



SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR IMPROVED EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN MUNICIPALITIES

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Abstract. This study explores skills development for improved employee performance in South African municipalities. This study was motivated by the need to expedite local government service delivery, hampered by municipal employees' poor capacity and skills over the years. Many municipalities need help to fulfil their service delivery obligations because of the requisite skills' scarcity, absence, and shortage. The study explores the skills development of municipal employees (focus) in South African municipalities (locus). It does not focus on one chosen municipality but looks at the situation holistically from a broader perspective. The study aims to find answers to the research question: what are the causes of skills shortage on employee performance in South African municipalities? A qualitative desktop study was adopted to find answers to the guiding question, and various secondary documents were analysed to gather information. The human capital theory was used as a framework for the study. The findings show that most local government employees' skills are outside the dictates of the current era. The study recommends interventions, among other things, improving local government skills development funding, adequately implementing monitoring and evaluation practices, developing soft skills for the current fourth industrial revolution era, and performing regular municipal skills audits.

Keywords: employee performance; the fourth industrial revolution; local government; service delivery; skills development; South Africa.

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1. Introduction

This study centres on skills development for improved employee performance in South African local government. Such is hinged on the need to train and develop human capital capable of improving public service delivery by municipalities. Municipalities are the local sphere of government nearest to the people and tasked with developing local communities and delivering goods and services for improved living standards. The local sphere of government is established in Section 152(1), Chapter 7 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996). It has various aims, which include providing a democratic and accountable government for local communities; ensuring the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner; promoting social and economic development; promoting a safe and healthy environment; and encouraging the involvement of communities and

community organisations in local government matters (Republic of South Africa (RSA) 1996:77). Furthermore, Section 152(2) of the RSA (1996) Constitution obligates municipalities to strive, within their financial and administrative capacity, to achieve the preceding objectives. This study notes that for the above aims of local government to be achieved, municipality employees require a specific set of skills. Therefore, this study discusses skills development's meaning and implications for employee performance. Also, Munzhedzi (2021:213) notes that attaining the various goals of local government requires competent human capital with the requisite skills to undertake the various tasks and duties. Furthermore, there is a solid link between the availability of skilled human capital and the timely delivery of quality public goods and services in local governments (Maphumulo & Bhengu 2019:7). Therefore, for the government to deliver on its constitutional mandate, there is an urgent need to sustainably strengthen human resources regarding the quantity and quality of capable municipal employees.

This study uses a qualitative research approach. Denzin and Lincoln (2005:7) state, "qualitative research is interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and spreads across humanities, the social sciences, and the physical sciences". Therefore, "qualitative research could be seen as an umbrella term for different approaches, with each having its theoretical background, methodological principles and aims" (Auriacombe 2009:97), and "it emphasises the careful and detailed description of social practice" as cited in Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad (2020:235); Mothabi & Vyas-Doorgapersad (2022:367) and Mutandwa & Vyas-Doorgapersad (2023:28). The 'insider's perspective' that emerges from qualitative researchers allows them to find the best way to interact with their research environments, thus allowing for flexibility and pushing research findings towards validity and believability (Patton, Hong, Patel & Kral 2017:8). The data is collected through literature review. A literature review "surveys books, scholarly articles, and other sources relevant to a particular issue, area of research, or theory. It provides a description, summary, and critical evaluation of these works concerning the research problem investigated" (Labaree 2009:1, cited in Ncamphalala 2019:16-17). The data was analysed through conceptual analysis. The "goal of using conceptual analysis as a method of inquiry into a given field of interest is to improve our understanding of how particular concepts are (or could be) used for communicating ideas about that field" (Furner 2006:233). It is also emphasized by Maxwell (2005) whose opinions are cited in Maile & Vyas-Doorgapersad (2022:83) and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2023:456), stressing that a conceptual analysis refers to the process of developing the empirical study's conceptual framework. The study employs conceptual analysis to draw the meaning of concepts related to skills development to see how they influence the performance of municipalities.

The study looks at the human capital theory and its applicability to this study. Understanding the approach used in this study depends on the initial and overall understanding of the phrase 'human capital'. Drucker (1999), cited in Annett (2019:16), states that human capital is increasingly considered the company's most asset. This implies that public and private organisations must give special attention to this resource since it significantly affects attaining their predetermined goals. By conceptualisation, Boon, Eckardt, Lepak and Boselie (2018:35) regard human capital as a phrase that refers to a blend of individual aptitudes such as knowledge, skills and capabilities of individuals with economic value to an organisation. Kucharcikova (2011:65) argues that the scope of human capital includes natural ability, innate and acquired skills, knowledge, attitudes, experience, talent, and inventiveness. These can further lead to an entity creating a good rapport with its stakeholders, building a good reputation in the short, medium, and long term.

2. Frameworks on skills development and employee performance

Skills refer to abilities for improved job performance as seen in the undertaking of an organised sequence of activities that are critical to the achievement of the predetermined goals of an organisation (Baartman & Bruijn 2011:127). The said organisation includes public entities such as the municipalities in South Africa, which comprise the local sphere of government. For this study, skills are critical to the effective functioning of municipalities because these are the centres of community development and public service delivery. From another

angle, skills denote the knowledge about how to do something, 'know-how' (Bolisani & Bratianu 2018:11). Therefore, skills effectively equip employees with the expertise and knowledge to undertake various organisational tasks. In the context of this study, skills can include an understanding of people-centred public or municipal service delivery.

Since 1994, South Africa has been confronted by a skills crisis. Skills development has been acknowledged as a critical component for its transformation (Tshilongamulenzhe 2012:30), leaving the state requiring a government-led skills revolution that can bring socio-economic transformation (Plant & Padotan 2017:35). Further to this, the scarcity and shortage of critical skills in South Africa correspondingly imply that there is the absence of competent public servants and key officials in all sectors of the economy (Plant & Padotan 2017:44). Kroukamp (2002:455) observes that the skills scarcity dilemma in South Africa is worsened by the half-hearted commitment by public officials and policy implementers to address the problem effectively, leading to its persistence. According to Matlala and Uwizeyimana (2020:2), the local sphere of government is not immune to this skills deficit, which has left municipalities in a quandary, with audit opinions from the Auditor General indicating that skills such as financial management are in short supply. Therefore, there is a need to use skills training and development interventions to equip local government with all the skills lacking. This is because municipalities are the centre of critical processes leading to community development and the post-1994 transformation agenda.

There are three central aspects to the skills debate in South Africa, as established by labour economists. First, skills shortages denote the acute absence of qualified labour to fill vacant positions (Hakansson & Bejakovic 2020:8). Second, skills mismatches occur when individuals seeking employment do not have the skills required for the vacant positions (Hakansson & Bejakovic 2020:8). Third, Taylor (2018:34) notes that there is information asymmetry that happens when potential employees or employers do not have information that could improve the matching of skills and available vacancies. The ability of employees to function and execute duties and responsibilities is related to their competencies and capacity to carry out those tasks. This capacity includes individual and organisational aspects, which means that organisations must create an enabling environment for employees' productivity and performance.

The skills development process is linked to the upskilling of individuals to improve them and ensure that the job-to-individual match is enhanced. Attaining such a balance is dependent on human capital skill sets being updated regularly using both informal and formal processes or interventions. In the case of municipalities, there is a need to ensure that the skills deficits that the post-1994 local government sphere faces are addressed through skills development and other related interventions. One such intervention is the training and development of local government employees through the Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority (LGSETA) (Turner, Halabi, Sartorius & Arendse 2013:2). In the process of skills development, there is a marked improvement required in the area of education and knowledge of those that will be on the receiving end of such training.

Furthermore, the study notes that optimal public service delivery depends entirely on the ability of those tasked with service delivery to conduct their community development tasks. The study argues that the transformative agenda of local government is directly credited to the ability of employers and employees to perform optimally. The study discusses the definition and implications of this concept hereafter. Iskamto (2021:143) defines performance as the "result of the work of an employee in carrying out the tasks assigned to him in accordance with his responsibilities and roles based on skills, experience, and sincerity as well as time accompanied by quality and quantity according to the rules laid down" (Iskamto 2021:143). Armstrong and Taylor (2020:136) note that as a concept performance "covers both what has been achieved and how it has been achieved". Performance "has to rely extensively on data-informed qualitative assessments of organisational capability or effectiveness in the pursuance of its set objectives" (Armstrong 2009:136). Vroom (1964), cited in Armstrong and Taylor (2020:142), notes that "the effects of motivation on performance are dependent on the level of ability of

the employee, and the relationship of ability to performance is dependent on the motivation of the employee.” It is noted that “Vroom also pioneered expectancy theory that, as developed by Porter and Lawler in 1968, proposes that high individual performance depends on high motivation plus possession of the necessary skills and abilities and an appropriate role and understanding of that role” (Armstrong 2009:143). In the same vein, enhancing performance refers to the deliberate act of increasing and augmenting the rate at which one delivers on their targets, that is, improving their output, quality, timeliness, or quantity (Dobre 2013:55). Sandhya and Kumar (2011:1779) argue that the enhancement of performance can be through the upgrading of skills, improved rewards, training and development and human capital interventions related to improving employee loyalty. Thus, South African municipalities have to consistently and constantly strive to keep enhancing their employees' performance by intervening towards improving their skill set. That kind of culture of performance enhancements can ensure that no resources and time are lost to low productivity and poor competencies amongst municipal employees and officials. Such a practice and virtue can improve the productivity of individuals, teams, and the organisation.

Employee performance is central to using skills development as a municipal service delivery intervention. Hermina and Yosepha (2019:71) note that employee performance refers to "the work quality and quantity achieved by an employee in carrying out his function in accordance with the responsibilities given to him." Al Mehrzi and Singh (2016:835) posit that this definitional perspective brings aspects of work standards vital to successfully undertaking work duties and responsibilities. In the municipal setting, these standards encompass the need to ensure public participation, people-centeredness, and the selfless promotion of public interest. According to Brhane and Zewdie (2018:72), the issue of employee performance is the total or aggregate output of individual employees' activities and actions in an organisation.

Moreover, employee performance levels can be described as low, moderate, and high. Low employee performance ratings in municipal settings can be equivalent to wasting resources and taxpayer money, in addition to being harmful to the delivery of public services. Employee performance in an organisation is often evaluated in light of an employee's contributions to accomplishing the organisation's goals.

3. Skills development challenges in South African municipalities

South Africa needs help with critical skills for its local government transformation agenda (Madzivhandila & Musara 2020:262). This scarcity of essential skills in municipalities can be traced back to the state-sanctioned discrimination under apartheid, where different standards of education and service delivery were provided to black people in South Africa (Davids & Esau 2012:83). In the same vein, Mohlala, Phago and Mpehle (2014:217) expand on the preceding by arguing that, transforming municipal management training and development is an essential aspect in government, as municipal management is statutorily mandated to ensure improvement of basic service delivery in the local tier of the South African government. Nonetheless, municipalities need to achieve this clear mandate because of various factors. Chief to these inhibitors is what Nengwekhulu (2009), cited in Mohlala et al. (2014:218), notes as a shortage of quality skills that directly and detrimentally impact, among other things, the managerial capacity in municipalities.

Davids and Esau (2012:86) advise that, in South Africa, local government entities are not only anticipated to establish and transform institutions, but they must simultaneously invest in human capital in the wake of the various obstacles confronting municipalities and service delivery today. Thakhathi and Kanyane (2019:53) bemoan the enormous investment that municipalities put into skills development for limited returns on that investment, leaving municipalities and other public entities facing the same challenges of poor employee performance or productivity. The study considers that such a lack of transformation frustrates local government service delivery, the site of South Africa's grassroots development.

It is important to note that a municipality must always strive to ensure that universal minimum living standards are attained by putting in place all needed apparatus for effective local community development (Nkhabu 2021:17). These apparatuses include capable and competent human capital. Therefore, it can be claimed that the incapacity of South African towns to increase personnel development and training as a means of improving resident outcomes is an indication of poor local government. Shah (2005:49) further argues that the public service orientation of local government must be visible, and municipalities must ensure that they promote public interest over individual interests. Further to the above, “municipalities must promote public value, which refers to measurable improvements in social outcomes or quality of life” (Moore 1996:25).

Some of the causes of skills shortage on employee performance in South African municipalities are stated below:

3.1. Influences of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)

Chu, Reynolds, Tavares, Notari and Lee (2021:8) note that the 4IR era requires skills development interventions that, unlike any other period that preceded the contemporary one, are characterised by the ever-growing influence of technologies. According to Tschang and Almirall (2021:647), in the current environment of private and public entities, automation has increasingly taken over the place of the human workforce in tasks that involve routine cognitive and manual input. Therefore, municipalities that need to acknowledge that soft skills are critical for this dynamic world are more likely to fail in delivering on their local government service delivery mandates. Additionally, Sonmez (2015:56) construes that, due to these demands and changes for municipalities, the labour force is now hiring people for jobs that require more analytical thinking, digital skills, and sophisticated communication skills, something that is very different from the times before the emergence of the 4IR. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2007:15), in the 21st century 4IR local government system, entities must impart skills linking to the broader world challenges that communities face together with the capacity to negotiate the complexities inherent in the contemporary knowledge-driven economy. South African municipalities must move with the times and ensure that they appreciate current trends in skills development and focal areas for employee training for improved municipal performance. According to Trilling and Fadel (2009:74), the 4IR skills that local government entities must consider are three key knowledge domains: innovative and critical thinking, information and digital literacies, and life and career skills. Hence, South African municipalities must catch up by using the many soft skills that can improve their service delivery. They need to embrace these and enhance the efficacy of their training and development interventions for improved community development. This statement is supported by the opinions of Shava & Doorgapersad (2021:142), suggesting that digital innovations can be adopted to accelerate service delivery within the local government sphere. However, institutional readiness and skills are vital to adequately utilise modern digital technologies to realise a change in the 4IR.

Heymans (2006:83) notes that South Africa’s ambitious local government reform programme (which includes employee performance improvement through training and development) requires ambitious management, but more than that, it demands skills. Unfortunately, South Africa’s local government transformation agenda has been affected by the absence of dedicated management capacity to sequence, plan, introduce and drive employee training and capacity building, thereby exposing municipalities to the problem of public or municipal service delivery failure (Heymans 2006:82). Many municipalities are confronting serious capacity limits and institutional shortcomings, which prevent the realisation of political and institutional reforms aimed at effective and efficient service delivery (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2010:44, in Vyas-Doorgapersad & Masibigiri 2022:133). According to Mbandlwa, Dorasamy and Fagbadebo (2020:1647), the Msunduzi Municipality is one of the local government entities affected by the challenges of poor skills in the leadership, i.e., the top management. This is a local municipality where funds are being misspent, the skills development of municipal employees needs to be prioritised, and the service delivery could be better (Mbandlwa et al. 2020:1647). Therefore, this points to the patterns of local entities who deliberately flout procedures and get away with poor employee performance and

overall slow community development. This challenge is rampant in other local government entities, indicating that skills development needs to be embraced and robustly implemented.

In the end, the transformation agenda of the post-1994 government becomes stifled by the absence of good leadership and management skills to promote and intensify the service delivery agenda effectively (Masuku & Jili 2019:1936). Arguably, this agenda requires an 'all hands-on deck' approach through synchronised short-, medium- and long-term approaches to local government and public service skills development (Masuku & Jili 2019:1940). The study deduces that the issue of ready and capacitated leadership for employee skills development in the local government tier is a significant issue hugely determinant on municipalities' abilities to equip the requisite skills for service delivery within living standards. These services include water, sanitation, infrastructure, safety, and other community amenities.

3.2. Status of local government employee performance

This section discusses the sad reality of South African municipal performance. According to damning assessments from the Auditor General of South Africa (AGSA), a financial watchdog monitoring public entity compliance and performance, local government entities lack the necessary capabilities. This section mentions several studies and their damning findings regarding the municipality's performance. For example, in the case of the Msunduzi Municipality in the KwaZulu-Natal Province, the AGSA established that during the 2016/2017 financial year, the entity incurred irregular expenditure, cumulatively R150 million and R11 million in unproductive and wasteful expenditure (Mbandlwa et al. 2020:1650). These humongous figures show losses to the public in South African local government. This study finds this to be absurd and a consequence of poor skill sets in those who make key decisions, and their commitment to skills training is also questionable. This poor decision needs to be better for the municipality's financial condition. Still, within the poor leadership and decision-making, the Msunduzi Municipality had fraudulently awarded tenders to service providers (amongst them, directors and shareholders) who were in the municipality's service, something that the AGSA indicated to be a flagrant disregard of local government laws and guidelines.

Moreover, the 2019/2020 Consolidated Local Government Audit Report by the AGSA laid bare the challenges caused by the absence of a skills development culture in municipalities, such as the Amathole District Municipality (ADM) in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. These have mainly been manifested in the financial management practices deemed poor by the AGSA (AGSA 2019/2020). Poor municipal financial management affects effective public service delivery. Regarding the ADM, outstanding creditors represented one-third of the next year's budget of R1.6 billion, which will now be used to pay creditors instead of funding new service delivery priorities (AGSA 2019/2020). In addition, the financial health of the ADM came into the spotlight in the AGSA report for the 2019/20 financial year, which states that the ADM was unable to recover money from consumers for services rendered, which compounded these financial difficulties and resulted in delays in paying their creditors (AGSA 2019/2020:70). The AGSA report (2019/2020:115) indicates that the absence of robust employee skills development practices in South African municipalities leads to them incurring fruitless expenditure and failing to curtail lavish expenditure that left their financial books in the red.

Moreover, the Amathole District Municipality is one of the municipalities that the AGSA has caught wanting in many of the performance shortcomings in the audit report. It is a sign that good governance, effectiveness, efficacy, and economy should be exercised with the due diligence they deserve. A superficial perusal of the AGSA's municipal audit outcomes and recommendations for the 2017/2018 and 2019/2020 financial years, one may perceive that most municipalities in South Africa need to establish workplace skills plans.

A study by Matlala and Uwizeyimana (2020:2) shows that slightly above 299 of the 338 municipalities audited in the 2012/2013 financial year were not awarded clean audit outcomes due to findings around their predetermined objectives by the ASGA. Matlala (2018:66) further observes that these outcomes were chiefly because of the anomalies related to non-compliance with the Public Financial Management Act (No. 1 of 1999) requirements, whereas, for the 2014/2015 local government report by the ASGA, a major finding was that the financial health of 92% of South Africa's 278 municipalities remained troubling and needed to be rectified. Such a large percentage is worrisome for South African local government, which is the core of community development and post-1994 transformation. A study by Mamokhere (2019:376) shows that in 2014 the Greater Tzaneen Local Municipality awarded a company an R38 million road-surfacing tender without following due process for the tender as stipulated in municipal statutes, procedures, and policies. This further proves that employee skills, especially in financial management, are deficient in South African local government. Matlala and Uwizeyimana (2020:8) further note that the AGSA (2017/2018:25) showed that "local government regular expenditure rose to R28.4 billion in the 2016/2017 financial year in contrast to R16.2 billion the previous year, showing an enormous 75% rise."

In addition to the preceding, the same AGSA report states that out of the 257 municipalities audited for the 2017/2018 financial year, a paltry 18 received clean audits, showing deterioration from the 33 municipalities that had received a clean audit in the preceding financial year (Matlala & Uwizeyimana 2020:8). Geldenhuys (2019:19) notes that another shocking example of poor municipal performance and decision refers to the wasteful and fraudulent R208 million payments by the eThekweni Municipality mayor to service providers for services that were never delivered. This study argues that these instances show gross negligence and a disregard for local government regulations, a sign of the lack of skills for municipalities to make good decisions. It should be further stressed that the outgoing synopsis of the various Auditor Generals reveals that local government malpractice indicates a tier of government in 'dire straits' when it comes to championing community development and transformation. This raises the need for robust adoption and implementation of comprehensive employee training and skills development programmes or initiatives as helpful interventions for effective local government service delivery.

Additionally, the recorded wastage of public funds is problematic since these resources could have been used to deliver essential and critical public goods and services to the people of South Africa. As discussed above, the 2017/2018 financial year saw the overall performance of municipalities rapidly decline. In the 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 financial years, the audit outcomes might be worse, especially considering how the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted service delivery and the administration of municipal entities in South Africa. This situation gives birth to another exponentially rising challenge in local government: public service delivery protests.

Note that municipalities are tasked with increasing the number and quality of fundamental services provided to residents across the province. Nonetheless, many municipalities are confronting severe capacity limits and institutional shortcomings, which prevent the realisation of political and institutional reforms aimed at effective and efficient service delivery (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2010:44, in Vyas-Doorgapersad & Masibigiri 2022: 133). In the context of the study, the lack of service delivery is "Insufficient municipal capacity due to a scarcity of skills (Chauke 2017:4, in Vyas-Doorgapersad & Masibigiri 2022: 133). This was also cited by Maseko (2018:29, in Kmep & Vyas-Doorgapersad 2020:1) that "shortage of qualified staff in the district and local government; inadequate standards of training and poor coordination between central, district and local levels of government, all of which hamper effective delivery of services", that may result into service delivery protests. According to Mpehle (2012), service delivery protests are the only avenue citizens have to register their displeasure with their government entities. This is because millions of residents in post-apartheid South Africa live under appalling conditions and do not enjoy the fruits of democracy. The chosen few enjoy it through corruption, nepotism and

fraud, among others. Therefore, the constitutional right to protect must be exercised to ring the alarm on the municipal governments (Mphele 2012:224). These protests sometimes turn violent and lead to the loss of public infrastructure or even lives. According to Singh (2019:2), the gross damage to municipal infrastructure during a 2019 public service delivery protest in eThekweni Municipality cost the municipality R3.5 million. In addition, “the death of Andries Tatane in Ficksburg in the Free State Province during a service delivery protests is one of the extreme and possible results of violent service delivery protests in South African local government” (Matebesi 2018:249). This ugly side of the public service delivery protests could be curtailed through the capacitation of municipal employees and the effective, efficient, and economic rendering of municipal services.

The ongoing lousy administration demonstrates these interventions' failure, which makes the connection between public service demonstrations and the municipality's training and development of the failed employees' skills inescapably visible. Most importantly, the local level of government is the best place to lead the way toward addressing the backlogs in public service delivery that have caused broad areas to wallow in poverty, misery, unemployment, and inequality nearly three decades after the end of apartheid. The reasons and discussion on the lack of alignment between municipal employees' skill sets and the demands of the 4IR demonstrate the necessity for efficient solutions to these anomalies. According to this researcher, all municipalities in South Africa need to make sure they devote all available resources to activities that promote efficient local governance through skill development. The audit opinions from the AGSA and other local government overseers can be strengthened significantly through rigorous skill development and local government employee capacity and competency growth. South African towns currently need more public funding due to ineffective leadership and inadequate personnel management methods. Skills development can assist in stopping this waste of resources.

Conclusions

The study explored the challenges that affect skills development as an intervention to address employee performance issues in South African local government. This was done through an exposition of the challenges in board terms where skills scarcity was once again the centre of the argument, where critical human capital competencies were revealed to be deficient.

The study lambasts the need for more return on investment by municipalities where vast sums of money are poured into skills development but with little or no return on the investment, hence a waste of resources. It was further established in the fourth chapter of this dissertation that local communities are finding it extremely difficult to improve their living standards because the people serving in their municipalities need to possess the requisite skill sets. The other impediment impacting skills development that the chapter looked at is the need for more investment in 4IR soft skill sets.

The study establishes that the South African municipality employees' skills must be updated and compatible with the 21st-century demands of local government service delivery. The literature review further confirms that the state of local government (public) service delivery is shambolic, as seen in the rampant financial mismanagement in most municipalities, where taxpayers' money could be more economically, effectively, and efficiently used. In the context of this finding, this study notes that the inability of South African local government employees to possess financial management competencies consistently is a massive contributor to losses in community development potential. Furthermore, the study discovered that the rise in service delivery protests that have caused the loss of human life and infrastructure was a testament to the poor employee performance in South African municipalities.

This study proposes the following recommendations for improvement. These recommendations and suggested strategies and interventions can be adopted and implemented by the identified role players to improve skills development continuously in the local sphere of government.

The study recommends pooling funds into a central local government fund for municipal skills training and development. Such a consolidated local government skills development fund can be housed in the Department of Cooperative Government, and such must be a national budget cost item. Such a structure of local government skills development can ensure that funds are available as and when required by municipalities. That will address the shortage of funds for real, wholesome interventions in local government employee skills development. In the same vein, this fund can be the only fund where all contributory levies, budget allocation and donations from other role players are kept for municipal skills development. The management of this fund needs to be legislated, and there must be stringent conditions and procedures for funding to be allocated. However, once due diligence is done, funds must be swift disbursement while the target skill sets are still relevant and impact directly on local government employee performance.

The study also vouches for adopting 4IR soft skills-related skills development practices in South African municipalities. Such a strategy will be implemented through a partnership between local government and the various stakeholders encompassing the LGSETA, tertiary education institutions and community-based organisations to do a feasibility study, diagnose urgent and relevant skill sets, and develop training programmes and the corresponding implementation modalities. This 4IR-related intervention can help municipalities train their employees and improve their competencies on relevant and time-compliant skills that can help the delivery of goods and services in a 21st-century context. This can be further aided by combining such skill development initiatives with an activity-based budgeting practice where funds are allocated only to relevant and urgent activities to avoid blind budgeting that sometimes allocates funds to activities far from critical.

This study ensures that skills development becomes an integral part of local government transformation, highlighting the significance of skills development for employee performance to transform municipal service delivery positively. Secondly, the study explores skills development practices for local government by identifying skills gaps so municipalities can ensure that the persistent challenge of skill scarcity in local government can effectively be addressed.

The study offers a holistic approach to skills development for improved municipality employee performance. Hence interviews do not form part of the study and can be considered a limitation.

Many questions occurred during the study, such as: What are the challenges affecting the efficacy of existing skills development initiatives and programmes in South African municipalities? To improve employee performance, which strategies can be adopted towards effective skills development practice in South African municipalities? Future publications may aim to find answers to these questions and form part of a longitudinal study, contributing to the fields of public management and local governance.

Overall, the scientific novelty of the obtained results expands the existing body of academic knowledge by bringing fresh perspectives to the challenge of poor performance and lack of skills in local government. The findings contribute to ensuring that skills development becomes an integral part of local government transformation, highlighting the significance of skills development for employee performance to positively transform municipal service delivery. Additionally, the findings explore skills development practices for local government by identifying skills gaps so municipalities can ensure that the persistent challenge of skill scarcity in local government can effectively be addressed.

NOTE:

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