to be useful in summarising key characteristics of a broad data set, as it required the researcher to take a well-structured approach to data handling, helping to generate a consistent and organised final report.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Fort Hare Research Ethics Committee (UREC) (reference number: REC-270710-028-RA Level 01).

Results

Demographic data

The researcher initially targeted 15 participants to participate in the study. Because of challenges posed by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) restrictions, only 12 participants were available for face-to-face in-depth interviews. However, the data gathered from respondents are verifiable and trustworthy because of their experience in the education sector and the qualifications they hold. The respondents had institutional memory because they were permanently employed, as opposed to many employees who worked in contracts for 3–5 years with the Department of Education.

TABLE 2: Summary of population, sample size and data collection methods.

Population	Sample size	Data collection method
Department line managers (ASD, DD, D)	2	In-depth interviews
Department employees	10	In-depth interviews
Total	12	-

ASD, assistant directors; DD, deputy directors; D, directors.

Age of respondents

Age is a very prudent aspect of research because different age groups represent different views and opinions about employee skills development in the local government sector. Age could come in as a factor in understanding the dynamics related to HRD and how this impacts employee competence in the ECDoE. Table 3 describes the age distribution of interviewed respondents.

Table 3 illustrates participants according to their age. This is important as people of different ages usually behave and respond to questions differently. In this case, there are young persons who in their responses might represent the aspirations of young people. In addition, the middle age group has been more willing to participate, thus assisting the researcher to balance views according to age.

Work experience

Work experience is also important because respondents share their experiences and opinions based on the experience they have. In assessing the nexus between skills development and employee competence in the department of education, respondents provided their work experiences, which are shown in Table 4.

As shown in Table 4, most respondents had 10–20 years of service in the public sector. This is significant as it is a well-known fact that an experienced respondent is the best. The researcher was able to delve deeper into their experiences with regard to the role skills development play on employee competence in the Department of Education. It is against this background that the researcher is of the opinion that the data collected are credible and trustworthy.

Levels of education

Education is broadly used as an instrument for organisational change because it increases the stock of human resources, which in turn increases organisational or institutional performance (Hickey 2018). This is essential for this study because the level of literacy of the people involved in skills development and employee competence generally affects the outcome of these processes. The educational levels of respondents are therefore shown in Table 5.

TABLE 3: Age distribution of participants.

Age distribution	Number of participants
25–35	04
35–45	06
54–55	02

TABLE 4: Work experience of study participants in years.

Experience of participants (years)	Number of participants
5–10	04
10–20	08
20–25	00

TABLE 5: Classification of respondents according to educational qualifications.

Qualifications	Number of participants
Diploma in Education	02
BA degree in Education	06
Honours or master's degree	04

BA, bachelor of arts.

As shown in Table 5, there are two participants with Diplomas in Education as a qualification. However, the in-service training skills imparted to them assisted with the knowledge and understanding required for interviews. In certain instances, these interviewees responded in their mother tongue; as a result, the interviewer had to interpret and translate their responses into English. Most of the interviewees have postdiploma qualifications; this made it easy for the researcher to interpret their responses.

Understanding employee skills development and its role in employee competence

Employee skills development, or HRD, is critical in addressing the skills gaps that exist in the public sector. This is largely because of several studies indicating that South African public institutions are plagued by skills shortages. As a result, in this section, participants' understanding of employee skills development in relation to employee competence was questioned. The opinions expressed on this subject were diverse. This is reflected in the following excerpt, in which one respondent during an interview expressed the following sentiments:

'[...S]kills development encompasses a number of strategies, ranging from in-service training and ensuring that the employees are capacitated with knowledge that will help them perform their tasks.' (Respondent 3)

In addition, one other key informant pointed out that:

'To improve the efficiency of employees and their impact on the job, training on that particular job is very important, as many of the employees have been found wanting in terms of the relevant skills.' (Respondent 7)

What can be deduced from the above remarks is that HRD or employee skills development is perceived to be a precondition for the efficiency of tasks that are usually assigned to employees by their superiors. This is in line with Hickey's (2018) assertion that employee skills development relates to the process of empowering employees so that they possess the abilities to carry out new roles and tasks to achieve required performance outcomes. More so, it can be deduced that in the ECDoE, skills development is seen to move beyond empowering employees to contribute towards the delivery of services offered by the department. Concerning the skills gaps in the department, some of the study respondents had divergent views because they felt that the gap was marginal in the department. One respondent reiterated that:

'Unlike a number of public institutions in the country, the education department is known for recruiting qualified staff ... the majority of the employees we have hold degrees, and this is

a sign that the skills gap has not been an issue in our department.' (Respondent 1)

Despite the fact that the department boasts about having qualified staff, the above assertion was criticised by one respondent, who argued that the possession of qualifications by staff has not yet translated to an efficient performance by the employees. The respondent argued that:

'[...E]mployee skills development remains important in our department because you will find out that even degreed employees need some in-service training because of the technological advances that have taken place ...' (Respondent 1)

In line with the assertion above, Fazekas and Burns (2011) elucidated that skills development is a process that seeks to help employees acquire relevant information, technical know-how and expertise on the job. The notion presented here is that employees need to have access to new technological advancements and information and understand how to use this technology in relation to their tasks. As such, a consensus was reached among the respondents that employees need to engage in lifelong learning so that they remain relevant with regard to technological advancements.

The effects of training and mentorship on employee competence

The conceptualisation of employee skills revealed that in-service training and mentorship are the key components that can be used to test the impact of employee skills development on the competence of staff. In a number of settings, many strategies to enhance employee competence have been attempted. A number of initiatives and programmes have centred on financial rewards such as outcome-based support or pay-for-performance but have seen little success in improving the competence of staff in the public sector domain. Hoover et al. (2020) ruled that traditional training systems have positioned employees during brief training sessions in structured environments, which are not successful in developing durable skills that are necessary for employee competence. In relation to the effects of training and employee mentoring, the respondents shared the same sentiments that it is seminal in imparting the skills required in the performance of tasks. One key informant pointed out that:

'Although a number of our employees are qualified for the job, we have noted some gaps between the qualifications and the requirement for the job; as such, we have had a number of interventions to bridge that gap.' (Respondent 8)

What can be deduced from the above remarks is the realisation that qualifications have not automatically translated to job competence, and in-service training and employee mentoring have been used to ensure that the skills possessed by the employees are in tandem with what they actually need to do. An employee in the department reiterated that:

'[...W]hen I first arrived here, I realised that despite having the qualifications, I did not possess the necessary skills. However, the in-service training programmes helped me a lot, and the

mentoring by my supervisor also assisted, and I can say I am efficient and competent in performing the tasks that are allocated to me.' (Respondent 2)

Evidence from texts reveals that in-service employee training and mentoring in the Department of Education has been provided in two types: that is, face-to-face and online. Face-to-face schooling is the most popular mode. Respondents revealed that the face-to-face mode refers to a scenario in which department and resource people sit and talk with each other on selected job problems or issues. These have included the face-to-face mode such as lectures, workshops, conferences and short-term training. These have been lauded as key in transforming employee competence. This is justified by one respondent, who pointed out that:

'[...T]he training and mentorship we get help us to keep in touch with the advancements especially technological ones and this has improved our performance in terms of completion of tasks, provision of timely feedback and quality output.' (Respondent 2)

Based on the above views, it can be confirmed that there is a positive correlation between in-service training or employee mentoring and employee competence.

Conclusion and recommendations

The goal of this research was to investigate and analyse the role employee skills development plays towards employee competence within the ECDoE. An analysis of the role skills development plays in the Department of Education context has been carried out in this study. A critical feature of such an analysis was the understanding that all levels of expertise, particularly 'high skills', intermediate skills and 'low skills', are essential. In essence, the article concentrated on the role of skills development in the competency levels of the employees, based on the findings from the ECDoE.

The article revealed that institutions such as the Department of Labour (DoL), Department of Education (DoE), Department of Science and Innovation (DST) and Department of Home Affairs (DHA) are joined by the wider skills learning system. At this point, the lack of communication between the DoL and the DoE is perhaps the most critical problem that has hindered the development of employee skills in the public sector. The insinuation presented here is that different state organs do not do enough to incorporate the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) learning relationships, and the system becomes highly suboptimal without doing this. Such problems have cascaded down to affect the competence of many public employees.

This article on the effect of training and development on employee performance has emerged as a tool for obtaining valuable knowledge on the issue while understanding the challenges faced by the ECDoE. In this case, public institutions will be motivated by the research results to make employee skills development a vital and strategic necessity to preserve

the productive efficiency and organisational growth of such institutions. In praise of Mansour (2013), it is emphasised that the cultivation of a creative, competent, versatile and elevated staff has become essential for organisations that aspire to succeed in the public sphere.

Findings also revealed that when implemented by institutions such as the SETA, higher education institutions and other private players, the skills training and development approach would ensure that employees are empowered, informed and trained, which translates into greater efficiency and effectiveness. In this case, public entities will benefit from spin-offs, as employees' elevated skills open up possibilities for job development and organisational performance in the long run. More so, the competent and trained employee would take decisive organisational decisions, successfully listening to the concerns of the clients. The advantages will trickle down to the communities where these organisations are based, and the greater image is the development that will be the ultimate for the government.

Elnaga and Imran (2013) observed, in confirmation of the findings of the present study at hand, that successful employee skills development programmes not only serve to improve the person but also enable public institutions such as the DoE to appropriately use their human capital to gain a competitive edge. Evidence from the conducted interviews showed that employees are required to respond efficiently and adequately to the requirements or concerns of a client. Furthermore, Elnaga and Imran (2013) mentioned that it would seem essential for organisations to prepare for employee training programmes to develop the skills and skills needed in their workplace. What is presented here relates to the fact that employees will gain access to professional opportunities in the workplace, providing innovation and fulfilment across a much wider reach. In this regard, this study concludes that the future success in every organisation eventually depends on the number of individuals in jobs and how productive they are.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

G.G. is the main author, and this manuscript is part of her original research for her master's degree. She was mainly responsible for writing the literature and data analysis. B.P. was mainly responsible for data mining, analysis and drafting the article. T.R. provided guidance, wrote the discussion and edited the manuscript. Z.C. is the corresponding author; she contributed towards editing the contents of the manuscript and was mainly responsible for identifying and submitting the work to the journal of choice.

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Data availability

Where applicable, a list of figures that have associated raw data is made available.

Disclaimer

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