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Public sector employees' experiences and challenges with the performance management system in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effectiveness of the Performance Management System (PMS) within a government department, with a particular focus on employees' perceptions of fairness, motivation, and developmental support. It seeks to understand how the PMS influences employee morale and performance outcomes. Adopting a qualitative, phenomenological, and exploratory design, the study explored the lived experiences of employees who had participated in performance appraisal cycles. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twenty participants, with thematic saturation achieved after the nineteenth interview. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and insights regarding the implementation and impact of the PMS. Findings revealed diverse perceptions of the PMS. Some participants regarded the system as fair, transparent, and motivating; however, the majority reported dissatisfaction due to perceived rating inconsistencies, limited feedback, and inadequate reward mechanisms. These challenges contributed to diminished morale and uncertainty about performance improvement. Participants proposed practical interventions, including rater training, enhanced feedback practices, clearer alignment between Key Performance Areas (KPAs) and rewards, and improved communication across hierarchical levels. The study underscores the need to strengthen fairness, transparency, and developmental value within the PMS. Implementing the recommended measures could enhance employee motivation, reduce dissatisfaction, and ensure that the PMS effectively supports performance monitoring, career progression, and the recognition of high performers.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes the first qualitative, phenomenological exploration of PMS effectiveness within the department. Unlike prior research, which predominantly used quantitative methods to examine satisfaction, commitment, or turnover intentions, this study offers novel, context-specific insights into employees' lived experiences with the PMS in the public sector.

1. INTRODUCTION

Performance management system, or PMS as it is commonly known, is one of the motivation and retention strategies employed by many organizations worldwide, including South African government departments (Agarwal, 2020; Aguinis, 2020; Bussin, 2020; Mahlala, 2024; Marie & Khumalo, 2024; Sharma, 2025). Furthermore, PMS plays a crucial role in monitoring performance to enhance employee effectiveness and overall organisational success (Agarwal, 2020; Aguinis, 2020; Bussin, 2020; Tran, Nguyen, Thi Bao Nhu, & Thi Thu Hao, 2024). The individual performance or employee effectiveness is monitored through performance review sessions following a contracting session, whereby clear performance goals and targets are identified and matching rewards are promised to employees

274

(Bussin, 2020). Some of the notable negative experiences are due to the system design (Khumalo & Sibiya, 2020; Meyer & Kruger-Pretorius, 2018), human agendas (Diamantidis & Chatzogloa, 2018), various forms of injustice and unfairness (Salleh, Hamid, Hashim, & Omain, 2014), and culture (Jasso, 2004). The PMS implementation, especially the distribution of rewards and incentives, should be "seen" to be "fair" if it is to serve its intended purpose. When implemented appropriately or rewards are distributed fairly, the PMS leads to rewards and career progression (Mkhwanazi & Dlamini, 2020). However, this is where some negative experiences and challenges begin because the distribution of the "promised rewards" often takes a subjective nature, leading to poor or negative experiences with the PMS and creating challenges for employees, ultimately causing the PMS not to serve its intended motivational purposes (Grote, 2020). When experienced negatively, PMS may lead to poor performance, low morale, decreased commitment and engagement, and high turnover intentions and actual turnover (Azzone & Palermo, 2020; Mkhwanazi & Dlamini, 2020; Whitman & Caleo, 2020). Perceived fairness in performance assessments positively influences various work outcomes, including job satisfaction and overall performance (Alqahtani, 2024; Brouwers & Van De Vijver, 2020; Martins & Coetzee, 2020; Salleh, Halim, & Baderun, 2020; Whitman & Caleo, 2020). Specific challenges with the PMS range from infrequent feedback (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017), bias and subjectivity (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995), lack of employee development (Aguinis, 2020), and disconnect from organisational goals (Pulakos, Mueller-Hanson, & Arad, 2019) all these render the PMS obsolete.

Previous South African studies have shown a favorable association between performance evaluations and the drive for public service (Nkoana & Matjie, 2024; Oschman & Matjie, 2025; Van Der Merwe, Saayman, & Botha, 2019), suggesting that PMS does act as a fair motivational tool for employees in the public sector. Contrarily, other studies found the PMS to be unfair (Agarwal, 2020; Muhammad, Khan, & Hameed, 2021) with reasons such as perceived and experienced injustices leading to such conclusions. Nevertheless, the findings of the above studies may be influenced by various contextual issues such as system design, leadership, and culture within a specific organization. As a result, the bureaucratic nature of a public sector department should be studied separately to understand the topic in its unique context and culture.

Existing studies used a quantitative design to examine PMS with motivation (Abane, 2022; Dangol, 2021), a book format (Bussin, 2020), whereas others used a systematic review (Fatile, 2014; Felício, Samagaio, & Rodrigues, 2021), while others used a qualitative design (DeNisi & Pritchard, 2020; Nkoana & Matjie, 2024; Oschman & Matjie, 2025). None of the studies were conducted at this specific government department; as a result, an empirical gap exists to be filled. Notably, there has not been a study on PMS within the government department, and thus, a literature gap exists regarding how employees experience the implemented PMS and the challenges associated with it. The primary aim of this study is to highlight employees' experiences and challenges with the implemented PMS at the government department and to make solid recommendations aimed at improving the PMS to serve its intended purpose. The main research question is: *What are employees' experiences and challenges with the implemented PMS at the government department in South Africa?*

1.1. PMS as a Motivational Tool in the Public Sector

Performance Management Systems (PMS) have emerged as integral motivational instruments within both public and private sectors on a global scale. A prominent study conducted by Marques, Da Cruz, De Gomes, Espejo, and Da Silva (2024) highlights the efficacy of PMS in a Brazilian oil refinery, demonstrating that such systems can significantly enhance employee productivity and engagement levels. This underscores the potential of tailored performance management strategies to foster a motivated and high-performing workforce. In the banking sector of Pakistan, Rozina (2021) found that PMS serves not only to elevate individual employee performance but also to enhance overall organisational effectiveness. This finding suggests a reciprocal relationship in which effective performance management practices lead to improved outcomes at both the employee and organisational levels. Furthermore, an investigation by Shaikhzada, Shinwari, and Khan (2025) focused on the construction industry in

Afghanistan and indicated that the combination of PMS with a collaborative organisational culture is instrumental in motivating employees. Their research suggests that the success of PMS is bolstered when implemented in environments that promote teamwork and cooperation, thereby leading to enhanced project outcomes.

A growing body of literature also supports the notion that PMS serves as a valuable motivational tool within the public sector. Studies by Abane (2022), Bussin (2020), Dangol (2021), DeNisi and Pritchard (2020), and Felício et al. (2021) collectively affirm the role of performance management practices in enhancing employee motivation across various governmental contexts. Within a South African context, findings from Fatile (2014), Maake, Harmse, and Schultz (2023), and Oschman and Matjie (2025) further corroborate the effectiveness of PMS as a motivational mechanism. These findings resonate with broader conclusions presented by Brouwers and Van De Vijver (2020), Mphahlele and Dachapalli (2022), and Whitman and Caleo (2020), all of which emphasise the applicability of PMS in augmenting motivation in the private sector as well. Finally, Mokoele, Masenya, and Makalela (2018) advocate for rigorous monitoring and evaluation of PMS implementation, highlighting the necessity of clear performance indicators. This is particularly relevant for government departments seeking to achieve their objectives effectively. They assert that maintaining transparent procedural and distributive justice in the decision-making processes regarding reward allocation is crucial. Therefore, for the government department to fulfill its role as a motivational entity, it must implement a comprehensive and well-received PMS framework.

1.2. South African Public Sector Context

The South African public sector is marred by poor service delivery (Grote, 2020; Mamokhere & Kgobe, 2023; Mofokeng, Ramolobe, & Bogopa, 2024; Okeng & Diala, 2024), and a study of this nature may provide some assistance from the PMS perspective to the government. As a developing country and member of the G20, South Africa is at its prime regarding socio-economic transformations and faces equal challenges such as high unemployment, legal and illegal immigration, crime, poverty, inflation, HIV/AIDS, and, more recently, negative impacts from COVID-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions. The country cannot afford to have one department that does not fully carry out its mandate to provide essential services to the populace. The department under study serves the public by regulating the South African labour market to promote a sustainable economy through appropriate legislation and regulations; inspection, compliance monitoring, and enforcement; protection of human rights; provision of employment services; promotion of equity; social and income protection; and social dialogue. Moreover, the department plays a significant role in reducing unemployment, poverty, and inequality through policies and programmes developed in consultation with social partners, aimed at improving economic efficiency and productivity, creating employment, fostering sound labour relations, eliminating inequality and discrimination in the workplace, and alleviating poverty in employment (Department of Employment and Labour, 2020). It is thus vital that the department has motivated and committed employees willing to fulfill its mandate from a strategic performance management perspective (Nkoana & Matjie, 2024; Van Dijk & Thornhill, 2003). Studies have shown that motivated, properly appraised, and rewarded employees become loyal, remain committed, engaged, perform better, have high morale, and exhibit lower intentions to leave (Adams, 1965; DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Maslow, 1943; Pulakos et al., 2019; Vroom, 1964).

One of the devastating, unique traits in the South African public service is the bureaucratic, hierarchical, and laissez-faire culture (Jasso, 2004; Mkhwanazi & Dlamini, 2020) perpetuated by the "service" aim rather than profit-making of private sector organizations. As a result, employees might not be willing to put much effort because there is no sense of "urgency" and no consequences for poor performance. When implemented, leaders should make it clear that PMS aims to motivate employees towards a high-performance culture influenced by valuable rewards and incentives (Maffini & Dlodlo, 2020). Discussed below are some theories that help us conceptualize PMS as a necessary motivating tool for employees' performance.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

Numerous theorists in the domains of organizational behavior and performance management have underscored the critical role that clearly defined performance goals, standards, and targets play in enhancing individual and collective performance. Locke and Latham (1992) demonstrated that the establishment of specific and measurable objectives not only directs attention and effort but also fosters greater persistence, ultimately leading to improved performance outcomes. Moreover, the fulfillment of basic human needs through appropriate reward systems is paramount, as articulated by Maslow (1943). His hierarchy of needs framework posits that individuals are motivated to achieve higher-level psychological and self-fulfillment needs only after their foundational physiological and safety needs are met. Therefore, the strategic implementation of rewards must consider this hierarchy to be effective. In addition, Adams (1965) and Vroom (1964) provided valuable insights into the significance of perceived equity and fairness in the distribution of rewards. Their equity theory suggests that individuals evaluate their input-output ratios in comparison to others, and when they perceive inequity, it can lead to decreased motivation and performance. Thus, ensuring a fair reward distribution is crucial for maintaining motivation within teams. Furthermore, McGregor (1960) advocates for a profound understanding of human nature in the design and implementation of Performance Management Systems (PMS). This theory posits that employees should be viewed as self-motivated individuals capable of responsibility, fostering an environment that encourages engagement and innovation. By recognizing and nurturing this intrinsic motivation, organizations can create a more effective framework for performance management, ultimately leading to sustainable improvements in organizational performance.

1.4. Conceptual Framework

The model presented herein succinctly illustrates that employees' perceptions of the implemented Performance Management System (PMS) can manifest as either positive or negative experiences of fairness. A positive or equitable perception suggests that the PMS functions effectively as a motivational instrument within the department. Conversely, a negative perception indicates underlying challenges that necessitate attention; in such cases, the PMS may be deemed ineffective and in need of a comprehensive redesign. This differentiation underscores the critical importance of aligning the PMS with employees' expectations of fairness to enhance its overall effectiveness.
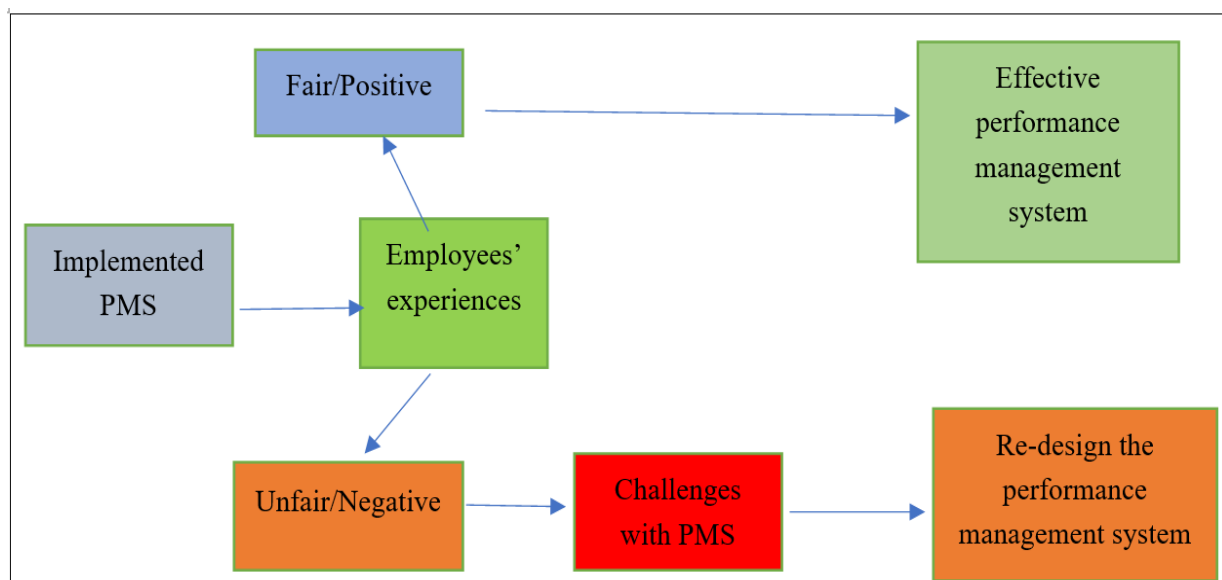

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Figure 1 illustrates the relations between the implemented PMS and how it can be experienced by employees, with various outcomes for either positive/fair or negative/unfair experiences.

2. RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

2.1. Research Design and Strategy

A qualitative approach was chosen, as it enables an in-depth exploration of employees' experiences with the performance management system (PMS). Qualitative research is advantageous for uncovering nuanced insights into participants' feelings, attitudes, and perceptions, making it ideal for understanding complex social phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach aligns with the study's objective of exploring employees' subjective experiences. The study adopted the interpretivism paradigm. An exploratory research strategy was selected. This choice aligns with the intention to investigate the experiences and challenges faced by employees with the PMS, an area that may not be sufficiently addressed in existing literature. The exploratory nature of this strategy enables in-depth investigation and the emergence of rich narrative data from the participants' experiences.

2.2. Research Paradigm

The interpretivist research approach was employed in this study, aiming to explore employees' experiences and perceptions of performance management within a government department. This paradigm sought to understand the participants' fundamental feelings and experiences in relation to their context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The approach aligned with the study's objective of delving into the subjective opinions and attitudes of employees in a unique organisational setting. The research aimed to uncover the causes, meanings, and motivations behind the participants' responses by examining their qualitative experiences (Flick, 2018).

2.3. Population and Sampling

Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants based on their work experience and the number of years they have undergone PMS cycles (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). This sampling approach ensured that the selected participants could provide valuable and relevant information about their experiences with performance appraisals. The sample size for this study consisted of approximately 20 participants from six Labour Centres in the Gauteng North region. The selection of this sample size was based on the principle of saturation, which aims to gather sufficient data to achieve information redundancy, where further data collection does not yield substantially new information (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

2.4. Rigour and Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility and rigor of the study, various techniques were employed, including triangulation, maintaining an audit trail, reflexivity, member checking, thick description, sustained engagement, and achieving data collection and analysis saturation (Creswell & Guetterman, 2024). These strategies aimed to improve the reliability and validity of the study findings by minimizing bias, promoting transparency, and ensuring consistency throughout the research process.

2.5. Ethical Consideration

Before commencing data collection, ethical clearance was sought, and the study was approved by the College of Economic and Management Sciences_ERC Industrial and Organisational Psychology, ref: 0465. Before data collection, informed consent was also obtained, and all participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study, as well as their rights to respect, confidentiality, and anonymity.

2.6. Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews with the following questions related to the research question, including probing.

1. What is your experience with the PMS in general, and how it is implemented in the department?

2. Can you describe a specific challenge or instance related to the PMS in the department that was problematic?

3. What would you recommend as solutions to the challenges with the current PMS in the department?

2.7. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2024). Thematic analysis involved identifying patterns and themes within the collected data, enabling the exploration of common experiences and perceptions among participants. The analysis process included several phases: data familiarisation, code generation, theme searching, reviewing and describing themes, naming themes, and producing the final report Braun and Clarke (2019).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysed data was presented using tables to elucidate biographical data as well as themes and subthemes.

Table 1 presents participants' biographical information.

Table 1. Research participants.

Participants pseudonym	Gender	Years of service	Age	PMS cycles
P1	Male	2 years	26 years	1
P2	Male	2 years	29 years	1
P3	Male	3 years	32 years	2
P4	Male	3 years	27 years	2
P5	Male	3 years	30 years	2
P6	Female	3 years	30 years	2
P7	Female	3 years	28 years	2
P8	Female	5 years	38 years	3
P9	Male	7 years	31 years	5
P10	Male	8 Years	33 years	6
P11	Female	10 years	39 years	12
P12	Female	10 years	40 years	12
P13	Female	11 Years	43 years	12
P14	Female	12 years	41 years	12
P15	Male	12 years	46 years	12
P16	Male	14 years	50 years	15
P17	Male	18 years	51 years	15
P18	Male	20 years	58 years	18
P19	Female	24 years	55 years	18
P20	Male	33 years	59 years	18

Table 1 presents the biographical information of the research participants involved in the study. It includes various demographic details such as gender, years of service, race, age, job position, and highest qualification. Out of the 20 people, 12 (60%) are men and 8 (40%) are women. Therefore, there are slightly more men than women in the group. While males slightly outnumber females, the representation of both genders is relatively balanced. Years of service range from 2 to 33 years, with a mean of 10.2 years, as follows: short-term service (≤5 years): 8 participants (40%), mid to long-term service (6–20 years): 9 participants (45%), and very long-term service (>20 years): 3 participants (15%). There is a noticeable mix of early-career and long-tenured employees, indicating a multi-generational workforce.

Participants' age ranged from 26 to 59 years, with a mean of 38.5 years. The distribution is as follows: Young professionals (≤30 years): 6 participants (30%), early middle age (31–40 years): 7 participants (35%), and senior professionals (41+ years): 7 participants (35%). The sample is fairly evenly distributed across different age categories, with a slight concentration in the early middle-age range. In terms of performance cycles, the range was from 1 to 18 cycles, with a mean of 8.4 cycles. The breakdown is as follows: PMS ≤ 3 cycles (early-career employees): 8

279

participants, and PMS ≥ 12 cycles (experienced/senior employees): 6 participants. PMS cycles appear to correlate closely with years of service, indicating regular appraisal and management cycles.

3.1. Themes and Subthemes

When the transcribed interviews were analyzed, the following themes and subthemes emerged. Due to the deductive and inductive nature of coding employed in the study, the research questions were transformed into themes (Proudfoot, 2025), while subthemes were allowed to emerge from the data itself, as shown in Table 2. Subthemes were generated based on the frequency of specific words mentioned by participants. Both inductive and deductive coding techniques were used to incorporate the research questions into themes, while also enabling respondents to provide subthemes through their quotes (Naeem, Ozuem, Howell, & Ranfagni, 2023). The selection of keywords was based on their relevance, richness, and frequency of mention in the data for thematic analysis (Naeem et al., 2023). According to the three main questions, three themes were identified: Theme 1: Experiences with the PMS system; Theme 2: Challenges with the PMS system; Theme 3: Proposed solutions. Subthemes are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes and subthemes.

Question asked	Themes	Sub-themes
What is your experience with the PMS in general, and how is it implemented at the Department?	Theme 1: Experiences with the PMS system	1. Motivating tool 2. Leading to low morale 3. Demotivating exercise 4. No promised rewards
Can you describe a specific challenge or instance related to the PMS in the department that was problematic?	Theme 2: Challenges with the PMS System	1. Unfair and biased 2. No feedback and room for improvement 3. Performance rating inequality
What would you recommend as solutions to the challenges with the current PMS in the department?	Theme 3: Proposed Solutions	1. Training and development on the system 2. Support from supervisors 3. Alignment of KPAs with rewards 4. Feedback and Communication

3.1.1. Theme 1: Experience with the PMS System

While responding to the question: *What is your experience with the PMS in general, and how it is implemented at the Department?* of the 20 participants, the word *demotivating* was mentioned by seven (7) participants, compared to five (5) times for *motivating*, five (5) times for *low morale*, and three (3) times for *no rewards*, when responding to the question about *their experience with the PMS in general and how it is implemented at the Department.*

3.1.1.1. Subtheme 1: Motivating Tool

P2 appreciated the clear goals and recognition of achievement provided by the implemented PMS at the department as motivational, with this quote: *The system has clear goals that really motivate me to perform well (P2, male).* The clear goals were supported by open recognition of achievement, which further motivated employees, as noted by a female P6: *I find the recognition of achievements in the system quite motivating.* The findings support existing literature that PMS can effectively motivate employees (Abane, 2022; Maake et al., 2023; Oschman & Matjie, 2025) when implemented properly with clear goals and expected rewards provided fairly, as per the goal setting and expectancy theories (Agarwal, 2020; Aguinis, 2020; Bussin, 2020; Locke & Latham, 1992; Mahlala, 2024; Marie & Khumalo, 2024; Sharma, 2025; Vroom, 1964).

This effectiveness relies on minimizing unjust practices in reward allocation, as outlined during contracting. Additionally, a well-implemented PMS enhances employee motivation, effectiveness, and overall organizational success (Agarwal, 2020; Aguinis, 2020; Bussin, 2020; Tran et al., 2024).

3.1.1.2. Subtheme 2: Leading to Low Morale

The participants also experienced the PMS as demoralizing because major changes were made to the PMS policy without their consultation, only to find out during the allocation of rewards, as noted by P1: *"Changes in the system without prior notice create uncertainty and decrease morale"* (male). This issue is further exacerbated by poor communication from supervisors regarding performance expectations and linked rewards during contracting, as noted here: *"The lack of communication about performance expectations contributes to low morale"* (P10 female). Similarly, researchers have concluded that when participants are aware of performance expectations and subsequent rewards, they become demoralized (Khumalo & Sibiya, 2020; Meyer & Kruger-Pretorius, 2018), thereby reducing their motivation and increasing turnover intentions (Franco-Santos & Otley, 2018; Singh & Twalo, 2015).

3.1.1.3. Subtheme 3: Demotivating Exercise

Overall, the participants experienced the PMS exercise as demotivating (N=7), citing lack of recognition and system design as the main reasons. As noted here: *Feeling undervalued due to the lack of recognition affects motivation negatively* (P18, male) and: *The system's focus on errors rather than achievements is demotivating* (P9, male). PMS can be a demotivating exercise if not designed (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Khumalo & Sibiya, 2020) and implemented correctly (Azzone & Palermo, 2020; Grote, 2020; Mkhwanazi & Dlamini, 2020; Whitman & Caleo, 2020).

3.1.1.4. Subtheme 4: No Promised Rewards

The main aim of PMS is to monitor and motivate employees' performance through rewards, and this is communicated during the contracting session. However, it is not surprising that some employers negate the promises made about performance targets and relevant rewards, as alluded to by P20: *There are no tangible rewards for the extra effort I put in, which is quite frustrating* (P20, male) and P17: *I feel like the system doesn't reward hard work adequately* (P17, male). The department renders its own PMS obsolete by not rewarding employee performance as expected (Lawler III, Benson, & McDermott, 2012). Previous studies concluded similarly (Bussin, 2020; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995; Salleh et al., 2014).

The theme 1 subthemes are somewhat contradictory; however, based on our analysis technique of repetition, the overall PMS seems to be a demotivating rather than a motivating tool. Moreover, notably, subthemes 2, 3, and 4 are negatively skewed towards the implemented PMS being ineffective, generally. This synthesis of findings highlights the crucial importance of proper implementation and fair practices in the effectiveness of performance management frameworks.

3.1.2. Theme 2: Challenges with the PMS System

When responding to the question: *Can you describe a specific challenge or instance relating to the PMS in the department that was problematic?* Unfair and biased was mentioned eight times; no feedback and room for improvement, and performance rating inequality subthemes were both mentioned six times.

3.1.2.1. Subtheme 1: Unfair and Biased

Participants raised concerns about favoritism, preferential treatment, and disparities in evaluations or discriminatory PMS that seem to favor certain groups or specific individuals: *The system is biased towards certain groups, which is extremely unfair.* (P11, female), and *I feel that certain individuals are favored in the appraisal system, leading to an unfair work environment.* (P14, male). As well as: *The system appears to have underlying biases that affect the evaluations and create unfair treatment. (P6, male).* It seems that the issue stems from critical incidents or halo effects ratings and subjective ratings by my supervisors, which implicate broader issues of a need for supervisors' training (Eneanya, 2018; Kumar & Singh, 2020; Oschman & Matjie, 2025). These issues are not new in the PMS literature, and they

indeed pose a challenge that diminishes the authentic intentions of the PMS system in any organization (Aguinis, 2020; Pulakos et al., 2019).

3.1.2.2. Subtheme 2: No Feedback and Room for Improvement

Another identified challenge with the PMS was the lack of constructive and frequent feedback, and thus, room for improvement. P3 mentioned that: *I rarely receive feedback, which makes it hard to know how to improve. (P3, male)*, making it hard to know what, where, and how to improve performance so that one can get a higher rating and be eligible for rewards and other incentives. Furthermore, the participants are unable to identify their strengths and weaknesses without feedback: *Without feedback, I struggle to identify my strengths and weaknesses. (P10, female)*, and: *There is a notable absence of guidance and feedback, making it challenging to identify areas for development. (P13, female)*. The researcher identified a lack of feedback as a pressing issue in PMS that leads to the system not fulfilling its purpose because it is seen as a monitoring trap rather than a developmental and reward intervention (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017). The main issue is the lack of constructive feedback and the frequency of feedback sessions, which diminish the PMS's intended purpose (Aguinis, 2020; Khumalo & Sibiya, 2020; Meyer & Kruger-Pretorius, 2018).

3.1.2.3. Subtheme 3: Performance Rating Inequality

The issues of human interference or subjectivity during the allocation of final ratings are prevalent in most PMS studies (Agarwal, 2020; Marques et al., 2024; Muhammad et al., 2021; Rozina, 2021; Shaikhzada et al., 2025) as noted in the following quotes in the current study:

- *"The ratings do not seem to align with the actual work being done, and that feels unfair." (P8, male)*
- *"I don't feel that the performance ratings accurately reflect my contributions." (P19, female)*.
- *"The appraisal system shows signs of bias towards specific job roles, creating disparities in performance assessments." (P18, female)*

Participants are not satisfied with how the final ratings that lead to rewards and incentives are allocated, and thus experience both distributive, informational, and procedural injustices. The participants raised these challenges, and the department should attend to them if its implemented PMS is to serve its intended purpose.

3.1.3. Theme 3: Proposed Solutions

After voicing their experiences and challenges, as part of a comprehensive and thorough research study, we proceeded to ask the participants about their proposed solutions that the department should implement or adopt to make the PMS valid, reliable, and fair. The question was: *What would you recommend as solutions to the challenges with the current PMS in the department?* The following subthemes emerged:

3.1.3.1. Subtheme 1: Training and Development on the System

According to the participants, there should be comprehensive training for all employees, and more specifically, for the supervisors or managers responsible for the allocation of ratings. This was highlighted by the following two quotes: *Regular development sessions focused on system navigation could enhance user proficiency and confidence* (P7, female), and *More training on how to navigate the system would be beneficial* (P1, male).

Previous studies not only support continuous training and development (Eneanya, 2018; Kumar & Singh, 2020; Oschman & Matjie, 2025; Pulakos, 2004; Pulakos et al., 2019) but also recommend that even before implementation, employers should obtain buy-in and provide workshops whereby employees are informed about the strategic importance of the PMS intervention. It is emphasized that the process is not solely about rewards and incentives but also about development and career progression (Nkoana & Matjie, 2024; Van Dijk & Thornhill, 2003), which is often lacking at the departmental level.

3.1.3.2. Subtheme 2: Support from Supervisors

Aligning well with the previous subtheme, it appears that participants would appreciate support from their supervisors, leading to an effective PMS. This will only be possible if supervisors are well-trained about the system, providing emotional support, technical support, or regular check-ins regarding current performance and challenges. P10 raised an issue here: *More frequent check-ins and communication from supervisors can help employees feel more supported in using the system* (P10, female), followed and supported by: *Increased support from supervisors would make navigating the system easier* (P15, male). Mokoele et al. (2018) and Tran et al. (2024) concluded that supervisors' support is crucial for the PMS to be effective, perceived positively, and accepted as an intervention in any workplace.

3.1.3.3. Subtheme 3: Alignment of KPAs with Rewards

For the PMS to be effective, it should be aligned with an individual's key performance areas (KPAs) (Oschman & Matjie, 2025). This ensures that employees understand what they are being evaluated or rated on, promoting fairness even if their ratings result in rewards or not. It is crucial because: *aligning Key Performance Areas with tangible rewards would improve motivation (P17, male),* and *making rewards more visible and accessible would boost engagement with KPAs (P19, female).* Evaluating or rating employees based on their attainment of KPAs is fair and helps them perceive or experience the PMS process positively (Aguinis, 2020; Bussin, 2020; Tran et al., 2024).

3.1.3.4. Subtheme 4: Feedback and Communication

Participants proposed that management allocate time to provide them with constructive and developmental feedback and also improve their communication strategies, as the current ones are ineffective, as noted here: *Regular feedback sessions that facilitate open discussions can improve employee experience and system utilization (P8, male)* and here: *Clear communication about how rewards are tied to KPAs would help everyone stay focused (P2, male).* Constructive feedback and effective communication are the cornerstones of PMS (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017). This proposed solution is a direct response to Theme 2, subtheme 2 challenge and indeed constructive feedback, and the frequent communication helps promote the PMS's strategic intention of development and rewards (Aguinis, 2020; Khumalo & Sibiya, 2020; Meyer & Kruger-Pretorius, 2018).

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study aimed to explore the experiences with and the challenges that employees at a South African national government faced with the implemented performance management system (PMS). Employees appear to experience the PMS negatively, more specifically as a demotivating and thus futile exercise, and these experiences appear to stem from the challenges related to the PMS being implemented in a biased manner and thus unfairly. The PMS appears not to be making any career progression or development efforts, and lastly, the subjective ratings allocated by managers do not reward deserving or high performers, accordingly. Furthermore, the study reveals that training of supervisors or raters to rate performance objectively, to give timely and constructive feedback, and communicate better with employees, while organizationally, the PMS policy ought to be changed to ensure regular sessions (three months interval), and align performance rewards with the attainment of key performance areas (KPAs).

The study recommends that the PMS policy be revised and that strategic buy-in from all employees and supervisors be sought before re-implementation. This should be followed by rigorous training of rates and amendments to the PMS policy on rewards allocation procedures to minimize negative experiences and promote fairness, ensuring that the PMS effectively supports performance monitoring, career growth, and motivation for high performers. Moreover, future studies should be conducted using quantitative methods to link performance, rewards, and motivation at the department level and for a larger sample size.

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