



Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA)

Understanding the Hard to Fill Vacancies (HTFVs) in the Public Service Sector: Case of selected National Departments.

Research Report

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Understanding the Hard to Fill Vacancies in the Public Service Sector: Case of selected National Departments

Research conducted by the Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA)

Andrica Letsoalo and Lucky Mkhonza

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**Skills Planning and Research Department
Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority
353 Festival Street
Hatfield
Pretoria
0028**

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Executive Summary

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) reviewed the Sector Skills Plan framework (2016) to respond to skills shortages through looking at the hard to fill vacancies and skills gaps in the sector which forms basis of Chapter 3 of the Sector Skills Plan. The analysis of hard to fill vacancies is therefore relevant and key for the sector as it is used as an indication of labour market dynamics.

The focus of this study was to analyse, and understand the hard to fill vacancies that exist in the national departments and the reasons of the vacancies being deemed hard to fill by those departments. The study explored this question by presenting evidence from the qualitative interviews which PSETA held with key informants from the sampled national government departments, supplemented by the other research reports and government online statements on the filling of vacancies in the public service sector. The face to face interviews held with the key informants has shown that the determinants of vacancies being hard to fill in the public service vary greatly as per the needs and strategic objectives of the individual departments.

Whilst some of the challenges in filling of vacancies are distinct to individual departments, this study concedes that some of the challenges do cut across national departments, and most departments do experience most of these challenges at one stage or another in their lifecycle. Some of the determinants why vacancies are hard to fill in the public service that repeatedly dominated the data included the following:

- The availability and quality of candidates possessing the competencies required for the position.
- The salaries typically paid outside the public service sector for similar positions.
- Recent turnover in similar positions.
- Special or unique competencies required for the position.
- The recruitment processes in the public service sector impacts on the period or duration it takes to fill the vacancies.
- Desirability of the duties work or organisational environment.
- The public service austerity measures impacts which vacancies are filled and the period to takes to fill vacancies in the public service sector.

The findings from the study has shown that using the length it takes the vacancy to be filled as a sole indicator of HTFVs can be misleading, the determinants and factors are usually complex and most of them are interrelated and should never be viewed in isolation.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

COGTA	Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DIRCO	Department of International Relations and Cooperation
DPSA	Department of Public Service and Administration
HRD	Human Resource Development
HRDS	Human Resource Development Strategy
HRM	Human Resource Management
HTFV	Hard to fill Vacancy
IT	Information Technology
KII	Key Informant Interview
NDP	National Development Plan
NSDS	National Skills Development Strategy
NSG	National School of Government
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFO	Organising Framework for Occupations
PERSAL	Personnel and Salary Information System of Government
PIVOTAL	Professional, Vocational, Technical and Academic Learning
PSETA	Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority
SCM	Supply Chain Management
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
SIC	Standard Industrial Classification
SMS	Senior Management Services
SMS	Senior Management Service
SSP	Sector Skills Plan
WSP	Workplace Skills Plan

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Chapter1: Background and Introduction

This chapter serves as an introduction to the research study on understanding the hard to fill vacancies (HTFVs) and their related reasons in the public service sector, mainly zooming into the case of sampled national government departments. For the purposes of this study, hard to fill vacancies are those vacancies that take the employer a period longer than 12 months to find suitable candidates to fill the vacancy (with mainly skills-related reasons). The research background, research aims and objectives are also outlined in this chapter.

In the past five years (2011-2017) the Human Resource Strategy (HRDS), the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) III, as well as the SETA Grant Regulations make clear reference to the need for the identification of scarce and critical skills in various sectors of the economy. The NSDS III further emphasises the need “to establish a credible, institutional mechanism for skills planning which would *inter alia*, identify skills needs using valid and credible means”. While the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training emphasises that “if the provision of education and training is to be better coordinated with the needs of the society and the economy, central information about skills needs is required”. This then requires the public service sector to identify the scarce and critical skills in its sector for skills planning purposes. The methodologies and approaches used to identify these scarce and critical skills has always been a source of contention. Thus, the HRDS and NSDS III has prioritised the need for the development of a scarce skills list based on sound, and accurate data.

The common terminology that has been used by the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) when compiling the Sector Skills Plan (SSP) referring to sectoral skills needs has always been scarce and critical skills until 2016 when the hard to fill concept was introduced into the SSP framework. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) reviewed the Sector Skills Plan framework to respond to skills shortages through looking at the hard to fill vacancies and skills gaps in the sector which forms basis of Chapter 3 of the SSP. The analysis of hard to fill vacancies is therefore relevant and key for the sector as it is used as an indication of labour market dynamics. The occupations are still however identified based on the occupational classification system, the Organising Framework for Occupations (OFO). As the hard

to fill vacancies term emerges in the SETA landscape it is critical to understand the term and what causes vacancies to be hard to fill in the sector.

Given the existence of the problems with hard to fill vacancies Sutherland (2010) denotes the presence of hard to fill vacancies in departments negatively impacts the performance and production of the workplace, this of course depends upon the number of vacancies, the type of occupations with those vacancies and the duration of the vacancy. With labour market dynamics in South Africa (or any other country), the Public service sector is not exempted from the occupational movements with most departments having vacancies at any point in time as individuals change occupations, the departments are required to fill those vacancies as they arise.

The current debate about the challenges of performance in the South African public service identifies an interesting knowledge gap of understanding the existing hard to fill vacancies within national departments. It is against this background that PSETA saw the need to embark on this study.

1.1. Motivation for the Study

The highly turbulent South African labour force affects most sectors including the public service sector's national department's sub-sector which employs most public servants employed under the Public Service Act (PSETA, 2017). Sutherland (2010) noted that larger sized establishments are more likely to have HTFVs when compared to the smaller sized establishments. In the case of this study most national departments fall under large organizations (as sourced from the Workplace Skills Plan (WSP), these are the organisations with more than 150 employees in their establishments. Therefore these establishments are likely to report hard to fill vacancies.

The Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA) has deemed it necessary to embark on a study that will determine whether some of the vacancies within national departments are described as hard to fill. The information gathered will help identify the hard to fill vacancies that exist in the sub-sector and will assist in the update of the PSETA Sector Skills Plan. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation

and Development (OECD) (2017) study on getting skills right attest to the validity of the identified skills needs in the SSPs through the Professional, Vocational, Technical and Academic Learning (PIVOTAL) list depends crucially on the quality of the information provided by employers, as well as the capacity of the SETA to understand and analyse the data. The analysis and understanding of the existence of the hard to fill vacancies in the public service will assist the sector to understand the vacancies which departments find challenges in filling and their related reasons in filling the vacancies.

1.2. Aims and Objectives

This study is aimed at analysing, and understanding the hard to fill vacancies that exist in the national departments and the reasons for the vacancies being hard to fill at the departmental level. This study will be guided by the following objectives:

- To determine whether some of the vacancies are described as hard to fill in the sampled national government departments
- Understanding the skills related reasons for the occupations to be hard to fill.
- Understanding the non- skills related reasons for the occupations to be hard to fill.

1.3. Sectoral Profile and Scope of the Study

The scope of the PSETA is informed by the Standard Industrial Classification of all Economic Activities (SIC) codes that informs the sectoral classification or categorization. PSETA is mandated in terms of the Skills Development Act, No.97 of 1998, to facilitate skills development for the public service sector. According to Section (10) of the Act, a SETA must develop, annually update and implement a Sector Skills Plan in accordance with the National Skills Development Strategy in accordance with this mandate, PSETA is primarily responsible for the provision of transversal skills (i.e. the business of government) to all national departments, provincial departments, PSETA registered public entities, national parliament and provincial legislatures as outlined in figure 1. These are categorized as four (4) different sub-sectors. Transversal skills and functions include administration, management, planning, legislation and policy development, which form the focus to drive the development of

skills and competencies in areas that will make the delivery of the business of government more effective and efficient.



Figure 1: PSETA Sub-sectors

The national and provincial departments (which fall within the PSETA scope) covers all employees employed in terms of the Public Service Act of 1994 (which excludes medical practitioners, nurses, teachers, police and the military). Many departments, such as education and health have 'dual reporting', i.e. reporting to PSETA and a line-function SETA, such as Health and Welfare SETA in the case of health and medical practitioners. National departments are responsible for implementing laws and policies decided on by Parliament or Cabinet. The scope of the study covers 15 sampled national departments out of the total of 38 national departments that are registered with PSETA with the focus being on transversal skills in department that solely submit to PSETA including the National School of Government (NSG), the Department of Telecommunication and Postal Services, and the Correctional Services Department.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Literature review is key to support the research study on the studies that have been undertaken before by various authors and field experts over the years. This chapter presents the various studies that have been conducted by various experts on the hard to fill vacancies.

2.1. Hard to fill vacancies analysis approach

Other countries such as the United Kingdom utilize the information on existing vacancies provided directly by employers through the National Employment Survey to detect recruitment difficulties (OECD, 2017). This is done through contracting three indicators at an occupational level to assess whether an occupation is in shortage or not. The indicators are as follows: a). percentage of skill-shortage vacancies relative to employment. b). percentage of skills-shortage vacancies relative to all vacancies. c). percentage of skills-shortage vacancies relative hard to fill vacancies. When these indicators exceed a certain threshold they therefore indicate a shortage. It is suggested that a similar methodology could be employed by SETAs in a South African context, if SETAs were to request employers to share data on the number of vacancies they have that are all hard to fill and if the SETAs used the same threshold to identify shortages. This kind of survey could go a step further to detect other sectoral issues existing if done at SETA level.

In 2015 DHET published a list of occupations in high demand that provided information on shortages at national level with SETAs scarce skills list providing information at sectoral level. The OECD (2017) emphasizes that South Africa misses skills need information at organisational level which OECD countries are currently collecting.

The literature has shown that for organisations knowing what skills the workforce has, where they are lacking, and how to bridge any gaps is key to remaining competitive in their space. The hard to fill vacancies analysis cannot only assist an organisation to relook at its recruitments process but also to hire the right employee for the right positions and can further assist the organisation to plan for the future in terms of addressing their future skills needs.

2.2. Reasons for vacancies to be “hard to fill”?

Sutherland (2010) summarily noted that hard to fill vacancies may arise for several different reasons, which can be practically subdivided into two categories; the quantity of applicants and/or the quality of the applicants. Few individuals may apply for vacancies in cases whereby the nature of the job (such as wages, conditions of employment, and/or location of the firm) does not suit the demands of the labour market (Sutherland, 2010). Hard to fill vacancies may arise for quality-related reasons; that is when the applicants have deficiencies in related experience and/or qualifications (Sutherland, 2010).

Literature shows us that the lack of available or suitable applicants is the most common reason employers give to explain why they are having difficulties in filling the available vacancies (Manpower group, 2016), mainly due to the applicants' lack of experience, and lack of technical competencies required to perform competently in the occupation (Manpower group, 2016). Employers also added that the salary expectations that exceed what they are offering always worsen the situation of filling the vacancies within the required time (Manpower group, 2016). The lack of soft skills also cause delays in filling the vacancies for employers. This shows that the reasons for a vacancy to be deemed hard to fill can be complex depending on the nature of the occupation and the size and status of the employer.

Jensen (2001) pointed that most sectors undergo difficulties in recruiting and filling hard to fill vacancies in the workforce due to competition within the sector and other economic sectors, the lack of adequate management of human resources and unattractive working conditions are also contributory factors.

The South African public service sector faces the same challenges despite the National Development Plan's (NDP) call of turning the “Public service as a career of choice” outlined in the Diagnostic Evaluation documents of the National Planning Commission that observed that amongst the many factors preventing the state from achieving the desired levels of performance, one is the skills deficits within the public service sector. Amongst the five key areas where targeted action would be important, the NDP (2012) recommends the following:

Making the Public Service as a career of choice. The state needs to build a capable and professional public service from both the top and the bottom. It recommends that at the top, recruitment and management should be based on experience and expertise while at junior levels, the state needs to focus on producing the skills and expertise that will be necessary for future public service cohorts.

The NDP recommends a two-pronged strategy to building a more professional public service from the top and the bottom - an approach that places the development of skills and professionalism at the heart of the plan for improving the public service. The strategy is aimed at increasing the pool of skilled people by ensuring that the public service and local government become careers of choice for graduates who wish to contribute to the development of the country and high-level staff are recruited on the basis of their suitability for the job. The challenge remains with filling those vacancies that are hard to fill.

The structural changes in the economy are exacerbating the skills shortages (Rasool & Botha, 2011). In cases where the organisation resorts to hiring externally to fill the vacancies, the organisation must be prepared that they may find difficulties in finding individuals in the external market who have the specialized skills that the organisation is looking for (Human Capital Institute, 2016). For departments to attract skills from the external labour market to fill vacant positions, they need to have the ability to identify, attract and secure the best talent within the external labour market (Human Capital Institute, 2016).

Chapter 3: Methodology

This section will detail the research tools, research design and techniques employed by the study to achieve its objectives of determining whether some of the vacancies are described as hard to fill in the sampled national government departments and the reasons thereof. This chapter answers the questions of how the data was collected and how the results were analyzed to allow the study to arrive at reliable findings and recommendations.

The HTFVs displayed in table 1 below was derived from the analysis which was initially undertaken for the purposes of updating the 2018-19 PSETA SSP. These HTFVs were not strictly filtered by virtue of them taking longer than 12 months to be filled, but rather by three vigorous criteria whereby occupations indicated as hard to fill by employers who submitted the WSPs for 2017, the list of HTFVs from the 2017/18 SSP and the DHET's list of top 100 occupations in high demand were triangulated. In total 17 HTFVs were arrived at as indicated in table 1 below. This list on table 1 served as a comparative guide in conducting this study and getting a sense of what vacancies may be deemed hard to fill by the participants.

The sampled 15 National departments were enquired against the HTFVs on table 1 to find out if any of these occupations were indeed hard to fill in their departments. The focus of the research study was on HTFVs in sampled departments using the 6-12 months length or more in terms of how long it takes to fill the vacancies as one of the criterion.

Table 1: List of HTFVs gathered through desktop review before data collection

Occupation	Number of HTFVs
2015-111204 – Senior Government Official	87
2015-111202 - General Manager Public Service	38
2015-333905 - Supply Chain Practitioner	34
2015-111207 - Senior Government Manager	34

Occupation	Number of HTFVs
2015-263101 – Economist	23
2015-121101 - Finance Manager	23
2015-121905 - Programme or Project Manager	21
2015-121201 - Personnel / Human Resource Manager	18
2015-121301 - Policy and Planning Manager	13
2015-241107 - Financial Accountant	12
2015-122301 - Research and Development Manager	8
2015-251101 – ICT Systems Analyst	6
2015-242211 - Internal Auditor	6
2015-242401 - Training and Development Professional	5
2015-241108 - Forensic Accountant	4
2015-241102 - Management Accountant	3
2015-112101 – Director (Enterprise / Organisation)	2

Source: WSP/Annexure 2 2017; Top 100 Occupation in High demand 2015 and PSETA SSP 2017/18

3.1. Research Design

Methods of data collection employed by this study were both primary as well as the secondary methods. Primary methods utilised were the researcher-administered semi-structured face-to-face survey method with key informants from the sample. To increase its credibility the study augmented the primary method with the secondary method of data collection, which comprised of documents analysis (desktop literature review). Desktop literature review data included but not limited to review of: government online statements, research papers/reports, and policies which relates to skills planning/development. The secondary method of data collection was employed to further allow the researchers access to the information the participants were unwilling or unable to provide.

The process to find answers to this research study was qualitative approach. The qualitative method allowed the study to explore the reasons for the participants' responses, as noted by Nieuwenhuis and Smit (2012) "the qualitative method is best when one is exploring the processes that are best obtained through interacting with those who are involved". The adoption of this method of inquiry was based on its ability to provide the study with validity, as it allowed the study to investigate different aspects of the skills gaps in the public service sector in more detail, as the participants were allowed to share their deep insights on the research questions.

3.2. Sampling Methods and Study Population

The HTFVs analysis for this study was conducted from the fifteen (15) sampled national departments that are registered with PSETA on the MIS Indicum system. Due to time constraints and the budgetary limitations the sampling was limited to the departments submitting Work Place Skills Plans (WSPs) to PSETA only, not national departments with dual reporting. Since it was improbable for the study to gather information from each national department, the study then utilised the sampling approach to sample the study participants as opposed to studying and collecting data from each member of the population of 38 national departments reported on the indicium.

For the reasons that the study did not randomly choose its sample, the type of sampling method employed by the study was non-probability sampling. The sample group members for the study was therefore selected on the basis of accessibility and availability. The specific type of the non-probability sampling that was utilised by the study is the purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was employed to allow the researchers to use their own personal judgement on choosing the sample that meets the predefined characteristics of the study, this was to ensure that the study gets the opinions of the specific target population as required by the objectives of the study.

Laher and Botha (2012) highlighted that with purposive sampling the researcher relies on their experience or ingenuity to identify and find the participants that are deemed to be representative of the population of interest. The study was specific in terms who among the population was needed to be the study participant, the study needed only

the Chief Directors, Director or Deputy Directors in Human Resource Management (HRM) and/or those involved in recruitment within their departments. Accordingly, the study adopted the sub-category of purposive sampling known as expert sampling to choose its participants. The expert sampling was chosen by the researchers for the reasons that it allowed the study to sample and elicit the views of individuals with expertise and experience in recruitment processes (HRM) for their respective departments.

List of sampled national departments submitting to PSETA:

Table 2: List of sampled National Departments

National Department reporting to PSETA only	Participation Status
Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA)	None participation
DHET	Participated
Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation	None participation
National Treasury	Participated
Department of Trade and Industry	None participation
Economic Development	None participation
Human Settlements	None participation
Public works	None participation
Presidency	None participation
Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO)	Participated
Home Affairs (DHA)	Participated
Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA)	Participated
Labour	None participation
National School of Government (NSG)	Participated
Correctional Services	Participated
Environmental Affairs (DEA)	None participation
Telecommunication and Postal Services	Participated
Statistics SA	None participation

3.3. Research Instruments and Techniques

PSETA held a discretionary grant engagement with its stakeholders in April 2017, all the participants of the workshop were sent the online survey tool via survey monkey. Since not all the PSETA stakeholders were part of the workshop, letters requesting participation from 15 national government departments which were sampled by the researchers on the basis that they that they only report to PSETA, were sent to the Human Resource Development (HRD) Chief Directors, Directors or Deputy Directors inviting them to participate on the study. Face-to-face interviews were then held with all the national departments who responded to the invitation which was five (5) in total. And the other three participants responded via the online survey tool.

The data collection tools for the research were face-to-face interview questionnaire guides for key informants, and an online survey questionnaire using survey monkey. The questionnaire was semi-structured in that it consisted of both close-ended and open-ended questions. This was done to ensure that more in-depth information is gathered from the respondents, and to allow the researchers an opportunity to probe further where clarity was needed.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The feedback from the individual surveys were captured and organised by the researchers into separate rows and columns in Microsoft Excel. The data was then analysed using Microsoft Excel. The participants were matched with their identified HTFVs in their departments and the related reasons explaining why those vacancies are considered hard to fill in their respective departments.

3.5. Limitations

The study had the following limitations:

- The adoption of the non-probability approach by the researchers; this limited the study to present every member of the population with an equal chance to be selected and be part of the study, as a result the study may have suffered biasness in the choice of organisations sampled.

- Lack of participation from some of the sampled departments, therefore the conclusions can only be drawn on the respondents.

Chapter 4: Data Display and Analysis

According to the DPSA’s Public Service Regulation (2016) “a funded vacant post shall be advertised within six months after becoming vacant and be filled within twelve (12) months after becoming vacant”. This however has not always been the case in most national departments as some of the vacancies have proven to be hard to fill. Captured below are some of the HTFV confirmed by the respondents and the reasons cited thereof.

Table 3: HTFV and Reasons: ICT and IT related vacancies

HTFV	Frequency ¹
ICT SYSTEMS ANALYST	8
Reasons for Hard to fill:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“Home Affairs has a challenge in IS and IT. The government does not have a strategy to retain the talented IT personnel (lack of talent retention in Government), there is a high turnover rate in IT related positions. The reluctance of government to move away from paper to paperless frustrates talented and young people. The public service sector is outcompeted by the private sector in keeping the IT employees”</i> (Home Affairs Key Informant (KII)). • Lack of relevant experience and required qualifications (DIRCO KII). • “Due to lack of sufficient and/or appropriate experience, the post has been vacant for more than 12 months and has been re-advertised” (DHET KII). • Due to resignation of skilled individuals (Telecommunications and Postal Services). • Due to lack of sufficient and/or appropriate experience, the position has been vacant for 6-12 months (Correctional Services) 	

¹ Presents the number of respondents who noted the vacancy as hard to fill, and does not represent the number of hard to fill vacancies

The information systems (IS) and information technology (IT) related vacancies were deemed hard to fill by the majority of the participants. Captured on table three above are some of the reasons why these vacancies are hard to fill in some of the establishments as cited by the participants. One predicament cited by the participants is that these positions are usually associated with high turnover rates, and for the public sector it is difficult to attract and retain the best talent due to the sector's outdated systems and technology.

Another key issue is the salaries usually paid outside the public sector for similar positions which places the public sector at a disadvantage in terms of remuneration offered. As in some cases, the public sector cannot outcompete the private sector in salaries. The high turnover rates in these positions may be a signal that the workforce is taking the public sector as a stepping stone to desirable opportunities (desirable duties or working environment and desirable salaries) outside of the public service sector. And when this happens, the public service sector has no strategy to retain the talented workforce as noted by the key informant from Home Affairs. The IT post has not been filled from 2009 (Home Affairs KII). If the public service sector does not address the challenges noted above, the filling of information systems and information technology related vacancies will continue to pose a challenge for the public service sector.

Table 4: HTFV and Reasons: Senior Government Manager/Chief Director

HTFV	Frequency
SENIOR GOVERNMENT MANAGER/ CHIEF DIRECTOR	6
Reasons for Hard to fill:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chief Director: Organisational Design is hard to fill, the recent employee left, the department is finding it hard to fill in this vacancy as Organisational Design is a specialised field, the organisation need someone with the Organisational Design experience (Home Affairs) 	

- The Chief Director SCM post has not been filled ever since the last employee vacated the position (Home Affairs)
- The Chief Director Revenue post has not been filled ever since the last employee vacated the position (Home Affairs).
- Chief Director for media and communication (department spokesperson), the department specifically need someone with an understanding of politics, in cases where the department find such people the challenge is usually the lack of experience (National Treasury).
- Due to lack of sufficient and/or appropriate experience (Telecommunication and Postal Services)
- “DDG: HR post is vacant and has been vacant for a long time” (Home Affairs KII).

The Senior Management Services (SMS) were generally reported as not hard to fill vacancies within national departments. Rather it is said to be hard to fill for specific vacancies or occupations that require specific specialization or competencies such as Chief Director specialising in Organisational Design, or Supply Chain Management (SCM), or Revenue etc. These require extensive experience and specialisation in the field. This accounts for the stated average vacancy rate at SMS level reported in PERSAL (2017) at 15.6%.

Table 5: HTFV and Reasons: Forensic Accountant

HTFV	Frequency
FORENSIC ACCOUNTANT	3
Reasons for Hard to fill:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home Affairs is having challenges in filling the vacancies of counter corruption personnel due to lack of skills (Home Affairs). 	

- Due to lack of sufficient and/or appropriate experience, the post has been vacant for 6-12 months (DHET).

The forensic accountant was deemed hard to fill due to its unique nature of the occupation which requires extensive forensic experience with accountancy background. One participant reported that they received a pool of applicants from the South African Police Services but they did not possess the relevant accountancy skills despite their extensive exposure to forensics.

Table 6: HTFV and Reasons: Internal audit/IT audit

HTFV	Frequency
INTERNAL AUDITOR and IT AUDIT	6
Reasons for Hard to fill:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“This is a chief director level post, the challenge is due to salary competition with the private sector, the private sector outcompetes the public sector and therefore takes preference for candidates, the department had to re-advertise the post and head-hunted twice to try and fill in the post” (COGTA KII).</i> • Due to lack of sufficient and/or appropriate experience, the post has been vacant for about 6-12 months (Correctional Services). • <i>“Due to salary competition with the private sector, the challenge is the misplacement of people with the right skills within the department” (DIRCO KII).</i> • Due to resignations and lack of relevant experience by applicants (National Treasury). 	

The common cited reason by the participants for the challenges in filling the audit-related vacancies is the special or unique competencies required for the position, as was the case with National Treasury who cited that they are looking for individuals with

both special IT and audit competencies. The nature of the occupation presents the departments with challenges in finding the suitable candidate who possess all the skills required in the position. With National Treasury citing the high turnover rates in the position, it may be an indication of an occupation that is in high demand, both in the public and private sector.

Table 7: HTFV and Reasons: Research and Development Manager

HTFV	Frequency
RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT MANAGER	3
Reasons for Hard to fill:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to lack of sufficient and/or appropriate experience, the post has been vacant for about 6-12 months (DHET). 	

The research related were vacancies were cited by a number of respondents as being hard to fill in their departments. The research-related vacancies vary in their nature of competencies required depending on the organisation and speciality of the occupation.

Table 8: HTFV and Reasons: Programme or Project Manager

HTFV	Frequency
PROGRAMME OR PROJECT MANAGER	2
Reasons for Hard to fill:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to lack of sufficient and/or appropriate experience, the post has been vacant for more than 12 months and has been re-advertised (DHET). 	

Most respondents reported that project management function in the public service sector is outsourced to consultants (mostly due to the short-term nature of public service sector projects). However, Senior Managers at SMS level are mandated to

have project management as part of competencies outlined in the “SMS handbook” and DPSA’s competency framework.

Other identified hard to fill which emanated from the engagement with the respondents included the following:

Table 9: Various HTFVs and their related reasons

HTFV	REASONS
ACCOUNTING GENERAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accounting General position has been vacant for about 2 years (National Treasury).
CHIEF PROCUREMENT OFFICER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>“This position is very hard to fill for the department, the department need someone with legal background with financial experience and that person must be registered with the professional body”</i> (National Treasury KII).
DATA ARCHITECT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>“Data architect position is HTFV due to the structure and speciality of the position”</i> (National Treasury KII)
ECONOMIST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The department do not have a challenge of getting applicants with the economics qualification, the challenge however lies in the applicants’ lack of specific skills that the department is seeking such as economic analysis, economic research, econometrics, micro & macroeconomic skills (National Treasury).
SENIOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The senior government official positions varies according to the speciality, some of the specialities are not hard to fill within the senior government official, whilst some are Hard to fill (National Treasury).
SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Movement of people (DIRCO)

General Challenges Highlighted related to filling of vacancies in their respective departments.

Complex concerns were raised by respondents that presents the departments with challenges in filling of vacancies in their individual departments. Noted below are some of the challenges that were raised by respondents in the filling of vacancies in their individual establishments, some of these challenges as can be noted below are skills-related and some are not:

- For Director General positions: DGs are on a five year contract, the challenge is that when the new minister arrives, they usually bring their own team (and replace the old team members). Political dichotomies therefore play a role in the filling of some vacancies in the public service sector (Home Affairs KII).
- Some workforces see the public service sector as a stepping stone to the senior positions (particularly to the private sector) which leads to high turnover rates in some occupations of the public service sector, and replacing such experienced personnel is usually a challenge for the public service (Home Affairs KII) (National Treasury KII).
- Some positions are deliberately not filled in some departments as a way of saving money for departments. When someone leaves the department, the department no longer fills that vacancy as a way of costs saving for the department (Home Affairs KII).
- The public service moratorium from National Treasury (which restricts the public service in filling positions, especially the unfunded positions contributes to the delay in filling vacancies in the public service.
- *“Due to budgetary constraints, the department is experiencing a lot of Vacancies”* (DHET KII).
- With the public service funding constraints, the departments may prioritise which vacancies to fill and which ones to freeze. *“With the funding constraints the SMS positions are not all a priority for the department”* (DHET KII).
- Poor succession planning has previously affected the time taken to fill in the vacancies in the department (DHET KII).
- *“As long as the job profile is clear in the advertisement of positions it is easy to attract the right candidate with the right expertise to fill vacancies”* (COGTA KII).

- *“It is usually the internal processes that delay the filling of positions in the department” (COGTA KII).*
- The challenge at DIRCO is the posting, one would find that the skills which are needed by one unit in the department are misplaced somewhere in another unit within the department (DIRCO KII).
- Some of the positions are hard to fill due to the competition with other sectors (i.e. private sector, like the banking sector), the salary structure of the public service sector makes it difficult to attract the talent needed as most potential employees prefer the private sector (National Treasury KII).
- *“The challenge with the public service sector is that it is not allowed to make counter-offers outside the notch bracket, so when the private sector counter-offer what the public sector offers to the applicants they are highly likely to choose the private sector offers” (National Treasury KII).* This is another reason why the public sector is challenged in retaining the skills in high demand.
- *“The economists we find them, but the challenge is that the economists we find lack the specific skills which are needed by the department, skills like tax policy and tax law, policy formulation, economic modelling” (National Treasury KII).* This then shows that sometimes the challenge in filling of vacancies in the public service does not lie on the lack of qualifications *per se*, but in the lack of specific competencies that the departments in the public service are seeking.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The principal focus of this paper was to analyse, and understand the hard to fill vacancies that exist in the national departments and the reasons of the vacancies being deemed hard to fill by those departments. This paper explored this question by presenting evidence from the qualitative interviews which PSETA held with key informants from the sampled national government departments, supplemented by the other research reports and government online statements on the filling of vacancies in the public service sector. The face to face interviews held with the key informants has shown that the determinants of vacancies being hard to fill in the public service vary greatly as per the needs and strategic objectives of the individual departments.

Whilst some of the challenges in filling of vacancies are distinct to individual departments, this paper concedes that some of the challenges do cut across departments, and most departments do experience most of these challenges at one stage or another in their lifecycle. Some of the determinants why vacancies are hard to fill in the public service that repeatedly dominated the data included the following:

- The availability and quality of candidates possessing the competencies required for the position.
- The salaries typically paid outside the public service sector for similar positions.
- Recent turnover in similar positions.
- Special or unique competencies required for the position.
- The recruitment processes in the public service sector impacts on the period or duration it takes to fill the vacancies.
- Desirability of the duties work or organisational environment.
- The public service austerity measures impacts which vacancies are filled and the period it takes to fill vacancies in the public service sector.

The data collected by this paper has shown that using the length it takes the vacancy to be filled as a sole indicator of HTFVs can be misleading, the determinants and factors are usually complex and most of them are interrelated and should never be viewed in isolation.

The public service sector runs the risk of losing the internal developed talents to the private sector, however building talents from within and having succession plans in place assists the departments a great deal in filling future vacancies. Building talent pipelines from within will assist departments in having a large pool of talent to choose from when recruiting to close vacancies.

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