



## The Analysis Aspects of Employee Engagement on Employee Innovation in the Public Sector

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyse the aspects of employee engagement in employee innovation in the public sector. Standardised face-to-face open-ended interviews were used in this study. To meet the goals of this study, six open-ended questions and one topic comprise the research measuring tool. Content analysis was used in tandem with the continuous comparative data analysis technique. The researcher grouped the data according to both their commonalities and differences. The absence of innovative ideas and employee engagement in the public sector makes innovation challenging to achieve. Employee engagement encourages employees to develop innovative concepts since they are confident, they will make sense. No study has ever been carried out focusing on employee engagement and innovation in the public sector. Thus, more research is needed on the effects of employee engagement on employee innovation within public sector organisations. The value of this study lies in filling this gap. Public sector organisations, specifically local government, will continue to provide poor service to their communities due to disengaged employees and their respective municipalities not promoting a conducive work environment and a culture of innovation among employees.

**Keywords:** Employee Engagement, Employee Innovation, Municipality, Organization, Public Sector

### Introduction

Organisations risk long-term investments in employee engagement and general economic performance when focusing only on short-term financial gains. Planners and executives are inclined to focus on fast victories despite if they do not serve the organisation's long-term best interests if there is no motivation, perceived benefit, or support for strategic, long-term thinking (Fierce, 2023). In human resources, "employee engagement" is often used as a catch-all phrase to group related concepts into one overarching domain of "people strategy" (Court-Smith, 2016). However, the issue is sliding and incoherent: for instance, just thirty per



cent of employees are proactively involved in their work, and then when defining the word "employee engagement", it is portrayed as a comprehensive term (Rayton & Dodge, 2012). Werner (2017) emphasised that very controlled environments with limited space for innovation, independence, or individual responsibility prevent employees from becoming engaged.

A deficient or absent work-life equilibrium precedes deficient levels of engagement. Many employees who utilise the remote employment paradigm expressed dissatisfaction about their employers' or bosses' disregard for their time at home (Pai, 2022). The inherent isolation of being a remote employee is one of the main obstacles to establishing and maintaining employee engagement (Sinclair, 2021). Inequity, especially in compensation and reward structures, extremely demanding work with no room for discretion or independence, ineffective line management techniques, bullying, and a prolonged period of uninterrupted work with not a moment's respite (Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009). Evaluating and encouraging engagement, employees' lack of knowledge about the critical areas that their organisation wants to monitor and enhance can cause more issues (Saks, 2017). In the broader public industry, innovation has yet to be well defined; moreover, many characteristics are shared across national and worldwide research initiatives and organisations for economic cooperation and development (OECD, 2005). Most organisations do not often acknowledge innovation management as an issue that requires a systematic approach to solve (Dieter, 2018). Making sense of a complicated, unpredictable, and hazardous collection of occurrences is one of the main challenges in innovation management. Perceiving innovation as an operation that is purely driven by the market or as a conventional "technology push" approach wherein all resources are allocated to research and development despite user input; perceiving innovation solely as major "breakthroughs" while disregarding the substantial potential of incremental innovation; perceiving innovation as just a disconnected alteration instead of as a component of a more extensive system; perceiving innovation as a good or process exclusively, lacking acknowledging the interplay involving the two of them (Tidd, 2006).

Organisational structures are typically complicated because they are boundary-spanning organisations that connect the organisation's technology abilities, business strategy, and innovation processes (Spieth et al., 2014). "Is there a way to gauge innovation?" has become a frequently asked issue. Specific individuals do not think so. The breadth, complication and immateriality of innovation operations render evaluating them difficult.



Quantifying innovation is sometimes referred to as "assessing the indescribable" by administrators (Jánošková & Král, 2021). Although public sector systems of measurement, metrics, and analytics are increasingly sophisticated, they cannot automatically imply that public sector actions result in transformation; instead, they function as characterisation instruments, modes of feedback, and warning signs indicating a requirement for more oversight and evaluation. However, assessing frequently serves as a stand-in for assessment (OECD, a2020). No study has ever been carried out focusing on employee engagement and innovation in the public sector. Thus, there is a research gap on the effects of employee engagement on employee innovation within public sector organisations. The problem identified in this study is a lack of systematic approach to innovation in the public sector, and disengaged employees affect local government employees' innovation capabilities. This study aims to analyse the aspects of employee engagement in employee innovation in the public sector. Given their numerous controversies, public sector officials should not overlook this study's importance.

## **Methods and Materials**

### **Research Methodology**

The researcher sampled ten individuals from the Nkangala District Municipality. Qualitative research prioritises content above general theories (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Because this study employed an exploratory research methodology, non-probability sampling was used. Because it is quick, suitable, and affordable, this study employed a haphazard convenience sampling approach (Mexon & Kumar, 2020; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Standardised face-to-face open-ended interviews were used in this study. To fulfil the goals of this investigation, the research instrument consists of six open-ended questions and one subject matter. Interviews were used to gather data. To conduct a thematic analysis, this study followed Braun and Clark's (2019) guidelines, which include acquainting oneself with the data, generating the preliminary codes, compiling codes with additional information, organising codes into themes, assessing and updating themes, and crafting a story to analyse. The study employed the deduced themes analysis of the data method. Content analysis was used in tandem with the continuous comparison data analysis technique. Each pertinent data element needs to be evaluated for every related data item, as Morse and Field (1998) stated. In this study, the term "constant comparative" corresponds to an inductive coded data process utilised to help interpret by classifying and comparing qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researcher grouped the data according to both their commonalities and differences. The primary



lesson from the interview, as well as any associated codes, and understanding the interview, including all its difficulties, highlights, and paradoxes.

**Employee Innovation in the Public Sector**

Although there is not a single definition for public sector innovation, there are several characteristics that it may have in common with commercial innovation, such as the desire to improve organisational procedures, services, goods, or processes (Moussa et al., 2018). An organisation’s frameworks, skills, talents, rules, regulations, guidelines, customs, cultures, attitudes, and other elements that together affect whether and how much innovation happens as well as what shapes what it requires can be viewed as an innovation system in the public sector's (Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, 2021). In public sector business organisations, innovative human resource management (HRM) approaches are management initiatives aimed at boosting individual performance (Choo & Yoon, 2009). However, compared to private-sector organisations, government organisations are generally less inclined to prioritise innovative HRM approaches since government workforce administration is characterised by strict categorisation, extended tenure, and an antagonistic labour-management interaction (Wright & Kim, 2004). Mulgan (2007) states that innovation in the public sector focuses on fresh concepts that add value for the general population. The ideas must be at least somewhat novel (as opposed to advancements); they must be implemented (as opposed to merely being excellent concepts); and they must be beneficial.

Municipalities that innovate focus on enhancing government operations and/or services see Table 1.

**Table 1:** Innovation in the Municipality

<b>Type A: A highly innovative municipality</b>	<b>Type B: A non-innovative municipality</b>
Encourages risk-taking through rewards	Discourages risk-taking by creating unfavourable consequences for risk-taking
Learns from mistakes collectively	Blames individuals for mistakes
Allows ideas to be tested before deciding whether they will work	Makes snap decisions and quick judgments about which ideas will work
Creates a separate innovation unit to drive innovative thinking and develop new ideas	Expect new ideas to emerge out of the blue, with no conscious processes to stimulate thought
Attracts ideas in lots of ways, via lots of different media, from other profiles	Either does not attract ideas at all or does so in a singular way



of people (anonymously, openly in meetings, through events)

Results-driven

Failure is a sign of experience and maturity

Investment in innovative ideas using grants or investment from other countries, municipalities, or non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

Research and Development and Innovation departments incentivise innovate

Driven by money, fame, competition, promotion

Process-driven; compliance-driven

Failure is frowned upon

Investment in innovation using taxpayers' money exclusively

No Research and Development department

Driven by altruism, desire to give back, recognition

**Source:** South African Local Government Association (SALGA) (2018:7)

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2017) justifies innovation from the private sector as not always translating immediately to the public sector; most of the time, public sector actions need prior notification and express consent from others (supervisors or various government departments). When you combine this with the need for authorised acts to adhere to set protocols, a worst-case scenario known as red tape innovation, it is much harder to carry out. Since they can only succeed and get the profits they want by taking such risks, private sector organisation owners gladly assume the risks of uncertainty and failure that come with the territory. An effective manager of public goods constitutes the benchmark in the public sector when vulnerability to potential failure is considered inconsiderate. In contrast, the public sector is usually characterised by an atmosphere devoid of market forces and rivalry. Due to the public sector, completeness is seen as an enemy of those harms. A significant barrier to innovation is the sheer number of numerous public sector organisations, especially those operating at the national level (military installations, health care programmes, and educational systems are a few examples). These organisations struggle with organisational drive and management, which are significant obstacles to innovation.

Nowadays, recognised best practices for handling technological innovation do not exist (Maier et al., 2016; Maier, 2018). Government building capacity is crucial to address society's multifaceted and insurmountable problems since public sector challenges are inherently complicated, cross-border, and insurmountable with conventional methods and techniques (Daglio et al., 2015). Society's increasing expectations for a more innovative and effective public sector are putting more significant strain on the public sector and its employees (Balla,



2021). Historically, public sector organisations and welfare providers like municipalities have not been thought of as places for innovation (Lidman et al., 2022). In Sub-Saharan Africa, multiple governments have recently been exploring new and innovative approaches to public service delivery, citizen engagement, and complicated policy issue solving (Bandauko, 2022). In South Africa, the public sector's innovation culture and practices are strengthened via the Centre for Public Service Innovation (CPSI). The Centre for Public Service Innovation collaborates extensively with organisations, collaborators, and service delivery units to establish innovation as a culture and practice in the public sector. Centre for Public Service Innovation achieves this by launching several programmes to identify and reward innovators, uncover innovation from around the public sector, showcase new ideas, jointly develop them, make duplication easier, and assist in integrating them (CPSI, 2023). Business innovation is frequently linked to creating new goods or services. However, it may also alter the organisation's practices (Business Victoria, 2023). Innovation includes addressing evolving client expectations or wants, developing innovative technologies and their applications, and improving industrial procedures and systems. The following are the goals of innovation in the South African public sector: streamline procedures to cut costs; increase service quality and/or efficiency at reduced prices; improve service delivery system's efficacy and efficiency while placing a focus on citizen interaction; create novel responses to enduring problems that various government organisations encounter and to develop innovations that enhance administrative areas Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and non-ICT systems and procedures (Republic of South Africa, 2017).

Excellent concepts, a well-thought-out procedure, and well-allocated resources are the foundation of each successful innovation. However, while choosing the best ideas, much care and detail must be taken into consideration (Țîtu et al., 2014). The research by Lidman et al. (2022) demonstrates the selection process for several innovation support techniques, encompassing concept guidance and instruction using service engineering techniques and proposal box configurations. Irrespective of the approach, the efforts encountered difficulties since there was no clear guidance on what needed to be innovated, and the innovation assistance did not extend to the application stages. There are also issues with managers entering the innovation procedures late in the process and getting an organisational willingness to engage with innovation. These results highlight the difficulties in implementing change in organisations generally, bringing innovation, and establishing supportive environments for



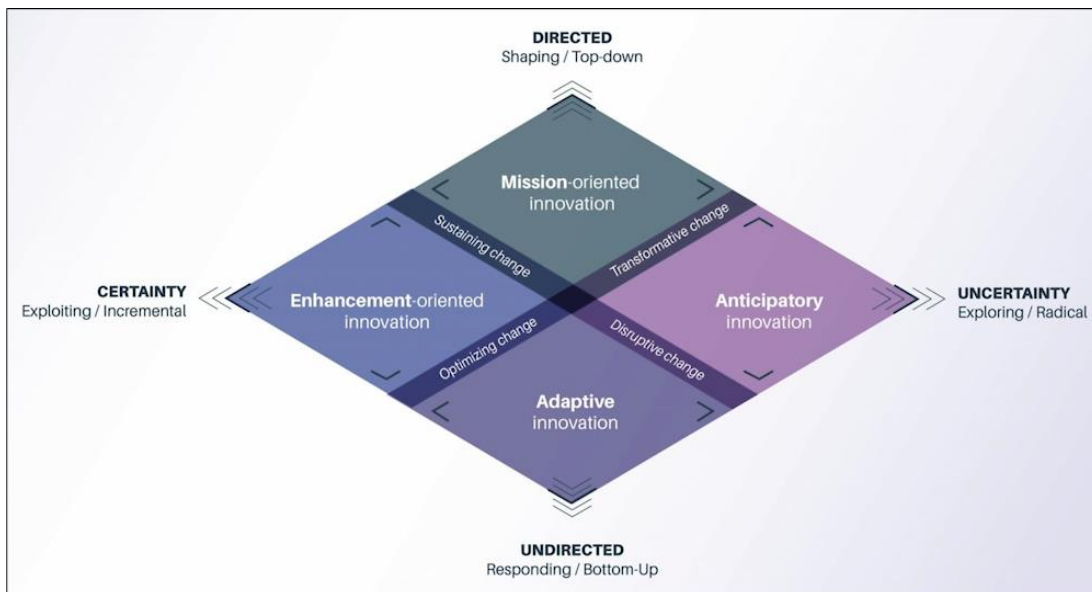
innovation in organisations that are part of the public sector. The term "digital innovation" has gained popularity recently in the public sector. However, it is still in the early stages of innovation governance. Various national government agencies in South Africa are attempting to implement a digital government, but the lack of a central governance structure makes the process seem challenging. The national government has established several government elements to promote innovation throughout departments. Nevertheless, there exists an absence of cooperation, which further perplexes administrators since no one has defined the responsibilities of various stakeholders to facilitate communication, exchange of concepts, and the development of an updated environment.

In less prevailing institutions and structures, innovators frequently find success. Good ideas are often overlooked or obstructed. Public services are still unable to adapt to improved models. In the public sector, there is an absence of funding models for innovation inside organisations, a shortage of human and non-human resources, insufficient mechanisms for rewards, and a lack of sophisticated risk management techniques and experimental methodologies. (Moussa et al., 2018). The study conducted by Cinar et al. (2018) examined four aspects of public sector innovation processes to identify barriers: categorisation, interrelations, innovation process, and kinds of inventions. They discovered that different systems and varieties of innovation had different obstacles. Municipalities frequently struggle to use innovation to fulfil their development mandates since they lack a comprehensive collection of innovation-related data and tools to guide their initiatives. This is particularly true in underprivileged communities. Insufficient revenue bases and exclusions from identifying remedies to address their geographically marginalised surroundings are characteristics of these towns (Department of Science and Innovation, South Africa, 2023).

### **Public Sector Innovation Facets Model**

Two elements determine an innovation portfolio's features (OECD, b2020) Does the innovation have a purpose? Does it have a specific goal in mind, or is it primarily focused on finding and reacting cautiously or spontaneously to alteration that comes from the outside? Does innovation handle much ambiguity? Is the setting, for instance, one of entirely uncharted territory being explored, or could it be where the problem and circumstance are somewhat comprehended? These two elements lead to the emergence of four aspects see Figure 1.





**Figure 1:** Public Sector Innovation Facets Model

**Source:** Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (a2020)

The unique characteristics of each component are discussed hereunder (OECD, b2020). Ahmad et al. (2019) enhancement-oriented innovation improves procedures, increases productivity, yields superior outcomes, and expands upon pre-existing frameworks without undermining the system. Without following a predetermined path, adaptive innovation explores and develops novel ways to address a changing operational setting and citizens' demands. With mission-oriented innovation, a limited-in-time problem is addressed with an explicit objective and overall purpose. Anticipatory innovation investigates and addresses new issues that could be unknown but potentially influence future commitments and priorities. An organisation's ability to provide a cogent explanation of its innovation process is uncommon (Mulgan, 2014). Mature positions, budgeting techniques, and assessment techniques are few. Instead, new methods are usually developed in a far more capricious manner. This results in implementing novel concepts from above without sufficient study and development, innovative but disjointed regional innovation, and dependent on virtual markets instead of radical innovation. Various degrees of unpredictability will surround public sector innovation, and such settings will call for multiple approaches, techniques, and forms of dispersion and distribution.

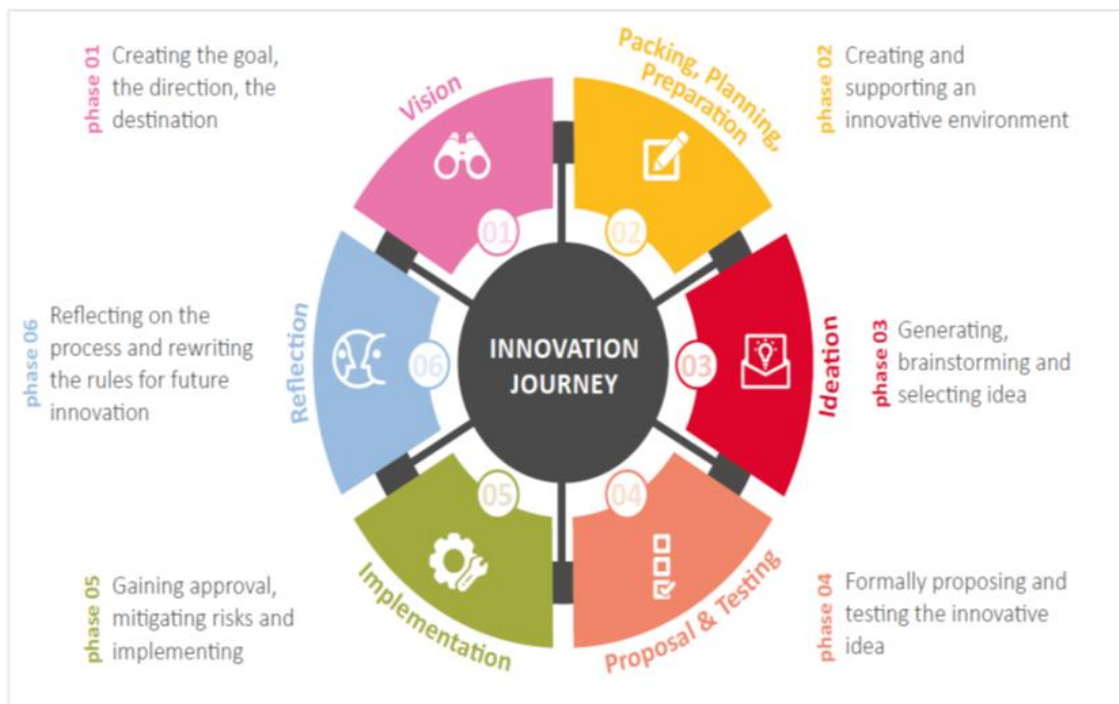
A culture of risk avoidance permeates nearly every organisation. Most managers and staff members are reluctant to take risks and would instead stick with a tried-and-true approach rather than take a leap of faith in an untested one. It feels good for them to play it securely and



maintain the present model since it provides predictability. Organisations do not modify their operational plans to include new technologies (Chesbrough, 2010). Occasionally, it might be difficult to test out novel operational models since the current one continues to be successful. From the perspective of the immediate future, it makes sense to make investments solely in the model that is currently in place. Static inside the organisation, commitment implications, and the organisation's prevailing rationale may further hinder the innovation of business models. A manager's lack of power to allocate resources to the appropriate location is an additional obstacle to business model innovation (Schendlinger, 2023).

### Innovation Process at the Local Municipal Level

Most innovations at the regional level of municipalities are incremental because they only involve minor adjustments to current procedures or procedures. Although they seldom alter organisational structures or cause operational turbulence at the level of municipal governments, incremental innovations are essential to the ongoing quest for better services for the public (SALGA, 2018). Figure 2 shows the phases of the municipal innovation journey. Phase one focuses on the identification and commitment to innovation by most senior leadership. This stage emphasises how crucial it is to develop the vision, objective, and path that will be followed on the innovation path.



**Figure 2:** The Phases of the Municipal Innovation Journey



**Source:** South African Local Government Association (2018)

Phase one investigates how leaders create the conditions for innovation, define the vision, and enlist groups to support achieving objectives. The following stage of travel involves planning, wrapping, and preparing for what is to come. Phase two focuses on the circumstances, requirements, and actions an innovator might take to foster an innovative environment. Administrators may take specific steps to create an environment conducive to innovation. When done sincerely, these acts can promote safety, permit taking calculated risks, build independence, and foster creativity. Idea development is the next step in the trip, which involves dissecting and recreating our knowledge of the goal. Phase three focuses on getting started: How can a municipality implement innovative ideas? Phase three entails the crucial action of incurring the initial numerous hazards and leaping off the innovation precipice. As innovation occurs, it is vital to stay on course to prevent the typical mistakes embryonic innovators make (SALGA, 2018).

Following the testing and proposal stages, the administration grants permission. The next step is reducing the risks of novel concepts (execution). The last effort to implement innovation is phase five. The concept's acceptance and the subsequent risk-mitigation work that still needs to be undertaken are crucial at this stage. Putting the invention into practice is the last stage before achieving the objective (SALGA, 2018). The physical endpoint of the journey, which is equivalent to the introduction of the invention, is at the finish (The process of reflection). Phase six examines how the innovation adventure permits a distinct viewpoint, including a thoughtful revision of the innovation roadmap and an overhaul of the guidelines for upcoming innovation. In this instance, it is crucial to consider the lessons acquired during the innovation journey, whether they will impact future tactics and the best way to utilise those lessons to inform choices (SALGA, 2018).

### **Employee Engagement in Employee Innovation**

Employee engagement refers to an employee's "wholehearted emotional investment" in the work he/she does for an organisation, and the drive inspires the workforce to work more efficiently and effectively (Werner, 2017). "Employee engagement" describes how invested an employee is in his/her employment. How loyal they are to their employer (Noe et al., 2015). Human resource professionals are increasingly interested in employee engagement (Rafi et al., 2022). However, this happens in the private sector. Public sector services encounter significant hurdles. Arguably, the key to overcoming these difficulties is having engaged public employees



(Eldor & Vigoda-Gadot, 2013). In the public sector, lack of involvement due to poor compensation and rewards programmes tends to bring about disengagement and aggressive behaviour by employees (Koodamara & Thomas, 2017). The constantly changing environment of modern business means that several factors play a crucial role in determining the success of an organisation. Two such factors are employee engagement and innovation performance. Employee engagement increases the likelihood that they will spur innovation, question the conventional wisdom, and support the organisation's growth (Shkurti & Mustafa, 2024). Many organisations rarely (when systems and processes fail) or routinely (though they engage in innovations with no collaborative or tactically advantageous collaboration) engage employees in the innovation processes (Stachová et al., 2018).

Employee participation is impossible in a highly structured environment where there is no room for individuality, innovation, or accountability, according to Werner (2020:423). Employees allowed to innovate are more likely to be involved in the organisation. Every organisation's performance largely depends on its ability to engage its workforce (Shailashri & Shenoy, 2016). Since innovative behaviour is inclined to be displayed by engaged employees (Ghani et al., 2023). Design activities, clarification, and execution of services are critical to the running of an organisation and employee engagement. Pedraza et al. (2016) believe that innovative behaviour is driven by engagement and, in the present scenario, is typified by sentiments of duty and autonomy (engagement - innovation) as well as a sense of ownership and belonging (engagement - managing family the organisation). According to Dixit and Upadhyay's (2021) research, innovative work practices and employee engagement are directly related. Another of the materials, job autonomy, directly impacts creative work practices; employee engagement has no mediating influence. Knox and Marin-Cadavid (2022:2043) label two practices for fostering employee engagement in public service initiatives for innovation – structural and embedding. Structural approaches, which were substantial and intended to rearrange organisational procedures to facilitate engagement, were implemented by executives and upper management from organisations with oversight of resources and decision-making authority. These behaviours either allowed or prevented employees from participating in innovation efforts. Organisations that wanted to increase employee engagement sought to free up additional resources and restructure organisational structures and work routines. Practices that limited involvement included separating organisational units to hinder straightforward engagement and restricting resources. Embedding approaches sought to either encourage or



discourage innovative involvement. These discrete activities aimed to shape people's opinions of the innovation endeavour, as opposed to structural procedures.

The absence of innovative ideas and employee engagement makes innovation challenging to see. Employees ought to be engaged by organisations with innovation objectives in an approach that gives them the flexibility, materials, and competencies to innovate. Higher job engagement levels in employees are associated with a propensity for creative and constructive work conduct that goes beyond conventional standards. Moreover, engaged employees have a strong mental, emotional, and physical attachment to their jobs. Positive attitudes toward their career, a capacity for involvement and engagement, and the capacity to empathise with and support colleagues are all signs of engaged employees, which fosters collaboration, improves the place of employment constructive criticism, and creates chances to engage in innovation and innovative work behaviour (Gulzar & Mehraj, 2018). According to Swaroop and Dixit (2018), organisational success depends on studying organisational behaviour that fosters innovation since innovation cannot occur without employees' involvement. Employee participation is impossible in a highly structured environment where there is no room for individuality, innovation, or accountability, according to Werner (2020:423). Employees allowed to innovate are more likely to be involved in the organisation. Design activities, clarification, and execution of services are critical to the running of an organisation and employee engagement. Good ideas are often overlooked or obstructed. Public services are still unable to adapt to improved models. In the public sector, there is an absence of funding models for innovation inside organisations, a shortage of human and non-human resources, insufficient mechanisms for rewards, and a lack of sophisticated risk management techniques and experimental methodologies. (Moussa et al., 2018).

### **Findings**

Organisations foster innovation and improve performance when employees raise issues and new ideas. Since they are frequently the first to witness problems first-hand, employees' opinions may be extremely helpful to managers when making decisions (Sherf et al., 2019). The municipality does not enable employees to feel that doing their best would help them achieve their goals at work, making them more efficient and effective. Employees' ideas and inputs are not taken into consideration. There are political interferences and favours within the municipality. The Sibiyá (2023) study confirmed that problems, including bias, inadequate education, and other unfavourable factors, contributed to low or non-existent employee



engagement in the municipality. The municipality does not encourage employees to accept the group's ideals, perspectives, and motives and is thus discouraged from communicating their values, beliefs, and objectives. Employees are discouraged from communicating their values, beliefs, and objectives. The municipality only considers what management has to say. Thus, it prevents them from sharing their values, beliefs, and goals. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2017), for organisations and employees to maximise their benefits from the exchange of knowledge, concepts, and viewpoints within the structure of contemporary employment practices, an entirely novel structure for communication is required. The conventional methods of addressing employee feedback remain restricted to a certain extent, driven by the belief that the primary objective of management should be to maximise corporate benefits.

The investigation discovered that decisions in the municipality are not made collaboratively or on common ground. The municipality uses a centralised decision-making system and an autocratic leadership style. The municipality is not focused on the significance of teamwork but on its organisational objectives and needs. Sebidi's (2022) study similarly found that the difficulty that municipalities then confront is a lack of adaptable and innovative management prepared to bravely take measured risks to overcome the challenges in providing services within the bounds of the law. It is challenging to instil cultural transformation in government organisations because of this leadership difficulty. Notably, diverse individuals produced the most innovative work in collectivistic societies. Innovation derives from having more varied members who provide access to a broader range of unique ideas and confidence that new ideas can be utilised for the group's good (Chatman et al., 1998). While collectivism is advantageous for marketing novel ideas, individuality is positively correlated with the innovation phase.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to understand the aspects of employee engagement in employee innovation in the public sector. Employee engagement is an essential indicator of innovation, and predictability tends to be stronger when the innovation factor's preparedness is included. The absence of innovative ideas and employee engagement makes innovation challenging to see. Employees ought to be engaged by organisations with innovation objectives in an approach that gives them the flexibility, materials, and competencies to innovate. Innovation results are more likely when engaged people, materials, and mechanisms improve preparedness for



innovation. Employee engagement encourages employees to develop innovative concepts since they know their ideas will make sense. A culture of risk avoidance permeates nearly every organisation. Most managers and staff members are reluctant to take risks and would instead stick with a tried-and-true approach rather than take a leap of faith in an untested one. It feels good for them to play it securely and maintain the present model since it provides predictability. The limitations that affected this study were its poor methodology, limited number of participants, which could prove it challenging to identify whether a specific result is a factual finding, and logistical limitations, which could restrict the period possible to explore a research subject and monitor progress with time. Further studies can focus on how inequity affects employee engagement and innovation, especially in compensation and reward structures. This study was based on a single municipality; another study can be conducted by comparing various municipalities or a provincial or national government. A study can be conducted on employees working virtually to understand their engagement in their employment and organisation.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because the research does not involve vulnerable groups or sensitive issues.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. Due to privacy concerns, they are not publicly available.

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