GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE PERCEPTIONS OF LABOUR RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS' COMPETENCIES

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Abstract - This study analysed the perceptions of employees from different gender groups of labour relations practitioners' competencies in sustaining and promoting sound labour relationships in the Department of Employment and Labour in Gauteng, South Africa. There was a need to understand the perceived role of labour relations practitioners in matters relating to dispute resolution, grievance processes, disciplinary processes, salary negotiations and workplace forums (committees).In carrying out this study, a quantitative research methodology was adopted. A survey questionnaire was used and a stratified random sampling method of 300 employees (employees stationed at the Department of Employment and Labour Head Office, Unemployment Insurance Fund Head Office, Compensation Fund Head Office and Gauteng Provincial Office in Gauteng)was used to collect the data. The T-test results revealed that there were significant differences between male and female respondents regarding the competencies of labour relations practitioners. Management and labour relations practitioners need to take note that males and females perceive labour relations competencies differently and need to adapt their management style to best manage labour relations.

Keywords - Gender, Labour Relations, Competencies, South Africa

I. INTRODUCTION

Labour relations management was born out of necessity with the advent of the Industrial Revolution and it aims to strike a balance between pure capitalistic, employer-driven, economic principles and employee demands. However, in order to find this balance, governments had to create a legal framework to regulate industrial relations and employment relationships (NEASA, 2023). In modern times, industrial relations became the tool used to manage relationships between employers, unions, employees and the government. Labour relations is a complex and dynamic discipline environment. Labour relations can be described as a relationship between an employer and employee/employees (as the main partners), with the state playing a more or less regulatory and protective role, and with trade unions and employers' organisations exercising considerable power at times as joint representatives of the core parties (Bendix, 2019). This traditional approach – focused on the state, employers and unions as main actors – faces severe limits in its capacity to analyse labour conflict in the face of the specific forms of labour regulation in the Global South (Nowak, 2021).

Nowak (2021) also claims that in order to properly understand labour conflict on a global level in the twenty-first century, labour conflict requires to be analysed on the level of the social formation in which it is situated. The gender of a worker is a social construct that is culturallydefined and, over time,has provided a basis for distinguishing roles, behaviour, mental, economic and politicalcharacteristics of the male and the female as prescribed by society (Aluko,2020). Men and women have different values that they bring with them to the workplace which may be reflected in the role perceptions of government professionals (Piatak, Douglas & Raudla, 2020).The role and competencies of government officials such as labour relations practitionersin South Africa are under-researched (Nkabinde, 2021). These practitioners are responsible for dealing with disputes that arise during these processes and for ensuring that all parties understand all the information in the collective bargaining agreements.

The research gap of this paper lies in the fact that it is not clear how different gender groups perceive the labour relations competencies of labour relations practitioners in South African government departments.The purpose of this paper is therefore to shed light on thedifferences between gender groups and labour relations practitioners' competencies.

The research objective for this study is stated as follows:
There are significant differences in how gender groups perceive labour relations practitioners' competencies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Maharaj (2005) sees the labour relations practitioner as providing support and advice to line management regarding matters such as grievances and discipline, collective agreements, dealing with trade unions, consulting employees and joint decision-making processes, dealing with disputes and the interpretation of labour policies, agreements and legislation.The concept of competencies refers to the capability of applying or using knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviours and personal characteristics to perform successfully critical work tasks and specific functions, or operate in a given role or position

(Wahome, Ng'ang'a & Sakwa, 2013). Botha (2016) identified the labour relations competencies themes and subthemes of labour relations practitioners in his qualitative study. These themes and subthemes are presented in table 1.

	Themes	Subthemes
1.	Business acumen	Knowledge of finance Knowledge of human resources Knowledge of technology Political shrewdness Strategic agility
2.	Transformation innovator	Change management Coaching/mentoring Capacity building Facilitation Human resource development
3.	Collective bargaining management	Collective bargaining Dispute resolution Negotiation skills
4.	Communication	Consultation Dialogue Diplomacy Listening skills Persuasion Presentation skills Verbal communication skills Written communication skills
5.	Emotion management	Assertiveness Emotional intelligence Resilience Self-efficacy
6.	Interpersonal relationships	Conflict management Social intelligence Teamwork
7.	Labour codes	Disciplinary procedure knowledge Grievance procedure knowledge Investigation/fact-finding Legislation
8.	Labour relations specialist expertise	Labour peace Labour relations practice Problem-solving Professionalism Service delivery Strike management
9.	Strategic management and leadership	Analytical reasoning Being proactive Integrity Labour relations management Project management knowledge Research methodology Strategic business management

Table 1: Labour relations competencies themes and subthemes
Source: Botha (2016)

According to Piataket al. (2020), gender plays an important role in workforce dynamics.

In previous studies on gender, Van den Berg, Stander and Van der Vaart (2020) found that males accounted for 95% of the respondents, while females made up only 5% of the total. Males accounted for 88.2% of total replies in Botha's (2016) study, while females accounted for 11.8%. Males accounted for 26.9% of total replies in Hanaysha's (2016) survey, while females accounted for 73.1%. In Mohololа's (2016) study, more women than men took part in the survey, while Mbonambi's (2016) study showed similar results, with females (57%) outnumbering males (43%) in the gender category.The bulk of the 57.6%

were males, while 42.4% were females in Abdullah, Musa and Ali's (2011) study. In Hanaysha's (2016) study, males accounted for 26.9% of total responses, while females represented 73.1%.Dlamini's (2018) research indicated that females accounted for 51.1% of the participants, while males accounted for 48.9%. Thus, there were more female respondents than male respondents in the sample. The difference between how men and women perceived management was insignificant. Women government professionals tend to go from passive to active representation when they have discretion in decision- or policy-making, have policy congruence with their identity group, and the issue is gendered (Riccucci & Van Ryzin, 2017). Little, if any, previous studies on gender differences in the perceptions of labour relations practitioners' competencies are available.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

Positivism, according to Park, Konge and Artino (2020), relies on the hypothetico-deductive method to validate a priori hypotheses, which are frequently stated quantitatively, and where functional relationships can be derived between causal and explanatory factors (independent variables) and outcomes (dependent variables). Positivism as the research paradigm was used in this study. A cross-sectional research design and a quantitative research method were used to conduct this study (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013).

According to Awang, Afthanorhan, Mohamad and Asri (2015), the quantitative variable can be classified as either continuous or discrete.A questionnaire was developed based on the labour relations competencies themes and subthemes of the qualitative study of Botha (2016). A total of 44 questionnaire items were identified. An appropriate measurement scale was linked to each questionnaire item. Each of the 44 selected items was linked to a five (5) category type scale with the following options: 1 - Always; 2 - Often; 3 - Sometimes; 4 - Seldom; 5 - Never. No general scale was developed, which means that each questionnaire item needed to be analysed in isolation.

The target population of the Gauteng Department of Employment and Labour was 3888 employees, comprising the Unemployment Insurance Fund (573), Compensation Fund (972), Head Office (759) and Provincial Office (1584). When conducting research, a sample is chosen to learn about the large population from which the sample has been drawn. A stratified random sampling method of 300 employees was drawn from the population to ensure an adequate representation (Bless et al., 2013).

The questionnaire was hand-delivered to the respondents and 140 respondents completed the questionnaire. Sealed boxes for the deposit of the completed questionnaire were used to ensure the confidentiality of the respondents. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology's Research Ethics Committee. All respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with participation being voluntary.

In this study, an exploratory factor analysis was performed to validate the measuring instrument. The factor analysis identified four factors where the cut-off loading was 0.4. The following 9 factors were identified when using the exploratory factor analysis.

- Factor 1: Interpersonal relationships
- Factor 2: Communication
- Factor 3: Emotional management
- Factor 4: Labour codes
- Factor 5: Transformation innovator
- Factor 6: Collective bargaining management
- Factor 7: Labour relations specialist expertise
- Factor 8: Business acumen
- Factor 9: Strategic management and leadership

The internal reliability of the questionnaire was determined by using Cronbach's alpha.Griethuijsen, Eijck, Haste, Brok, Skinner and Mansour (2014) refer to acceptable Cronbach's alpha values of 0.7 or 0.6 and Cronbach's alpha values less than 0.7 or 0.6 to indicate the level of internal reliability. All the factors of this questionnaire were above 0.7 which was an indication of the acceptable reliability of the questionnaire.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

First, the descriptive statistics of the gender groups are presented in figure 1.

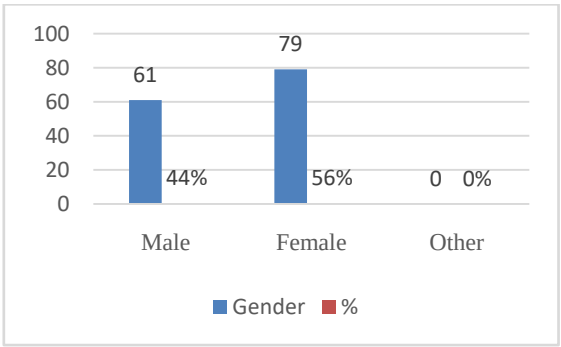


Figure 1: Gender frequency

The above figure shows that both male and female employees took part in the study. There were no other gender groups indicated by the respondents. Females made up most participants (56.4%). This indicates that more women are engaged in labour relations issues and that women make up a larger proportion of the Department of Employment and Labour's workforce. Women are beginning to speak up and protect their labour rights and positions, resulting in a shift of attention between the genders.

The average means were between 2.36 and 3.18 for males and females in terms of how they viewed issues related to the competencies of labour relations practitioners (interpersonal relationships, communication, emotion management, labour codes, transformation innovator, collective bargaining management, industrial relations specialist expertise, business acumen, etc.). The results showed that females had higher mean scores than males which meant that they viewed the competencies of labour relations practitioners in a more positive light.From a sample of 140 respondents, the respondents aged 41-50 had the highest percentage, followed by those aged 31-40. A T-test is a statistical test that compares the means of two groups (Kim, Lin & Leung, 2015). T-tests were used to compare the mean scores of respondents. Independent samples T-tests were used to see if there were any significant differences in the competencies framework of labour relations practitioners (interpersonal relationships, communication, emotional management, labour codes, transformation innovator, collective bargaining management, labour relations specialist expertise, business acumen, strategic management and leadership) between gender groups.

Levene's test for equality of variances, which assesses the significance of differences in numbers in variance between the two groups (males and females), was used in this study. One of the assumptions of the T-test is that, should the significance value for Levene's test be less than p 0.05, there is a significant difference between the variances, and the T-test with equal variances will be used. If the value is greater than $p > 0.05$, there is no significant difference between the variances, and the equal variance assumption was used.

The results showed that there were significant differences between male and female respondents regarding the competencies framework of labour relations practitioners (interpersonal relationships, communication, emotion management, labour codes, transformation innovator, collective bargaining management, labour relations specialist expertise, business acumen, strategic management and leadership), with $p < 0.05$. Therefore, the T-test for equal variances not assumed was used. There were no significant differences between male and female respondents regarding absorption, with $p > 0.05$. Therefore, the T-test for equal variances assumed was used. The results, therefore, showed statistically significant differences between male and female groups concerning the competencies framework of labour relations practitioners (interpersonal relationships, communication, emotion management, jurisprudence/labour codes, transformation innovator, collective bargaining management, labour relations specialist expertise, business acumen, strategic management and leadership).

From a sample of 140 respondents, the respondents aged 41-50 had the highest percentage, followed by those aged 31-40. This contrasts with the findings of Abdullah et al. (2011) and Dlamini (2018) that respondents of all ages were represented, with the majority in the 30-39 age range, followed by the 40-49 age group.According to Piataket al. (2020), women are more likely to see their role as providing a voice for society compared to men; however, no gender differences were found in policymaking.The T-test results revealed that there were significant differences between male and female respondents regarding the competencies framework of labour relations practitioners. The research objective was therefore successfully addressed.

Managerial impact

Based on the study findings, managerial impact in maintaining and promoting sound labour relations among the various stakeholders in the Department of Employment and Labour, Gauteng Provincial offices, are through effective communication, grievance and dispute prevention and resolution practices.

Managers can provide adequate and consistent feedback to employees. Reliable information and feedback should concentrate on the weaknesses and strengths of both the employer and the employees. Managers must address employee underperformance appropriately, rather than acting as if it does not exist. Underperformance feedback, on the other hand, should be delivered with tact and insight to reduce feelings of rejection and negativity among employees. Management may provide training and coaching on the role and services of labour relations practitioners to help employees understand the entire process of maintaining and promoting sound labour relations among stakeholders through effective communication, grievance and dispute prevention and resolution practices.To provide justified recommendations and guidance to line management, labour relations practitioners must first analyse grievances, misbehaviour and disciplinary cases. Second, labour relations professionals must demonstrate how they explore, analyse and interpret information related to labour relations issues and situations. Departmental management must express gratitude and respect and promote trust, compliance, fairness and good faith in employment or labour relations. Management and labour relations practitioners need to take note that males and females perceive labour relations competencies differently and need to adapt their management style to best manage labour relations.

Limitations

This study was a starting point for the perceived competencies of labour relations practitioners in the Gauteng Department of Employment and Labour; the study's concepts, findings, conclusions, and

recommendations are not final. This study focused on employees' perceptions of labour relations practitioner competencies in the Gauteng Department of Employment and Labour. The findings may or may not apply to other government entities, the private sector, or government-private sector partnerships. This study was cross-sectional in nature and the findings cannot be generalised to other similar work environments. Lastly, if any, previous studies on gender differences in the perceptions of labour relations practitioners' competencies are available.

Recommendations

It is recommended that departmental management ensure that labour relations practitioners have the 44 competency skills, particularly technological knowledge. Consistency, bias suppression, accuracy, correctability, representativeness, and ethics should also be applied by labour relations practitioners in all procedures for maintaining and promoting good labour relations. Employees may become defensive if the process is perceived as insufficient, and managers - and eventually national departments - may lose their loyalty, good faith, and trust. For future research, it is recommended that a similar study be conducted in other South African government departments as well as in other countries and that the results be compared to the findings of this study. A qualitative study can be conducted to obtain rich data about different gender groups' perceptions of labour relations competencies.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the employees' perceptions of whether labour relations practitioners had the necessary competencies to perform their duties, and the study focuses on the perceptions of gender groups. There were significant differences in how the gender groups perceived the competencies of labour relations practitioners in the Gauteng Department of Employment and Labour.

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