

real briefing

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Why Management is not an Occupation:

Implications for professionalising the public service sector

Introduction

The government's aim to create a professional, ethical and capable developmental state rests on competent public sector employees driving service delivery. The National Framework for the Professionalisation of the Public Service includes an approach to appointing managers. The approach includes how managers will be assessed for competencies, trained, and upskilled. The critical question is how the public service sector understands and defines management.

International classifications of occupations and our Organising Framework for Occupations (OFO) classify 'management' as a highly-skilled occupation. Occupational classifications are essential for qualification development, skills planning, funding, and provisions. They work well if there is a one-on-one relationship between qualifications, jobs, and occupations, the core knowledge of the occupation is well established, and the occupation has clear jurisdiction over its tasks. This is generally the case in regulated occupations where knowledge is clearly defined. Nevertheless, in occupations with no license to practice, no professional council, and no systematic and agreed-upon technical knowledge base,

the idea of a one-on-one relationship between qualifications, jobs, and occupations is harder to apply. Management is one such example.

So, in moving to professionalise the public service sector, this REAL brief considers the status of management as an occupation. We have questioned this status based on research conducted by the University of Witwatersrand's Centre for Researching Education and Labour (REAL) on behalf of the Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA).

If management is classified as an occupation, is it independent of a government department's expertise?

How we define or classify management has implications for the PSETA regarding the kind of interventions it would propose and provide for management. This briefing argues that both the qualification requirements and training interventions for managers in the public service will not be effective in professionalising the public sector if the relationship between *role* and *occupation* is not thoroughly defined.

The problem

When the role of a manager is synonymous with '**occupation**', the core knowledge set involves the work of public administration and management. In the public service sector, management is treated as a 'transversal' occupation with skills and abilities transferable across technical departments.

In contrast, when the work of a manager is seen as a **role** within an occupational field, the knowledge of public administration and management is not core. Serving in a manager role means that a person's specialisation is the occupational knowledge required in their technical field of practice. These fields include education, agriculture, finance, health, energy, and environment. When occupational knowledge is mandatory, a person will progress into a manager role within a specific technical field of practice.

When defined as an occupation that cuts across tasks and roles, public service management poses a conceptual challenge.

Public service managers are, therefore, not currently expected to demonstrate the occupational knowledge that underpins the technical field of practice they manage. Rather, managers in the public service are expected to know about administration and management. This knowledge could be acquired formally, through experience, and then applicable to *any* technical field. This means that a manager's function, role, and duty is to manage a technical field of practice but not to study and specialise in it.

This problem emanates from the conflation between role and occupation in the classification of managers.

The difference between role and occupation

Management is a means and not an occupation. Therefore, in examining the idea of management as a role and understanding the relation between transversal (generic competencies) and the specialised aspects (occupational knowledge) of management, we explore the concept of the 'division of labour' within an organisation (or a government department). We use this notion to look at the central issue of this Policy Brief — the relationship between the general (transversal) and specialisation aspects (occupation) of management.

The division of labour is made of two matrices: the *matrix of power* (authority over the work of others in a chain of command; also known as 'in authority'), and the *matrix of expertise* (authority over knowledge which creates differentiation of knowledge across an organisation, also known as 'an authority') (Peters, 1973; Winch, 2010).

The matrix of power has hierarchical features. People in higher employment positions have greater power and control over the work of people subordinated to them. The mode of control used in the power matrix could vary between bureaucratic compliance to professional accountability (Abelman et al., 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1989). In traditional 'firms', people progressed into a management role from inside that company, having specialised in the technical field of practice, formally and through experience. Managers of this type learned management skills, formally and through experience.





How do the two matrices relate to one another?

Ideally, but not always in practice, the higher a person's role in an organisation through occupational knowledge will mean they could take on other responsibilities. These experts could learn other forms of knowledge, including strategic knowledge, knowledge of management, organisational knowledge, political knowledge, knowledge of the economy, experiential knowledge, and people management. In this case, managers command knowledge, ideas, and ways of addressing problems to support and lead professionals of different but related occupations.

People are put into positions of management based on management qualifications, provided mainly by the new proliferation of management courses and qualifications. Their occupational knowledge of the technical field of practice is not always the primary consideration.

In public service, further complexity exists: people are recruited and promoted on political grounds by being loyally affiliated with the dominant party.

The matrix of expertise is about transmitting technical occupational knowledge essential to the organisation's core offerings. High, medium and elementary specialisations create a complex network of occupational expertise. This organisational order aims to grow, distribute and expand the expertise of the technical field of practice across the organisation.

To this end order is vertical rather than hierarchical. The transmission of occupational and managerial knowledge depends on **having authority over knowledge**. Recognition of expertise in the technical field of practice is fundamental.

Occupational knowledge is core, while public administration and management are additional.

The matrix of expertise thus foregrounds knowledge over position in the division of labour.

Discussion is encouraged. Orders and rules are carefully justified, and compliance is used only for specific purposes.

Where managers are not technical experts in their department, how the matrices of power and expertise intersect will depend on leadership style and how power is exercised. A person in a management role who acknowledges the limitations of not being versed in the occupational knowledge that underpins the technical field of practice they manage, could adopt a leadership style that creates a better flow of ideas across the organisation.

This view of the role of managers is not seen in the public service (PARI Public Affairs Research Institute, 2022; PSC, 2021). At the risk of generalisation, political executives lead by instituting policy, managers administer policy, and professionals are told to follow procedures. Public administrators, especially public service managers, operate as administrators and political executives lead.

If management is seen as an occupation and the source of specialisation, it is unlikely that the work of professionals would be recognised. It is more likely that a culture of compliance prevails.

The following is encouraged:

- An equal distribution of occupational and management knowledge;
- A field of practice that draws on clear bodies of knowledge;
- Recruitment and progression into management positions that take occupational knowledge and experience into account; and
- Knowledge of administration and management (transversal abilities).

Conclusion

Trying to unpack the challenges around defining management in the public service as a transversal occupation is not purely an academic argument. It has implications for how government departments understand the jobs and people they need, design those jobs, align them with each other, and ensure that management's knowledge and power are not inflated. Seeing management as a role and not an occupation provides a lens to ensure that management commands in a department are based on power *and* occupational expertise.

Therefore, a government department manager can create a variety of pathways for career progression, devise labour processes that distribute professional judgements, and create opportunities for learning with and from others without sacrificing accountability to the public good.

Recognition of occupational knowledge should influence recruitment and career progression plans and guide the kinds of intervention programmes supported by the PSETA.