



Effective strategy execution for enhanced service delivery in south african municipalities



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Background: The research specifically focusses on an African perspective, acknowledging the unique challenges and context of public sector organisations in Africa. This regional focus is important as it considers the specific socio-political, economic, and cultural factors that impact strategy execution in African countries.

Aim: This article aims to explore the critical factors influencing the successful execution of strategic initiatives in South African municipalities, with a focus on identifying barriers, drivers, and best practices that contribute to effective strategy implementation and its impact on the South African municipal sector, ultimately promoting effective governance and public service delivery capabilities.

Setting: The study locus included metropolitan, local and district municipalities in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province, allowing for a comparative analysis of strategy execution by South African municipalities.

Methods: A cross-sectional qualitative study was used. A total of 24 interview participants were selected purposively, and analysed thematically.

Results: The findings revealed that there is an uncoordinated lacuna between strategy planning and strategy execution in public sector organisations. Furthermore, the results indicate that strategy implementation in the public sector fails because of notable gradual retardation of commitment towards execution, monitoring, and evaluation when compared to emphasis given to strategy planning.

Conclusion: Customised strategy delivery tools for public services are a niche requirement. Inclusiveness of all organisational hierarchical levels prove to be the successful approach to strategy implementation.

Contribution: This paper was impelled by the necessity to develop a model for transitioning from a formulated strategy to an executed strategy mirrored in the practically attained desired goals in the public sector.

Keywords: strategy execution; strategy execution impediments; public sector; strategic management; African perspective.

Introduction

Strategy execution in the public sector involves the implementation and operationalisation of strategic initiatives to achieve desired outcomes and effectively serve the needs of the community. It encompasses a systematic and coordinated approach that aligns the organisation's resources, policies, and activities with the defined strategic objectives (Stimie & Vlok 2016). Successful strategy execution in the public sector requires clear communication and engagement with stakeholders, including citizens, government agencies, and civil society organisations. It involves translating strategic plans into actionable steps, setting performance targets, and establishing monitoring mechanisms to track progress (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011). Additionally, effective leadership, efficient allocation of resources, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances are crucial for the successful execution of strategies in the public sector. By prioritising accountability, transparency, and citizen participation, strategy execution in the public sector can drive positive change and contribute to the overall development and well-being of the society it serves.

This study focusses on impediments of strategy execution in the African perspective, with South African municipalities in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province as a case in point. Understanding and addressing these impediments is essential for promoting sustainable development, improving

service delivery, and achieving strategic objectives in South Africa's local governance structures. The study was prompted by an observed trend of poorly executed strategies in the public sector, resulting in inadequacy of optimal utilisation of public resources for the attainment of determined strategic objectives. In South Africa, the administrative divisions are organised into three main categories: metropolitan municipalities, district municipalities, and local municipalities. Metropolitan municipalities are large urban areas that encompass major cities and their surrounding regions. They have a high population density and serve as economic hubs. District municipalities, on the other hand, are rural or semi-urban areas that consist of multiple local municipalities. They are responsible for providing services to a broader geographic area and coordinating development initiatives. Local municipalities are the smallest administrative units and are found within both metropolitan and district municipalities. They represent specific towns, suburbs, or rural areas, and are responsible for providing basic services such as water, sanitation, and local infrastructure. Together, these three tiers of municipalities play a crucial role in governing and serving the diverse needs of the South African population.

Constitutionally, standards for government services are centred at effectiveness, efficiency, and economic resource utilisation (Kim & Holzer 2016). In the dynamic and ever-evolving landscape of the South African public sector organisations, effective strategy execution plays a crucial role in achieving desired outcomes and driving sustainable development. With a multitude of challenges, including socio-economic disparities, governance issues, and resource constraints, strategy execution requires careful planning, alignment, and coordination across various governmental entities. As a result, there is a void between strategy formulation and strategy execution, meaning that predetermined targets are not efficiently realised as desired outcomes. The central issue is how the government can convert public service delivery into practical tangible results (Kleinbaum & Stuart 2014). This research focussed on assessing the factors that impede strategy execution in public sector organisations, with the aim of developing a simplified strategy application model, considering the idiosyncratic nature of the public sector.

Public sector strategy execution

The concept of strategy execution has its foundation in strategic management, which is divided into two sections as strategy formulation and strategy implementation (Calhoun 2013). The link is illustrated in the two primary concepts of strategy execution definition: procedures and capability. According to Bossidy, Charan and Burck (2011), strategy execution is a structured process of asking questions, evaluating problems, and taking steps to achieve objectives, as well as a learning process that involves combination of personnel and processes to accomplish the required goals. Bryson, Edwards and Van Slyke (2018), on the other hand, posit that the application of strategy comes with a specific capability encompassing the use of a variety of available

resources and approaches to achieve strategic objectives, and that it derives from the capability of achieving goals while executing strategies. Thus, the aim of strategy execution, whether as a procedure or a capability, is to achieve organisational strategy. Therefore, strategy implementation can be summarised as the ability to achieve a specific strategic objective, denoting strategy execution is the ability of an effective system, organisation, culture, work-processes, and methods to turn strategic decisions into anticipated results.

Strategic management conceptualisations place a strong emphasis on coupling performance evaluation with strategic planning. According to Thompson and Strickland (1987), strategy execution, evaluation, and adjustment is regarded as an integral part of strategic management. The organisation's strategy links it with the exterior environment and is reflected in the pattern of steps and techniques the management comes up with to achieve the desired results (Monauni 2017). The development of a strategy signifies a managerial determination to take a specific set of actions in performing operations and enhancing the organisation's efficiency in order to achieve the desired outcome. Thus, strategic management can be defined as the process by which managers establish an organisation's long-term direction, set specific performance objectives, formulate planned approaches for the attainment of these targets in accordance with the applicable interior and exterior circumstances, before implementing the selected action plan (Chiwawa, Wissink & Fox 2021). What an organisation (or other entity) is, what it does, and why it does it is shaped and guided by fundamental decisions and activities that are produced through deliberate, disciplined strategic planning (Bryson 2018).

In the context of growing globalisation, the rapid pace of technological innovation, shifting social and demographic trends, and the increasing knowledge intensity of public services, few would therefore contest that one of the main responsibilities of today's public managers is strategic planning in order to develop well-thought-out strategies capable of achieving organisational and societal change (George, Walker & Monster 2019). Nevertheless, organisational and societal transformations are complicated, diverse occurrences, and it can be challenging to bring about sustainable change, particularly in public organisations where the objectives are much more imprecise and a large number of actors are involved (Bryson, Edwards & Van Slyke 2022). Even though many public organisations have implemented strategic planning procedures, their failure to implement strategic planning processes to bring about the desired organisational and societal change has fuelled criticism of the effectiveness of strategic planning in public organisations (Bovaird 2008). Thus, while strategic planning aids in the identification of change-related strategies, it does not compel their implementation.

As a result, ensuring that strategy is implemented successfully requires strategic management (Poister 2010). In other words,

through developing and putting into practice smart strategies, both strategic planning and strategic management are important for achieving desired organisational and social transformation. The majority of study and practice have so far concentrated on performance assessment as a method to strategy implementation, even though Poister's (2010) definition of strategic management does not presuppose one preferred way to strategy implementation. However, according to some research (George et al. 2017; Hood 2013), performance assessment has actually led to blame-avoidance behaviour and the naming and shaming of public institutions rather than encouraging learning. It is not unexpected that where there is minimal tolerance for error owing to performance evaluation, openness to issues and incentives to take initiative (all of which are necessary for learning) are reduced. To put it another way, performance assessment necessarily places restrictions on the capacity of public organisations to learn, which, in turn, limits their potential to bring about long-lasting change by creating and putting into practice astute strategies.

With its mandate generally guided by legislation, the value proposition of the public sector is basically to promote the social and economic well-being of all its citizens (Ferlie & Ongaro 2022). As a result, it is critical to have a strategy that is concise, focussed, and well-defined. Owing to the increased number of stakeholders and increased complexity, the public sector requires a more cautious approach in the implementation of its plan, requiring more time for engagement, buy-in, and decision-making (Olivier & Schwella 2018). It is critical to recognise the increased openness to environmental and stakeholder effects, as well as the necessity to adapt to them throughout plan execution. The specific internal and external constraints that governments encounter make strategy execution appear more challenging in the public sector than in the private sector.

Based on the unique context of the public sector, it would therefore be imprudent to approach the strategy execution in the public sector in the same way that it is in the private sector. Olivier and Schwella (2018) assert that when executing strategies, the nature of the public sector organisations varies by countries and between national, regional, and local governments. Because of its much longer duration and complexity, situational and contextual analysis should be used for strategy execution more than strategic planning. The unique public sector leadership characteristics (such as its shorter term, its power base, as well as its criteria for selection and success) should be given consideration. The larger and more complicated public sector organisational structure, which is spread out over numerous vertical hierarchical tiers and geographic locations, also complicates tasks like communication, engagement, buy-in, and coordination (Cohen 2011). Human, structural, physical, and other resources are frequently misaligned with strategy. Efficient and successful plan implementation is exceedingly unlikely in the absence of or informal approach to project

management. Hence, a high likelihood of more frequent scope revisions on large and complicated projects, resulting in time and cost increases. Procurement and contract management become increasingly sophisticated as a result of extensive outsourcing.

Factors influencing strategy implementation

Strategy implementation is a critical process that involves converting a well-defined strategic plan into action to achieve the desired results. However, several factors can influence the successful implementation of a strategy. As strategic execution is a necessary capability that decides whether an organisation's strategy can be executed, research on factors influencing it also provides theoretical guidance for organisations in designing their own strategy implementation than only contributing to the theory. Strategic management, staff attitude, and organisational mechanisms are the key factors influencing strategy execution (Monauni 2017).

Member attitude

People are at the centre of strategy execution, according to Lee and Puranam (2016), and members' attitudes determine motivation, which in turn defines an organisation's strategy execution. When leaders' vision and organisational belief is promotive of strategy execution, members' attitudes will influence strategy execution. Vision, as a value concept, reflects a higher expectation of the future at work and guides the organisation's growth. Only if the top managers have a strong view of the vision and truly believe in it, and then effectively convey/communicate the vision and values to all team members, will the team members' efforts be centred on the organisational vision and thus shape the strategy execution (Borst, Kruijen & Lako 2019). By optimising the combination of various types of resources, having the strategy implementers fathom the strategy would help with strategic decision-making and strategy execution. First and foremost, regular strategic contact between middle and top managers aids in the formation of their strategic understanding, resulting in improved strategy implementation and efficiency (Levenson 2018). Secondly, middle managers are closer to the specific business function than top executives, allowing them access to more information for determining and enhancing the efficiency of strategic decisions and, ultimately, strategy implementation. Finally, as a link between top managers and entry-level staff, the middle manager plays a vital role in promoting and accelerating strategic coordination in the organisation, helping participants to conduct their roles in the organisational culture and collaborate in a systematic manner to achieve the plan (Neilson, Martin & Powers 2008).

The identification and contribution of employees to the plan is the most important element in the development of strategy execution (Chiwawa 2022). The employees get motivated and passionately engage if they believe their position plays a notable role in the organisational strategy. This improves strategy execution. Furthermore, as

organisational members agree with the corporate plan and reach a strategic consent, they can strengthen their allegiance to the strategy, allowing it to be executed more effectively and produce higher results.

Strategic management

The implementation of a strategy, as an organisation's ability to accomplish its predetermined goals, begins with an organisational strategy and ends with successful implementation, depicting that strategy is the source of strategy execution (Chiwawa et al. 2021). Precisely, clear strategic aims, specific goal structures, and strategic control should all be in place. A transparent declaration of the strategic aim, according to Goel, Khanna and Kishore (2010), is the first step in strategy execution. Sull, Homkes and Sull (2015) also agree that the first step in building strategy execution is defining and verifying organisational strategic goals, as only a specific strategic aim will lead an organisation to insist on its choices for resource allocation towards optimal benefits. The achievement of such a transformation necessitates a clear strategic targets structure, with strategy execution defined as the ability to assign resources and turn strategies into actions (Levenson 2018). The unique strategic goals framework assists each participant in better understanding the plan, while a detailed strategic targets structure explains the roles and responsibilities of members and units. This in turn enhances strategic collaboration between departments for improving optimal resource usage and strategy execution.

According to Liu et al. (2021), strategy execution involves strategic control, which means that after establishing a target system and allocating resources, timely steps to improve strategy execution should be taken. This involves keeping track of the environment in which it operates, as well as implementing, assessing, and promoting productivity levels through employee engagement. The aim of strategy execution is to organise participants' activities in order to achieve the strategy's objectives. Following the assignment of resources, strategic management is used to determine if the resources are being used to their full potential, whether members' behaviours are strategically focussed, and if the success obtained is in line with the strategy (De Oliveira, Carneiro & Esteves 2019). As a result, strategic control has a significant impact on strategy implementation.

Organisational mechanisms

According to Espirah and Murigi (2019), the cooperation of members is required for strategy execution, and strategy execution is echoed in the members' passion, behaviours, and output. Organisational management approaches and processes, which can combine strategy and members to improve strategy execution, are the connection between strategy and members. Vernizzi, Zannoni and Zuccolotto (2019) highlight the fact that there are three dimensions of organisational mechanisms, grouped as strategic

communication mechanism; organisational mechanisms to motivate members; and organisational mechanisms of tracking.

The strategic communication mechanism posits that it is important to distribute the strategy to all organisational stakeholders, including staff, clients, and suppliers, when decomposing the strategy into a strategic target structure (Dalcher 2018). As a consequence, creating the appropriate strategic communication networks would have a direct effect on the power of organisational strategic harmony, and ultimately on strategy implementation. The organisational mechanisms to motivate members aspect states that as strategy execution is dictated by the motivation and behaviours of the organisation's members, an effective motivation mechanism may enhance strategy execution by prompting the motivation and performance of execution participants (Glushakova, Chernikova & Strekalova 2020). Finally, organisational tracking mechanism states that when executing strategies, accurate feedback will affirm subordinates' comprehension of the strategy, resulting in better strategy execution (Siam 2017). Members can confirm their positions in strategy implementation and take action immediately because feedback can inform them about their actions and the next orientation in which they can work.

Guiding framework

Strategic planning is a critical aspect of organisational success, but it is often fraught with challenges, particularly during the implementation phase. These challenges can impede an organisation's ability to achieve its vision and goals. Hoshin Kanri, a Japanese strategic management tool, provides effective solutions to these obstacles. Accordingly, this article is guided by the Hoshin Kanri framework, often referred to as Policy Deployment or Hoshin Planning, which is a strategic planning and execution framework that originated in Japan. It has been widely used in various organisations around the world, including municipalities, to align strategy with daily operations. In the context of South African municipalities, Hoshin Kanri can be a valuable tool for improving the effectiveness of service delivery, governance, and overall performance. Hutchins (2008) asserts that one common problem organisations encounter is a lack of a clear and shared vision for the future, leading to ineffective projection of the company's direction. Hoshin Kanri emphasises aligning organisational objectives with individual and departmental goals, thereby fostering a shared vision and commitment to the strategic plan. Another challenge arises from the qualitative nature of non-financial management indicators, which can make decision-making complex. Hoshin Kanri encourages the use of both quantitative and qualitative data, enabling informed decisions at both strategic and operational levels, ultimately improving overall management (Tennants & Roberts 2001).

Opinion-based decision-making is a common issue that can lead to conflicts and hinder consensus. Hoshin Kanri advocates data-driven decision-making, reducing the subjectivity in

strategic choices and enhancing internal alignment (Boisvert 2012). In many organisations, data sources are often outdated, leading to a lack of real-time information. Data silos within an organisation can also hinder communication. Hoshin Kanri stresses the importance of addressing these data issues for the successful implementation of the method. A blame culture within an organisation can hinder problem-solving as errors are personalised rather than objectively analysed. Hoshin Kanri fosters a culture of continuous improvement and problem-solving, shifting the focus from individuals to systemic issues.

In a nutshell, Hoshin Kanri offers a comprehensive solution to a wide range of strategic problems faced by organisations. By promoting a shared vision, data-driven decision-making, competitive awareness, and improved strategic implementation, it enables organisations to navigate the complex landscape of strategic planning more effectively. It empowers middle managers, aligns departmental goals with the organisation's vision, and promotes sustainable, systemic solutions, ultimately leading to more successful and enduring strategic outcomes. Hoshin Kanri is a valuable tool that can help organisations overcome these common strategic challenges and improve their overall performance.

Research method

For the purposes of this research, a cross-sectional qualitative study was used. This approach was considered because the study research questions are exploratory, which is a good fit for this design (Cardano 2020). In order to establish a basic knowledge of the major difficulties the public sector faces in implementing its strategies, an exploratory study with an interpretive philosophical approach was necessary (Saunders, Kitzinger & Kitzinger 2015). The design of the interview pro forma was assisted by an initial literature study, which reflected a theoretically informed rather than a grounded theoretical/purely inductive approach (Gawda 2023). In order to verify the facts that the study is based on, the data collected by using several sources were triangulated. For the purposes of data collecting in this study, document analysis, in-depth interviews, and general observation were the used techniques.

The study involved face-to-face interviews with 24 key informants who were purposively selected based on their roles in South African metropolitan, district, and local municipalities, specifically those responsible for strategy development and execution. The participant group comprised municipal managers, chief financial officers, chief strategy officers, and heads of departments. The choice of these informants was made to ensure a broad and representative view of the public sector's strategic challenges. On-site visits and phone conversations with these and other informants were combined with formal, in-depth interviews. While the duration of each interview varied, the average interview lasted approximately 45 min. The variation in interview durations was because of the depth of discussion and the willingness of participants to share insights. Some informants

developed into intimates, with whom it was feasible to have informal discussions and request more information. A final interview protocol for open ended semi-structured interviews was developed following the literature research and pilot empirical studies. *A priori* identified interview questions were augmented with questions deemed worthwhile to pursue during the interview (Denscombe 2021). Even though permission to record the interview was always requested, only some were as the preliminary interviews revealed that respondents felt more at ease when there was no tape recording. All interview transcripts were created, and participant responses were double-checked. Data were analysed thematically.

A thorough review of relevant documents, reports, and strategic plans within South African metropolitan, district, and local municipalities was conducted by the researchers. This endeavour served to establish a historical context and form the basis for the interview protocol. On-site visits and telephone conversations with key informants were conducted to complement the interview data, thus enhancing the researchers' grasp of the contextual backdrop against which these strategies were being put into practice. The data obtained through document analysis and interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, involving the identification of recurring patterns and themes within the dataset. This process allowed for the identification of common challenges, insights, and perspectives pertaining to the implementation of public sector strategies. To facilitate the systematic coding and organisation of data into themes, NVIVO 14 qualitative data analysis software was employed. Biographical information concerning the participants, including their professional backgrounds, years of experience, and specific roles within the municipalities, was diligently recorded. These details are presented in anonymised form in the research findings, enhancing the context and offering a deeper insight into the perspectives presented.

To ensure research ethics, the study obtained informed consent from all participants involved, including municipalities, government officials, employees, and other stakeholders. They were made aware of the research's objectives, methods, potential risks, and benefits before agreeing to participate. Protecting the confidentiality of participants and their data is paramount. To ensure this, the researchers implemented rigorous data security and storage protocols to safeguard sensitive information. Anonymity was maintained when presenting results to prevent any identification of individual participants.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (No. HSS/1228/017D).

Findings and discussion

The research findings highlight the significant impact of political interference on the autonomy of public sector

organisations. Strategies in the public sector are often subject to political interference, which can derail or delay their execution. Changes in political leadership or priorities can lead to frequent changes in strategy, resulting in instability and confusion. When politicians interfere in the decision-making process or implementation of policies, it can lead to a divergence from the organisation's strategic goals and objectives. Political interference can result in changing priorities, where the focus shifts from long-term strategic goals to short-term political gains. This can lead to the neglect of important issues and the abandonment of critical projects. This resonates with the literature on 'agenda setting' and 'issue attention cycles', where Kingdon (2003) argues that political leaders may prioritise issues that cater to their political base, potentially neglecting important but less politically attractive matters. When decisions are made based on political considerations rather than strategic priorities, resources may be allocated to less critical projects, resulting in the diversion of funds from critical projects. One of the respondents had the following to say:

'Political interference can also affect the autonomy of public sector organisations. When politicians exert undue influence on decision-making, it can undermine the independence and integrity of public sector organisations.' (Participant 4, manager, 2023)

This observation aligns with existing literature such as De Visser (2010), who underscores the importance of preserving the independence and integrity of these entities. When politicians wield excessive influence over decision-making processes within public sector organisations, it not only compromises their ability to function objectively but also raises concerns about accountability and the potential erosion of public trust in government institutions. These findings underscore the importance of safeguarding the autonomy of public sector organisations to ensure their effective and unbiased operation.

The research findings also underscore the significance of prioritising strategic considerations over political factors in decision-making processes. This emphasises the need for public sector organisations to adhere to the principles of strategic management, which emphasise aligning actions and decisions with the organisation's mission and long-term objectives. In practice, this means that public sector leaders should make decisions that promote the greater good and the organisation's overall mission, rather than succumbing to short-term political pressures or considerations. By doing so, they can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery, ultimately leading to better outcomes for the constituents they serve. This emphasis on strategic decision-making corresponds with Bryson and George (2020), who underscore the necessity for government entities and organisations to formulate and execute strategies that are firmly rooted in their mission and long-term objectives, rather than being swayed by short-term political considerations. The findings further highlight the challenges and complexities associated with ensuring that strategic priorities guide decision-making in the public sector. Political

influences often permeate public policy and administration, making it difficult to maintain a steadfast focus on long-term goals. Thus, the research suggests that successful implementation of strategic management in the public sector requires strong leadership, effective communication, and a commitment to transparency and accountability. It also calls for ongoing efforts to bridge the gap between political decision-makers and strategic planning teams, fostering a culture where strategic priorities take precedence in shaping the future of public services.

Another significant finding from the research was the crucial role of resources in successful strategy execution. The research revealed that strategic success often hinges on the ability of organisations, in this case, South African municipalities, to take calculated risks. However, it was observed that when these organisations lack the necessary resources, their capacity to manage these risks effectively is compromised. This resource deficit can lead to a cascade of adverse consequences. Costly mistakes, delays in project timelines, compromises in the quality of outcomes, suboptimal performance. One of the participants had the following to say:

'Strategies may necessitate calculated risks, but a lack of resources can hinder effective risk management, leading to costly errors, delays, compromises, suboptimal outcomes, or failure to achieve goals. Resource scarcity can also dampen employee motivation and engagement, impacting productivity and performance if essential tools, equipment, or personnel are lacking.' (Participant 9, HOD, 2023)

Furthermore, the study highlighted the profound impact of resource scarcity on employee motivation and engagement within these municipalities. The lack of essential resources or sufficient personnel to implement strategies was found to have a demotivating effect on employees. These findings echo the work of Chiwawa and Wissink (2021) as well as Lee and Puranam (2016), who argue that the attitudes and motivation of organisational members play a crucial role in shaping the execution of strategies. As a result, employees were more likely to become disengaged, affecting their overall productivity and performance in a detrimental way. When leaders promote a vision and organisational belief that are conducive to strategy execution, members' attitudes become pivotal in influencing the outcome.

The research findings also shed light on the detrimental impact of bureaucracy and red tape within the South African public sector, particularly in the context of strategy implementation. This was confirmed by the below response, asserting that these barriers involve complex decision-making processes that lead to delays and inefficiencies:

'Bureaucracy and red tape in the public sector significantly impede strategy implementation. They entail complex decision-making processes, causing delays, inefficiencies, and higher costs. Moreover, rigid rules hinder adaptability to changing circumstances, obstructing swift responses and thereby impeding strategy implementation.' (Participant 13, HOD, 2023)

These findings are in line with the broader literature on public administration and strategy execution, which highlight the challenges posed by bureaucratic hurdles in achieving effective governance and public service delivery. Bureaucracy and red tape in South African municipalities have been identified as significant roadblocks to successful strategy implementation. This finding aligns with the work of scholars such as Mai (2016), who have emphasised the role of bureaucracy in slowing down public sector operations and decision-making. The resulting inefficiencies may contribute to higher operational costs, which can strain the already limited resources of municipalities. The research also underscores that rigid rules and regulations further exacerbate the problem, as they impede adaptability to changing circumstances. The inability to respond swiftly to evolving situations is a fundamental challenge when it comes to implementing effective strategies. This observation is consistent with the literature on organisational adaptability and strategic agility (Do, Yeh & Madsen 2016). Scholars like Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) have highlighted the importance of flexibility and adaptability in ensuring the success of strategic initiatives. In the context of South African municipalities, the study demonstrates that red tape and bureaucratic processes hinder the ability to make the necessary adjustments to strategies in a timely manner.

The findings from this study also emphasise the significance of accountability in strategy implementation. A lack of accountability can lead to misalignment of resources, inefficient decision-making processes, and delays in the implementation of strategies. One of the participants had the following to say:

‘A lack of accountability can hinder resource alignment, delay decision-making, and compromise strategy implementation. It can also foster corruption, hinder resource management, and impede stakeholder engagement in strategy implementation.’ (Participants 17 & 12, Executive Mayor & Director, 2023)

This is consistent with the work of authors such as Kaplan and Norton (1996) who have highlighted the importance of accountability in the Balanced Scorecard framework, which is widely used in strategy implementation. Moreover, accountability is also crucial for preventing corruption and unethical behaviour, as pointed out in the extract. Recent studies such as by Sinha et al. (2019) have demonstrated the negative impact of corruption on public sector strategy implementation, making clear accountability even more essential. Another finding underlines the role of stakeholders in strategy implementation. It acknowledges that different stakeholders may have varying levels of influence and priorities that may not always align with the organisation’s strategic objectives. To address this, organisations should identify and manage these stakeholder relationships to ensure they do not hinder the implementation process. Recent research by Mitchell et al. (2022) on stakeholder theory highlights the importance of engaging and managing various stakeholders to ensure the success of strategic initiatives. One of the key informant stated the following to confirm this:

‘Stakeholders, with varying levels of influence, may have divergent interests that can potentially impede an organisation’s strategic objectives. Balancing these competing interests is essential to allocate resources effectively for strategy implementation. Furthermore, organisations operating in the public sector must navigate regulatory and policy constraints that can affect their strategy execution. Hence, they must remain aware of and comply with these regulations during implementation.’ (Participants 18 & 23, Town Planner & Finance Manager, 2023)

Furthermore, the extract mentions the need to balance competing demands and adhere to relevant regulations and policies, both of which are also crucial in managing stakeholder relationships and complying with legal requirements in the public sector.

One of the key findings of this research pertains to the challenge of operating in silos within public sector organisations. According to research participants, in the following excerpt, this issue is prevalent in South African municipalities, where different departments and agencies tend to work independently of each other:

‘Public sector organisations often operate in silos, with different departments and agencies working independently of each other. This can make it difficult to align strategies across the organisation and to coordinate efforts effectively.’ (Participant 14; 21; 24, Municipal Manager, HOD, Mayor, 2023)

This siloed approach can have significant implications for the success of strategy implementation. Recent literature supports this finding. This finding is consistent with the arguments made by authors such as O’Toole and Meier (2011), who emphasise the need for interdepartmental coordination in public administration for effective strategy implementation. Additionally, as noted by authors like Osborne (2010), it is essential to have a shared vision and common goals across the organisation to facilitate successful strategy execution. They argue that lack of coordination and alignment across departments can hinder the delivery of public services and ultimately impact governance. Addressing this challenge is crucial for South African municipalities to enhance governance and public service delivery. The research suggests that fostering a culture of collaboration, breaking down departmental barriers, and creating mechanisms for cross-functional coordination will be essential for successful strategy implementation in this context. This finding underscores the importance of not only formulating effective strategies but also ensuring their seamless execution by overcoming the siloed approach within these organisations.

Proposed model

The developed model for strategy execution in public sector has its footage in the integration of three main constructs namely: organisational approach; political support; and attitude of execution participants. One of the common impediments to

strategy implementation is that most workers consider themselves as cost centres because they do not explicitly contribute to the accomplishment of core organisational objectives (Borst et al. 2019). Yet, they can become value centres for the specific purpose of generating more value than they can provide, through service, support and response. This way, they become more committed as they can see the servicing value as their contribution as they look at their contribution in a different way. Figure 1 summarises the proposed strategy implementation model for public sector organisations.

The most challenging stage of strategy implementation, according to the proposed strategy execution model, is working with people who have varying levels of motivation, engagement, and dedication. These discrepancies often lead to interpersonal disputes, which, if unresolved, may sabotage execution efforts and results. Strategy execution efforts often fail if the majority of execution participants and middle management do not support and commit to the strategy, which may be the case if they were not consulted during the development process (Henry 2008). Strategy execution necessitates energising all layers of the organisation's staff and administrators to put the formulated strategies into effect. A good strategy executed poorly would produce the same poor results as a bad strategy (Van den Steen 2018). Constant investment in management capabilities is needed to turn plans into action. It appears to be particularly difficult in large or complex organisations like public sector, where the gap between those who formulate strategy (politicians) and those who execute it (arms of the civil service) may be significant.

The model further suggests the need for proper management of resource for a successful strategy implementation. Accordingly, while the presence of resources is important, resources in and of themselves do not provide much value to an entity (Olivier 2018). An organisation's competencies are given by the efficient configuration of resources. Therefore, resources are viewed as inputs that enable an organisation to carry out its activities, as resources only add value to the organisation after they have been put into production

(Barrick, Thurgood & Smith 2015). However, the organisational approaches require the support of the political will by the governing authorities, and this in turn will determine the attitude of execution participants.

Apropos to the suggested model earlier, the researchers of this paper opine that most leaders are in charge of a variety of activities, and that they are often presented with tasks that necessitate a particular form of leadership actions. Furthermore, as subordinates differ in terms of experience, abilities, beliefs, and needs, a leader's behaviour with different people can vary accordingly. Therefore, some behavioural versatility and adaptability are required. The chosen behaviours must be appropriate for the contexts in which they are used in order to be adaptive. It is critical to be aware of the vertical hierarchical gap that exists between political policy makers and the administration responsible for implementation. Furthermore, horizontal historical gaps between the mandates of elected politicians should be foreseen, which may result in the halting of strategy and projects. It could also lead to a shift in goals. It is important to tread carefully when it comes to too ambitious and unachievable goals that are typically based on political rather than reasonable considerations, and can be construed in a variety of ways. Within these regulating institutions and limiting processes, decision-making is often more complex.

According to the earlier proposed model, the following are key elements of effective strategy execution in the public sector:

1. *Clarity of goals and objectives:* The goals and objectives of the public sector organisation must be clearly defined and communicated to all stakeholders. This includes setting specific targets and timelines for achieving these goals and objectives.
2. *Alignment of resources:* Public sector organisations must ensure that resources, including budget, personnel, and technology, are aligned with the goals and objectives of the organisation. This includes prioritising initiatives and projects that are most critical to achieving strategic objectives.



FIGURE 1: Public sector strategy execution model.

3. *Performance measurement and reporting*: Public sector organisations must establish clear performance metrics and reporting mechanisms to track progress towards strategic goals and objectives. This includes regular reporting on performance, as well as using data and analytics to inform decision-making.
4. *Collaboration and stakeholder engagement*: Effective strategy execution in the public sector requires collaboration and engagement with stakeholders, including other government agencies, private sector partners, and citizens. This includes developing partnerships and alliances to support implementation efforts and engaging citizens in the process.
5. *Continuous improvement*: Public sector organisations must continuously monitor and evaluate their strategies and initiatives, and adjust as needed. This includes learning from successes and failures, and using this knowledge to improve performance and achieve better outcomes.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

The study has several limitations that warrant consideration. Firstly, the sample size of South African municipalities included in the research is relatively small, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to the entire country. To enhance the validity of future studies, it is essential to work with a larger and more diverse sample. Secondly, the study's limited timeframe may not fully capture the long-term dynamics of strategy implementation in South African municipalities, particularly as these entities face evolving challenges. The inclusion of longitudinal studies in future research would provide a more comprehensive perspective. Lastly, the research predominantly focussed on internal factors influencing strategy implementation, overlooking external factors like political changes and economic conditions, which can significantly impact municipal governance. Future studies should adopt a more holistic framework that considers both internal and external dynamics.

Implications of the study

This study makes significant contributions in several key areas. Firstly, it enhances the understanding of municipal strategy implementation in South African municipalities by identifying the crucial drivers and barriers that impact its success. This insight empowers stakeholders with the knowledge needed to make informed decisions. Secondly, the research carries substantial policy implications, offering direct guidance to policymakers, municipal leaders, and public service providers. It informs the development of more effective policies and strategies, with the aim of bolstering governance and public service delivery in the South African context. Additionally, this study adds to the academic literature on strategy implementation and public administration, offering a valuable foundation for future

research in this field. Moreover, the implications of this research extend to practical improvements in governance, as a deeper understanding of critical factors can lead to more effective municipal administration. By informing strategies to enhance public service delivery, the study directly contributes to the well-being and satisfaction of South African citizens, emphasising the importance of improved governance and public service in the region.

Conclusion

Strategy execution in the public sector often faces numerous impediments that can hinder the successful implementation of policies and initiatives. One significant challenge is the inherent complexity of bureaucratic structures and processes, which can lead to slow decision-making, excessive red tape, and a lack of agility. Additionally, political factors and frequent changes in leadership can disrupt continuity and long-term planning, as new priorities and agendas may supersede existing strategies. Resource constraints, including budgetary limitations and competing demands for funding, pose another obstacle to effective strategy execution. Moreover, resistance to change and a risk-averse culture within public sector organisations can impede the adoption of innovative approaches and hinder the alignment of personnel with strategic objectives. To overcome these impediments, proactive efforts are required, including streamlined decision-making processes, stable leadership, adequate resource allocation, and a supportive organisational culture that embraces change and fosters collaboration.

The study concludes that instead of having strategic planning and execution as independent functions, they should be regarded as just two 'ends' of a same continuum for a common purpose. Strategy execution in the South African municipalities is a multifaceted and crucial process that plays a vital role in achieving national goals and delivering effective public services. It involves translating strategic objectives into concrete actions, mobilising resources, and implementing initiatives to drive meaningful change. The South African government recognises the significance of strategy execution and has taken steps to enhance its effectiveness through the establishment of robust governance structures, clear performance metrics, and stakeholder engagement. However, challenges such as bureaucratic red tape, capacity constraints, and political factors can hinder seamless execution. To overcome these obstacles, the South African local governance should increasingly focus on fostering a culture of accountability, enhancing coordination among various government entities, and leveraging technology to streamline processes. By prioritising strategy execution, South Africa aims to achieve sustainable development, improve service delivery, and create a better future for its citizens. Strategy execution therefore becomes the systematic collection of interconnected activities allowing an organisation to convert strategy into action. Strategy and execution are ineffective when separated as they are inextricably linked, as the latter is the means of attaining the former. Hence, failing in one is failing in both.

Recommendations for the study

Based on the conclusion of the study, it is recommended that South African municipalities integrate strategic planning and execution as interconnected components of a continuous process aimed at achieving national goals and enhancing public service delivery. To enhance the effectiveness of strategy execution, it is crucial to address challenges such as bureaucratic red tape, capacity constraints, and political factors by fostering a culture of accountability, promoting coordination among government entities, and leveraging technology for streamlined processes. Additionally, ongoing efforts to establish robust governance structures, clear performance metrics, and stakeholder engagement should be continued and refined. By prioritising this integrated perspective and focussing on the seamless alignment of strategy and execution, South Africa can work towards achieving sustainable development, improved service delivery, and a better future for its citizens, understanding that success in one area is closely tied to success in the other.

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Authors' contributions

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, N.C., upon reasonable request.

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