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Barriers to Effective Performance Management in Zambia's Public Sector

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the disablers in the Management System in Zambia's public service. Employing a qualitative research methodology with a case study design, the study comprised 60 purposively selected Zambia public service workers as participants. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate evidence. The findings reveal that the implementation of the Performance Management System (PMS) is hindered by several disablers, including low feedback rates, lack of top management commitment, inadequate funding, time constraints, ineffective leadership, frequent leadership changes, mistrust, unfairness in performance management, lack of rewards and effective reward systems, inadequate training, poor coordination, ineffective supervision, and cultural beliefs. To improve public service performance, it is essential to combine available resources and competencies to overcome these disablers, consistent with the Resource-Based View theory. Managers of public service must recognize the importance of understanding and applying this theory to mobilize and deploy resources effectively, ensuring the appropriate implementation of performance management practices.

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of effective performance management systems (PMS) is crucial for enhancing public service delivery in Zambia. Despite improved service conditions, the public service has been criticized for its poor working culture and performance (Times of Zambia, 2016; Waal & Mulimbika, 2017; Mulenga, 2013). The government has implemented various PMS, including the Annual Confidential Reports, to address these issues (Kanchebele, 2012). However, these systems have been criticized for being subjective and lacking baseline performance targets (Kamfwa, 2016).

Zambia's public sector is facing significant challenges in delivering quality services to its citizens. The country's economic growth has been hindered by poor public service delivery, corruption, and inefficiencies (World Bank, 2020). The government's efforts to improve public service delivery have been hampered by inadequate resources, lack of capacity, and ineffective performance management systems (Zambia Development Agency, 2019). The need for effective performance management systems has never been more pressing, as the country seeks to achieve its development goals and improve the welfare of its citizens.

The importance of performance management in the public sector cannot be overstated. Effective PMS enables organizations to set clear goals, monitor progress, and evaluate performance (Armstrong, 2017). It also helps to identify skills gaps, improve employee productivity, and enhance accountability (Aguinis, 2019). In the context

of Zambia's public sector, effective PMS is critical for improving service delivery, reducing corruption, and promoting transparency and accountability.

Despite the importance of PMS, many public sector organizations in Zambia continue to face challenges in implementing effective systems (Waal & Mulimbika, 2017). These challenges include inadequate resources, lack of top management commitment, and resistance to change (Kamfwa, 2016). This study explores the barriers to effective performance management in Zambia's public sector, contributing to the global body of knowledge on factors affecting PMS implementation. The main objective is to identify the barriers hindering effective PMS implementation in selected Zambian ministries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Effective performance management is crucial for public sector success, but several barriers hinder its implementation. In Zambia, studies have shown that performance management systems (PMS) face significant challenges.

Performance management involves setting goals, measuring progress, and providing feedback to improve employee performance (Aguinis, 2019). However, low feedback rates can hinder PMS implementation, affecting employee confidence and job satisfaction (Bwanga *et al.*, 2023; Phiri, 2021). Top management commitment is essential for PMS success, lack of commitment from top management and junior officers can impede effectiveness (Kanyamuna *et al.*, 2021; Mwanza & Dar, 2025).

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Inadequate resources, including funding and time, can also hinder PMS implementation (Phiri, 2021; Mwanza & Dar, 2025). Time constraints, lack of training, and ineffective reward systems can further exacerbate the issue (Bwanga *et al.*, 2023; Phiri, 2021). Lack of trust in top management can foster skepticism and resistance to PMS.

Studies suggest that addressing these barriers requires a context-specific approach, considering factors like organizational culture, leadership, and employee engagement (Armstrong, 2017; Kanyamuna *et al.*, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory, which describes how organizations are actually operated (Lockett *et al.*, 2009). The RBV theory was first presented by Penrose (1959), set forth by Wernerfelt (1984), and later popularized by Barney (1991). According to Barney (1991), an organization's resources can be tangible or intangible and are considered valuable if they are rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable.

Recent studies have continued to explore the application of RBV in various contexts. Rumangkit and Prabowo (2024) examine recent research conditions and future research themes related to RBV, highlighting its relevance in contemporary business environments. Ferreira and Ferreira (2025) map the RBV field based on a systematic literature review, identifying key trends and future research directions.

The RBV theory posits that an organization's resources are the major conditions that lead to a sustainable competitive edge (Wernerfelt, 1984). Different authors (Amit & Schoemaker, 1993; Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) have stated that the resources that organizations possess have a substantial influence on their goals and strategies. Newbert (2007) found a positive relationship between resources and organizational performance, suggesting that combining resources and competencies can explain performance differences between organizations.

The RBV perspective builds on the premise that superior profitability stems from inside the organization (Combs & Ketchen, 1999). This requires that relevant resources are specific to the service and not easily imitable by rivals (Barney, 1991). Resources must satisfy the requirements of being valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable to contribute to a competitive advantage (Bowman & Ambrosini, 2003).

In this study, the RBV theory is applied to illuminate the understanding of the nature of disablers inherent within public service management services and how the status quo could be improved upon.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the implementation of Performance Management Systems (PMS) in Zambia's Public Service from an interpretivist worldview. The interpretivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology, subjectivist epistemology, and naturalistic methodological procedures

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This approach is suitable for understanding the meanings participants attribute to their environment and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Case Study Research Design

A case study research design was used to examine the implementation of PMS in the Zambian Public Service. This design allows for an in-depth examination of a specific context, enabling the researcher to gather rich and detailed data (Yin, 2018; Stake, 2005).

Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

The sample consisted of 60 participants selected from top management of the Ministry of Finance, Health, and Energy headquarters in Lusaka, using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015). The sample size was determined by considering factors such as the scope of the study, data quality, and research design (Morse, 2000). The inclusion criteria were: (i) civil servants currently working in the specified ministries, (ii) with more than five years of experience, and (iii) interested in participating in the study.

Data Generation Procedure

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Interviews were conducted in English, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and took place at the participants' workplaces to empower them (Seidman, 2013). Two recording methods were used: field notes and voice recordings, with participants' consent.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study findings revealed that the implementation of the Performance Management System (PMS) in Zambia's public sector is hindered by several barriers, including low feedback rates, lack of commitment from top management and junior officers, inadequate resources, time constraints, lack of training, ineffective reward systems, and lack of trust.

Low Feedback Rates

The study found that the level of feedback posed a significant challenge to PMS implementation. Participants indicated that they had not received feedback on their performance, leading to a loss of confidence in the system. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Bwanga *et al.*, 2023; Phiri, 2021). Feedback is essential for effective PMS implementation, as it influences attitudes, happiness, and job satisfaction.

Lack of Commitment from Top Management and Junior Officers

The study revealed that lack of commitment from top management and junior officers hindered PMS implementation. Participants cited top management's unwillingness and lack of meetings to discuss PMS as major concerns. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Kanyamuna *et al.*, 2021; Mwanza & Dar, 2025). High-level commitment is essential for PMS institutionalization and effectiveness.

Inadequate Resources

The study found that inadequate resources, including funding and time, posed significant challenges to PMS implementation. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Phiri, 2021; Mwanza & Dar, 2025). Adequate resources are essential for PMS success.

Time Constraints

The study revealed that time constraints hindered PMS implementation. Participants indicated that their workload and rigid work environment made it difficult to implement PMS.

Lack of Training

The study found that lack of training was a major challenge to PMS implementation. Participants indicated that they had not received training on PMS, leading to confusion and ineffectiveness. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Bwanga *et al.*, 2023; Phiri, 2021).

Ineffective Reward Systems

The study revealed that a lack of effective reward systems hindered PMS implementation. Participants indicated that the absence of rewards and recognition led to demotivation and disinterest in PMS.

Lack of Trust

The study found that lack of trust was a significant barrier

to PMS implementation. Participants indicated that they did not trust top management, leading to skepticism and resistance to PMS.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has revealed significant barriers to effective performance management in Zambia's public sector. Key challenges include low feedback rates, lack of commitment from top management and junior officers, inadequate resources, time constraints, lack of training, ineffective reward systems, and lack of trust. To improve public service performance, it is essential to address these barriers and mobilize available resources, consistent with the Resource-Based View theory.

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