



The influence of work environment on employee performance: A case study of the Department of Public Works, OR Tambo District

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigated the relationship between the work environment and employee performance within a South African public institution, the Department of Public Works in the Eastern Cape province. The explored the experiences of employees and perceptions of performance management within the Department of Public Works. Drawing on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theoretical framework, the research sought to understand how elements of the physical workspace and organizational culture contribute to employee outcomes. The researchers used an interpretive paradigm, an influential qualitative approach, and a case study research design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, structured observation, and document analysis with eight purposively selected participants occupying various roles within the Department. The thematic analysis revealed that ergonomic workspace design, including adequate lighting, ventilation, and spatial layout, significantly influences employee comfort and efficiency. In parallel, supportive leadership, open communication, and a collaborative organizational culture enhanced job satisfaction, motivation, and overall performance. The study highlights the importance of an enabling work environment as a strategic lever for optimizing public sector productivity. It concludes by offering evidence-based recommendations to foster conducive working conditions and strengthen institutional culture to improve employee performance. Therefore, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on public sector management by providing empirical insights into how the work environment and organizational culture jointly shape employee performance. It extends the application of the JD-R theoretical framework to the South African public service context, offering a contextualized understanding of performance dynamics and informing both theory and practice in human resource management and organizational development.

Keywords - Work Environment, Employee Performance, Organizational Culture

INTRODUCTION

A supportive and well-structured work environment is widely recognized as a fundamental determinant of employee performance and overall job satisfaction.¹ The interplay between the physical workspace and the

¹ N. Faez, A. Hamdan, and M. Abdulrasool, "Examining the Effects of Work Environment and Organizational Culture on Employee Performance: Evidence from Government Institutions," *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 36, no. 4 (2023): 671–90.

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organizational culture forms a crucial foundation for enabling employees to perform optimally. A growing body of research underscores that favourable physical conditions, such as adequate lighting, noise control, ergonomic furniture, and air quality significantly enhance employee productivity, health, and well-being.² Additionally, a positive organizational culture characterized by open communication, supportive leadership, mutual respect, and shared values further strengthens employee engagement, reduces workplace conflicts, and promotes a sense of belonging and purpose.

Empirical evidence has suggested that these conducive environments lead to increased productivity and lower absenteeism and staff turnover levels while enhancing employee morale and commitment.³ Conversely, poor working conditions, whether in terms of the physical setup or toxic cultural dynamics, are associated with heightened stress levels, burnout, and declining performance.⁴ These adverse outcomes can significantly undermine organizational efficiency and employee well-being.

A conducive work environment is widely recognized as a fundamental determinant of employee performance, motivation, and overall job satisfaction. In the South African public sector, the Public Service Regulations of 2016, enacted under the Public Service Act (1994), strongly emphasize creating and maintaining a safe, supportive, and enabling work environment. These regulations are designed to facilitate effective service delivery at the same time, safeguarding employee well-being. Regulation 55 of Part VI stipulates that every government department must “ensure that the working environment is safe and does not pose a risk to the health of employees and that workplace conditions enable the effective performance of duties.”⁵

Additionally, the Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993 extends the legal obligation of employers, including public institutions, to ensure that the workplace is devoid of physical and psychological hazards. This legislation compels departments to implement practices and standards that support all employees' physical integrity and mental wellness. When implemented effectively, these policy frameworks are instrumental in fostering a high-performing, ethical, and citizen-focused public service. Despite comprehensive regulatory frameworks, the work environment at the Department of Public Works in Mthatha reveals substantial deviations from policy expectations. Preliminary assessments, including informal staff interviews and field observations, indicate deficiencies that compromise employee well-being and performance. These include overcrowded and poorly maintained office spaces, insufficient and outdated technological infrastructure, inadequate ventilation, substandard lighting, and persistent disruptions due to unresolved maintenance challenges.

The evident disconnect between the policy framework and the working conditions at the Department of Public Works in Mthatha necessitates urgent scholarly investigation. Although public service policies in South Africa clearly advocate for an environment conducive to employee efficiency and welfare, the department's current state illustrates significant implementation shortfalls.

This paper is therefore justified in its aim to critically examine the influence of the work environment on employee performance within this specific public institution. By identifying the root causes of existing challenges and assessing their impact on employee behavior and service outcomes, the research provides evidence-based insights that can inform policy reform, strengthen compliance mechanisms, and ultimately improve workplace standards in the public sector.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study investigates the impact of the work environment on employee performance within the Department of Public Works in the OR Tambo District, using the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model as its theoretical foundation. This model posits that a supportive and well-structured work environment

² Faez, Hamdan, and Abdulrasool, “Examining the Effects of Work Environment and Organizational Culture on Employee Performance: Evidence from Government Institutions.”

³ Faez, Hamdan, and Abdulrasool, “Examining the Effects of Work Environment and Organizational Culture on Employee Performance: Evidence from Government Institutions.”

⁴ Arnold B Bakker and Evangelia Demerouti, “Job Demands–Resources Theory: Taking Stock and Looking Forward.,” *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 22, no. 3 (2017): 273.

⁵ Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), “Public Service Regulations,” *Government Gazette No. 40167*, 2016.

fosters job satisfaction and enhances employee performance outcomes. Furthermore, the influence of leadership style, particularly transformational leadership, is emphasized as a vital factor that can strengthen this relationship by motivating and empowering employees.



Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Showing the Influence of Work Environment on Employee Performance

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global research emphasizes the value of a conducive work environment in promoting employee performance. Faez, Hamdan, and Abdurassool highlight the importance of open communication, opportunities for professional growth, and positive collegial relationships in fostering motivation and productivity.⁶ According to Cohen et al., a significant positive correlation exists between well-designed physical workspaces and employee efficiency, creativity, and satisfaction.⁷ Bakker and Demerouti highlight the role of organizational support mechanisms, such as access to resources, autonomy, and supervisory feedback within the JD-R framework, asserting that these mechanisms enhance psychological well-being and reduce burnout, thereby improving job performance.⁸

In Southeast Asia, recent studies have emphasized that organizational culture and job satisfaction are key determinants of employee performance. Baharuddin et al. demonstrated in South Sulawesi that employee commitment mediates the relationship between organizational culture and job performance, highlighting the importance of value alignment.⁹ Similarly, Putri and Hasibuan, in their study in South Tangerang City, found that the work environment, including team dynamics and leadership style, was a

⁶ Faez, Hamdan, and Abdurassool, "Examining the Effects of Work Environment and Organizational Culture on Employee Performance: Evidence from Government Institutions."

⁷ S. Cohen et al., "The Impact of Physical Office Environments on Employee Well-Being and Performance: A Multi-Study Investigation," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 77 (2021): 101683.

⁸ Arnold B Bakker and Evangelia Demerouti, "Job Demands–Resources Theory: Taking Stock and Looking Forward.," *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 22, no. 3 (2017): 273.

⁹ R., Baharuddin, A. Tamba, and M. Taba., "The Effect of Organizational Culture on Employee Performance: Mediating Role of Commitment," *Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business* 7, no. 11 (2020): 1007–16.

more influential predictor of performance than workload, suggesting that social and emotional support in the workplace plays a vital role.¹⁰

South African scholarship supports these international and regional trends, emphasizing the critical role of supportive workplace structures, empathic leadership, which are closely enhanced. Zakeyo reports that interpersonal trust, transparent communication, and empathetic leadership are closely linked with improved employee performance and retention.¹¹ He also finds that High Performance Work Systems (HPWS) which include training, performance-based incentives, and participative decision-making are significantly associated with improved employee well-being and organizational effectiveness.

Expanding this further, MacDonald argues that employee engagement, facilitated through recognition, goal clarity, and feedback loops, is central to effective performance management, particularly within South African public institutions.¹² Moreover, Dlamini and Mokoena highlight that psychological safety and inclusive workplace practices contribute meaningfully to job satisfaction and innovation, especially in diverse, post-apartheid organizational contexts.¹³ Similarly, Nkosi and Zulu assert that transformational leadership and access to professional development opportunities are essential drivers of performance in both public and private sectors.¹⁴ These findings reflect a growing consensus that a holistic and employee-centred approach to workplace management is vital for sustainable performance outcomes in South Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is based on the JD-R model, which asserts that job characteristics can be classified into two broad categories: demands and resources. Job demands, such as excessive workload or unfavourable environmental conditions can deplete energy and cause burnout.¹⁵ In contrast, job resources, such as organizational support, autonomy, and feedback can mitigate these effects and promote engagement and motivation. The JD-R model is particularly relevant to this study because it offers a dual-pathway explanation of the health impairment and motivational processes. This model assisted the researchers in understanding the current situation of the influence of work environment on employee performance in the Department of Public Works in the OR Tambo District.

The health impairment process describes how excessive job demands exhaust mental and physical resources of employees, leading to burnout and health problems.¹⁶ Conversely, the motivational process outlines how job resources enhance motivation and organizational commitment, improving performance and job satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

The study used an interpretive paradigm and a qualitative case study design to investigate experiences of employees and their perceptions about the influence of the work environment on performance within the Department of Public Works in the OR Tambo District, Eastern Cape. This methodology facilitated a comprehensive understanding of lived experiences of employees and the contextual factors shaping their performance. Using a purposive sampling technique, the research selected eight information-rich

¹⁰ A. M. Putri and B. K. Hasibuan, "The Effect of Work Environment and Leadership Style on Employee Performance in South Tangerang," *International Journal of Business and Management Invention* 10, no. 5 (2021): 10–18.

¹¹ T. Zakeyo, "High Performance Work Systems and Organizational Effectiveness in the South African Public Sector," *South African Journal of Labour Relations* 49, no. 1 (2025): 55–70.

¹² M. MacDonald, "Employee Engagement and Performance Management in South African Public Institutions," *Journal of Public Administration* 60, no. 1 (2025): 43–60.

¹³ N., Dlamini and P. Mokoena, "Inclusive Leadership and Job Satisfaction in Post-Apartheid South African Organizations," *South African Journal of Human Resource Management*, Article A1887. 22, no. 1 (2024).

¹⁴ S. Nkosi and P. Zulu, "Transformational Leadership and Employee Performance in Public and Private Organisations in South Africa," *Management Dynamics* 32, no. 3 (2023): 1–15.

¹⁵ Arnold B. Bakker, Evangelia Demerouti, and Ana Sanz-Vergel, "Job Demands–Resources Theory: Ten Years Later," *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 10, no. 1 (January 23, 2023): 25–53, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-120920-053933>.

¹⁶ Leon T De Beer, Jaco Pienaar, and Sebastiaan Rothmann Jr, "Job Burnout, Work Engagement and Self-reported Treatment for Health Conditions in South Africa," *Stress and Health* 32, no. 1 (2016): 36–46.

participants from various units within the department, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives. The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview schedule, which allowed for gathering detailed and descriptive responses. Complementary data were collected through observations and analyses of internal reports, policy documents, and performance management frameworks, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings via triangulation. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which involved coding, categorizing, and identifying emerging patterns and themes within the collected data. This analytical approach was chosen to ensure clarity, coherence, and ease of interpretation, aligning with the qualitative and interpretive nature of the study. Ultimately, the research aims to contribute valuable insights into how the work environment affects employee performance, providing implications for policy and practice in the public sector.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and the Department of Public Works permitted the study. All participants gave informed consent and were informed that their responses would be kept confidential and their identity anonymous. They were also informed that they may withdraw from the study without consequences.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The following are the themes that emerged and are discussed in this paper:

1. Physical Work Environment
2. Organizational Culture

The findings are presented and discussed according to the two themes that emerged as outlined above.

Physical Work Environment

Participants identified several physical factors that influence their productivity. These include lighting, noise levels, and furniture ergonomics, within the Department of Public Works. Three respondents noted,

"Noise levels really affect my concentration. A quiet environment helps me stay focused and be more productive. When there is constant background noise, like people talking loudly, phones ringing, or construction sounds outside, it becomes challenging to concentrate on tasks that require deep thinking or attention to detail. I often find myself having to reread documents or redo parts of my work because I got distracted. On the other hand, when the office is quiet or has controlled ambient sound, I can stay in the zone longer and finish tasks more efficiently. A peaceful workspace not only boosts my productivity but also helps reduce stress and mental fatigue." (Participant 2)

"Good lighting is crucial for me. When the lighting is adequate, I can focus better and avoid eye strain. Poor lighting, especially dim or overly harsh lighting, tends to make me feel fatigued more quickly and impacts my concentration levels. On days when the lighting is optimal, whether it is natural light from the windows or well-placed artificial lighting, I notice a significant improvement in my ability to stay attentive and complete tasks efficiently. It also helps reduce headaches and eye discomfort, which can otherwise become a distraction. A well-lit environment, in my view, sets the tone for a productive workday." (Participant 3)

"Having a comfortable chair and a properly set-up desk reduces my physical discomfort and allows me to work longer without fatigue. Before we had ergonomic setups, I often experienced back pain, neck stiffness, and wrist strain, especially after sitting for long periods. But with the right chair that supports my lower back and a desk that's the correct height, I feel much more physically supported throughout the day. It also helps me maintain better posture, which contributes to my overall well-being. When my body feels comfortable, I'm less distracted by aches and pains and can concentrate more fully on my work tasks. In the long run, I believe ergonomic furniture plays a crucial role in preventing work-related injuries and boosting overall productivity." (Participant 8)

These observations are consistent with Cohen et al., who demonstrated that thoughtfully designed physical environments are linked to higher levels of output.¹⁷ Environmental variables, such as temperature and ventilation, as discussed by Verkada, were also cited as significant contributors.¹⁸

Organizational Culture

A strong theme that emerged was the value of supportive leadership and open communication. Two employees remarked,

“When management is supportive and communicates openly, it creates a positive and trusting work environment. Knowing that my managers are approachable and willing to listen to my concerns makes me feel valued and respected. This support helps me to overcome challenges and stay focused on my tasks. I have noticed that when leaders are transparent about decisions, provide regular feedback, and show genuine interest in staff well-being, it boosts morale and creates a sense of psychological safety. It becomes easier to ask questions, suggest improvements, or even admit mistakes without fear of negative consequences. That kind of environment makes me more engaged, motivated, and committed to my responsibilities. It also promotes teamwork and reduces the stress that often comes from unclear expectations or inconsistent communication.” (Participant 4).

“Open communication ensures that I am well-informed about company goals and changes, which aligns my efforts with the organization's objectives. This clarity and support boost my confidence and drive, ultimately motivating me to perform at my best. When information is shared transparently, whether it is about new projects, performance expectations, or organizational changes, I feel more secure in my role and better equipped to contribute meaningfully. It eliminates uncertainty and reduces misunderstandings, which can cause frustration or demotivation. Furthermore, open communication creates a sense of inclusion, where employees feel that their voices matter. When I'm encouraged to share my thoughts or ask questions without judgment, it improves collaboration and reinforces a culture of mutual respect and accountability. In such an environment, I feel empowered to take initiative and go the extra mile in my work.” (Participant 1)

This view aligns with Faez, Hamdan and Abdulrasool, who emphasized the impact of interpersonal dynamics on productivity.¹⁹ Similarly, RSM South Africa found that positive intra-team relationships and leadership support elevate performance metrics.²⁰

DISCUSSION

The relevance of the JD-R model in public-sector contexts, within the Department of Public Works in Mthatha, is highlighted by results showing that both physical and social aspects of the work environment function as essential job resources that directly influence employee well-being and performance. The practical value of the JD-R model is evident: participants consistently identified well-maintained physical workspaces with adequate lighting, reduced noise levels, and ergonomic furniture as key contributors to enhanced productivity and reduced physical strain. These environmental features reflect the “resources” described in the JD-R model, as they support employees in managing job demands while maintaining their energy and focus.²¹ Equally significant is the role of organizational culture as a social resource. Participants emphasized the positive impact of open communication, supportive leadership, and recognition, fostering a sense of morale, belonging, and motivation. These findings are particularly relevant in public institutions, where rigid bureaucratic structures often challenge employee engagement. The results are consistent with

¹⁷ Cohen et al., “The Impact of Physical Office Environments on Employee Well-Being and Performance: A Multi-Study Investigation.”

¹⁸ A. Verkada, “The Impact of Air Quality and Temperature on Workplace Productivity: Evidence from Real-Time Sensor Data,” *Building and Environment* 207 (2022): 108480.

¹⁹ Faez, Hamdan, and Abdulrasool, “Examining the Effects of Work Environment and Organizational Culture on Employee Performance: Evidence from Government Institutions.”

²⁰ RSM South Africa, “Enhancing Performance through Culture: The South African Workplace Experience,” RSM Global, 2023, <https://www.rsm.global/southafrica>.

²¹ Bakker and Demerouti, “Job Demands–Resources Theory: Taking Stock and Looking Forward.,” 2017.

Smith and Brown, who noted that environments in which employees feel acknowledged, respected, and supported are more likely to experience higher levels of morale and job satisfaction.²²

Furthermore, this study adds to the broader understanding of how physical and social environments influence public sector performance. A supportive work environment can protect against stress, burnout, and disengagement in resource-constrained settings such as the Department of Public Works. A positive organizational culture enhances individual performance and promotes collaboration, accountability, and overall departmental efficiency. These factors collectively strengthen the institution's ability to deliver on its public service mandate.

Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of embedding employee well-being into strategic human resource and operational planning. Investing in a supportive physical and organizational environment should not be regarded as an optional or secondary concern, but rather as a core strategy for improving employee performance and advancing institutional effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations are proposed to enhance employee performance by improving work environment practices within the Department of Public Works and similar public sector organizations.

Enhance Physical Work Conditions

The study recommends that improving physical environment the workplace is essential for promoting employee comfort, productivity, and overall well-being. It is recommended that regular ergonomic assessments conducted to identify and handle factors that may hinder physical comfort or contribute to occupational health risks. Specific attention should be paid to optimizing lighting to prevent eye strain and enhance visual comfort, reducing ambient noise to improve concentration, and ensuring effective ventilation systems to promote air quality and reduce fatigue. Investing in such physical enhancements contributes to higher productivity and demonstrates institutional commitment to staff welfare.

Foster a Positive Organizational Culture

The study further recommends that organizational culture be central in shaping employee morale and performance. It is imperative to implement leadership development programmes that equip managers with the skills to lead empathetically, communicate transparently, and cultivate inclusive team environments. Encouraging open, reciprocal communication between management and employees can help build trust, promote a sense of belonging, and empower staff to contribute meaningfully to organizational goals. Establishing collaboration, feedback, and recognition spaces further contributes to a workplace culture that values participation and mutual respect.

Establish Feedback and Recognition Mechanisms

This study recommends that introducing structured feedback and recognition systems is essential for guiding performance and fostering employee motivation. Constructive feedback helps employees understand expectations, monitor their progress, and identify areas for development. Simultaneously, recognizing individual and team achievements, whether formally through awards or informally through verbal appreciation, enhances motivation and reinforces a culture of excellence. These practices help maintain high morale and provide employees with a sense of direction and achievement, which are crucial for sustained engagement.

Promote Work–Life Balance

Organizations need to support holistic well-being of employees and implement initiatives that encourage a healthy balance between work responsibilities and the personal life of employees. Wellness programmes

²² T., Smith and K. Brown, "Organizational Support and Psychological Safety in Public Sector Environments," *Journal of Workplace Psychology* 15, no. 2 (2022): 115–29.

focusing on mental and physical health, such as stress management workshops, access to psychological support services, and health promotion activities, can reduce burnout and absenteeism. Additionally, flexible working arrangements, including staggered hours, remote work options, and leave policies, provide employees with autonomy over their schedules, significantly improving job satisfaction and retention. Prioritizing work–life balance is particularly critical in high-pressure public service environments, where demands can often be overwhelming.

CONCLUSION

This study establishes that the physical work environment and organizational culture are critical in influencing employee performance within the Department of Public Works in Mthatha. The findings highlight the importance of strategic investment in improving workplace conditions and fostering a positive organizational culture. These measures are essential for enhancing employee productivity, promoting job satisfaction, and reducing staff turnover. The study underscores the imperative for public sector institutions to prioritize internal environments to strengthen overall institutional effectiveness.

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