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Servant leadership in the digital age: A conceptual reflection on employee performance in South African municipalities

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has transformed organizational dynamics, requiring leadership approaches that foster adaptability, engagement, and high performance. This study examines the critical role of servant leadership in enhancing employee performance in the digital age. Servant Leadership, which prioritizes the needs of employees, empowerment, and ethical decision-making, is increasingly relevant in digitally evolving workplaces. This article utilizes a qualitative semi-systematic literature review to explore how servant leadership practices have contributed to enhanced employee performance, including the integration of digital solutions, improved service delivery, and the cultivation of a supportive organizational culture. The study explores how this leadership style influences motivation, job satisfaction, and productivity in the context of digital transformation. Conclusions from the literature show that leaders who embrace servant leadership principle such as empathy, active listening, and support enhance employee engagement and digital competency, leading to improved service delivery. However, challenges such as resistance to change and skills gaps in digital adoption remain. The study contributes to understanding the intersection of leadership and technology in public sector institutions and offers recommendations for leveraging Servant Leadership to drive employee performance in the digital age.

Keywords: Servant Leadership; Employee Performance; Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality, Service Delivery; Digital Era

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1. Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of the digital era, organizations are continuously transforming to adjust to the fast-paced developments caused by technological progress and changing workplace models. The South African municipalities acknowledge the necessity of adjusting its leadership approach to effectively utilize the opportunities presented by digital transformation, while also prioritizing the welfare and productivity of its employees. A key obstacle encountered by contemporary leaders is the need to not only adeptly traverse these transformations, but also to cultivate a conducive atmosphere that enables people to flourish and make optimal contributions to the organization's achievements (Saleem et al., 2020). In response to this challenge, servant leadership has arisen as a compelling leadership philosophy that places a high priority on the welfare and development of employees. This study examines the implementation of servant leadership in South African municipalities and its effect on improving employee performance.

Servant leadership a philosophy where leaders prioritize the needs of employees and empower them to grow and perform has emerged as a relevant and compelling model for fostering trust, collaboration, and engagement in the digital workplace (Qiu et al., 2020). Unlike traditional authoritarian models, servant leadership encourages participation, empathy, and support, which are essential in navigating the complex and technology-driven challenges municipalities face today. As municipalities integrate digital systems to improve efficiency and responsiveness, the leadership style adopted can significantly influence employee adaptability, morale, and overall productivity (Ji and Hyun, 2021). However, there is limited conceptual exploration of how servant leadership principles interact with digital transformation efforts and how this intersection affects employee performance in South African municipalities.

The South African municipalities are responsible for delivering vital public services to its residents. Municipal employees encounter distinctive problems in an era characterized by swift technological progress, shifting demographics, and changing public expectations. The municipalities are required to not only efficiently provide necessary services but also adjust to the requirements of the digital era. Servant leadership, a term introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf in the 1970s, is a leadership style that highlights the leader's responsibility as a servant to their followers. It prioritizes the well-being and growth of employees (Greenleaf, 1977). This leadership style is centered on the notion that leaders have the primary purpose of serving and empowering their teams, rather than the other way around (Chiniaran and Bentein, 2016). The digital era, characterized by its focus on cooperation, ingenuity, and the welfare of workers, closely corresponds to the fundamental principles of servant leadership.

Recent study conducted by Aboramadan et al. (2022), emphasized the potential advantages of servant leadership in promoting beneficial results inside organizations, such as improved employee performance, work satisfaction, and general well-being. Nevertheless, the examination of how servant leadership is used in municipal administration, where hierarchical systems typically dominate, is an area that deserves investigation. This article aims to investigate the implementation of servant leadership within the South African municipalities and how it affects employee performance. The main objective of this study is to increase employee performance, foster a culture of empowerment and collaboration, and eventually enhance the delivery of public services in the digital era.

The study is underpinned by the following objectives:

- To assess the current state of digital integration and leadership within South African municipalities.

- To analyze the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital age for employee performance in South African municipalities
- To recommend how the implementation of Servant Leadership can enhance employee performance in the digital age in South African municipalities.

2. Literature review

The concept of servant leadership is not new among both academics and practitioners, as it was first introduced by Greenleaf in his essay "The Servant as Leader" (Greenleaf, 1977). In this essay, Greenleaf posited that genuine leadership is more concerned with service, and that the primary focus of servant leaders is to serve others, including employees, customers, and the community. The concept of servant leadership is believed to have originated in the United States, as indicated by American studies. Prior to this, servant leadership can be attributed to Christianity and biblical teachings (Cassar et al., 2017). Servant leadership has regained popularity in the last twenty years as an ethical and moral style of leadership. In recent years, leadership research has increasingly focused on the servant leadership style. Organizational scholars have shifted their attention from self-serving leadership styles to ones that prioritize leader-follower interactions. This change is reflected in both conceptual and empirical studies (Dutta and Khatri, 2017; Ji and Hyun, 2021).

Servant leadership is a philosophical approach that highlights the importance of serving and giving priority to the needs of citizens, rather than the personal interests of the leader (Klein 2020). Servant leadership is a comprehensive approach in which leaders demonstrate moral behavior, prioritize the well-being of the organization's stakeholders, and engage followers on various levels, including emotional, relational, and ethical (Liu, 2019; Ali and Zafar, 2021). The goal is to unlock their full potential and enable them to develop into their highest capabilities. Servant leadership has been associated with improved individual and collective outcomes, including behavioral, attitudinal, and performance improvements, through multiple mediators.

The attributes of servant leadership are empowerment, stewardship, honesty, humility, interpersonal acceptance, and offering direction. Additional attributes of servant leadership, as outlined by Greenleaf (1977), encompass attentive listening, empathy, healing, mindfulness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, dedication to personal development, and fostering communal cohesion. Prior research indicates that servant leadership fosters trust through the actions of the servant leader in a transparent organizational environment, hence cultivating a culture of assistance and positively impacting team support for innovation (Qiu et al., 2020). The concept of servant leadership is of utmost importance in this article and so deserves careful examination.

Servant leaders have a strong desire to serve others instead of seeking to be served (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leadership is an approach to leadership that focuses on prioritizing the individual needs and interests of followers, while also shifting their concern from themselves to others within the organization and the larger community. This practice enriches individuals' lives by providing mentorship and guidance to help them gain a deeper understanding of servant leadership and adopt a more service-oriented mindset (Greenleaf, 1977). The strength of servant leaders resides in their ability to combine leadership and servanthood (Kgatle, 2018). Rosnani (2018) characterizes the servant leader as an exemplar of honesty, reliability, and astute rationality. Implementing the principles of servant leadership can enhance the transparency and reliability of governance. The servant leader demonstrates a sincere and authentic care for the aspirations and requirements of their followers, setting this paradigm apart from other styles of leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). Although servant

leadership is seen as a desirable technique for effective governance and sustainable public service delivery in industrialized countries, many African countries have numerous hurdles when attempting to adopt or execute this leadership style.

Effective leadership is actively interacting with community members to comprehend their needs and preferences. The utilization of this participatory approach facilitates the development and execution of policies that are more suited to the specific circumstances of the local environment (Kohntopp and Mccann, 2018). For example, the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality has a dynamic ward committee system that actively engages community members in the process of local governance. Ward committees act as an intermediary between the municipality and the community, guaranteeing that the opinions of people are considered during the decision-making procedures (Crocker, 2020). The South African municipalities organizes regular forums for Integrated Development Planning, during which community members can contribute their input regarding development goals and priorities. The use of this participatory strategy guarantees that the municipality's development endeavors are in accordance with the requirements and ambitions of its inhabitants (Sibanda and Lues, 2021).

2.1. Guiding theory: New public management theory

The New Public Management (NPM) theory prioritizes efficiency, performance measurement, and market-oriented reforms. In contrast, servant leadership concepts focus on serving others, promoting collaboration, and valuing employee well-being (Greve, 2015). Servant leadership promotes decentralization as a means to enhance the responsiveness and flexibility of public service delivery. The idea of leadership provides employees with the authority and capability to take initiative and make decisions that enhance public service (Hyndman and Liguor, 2016). Decision-making fosters increased autonomy among employees, in accordance with servant leadership's focus on empowerment. During the era of digital technology, this can be made easier with the help of digital technologies that allow for remote work, instant communication, and collaboration platforms. Leaders in South African municipalities can utilize digital platforms to provide support and guidance to their teams, demonstrating servant leadership principles while also taking advantage of the efficiency encouraged by NPM.

The NPM approach emphasizes the importance of setting specific performance goals and ensuring responsibility for achieving them. Servant leadership prioritizes the welfare and growth of employees, fostering a nurturing atmosphere that can result in improved performance (Klein, 2020). Performance metrics in South African municipalities can be formulated to assess not just outputs, but also take into account employee satisfaction and growth, in line with the servant leadership concept (Ropret and Aristovnik, 2019). Utilizing digital tools can offer uninterrupted feedback and assistance, facilitating the growth and advancement of individuals, hence enhancing overall performance.

The NPM regards citizens as customers, placing emphasis on the quality and efficiency of services. Servant Leadership prioritizes the well-being and satisfaction of employees, operating under the belief that content and motivated employees will inherently deliver superior service to citizens (Greve, 2015). By implementing a servant leadership model in South African municipalities employees become actively involved and driven, resulting in enhanced service delivery for citizens. The NPM provides leaders with greater liberty to make decisions. Servant leadership promotes the utilization of managerial autonomy to serve and provide support to their teams. Leaders in South African municipalities could exercise their independence in order to establish

a nurturing and cooperative atmosphere, utilizing digital tools to improve communication and teamwork (Zindi, 2024).

Implementing servant leadership principles enables managers to prioritize team building and employee growth, resulting in improved performance outcomes. The NPM implements market processes to enhance efficiency. Servant leadership guarantees the ethical implementation of such systems, considering the well-being of employees. The South African municipalities can utilize digital solutions to make operations more efficient and boost productivity. However, it is important to ensure that the deployment of these solutions is done in a way that considers ethical issues and prioritizes the well-being of employees (Dutta and Khatri, 2017).

2.2. Servant leadership and employ performance

Employee performance refers to the extent to which an employee effectively carries out their job duties and accomplishes tasks within their designated position (Zindi and Sibanda, 2022). It includes the productivity, proficiency, and excellence of their job, as well as their conduct and contributions to the work environment. Performance can be assessed using a range of factors, such as productivity, goal attainment, job quality, compliance with business standards, and interpersonal abilities (Kennedy, 2022). Employee performance in this study pertains to the extent to which municipal employees execute their responsibilities, achieve organizational objectives, and contribute to the overall operation and prosperity of the municipality. This involves multiple aspects of their work, including their level of productivity, the quality of service they provide, and their professional manner. In the context of this study, this leadership technique has the potential to greatly improve employee performance across multiple critical domains.

A significant positive correlation was found between servant leadership and all aspects of organizational environment, with communication, training and development, teamwork, leadership, and transformation and diversity scoring the highest. A study has shown that servant leadership can motivate employees to have favorable perceptions of their work inside the organization (Amor et al., 2020). Servant leadership fosters a ripple effect that extends from the leaders to the employees, resulting in heightened enthusiasm that directly correlates with enhanced work performance (Liu, 2019). This aligns with the findings of Ali and Zafar (2021), who suggest that servant leaders have a significant influence on the performance of both individuals and teams. The unique emphasis of a servant leader on meeting the needs of their followers and their commitment to fostering unity can effectively enhance team performances (Haq etbal., 2021). Organizations globally have reorganized their teams to achieve swift and efficient goal attainment, and private schools have also undergone this significant transformation (Kohntopp and Mccann, 2018). The favorable impression of communication suggests that school leadership recognizes communication as the central and vital element of a thriving organizational climate (Stauffer and Maxwell, 2020). This aligns with the findings of Rosnani (2018), who concluded that effective communication management is essential for senior leadership and plays a crucial role in achieving organizational goals.

Multiple studies have consistently found that a positive leadership style serves as a motivating factor for employees, leading to their sustained engagement in their work. When employees are fully engaged, they demonstrate complete dedication to fulfilling their responsibilities to the best of their capabilities, ultimately benefiting the organization and yielding optimal organizational outcomes (Ahmad and Gao, 2018; Zhou, Gul and Tufail, 2022). Previous research indicates that employees exhibit higher levels of work engagement when

their managers effectively meet their demands and interests. The study conducted by Alafeshat and Aboud (2019) also discovered that the empowering and motivational demeanor of servant leaders stimulates followers to enhance their participation in different work-related decision-making processes. As a result, people have greater chances to learn from one another through sharing information and can create new and effective approaches to complete their work duties.

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped the roles, expectations, and performance dynamics of employees within South African municipalities. Traditionally, many municipal functions were paper-based, highly manual, and process-heavy, leading to inefficiencies and delays in service delivery (Zhou et al., 2022). With the integration of digital tools such as automated workflow systems, electronic document management, and e-governance platforms, employees are now expected to operate in a technology-driven environment that demands agility, digital literacy, and continuous learning (Zindi and Majam, 2024). For example, in the City of Johannesburg, the introduction of an e-services platform has altered how frontline staff interact with residents, requiring them to manage digital queries, update online service records, and use Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems (Shava, 2022). Similarly, the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality implemented an internal digital document management system that reduced reliance on physical records and streamlined administrative workflows (Shava and Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022). This has increased efficiency but also redefined job descriptions, requiring staff to possess technical skills that were not previously necessary.

In Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, the use of automated supply chain and procurement systems has significantly reduced the administrative burden on procurement officers, improving turnaround times and enhancing accountability (van der Hoogen, Fashoro, Calitz and Luke, 2024). Employees are now expected to upload tenders, track procurement status, and manage supplier databases digitally. In Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, the rollout of the e-Recruitment platform changed the HR landscape by requiring HR officers to manage applications online, automate shortlisting processes, and coordinate digital interviews highlighting the shift from clerical to strategic HR functions (Zindi, 2024).

Furthermore, digital transformation introduces a performance-oriented culture in which employees are increasingly evaluated based on output, turnaround time, and the ability to adapt to new systems and technologies. For instance, in eThekwini Municipality, the deployment of smart infrastructure tools such as remote water meter readings and digital billing has required technical staff to interpret digital data and respond to system alerts, shifting the nature of their work from routine maintenance to data-driven decision-making (Ngcukana, 2020). Additionally, the Drakenstein Municipality in the Western Cape piloted a municipal mobile app allowing residents to report service issues and track progress, which has increased pressure on customer service employees to respond promptly and update the system in real time (McKibbin and Fernando, 2020).

3. Methodology

A qualitative semi-systematic literature review was adopted for the study with the aim to gain an in-depth understanding of the the implementation of servant leadership in South African municipalities and its effect

on improving employee performance. The focus is not on the number of articles written on a particular topic but rather on the content of existing debates on the implementation of servant leadership in South African municipalities and its effect on improving employee performance. The article for analysis were searched on the Google Scholar database since it did not require a user account like the Web of Science. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) approach was then used to search for articles. The use of PRISMA had several advantages that fitted the semi-systematic nature of this article. For instance, instead of using all the 27 search principles of PRISMA, the authors only chose a few principles that would satisfy the set qualitative research objectives. PRISMA offers the flexibility to search the required articles using various options. In this article, the search was confined to title, keywords and abstracts. Additional principles used are summarised in Table 1. The search period was between 2019-2024.

Table 1. Article retrieval limits from Google Scholar

Database	Google Scholar
Search field	Title, abstract, keywords
Keywords	'Servant Leadership' AND Digital age' and 'Employee Performance
Open access	All
Years	2019-2024
Author names	Exclude unidentified names
Publication stage	All
Document Type	All
Affiliation	All
Country	South Africa
Source type	All
Language	English

As shown in Table 1, the search keywords were 'Servant leadership' AND 'Digital age' AND Employee Performance'. In the initial search which used the first three principles in Table 1, 900 articles were identified. However, when the last 8 principles were applied, 630 articles were eliminated to remain with 270 articles. This number was still considered large for a qualitative study. The search was narrowed down to select articles that has the term Servant leadership' AND 'Digital age' AND Employee Performance AND South African Municipalities' in the title. This led to the exclusion of 170 articles to remain with 100 articles. These articles were then browsed to determine whether they were in South Africa. An additional 40 articles were eliminated to remain with 60 articles. Articles that used multi-case studies that included other countries outside South Africa were excluded. Furthermore, the authors left out all the articles that could not be downloaded. These additional measured resulted in the elimination of 33 articles to remain with a sample of 27 which were then considered in the final analysis. Table 2 shows a summary of the sampled articles.

Table 2. Summary of sampled articles

Author(s)	Type	Category	Publisher	Results/Finding
Zindi (2024)	Journal	Academic	International Journal of Development and Sustainability	Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped the roles, expectations, and performance dynamics of employees within South African municipalities.
Nelson Mandela Annual Report, 2022/23	Annual Report	Academic	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality	The Electronic Document and Records Management System (EDRMS) was introduced to replace outdated manual filing processes.
Zindi and Majam (2024)	Journal	Academic	Journal of Public Administration	The automation of record-keeping reduces administrative delays and ensures that employees spend less time on paperwork and more time on value-adding task.
Ji and Hyun (2021).	Journal	Academic	Administrative Sciences	The implementation of an e-Recruitment and HR Information System required HR professionals to manage data-driven personnel tasks
Ali and Zafar, (2021)	Journal	Academic	Journal of Social Sciences Humanities	managers who practiced servant leadership held open forums, listened to concerns, and included staff in decision-making and system customization.
eThekwini Municipality Annual Report, 2022/23).	Annual Report	Academic	eThekwini Municipality	Leaders who took time to explain the broader impact of these roles on community well-being and sustainability observed increased engagement and improved employee responsiveness.

Author(s)	Type	Category	Publisher	Results/Finding
Shava (2022)	Book Chapter	Academic	Springer, Cham	The implementation of digital tools and technologies in South African municipalities have fundamentally transformed the municipality's operations, leading to substantial enhancements in efficiency and production.
Ngcukana, (2020)	www.news24.com/citypress/news/eastern-cape-premier-calls-for-help-from-siu-to-investigate-covid-19-linked-corruption-20200712	Academic	Eastern Cape	Servant leadership fosters a sense of purpose and belonging, encouraging employees to take ownership of their work leading to high efficiency and productivity
McKibbin and Fernando, (2020).	Report	Academic	Centre for Economic Policy Research London.	Virtual Private Networks enabled employees to securely access the municipality's internal network from their residences, thereby ensuring the protection of sensitive information
Van Hoogen, Scholtz and Calitz, (2022).	Journal	Academic	Sustainability	Cloud services with robust security measures allow for the safe storing and exchange of documents, collaborative project work.

Author(s)	Type	Category	Publisher	Results/Finding
Mensah, Zeng, and Mwakapesa, (2022)	Journal	Academic	Frontiers in psychology,	The implementation of platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Slack has enhanced employees' ability to collaborate and communicate in real-time, leading to increased effectiveness in their work
Jakoet-Salie (2020).	Journal	Academic	Administratio Publica	Leaders who provided mentoring, encouraged collaborative learning, and recognized small achievements helped foster a culture where employees embraced digital change.
Shava and Vyas-Doorgapersad, (2022)	Journal	Academic	International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science	Servant leaders create safe environments for increased the availability of information and learning tools, facilitating ongoing professional growth within South African municipalities.
Stauffer and Maxwell (2020)	Journal	Academic	Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics	Employees located in remote or underprivileged locations frequently encounter substantial obstacles, such as limited internet connectivity and inadequate availability of essential technologies such as computers or smartphones
Su, Lyu, Chen, and Zhang (2020).	Journal	Academic	Baltic Journal of Management	Cyber-attacks can result in significant repercussions, such as the loss of data, financial harm, and the disruption of vital services

Author(s)	Type	Category	Publisher	Results/Finding
Ndebele and Enaifoghe, (2024).	Journal	Academic	Social Sciences and Education Research Review	The implementation of new digital tools and processes by the municipalities had led to a notable disparity in skills among personnel, since they have difficulties in adapting to these changes
Bibri and Krogstie (2020)	Journal	Academic	Urban Science	Absence of focused training initiatives leads to a divided labor force, impeding overall efficiency.
Alafeshat and Aboud, (2019)	Journal	Academic	International Journal of Human Resource Studies	Technical malfunctions can interrupt operational processes and result in inefficiencies, affecting overall efficiency and the provision of services.
Majchrzak and Griffith (2020)	Book Chapter	Academic	Elger	Automation of jobs can lead employees to excessively depend on the system, so disregarding the cultivation of their analytical and problem-solving skills.
Mohanty and Mishra, (2020).	Journal	Academic	Revista ESPACIOS	The advent of the digital era has facilitated unprecedented interconnectedness, allowing employees to operate with greater flexibility and productivity.
Morgan and Papadonikolaki, (2022).	Book Chapter	Academic	Springer	employees develop excessive reliance on automated systems, resulting in a decline in their ability to think critically and solve problems

Author(s)	Type	Category	Publisher	Results/Finding
Nel and Masilela, (2020).	Journal	Academic	International Journal of eBusiness and eGovernment Studies	Budgetary constraints can greatly restrict the scope digital transformation endeavors in municipalities.
Rodriquez-Roman (2021)	Journal	Academic	Koinonia Interdisciplinary Refereed Journal	Resistance to change is frequently encountered, especially among employees who are accustomed to traditional work practices
Zhou, Gul and Tufail, 2022	Journal	Academic	Frontiers in Psychology	With the integration of digital tools employees are now expected to operate in a technology-driven environment that demands agility, digital literacy, and continuous learning
Klein (2020).	Journal	Academic	An International Journal	Servant leadership, a philosophy where leaders prioritize the needs of employees and empower them to grow and perform has emerged as a relevant and compelling model for fostering trust, collaboration, and engagement in the digital workplace.
Qiu, Larry and Lei, (2020).	Journal	Academic	Tourism Management	Effective leadership is actively interacting with community members to comprehend their needs and preferences.
Klus and Müller, (2021).	Journal	Academic	Journal of Business Economics	Data driven decision making are paramount in monitoring progress and identify areas that require intervention.

The sampled articles were then subjected to content analysis whereby the presence of themes was determined from the sampled articles. This analysis was manually, with no computer software. Texts were

read through to determine recurrent aspects in the texts. Latent coding a strategy whereby aspects that share particular meanings were grouped together - was then used (Kumar, 2019). Thematic analysis was then deployed to group the identified aspects into themes.

4. Digital transformation and servant leadership in South African municipalities

The South African municipalities have embraced digital transformation to enhance employee performance while fostering a servant leadership approach. Servant leadership emphasizes empowerment, support, and collaboration, ensuring that employees have the necessary tools and resources to excel in their roles (Zindi, 2024). Through digital innovations, the municipalities have streamlined operations, improved service delivery, and created an environment where employees can work more efficiently.

One of the key implementations in Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality's digital transformation process is the Electronic Document and Records Management System (EDRMS) (Nelson Mandela Annual Report, 2022/23). This system has replaced outdated manual filing processes, allowing employees to access, retrieve, and share documents digitally. The automation of record-keeping reduces administrative delays and ensures that employees spend less time on paperwork and more time on value-adding tasks (Zindi and Majam, 2024). By removing bureaucratic inefficiencies, this system aligns with servant leadership principles, as it enables employees to focus on their core responsibilities rather than being burdened by administrative challenges.

In a digital environment, employees often face new systems and tools that require upskilling and adaptation. Servant leaders prioritize employee growth and development, ensuring that staff receive the necessary support and training. For example, in the City of Tshwane, the implementation of an e-Recruitment and HR Information System required HR professionals to manage data-driven personnel tasks (Ji and Hyun, 2021). Leaders who adopted a servant leadership approach ensured that all staff were given time, mentorship, and technical training, which led to smoother adoption and improved confidence and performance in HR teams.

Digital transformation often causes uncertainty, especially among employees unfamiliar with technology. Servant leaders build trust and foster a collaborative environment, helping reduce resistance to change. In Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, when an e-procurement system was introduced, procurement staff initially resisted the move due to fear of obsolescence (Ali and Zafar, 2021). However, managers who practiced servant leadership held open forums, listened to concerns, and included staff in decision-making and system customization. This inclusive approach improved morale, ownership, and ultimately, performance as employees adapted to the new tools.

In addition, servant leaders motivate employees by aligning their roles with meaningful service and community impact. In eThekwini Municipality, digital service tools like smart water meters and e-billing systems required technical staff to shift from manual labor to more analytical, customer-facing roles (eThekwini Municipality Annual Report, 2022/23). Leaders who took time to explain the broader impact of these roles on community well-being and sustainability observed increased engagement and improved employee responsiveness, resulting in higher service satisfaction rates.

5. Benefits of servant leadership on employee performance in South African Municipalities

The digital age has revolutionized how organizations operate, with technological advancements driving efficiency, innovation, and connectivity. Workers are experiencing growing demands to stay updated with technological progress, which can have an effect on their productivity, job contentment, and overall welfare.

5.1. Enhanced efficiency and productivity

The implementation of digital tools and technologies in South African municipalities have fundamentally transformed the municipality's operations, leading to substantial enhancements in efficiency and production. The use of a digital document management system in municipalities such as Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality and City of Johannesburg have decreased the amount of time employees dedicate to manually filing and retrieving papers (Klus and Müller, 2021). The digital system has centralized document storage, enabling employees to efficiently search for and retrieve documents using keywords or tags. This has significantly decreased the amount of time dedicated to administrative activities. In addition, employees can retrieve essential papers from any location, which becomes especially advantageous in remote work scenarios (Shava, 2022). This adaptability guarantees uninterrupted work without the necessity of being physically present in the office. Through the process of digitizing records, the requirement for physical storage space has diminished, resulting in space savings and reduced expenses related to the upkeep and protection of physical information.

Servant leadership fosters a sense of purpose and belonging, encouraging employees to take ownership of their work leading to high efficiency and productivity. In City of Cape Town, where digital permit processing was rolled out, leaders who involved employees in planning and decision-making processes noted increased engagement, efficiency and productivity (Ngcukana, 2020). Employees were more committed to learning about the new system, and turnaround times for processing permits improved significantly. Engaged employees are more likely to go above and beyond their job descriptions, resulting in better performance resulting in high efficiency and productivity (Klein, 2020).

5.2. Remote work implementation:

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the South African municipalities implemented remote work policy facilitated by digital tools. This transformation was crucial for preserving the uninterrupted provision of services while prioritizing the safety and welfare of personnel. The adoption of remote work emphasized the crucial requirement for a strong digital infrastructure and thorough cybersecurity protocols (Ngcukana, 2020). In order to enable remote work, South African municipalities made use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and secure cloud services. VPNs enabled employees to securely access the municipality's internal network from their residences, thereby ensuring the protection of sensitive information (McKibbin and Fernando, 2020). The creation of the Open Data Portal in Cape Town was a deliberate action aimed at fostering transparency and accountability. The decision necessitated meticulous strategising and deliberation regarding the utilisation of the portal by both the public and municipal staff, guaranteeing its effectiveness as a valuable instrument for enhancing civic participation and operational effectiveness (Tutak and Brodny, 2022).Cloud services with robust security measures allow for the safe storing and exchange of documents, collaborative project work,

and access to important applications while ensuring data protection (Van Hoogen, Scholtz and Calitz, 2022). The use of remote work policies facilitated the ongoing provision of municipal services during the pandemic. Employees can effectively carry out their responsibilities from remote areas, attending to the needs of citizens and overseeing municipal operations. The ability to adapt was essential for upholding public trust and sustaining high standards of service delivery throughout a challenging time.

5.3. Improved communication and collaboration

Enhancing employee efficiency is crucial, and the digital era has transformed communication and collaboration within South African municipalities. The implementation of platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Slack has enhanced employees' ability to collaborate and communicate in real-time, leading to increased effectiveness in their work (Mensah et al., 2022). These platforms facilitate virtual meetings, instant chat, and file sharing, enabling smooth communication across many departments. Consequently, personnel have the ability to effortlessly exchange information, engage in discussions, and find solutions to challenges, irrespective of their geographical position. Moreover, the utilization of project management software like Trello and Asana has played a crucial role in enhancing communication within Tshwane municipality. These tools facilitate collaborative project management by monitoring progress, allocating tasks, and establishing deadlines. The utilization of such software has led to an increase in transparency and accountability, since all parties involved are able to observe the progress of projects and individual obligations (Jakoet-Salie, 2020). The clarity fosters enhanced coordination, prompt task completion, and improved project results.

Integrating these digital technologies has not only simplified communication and cooperation but has also cultivated a more interconnected and productive work environment. Employees are more proficient in exchanging knowledge and resources, collaborating towards shared objectives, and providing mutual assistance, hence improving overall performance and service provision within the municipality (Shava, 2022). By utilizing these technological innovations, municipalities can persist in constructing a cooperative and highly efficient work atmosphere that fulfills the requirements of its employees and the community they serve.

5.4. Access to information and learning

Servant leaders create safe environments for increased the availability of information and learning tools, facilitating ongoing professional growth within South African municipalities. In Mangaung Municipality when the municipality digitized its procurement system, a significant number of employees had to upskill quickly (Mensah et al., 2022). Leaders who provided mentoring, encouraged collaborative learning, and recognized small achievements helped foster a culture where employees embraced digital change. This adaptability led to a reduction in procurement errors and improved workflow efficiency. These activities encompass training programs on cutting-edge software technologies, compliance regulations, and leadership enhancement, empowering personnel to remain up-to-date with industry norms and methodologies. The eThekwini Municipality successfully executed a comprehensive change management strategy to facilitate the transformation of its Geographic Information System (GIS). This strategy included providing sufficient training and assistance to the staff members involved in the transition process In the context of digital transformation, intranets and knowledge-sharing platforms are essential tools that facilitate employees' seamless access to information, best practices, and rules. These platforms cultivate an environment of ongoing learning and

sharing of knowledge, hence improving the capacities of employees. Employees have easy access to resources, may work together on projects, and exchange knowledge, resulting in better decision-making and enhanced job performance (Morgan and Papadonikolaki, 2022). Municipalities ensure that its workforce remains well-equipped to handle the changing needs of their roles by utilizing various digital technologies. Uninterrupted availability of educational materials enables employees to acquire new abilities and progress in their professional paths, resulting in increased workplace contentment and drive (Stauffer and Maxwell, 2020). The emphasis on professional development ultimately improves the municipality's overall performance and service delivery, benefiting both personnel and the community they serve.

6. Challenges encountered when implementing digital transformation in South African Municipalities

Despite the benefits, the digital age also presents challenges that can impact employee performance in South African municipalities. A fuller discussion of challenges is given below.

6.1. Digital divide and inequality

Although digital technologies can significantly improve communication, cooperation, and professional growth, not all employees have equal access to these tools and resources. Due to limited access to digital devices, low rates of digital literacy, and language barriers, municipalities like Ntabankulu, Umzimvubu, and Matatiele in the Alfred Nzou District Municipality struggle to provide digital services to remote communities, which results in exclusion and unfair service delivery (Zindi, 2024). Access to and use of digital technologies in these municipalities varies greatly, especially in outlying villages and underprivileged areas. According to Mohanty and Mishra (2020), people living in isolated areas could not have access to computers, cellphones, tablets, or other digital devices, nor to dependable internet. These discrepancies can impede their capacity to engage in online training programs, obtain information, and work efficiently with colleagues. Employees that have greater access to these resources are more inclined to derive advantages from ongoing learning and skill enhancement, while those lacking access may lag. This disparity might worsen pre-existing socio-economic disparities, resulting in a less united and efficient workforce (Jakoet-Salie, 2020).

6.2. Cyber security threats

The increased use of digital tools raises concerns about data security and privacy. As municipalities increasingly relieve digital tools and systems to enhance efficiency and service delivery, the risk of cyber security breaches becomes a significant concern. Cyber-attacks can result in significant repercussions, such as the loss of data, financial harm, and the disruption of vital services. Managing cybersecurity at municipalities is primarily challenging due to the wide variety of systems and devices utilized by employees. As remote work and mobile devices become more prevalent, the task of guaranteeing the security of all endpoints gets increasingly intricate. When employees access municipal systems from different places and devices, they can unintentionally create weaknesses or security risks. For instance, in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality concerns have been raised about the security of citizens' personal information stored in online databases. The municipality collects and stores data related to residents' utility bills, property taxes, and service requests

through its digital platforms (Mensah et al., 2022). However, without robust data protection measures in place, such as encryption, access controls, and regular security audits, there is a risk of data breaches or unauthorized access to this sensitive information. In the event of a breach, citizens' personal and financial data could be compromised, leading to identity theft, financial fraud, and other malicious activities. The escalating complexity of cyber threats requires a holistic approach to cybersecurity that is beyond mere technological safeguards.

6.3. Lack of technological adaptation and skills gap

The South Africa municipalities are currently facing the fast-paced progress of technology, which requires a constant development of personnel abilities. The implementation of new digital tools and processes by the municipality has led to a notable disparity in skills among personnel, since they have difficulties in adapting to these changes (Bibri and Krogstie, 2020). If not addressed through sufficient training and support, this challenge can have a significant negative influence on the efficiency and production of the municipality. Proficiency in new software, hardware, and digital platforms is necessary for employees to adapt to technological changes, which aim to expedite operations and improve service delivery. For instance, In Johannesburg city, the implementation of the e-services platform was hindered by the City of Johannesburg's staff lacking the necessary skills to effectively manage and operate the new digital systems (Mohanty and Mishra, 2020). The eThekwini Municipality acknowledged that a significant number of its employees lacked the requisite proficiency to effectively utilise sophisticated digital tools, which is a crucial component of its Digital City Strategy (Scholtz and van der Hoogen, 2022). Nevertheless, individuals lacking familiarity with such technologies may perceive the move as intimidating, resulting in reluctance or mistakes in its utilization. This lack of familiarity might impede the speed of procedures, hence nullifying the stated efficiency advantages of technology.

The skills gap is further exacerbated by the diversity of the workforce, which includes employees with varying degrees of digital literacy. Experienced personnel who have been with the organization for a long time may have a deep understanding of traditional processes, but they may not be well-versed in current digital tools (Zindi, 2024). In contrast, younger employees may possess greater proficiency in technology but may lack the necessary practical experience to effectively utilize these tools within a municipal setting. In the absence of focused training initiatives, this discrepancy might lead to a divided labor force, impeding overall efficiency. Nevertheless, certain divisions within the municipalities encountered challenges while implementing these technologies as a result of insufficient training.

6.4. Overreliance on technology

The utilization of digital tools in the municipalities has undeniably improved efficiency and optimized different procedures. Nevertheless, over dependence on technology can pose substantial challenges. According to Kashaija (2022) employees develop excessive reliance on automated systems, resulting in a decline in their ability to think critically and solve problems. In addition, technical malfunctions can interrupt operational processes and result in inefficiency, affecting overall efficiency and the provision of services. As municipalities continue to incorporate sophisticated technologies into their operations, the danger of over dependence becomes more evident. Automated workflow systems have been utilized to effectively handle typical

administrative operations, such as approvals and reporting. Although these systems alleviate bottlenecks and guarantee prompt task completion, they can also foster complacency among personnel. Majchrzak and Griffith (2020) assert that the automation of jobs can lead employees to excessively depend on the system, so disregarding the cultivation of their analytical and problem-solving skills. This reliance can be harmful in instances where human discernment and intervention are necessary. For example, the municipality's use of an automated document management system has optimized the storage and retrieval of documents. However, during a recent system upgrade, unexpected technical complications arose, causing a temporary disablement of the system. Employees who had grown accustomed to the automated procedure encountered challenges with manually handling documents, leading to delays and confusion.

6.5. Lack of work-life balance

The advent of the digital era has facilitated unprecedented interconnectedness, allowing employees to operate with greater flexibility and productivity. However, expectations of continuous availability arise because of how frequently this constant connectedness crosses the lines between work and personal life. This behavior can lead to burnout and stress, which have a detrimental impact on work performance and general well-being (Mohanty and Mishra, 2020). To tackle these concerns inside, it is necessary for municipalities to adopt policies and procedures that foster a favorable balance between work and personal life. The implementation of digital tools, such as email, instant messaging, and collaboration platforms, City of Johannesburg has enhanced communication and optimized operations. Nevertheless, it has also fostered a setting in which employees feel obligated to address work-related emails outside their normal working hours (Enaifoghe and Ndebele, 2024). The blending of boundaries is especially apparent in positions that necessitate immediate responses, such as municipal services and emergency management. The influence of this constantly connected society is significant. Employees who are always engaged with work may encounter difficulties in disengaging both mentally and physically, resulting in heightened levels of stress and decreased chances of relaxation and personal interests (Muthoni and Mkhonto, 2019). Over a period, this can lead to burnout, which is characterized by emotional tiredness, decreased professional effectiveness, and a feeling of disconnection from work. For instance, a municipal planner who frequently works late into the evening to fulfill project deadlines may suffer from chronic stress, which can have a detrimental impact on their creativity, productivity, and overall job satisfaction.

6.6. Budget constraints

The limited financial resources of municipalities restrict its ability to invest in digital transformation, which may have an adverse effect on the success of these projects. The initial expenses associated with digital transformation can be substantial, as they involve obtaining sophisticated software, hardware, and other technological instruments that necessitate a significant upfront expenditure. In the Western Cape, the implementation of e-government projects, which are intended to improve administrative efficiency and enhance citizen access to services, has been delayed by budgetary restrictions (Nel and Masilela, 2020). Deploying sophisticated digital technologies can incur significant expenses, including investments in hardware, software, cybersecurity, and continuous maintenance. Smaller towns, in particular, face challenges in affording

these upfront and recurring costs. Ndebele and Enaifoghe (2024) recognized that the implementation of an automated document management system entails the acquisition of licenses, servers, and other essential infrastructure. The expenses associated with these technologies can put significant pressure on the municipality's financial resources, particularly when different departments want customized solutions to meet their individual requirements. The continuous maintenance and support exacerbate the cost burden. In order to maintain functionality and security, digital systems necessitate regular upgrades, security patches, and technical support. It is imperative to consistently monitor and maintain the digital infrastructure of the municipality in order to safeguard against cyber-attacks and provide optimal performance (Morgan and Papadonikolaki, 2022). Engaging IT personnel or organizations for these services results in extra expenses. Moreover, unforeseen technical glitches or system malfunctions may necessitate immediate attention and repairs, hence increasing the cost of maintenance (Nel and Masilela, 2020).

6.7. Resistance to change

Implementing digital initiatives at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality is an essential measure to enhance efficiency and the provision of services. However, opposition to change is frequently encountered, especially among employees who are accustomed to traditional work practices (Shava, 2022). The presence of this resistance might impede the progress of digital projects and have a negative impact on overall performance. Traditional bureaucratic structures and entrenched work practices can stifle innovation and inhibit the adoption of new technologies, making it difficult to implement digital transformation effectively. Stauffer and Maxwell (2020) observed that municipal authorities and personnel may exhibit hesitancy in adopting new technological developments due to anxieties regarding job stability, or simply a preference for the existing situation. Some municipal employees may have concerns that emerging technology could make their roles irrelevant or result in unemployment (Mohanty & Mishra, 2020). This anxiety can result in a hesitation to embrace digital tools and engage in training programmes. Scepticism and resistance might arise from a lack of knowledge regarding the advantages and possibilities of digital transformation. Traditional management approaches might impede innovation and demotivate employees from embracing change (Rodriquez-Roman, 2021).

7. Recommendations

To adapt and thrive in the digital era, the South Africa municipalities can consider implementing the following recommendations.

7.1. Robust cybersecurity measures

Implementing robust cybersecurity measures is the first line of defense against cyber threats. The South African municipalities must have the capability to allocate resources towards implementing cutting-edge security technology, such as firewalls, intrusion detection systems, and encryption algorithms, to safeguard its digital infrastructure. Consistently keeping software and systems up to date to fix vulnerabilities is also crucial.

For example, by ensuring that all municipal systems are regularly updated with the latest software patches, the risk of cybercriminals exploiting known vulnerabilities can be minimized.

7.2. Balanced use of technology

Municipalities are encouraged to promote cross-functional teamwork to reduce the risk of overreliance on technology. By encouraging collaboration between different departments, municipalities can foster an environment where employees share knowledge and expertise. This collaborative approach ensures that employees are not solely dependent on automated systems and can collectively address challenges that arise. Regular assessments can identify areas where overreliance on technology is evident and prompt corrective actions.

7.3. Inclusive digital policies

The South African municipalities are encouraged to ensure equitable access to digital tools and resources for all employees. Mentorship programs can also be beneficial, pairing tech-savvy employees with those less comfortable with new technologies. This peer-to-peer learning model not only fosters a supportive work environment but also accelerates the learning process. For instance, younger employees proficient in digital tools could mentor senior staff, helping them navigate new systems and applications.

7.4. Effective change management

Effective management changes are crucial to address and mitigate this resistance. Engaging employees in the process of changing is another critical strategy. Involving employees in the planning and implementation phases can foster a sense of ownership and reduce resistance. One of the first steps in managing change is to communicate the benefits and necessity of digital transformation clearly and consistently. Employees need to understand how new technologies will improve their work processes, enhance efficiency, and contribute to the municipality's overall goals. For example, leadership in municipalities could organize informational sessions and workshops to explain how a new automated workflow system will reduce administrative burdens, allowing employees to focus on more strategic tasks.

7.5. Comprehensive training programs

Municipalities are recommended to conduct regular training sessions that emphasize critical thinking and problem-solving skills which can help employees maintain a balance between technological and manual capabilities. For example, scenario-based training exercises can simulate situations where technology fails, requiring employees to rely on their analytical skills to resolve issues.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the assessment of the critical relevance of servant leadership in enhancing employee performance in the digital age within South African municipalities underscores its transformative potential.

Servant leadership, characterized by prioritizing the needs of employees, fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment, and emphasizing ethical behavior, aligns seamlessly with the demands and opportunities presented by digital transformation. The digital age has introduced new tools and technologies that can significantly boost productivity and efficiency. However, the successful implementation and optimization of these tools require a leadership style that is adaptable, empathetic, and committed to the growth and well-being of employees. Servant leadership promotes a culture of continuous learning and innovation, crucial for navigating the complexities of digital initiatives.

In municipalities, servant leaders can facilitate the adoption of digital tools by ensuring employees feel valued and supported during transitions. This leadership approach helps in building trust, reducing resistance to change, and fostering a collaborative environment where employees are motivated to leverage digital technologies to their fullest potential. By focusing on the development and empowerment of employees, servant leaders can enhance job satisfaction, commitment and overall performance, leading to improved service delivery and organizational success. Thus, the integration of servant leadership with digital transformation strategies presents a synergistic opportunity to drive meaningful and sustainable improvements in employee performance. As the municipality continues to evolve in the digital age, the principles of servant leadership will remain vital in cultivating a resilient, innovative, and high-performing workforce.

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