

# Factors influencing job satisfaction among public sector employees: an empirical exploration

by Chenedzai Mafini\*

## Abstract

*Performance problems in public sector organisations in South Africa may be partially attributed to employee-related factors, including low job satisfaction levels. This study set out to examine factors influencing the job satisfaction of employees in a South African public sector organisation. A two-section survey questionnaire was administered to 246 government employees based in the Gauteng province of South Africa. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics of the sample and factor analysis to establish the factors that contributed to the job satisfaction of public sector employees. Reliabilities were measured with the aid of Cronbach's alpha. Five underlying factors that contributed to job satisfaction, namely working conditions, ability utilisation, teamwork, creativity and autonomy were identified. Among these factors, teamwork emerged as the highest contributor to respondents' job satisfaction. The findings suggest that to enhance employee job satisfaction levels, managers in public organisations should pay particular attention to each of the five factors identified in this study. This could be a solution to improving employee relations as well as meeting the performance challenges that currently face public organisations in South Africa.*

**Key words:** *job satisfaction, public sector organisation, public sector employees, South Africa, teamwork, working conditions, creativity, autonomy, skills utilisation*

## 1 Introduction and background

Public sector organisations in South Africa are under pressure to transform their performance to achieve improvement. Since the emergence of democracy in the country, the issue of public sector underperformance which is evidenced by unsatisfactory service delivery has emerged as a topical concern to many stakeholders in the country (Van der Heijden & Mlandi 2005; Nengwekhulu 2009; Molinyane 2012; Nathan 2013). As indicated by Carrim (2009), the underperformance of public sector organisations in South Africa continues unabated despite several interventions that have been put in place to turn these organisations around. Very few of the interventions and strategies designed to improve performance in the public sector have achieved either the desired outcomes or commensurate results (Okanya 2007; Saravanja 2010; Sharp 2013). Although significant progress has been made in many areas, there is a growing sense of frustration within the public sector that too little has been achieved, resulting in a wide range of initiatives and programmes – all focused on improving organisational performance (Julyan 2011; African Development Bank 2013).

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It has been suggested that the inadequate performance of the South African public sector could be attributed in part to dissatisfaction within the labour force in the sector (Barbie 2010). The high and recurring incidence of industrial action, turnover, absenteeism and excessive unionism within the public sector has not gone unnoticed (Nilsson 2010). As perceived by a number of management scientists (Ericksen & Dyer 2005; Katou & Budhwar 2007; Watson, Maxwell & Farquharson 2007), most successes or problems in organisations can be traced back to the level of satisfaction as well as the competency of human resources. Organisations recognise that people are the true agents in business and that all assets and structures, whether tangible or intangible, are the result of human actions (Flood, Guthrie, Liu, O'regan, Armstrong, Maccurtain & Mkamwa 2008). This could explain why most organisations locally and internationally invest astronomical amounts of money in attracting and placing human talent (Ireland, Hoskisson & Hitt 2009). It becomes important, then, to continue focusing empirical research efforts on relevant issues such as employee job satisfaction, with a view to ultimately addressing labour and performance inundations currently affecting public sector organisations in South Africa.

The purpose of the present study was to examine factors influencing the job satisfaction of employees in a South African government department. Few topics, if any, have received as much empirical introspection as has employee job satisfaction. The South African public sector has not escaped the scrutiny of empirical research focusing on this matter. Appel (2006) examined the levels of job satisfaction among environmental officers in the Gauteng Provincial Government. Luddy (2005) examined job satisfaction levels among employees in a public hospital in the Western Cape. McKenzie (2008) investigated the job satisfaction of dieticians in government hospitals. Pillay (2009) conducted a comparative study of the job satisfaction of public sector and private sector employees. Ramasodi (2010) conducted an empirical study on the job satisfaction of healthcare professionals in a government hospital on the East Rand in Gauteng. Koketso (2011) examined challenges associated with enhancing job satisfaction in the Cape Town Municipality. A common thread among the findings of these studies is that job satisfaction among employees in the public sector is generally satisfactory. However, the studies cited a number of challenges such as the paucity of effective employee retention strategies, ineffective employee recognition, succession planning and management problems, as well as sluggish career management strategies, which still need attention.

It is interesting to note that most of the studies that have been conducted within the South African geospatial context sought to establish the degree to which employees were satisfied within their organisation. Factors contributing to the levels of employee job satisfaction were not examined. It is against this backdrop that the present study undertook to explore factors that influence employee job satisfaction in a public organisation in South Africa. The present study naturally addresses this gap. Furthermore, by virtue of its importance to organisations, the subject of employee job satisfaction merits continued empirical research in order to obtain new information, in specific contexts, to augment and update what is already known about the subject. The present study is significant in that the outcome could provide useful information for managers in the public sector with a view to improving the working conditions of public sector employees, which could have a ripple effect in ensuring harmonious employee relations and improved performance of the sector.

As mentioned before, the current operational climate in the public sector in South Africa is characterised by a host of dysfunctional practices, as evidenced by persistent

poor service delivery, ineffective financial planning, high operational costs, corruption and the misuse of taxpayers' money (Mafini & Pooe 2013). Ultimately, these defects tend to reduce employee job satisfaction since the need to address them diverts attention away from satisfying the needs of public employees. Furthermore, unhealthy practices in the workplace are known to be natural drivers of job dissatisfaction among employees (Chandrasekar 2011). In turn, low job satisfaction levels among employees damage the relationship between employees and their employer, in this case the government. It is therefore necessary to empirically examine the factors that determine employee job satisfaction among public employees, with a view to promoting harmonious labour relations between government and its employees. The present study was therefore aimed at exploring this pertinent issue in the South African public sector.

## **2 Review of related literature**

In the present study, employee job satisfaction was studied from the perspective of the Range of Affect Theory, which was proposed by Locke (1976). The theory, which is arguably the most famous job satisfaction model (Saari & Judge 2004), postulates that employee job satisfaction is determined by the discrepancy between what one expects from the job and what one actually gets from the job. As such, job satisfaction occurs when one's expectations are met whereas job dissatisfaction is the result of unmet expectations. In addition, an individual may place great value upon identifiable aspects of a job, such as teamwork, working conditions and ability utilisation, among others. In such cases, these facets become important moderators of the job satisfaction of that particular individual (Cote & Morgan 2002).

Numerous definitions of employee job satisfaction are to be found in the literature. In his widely acclaimed study, Lockie (1969:310) defined employee job satisfaction as 'a function of the perceived relationship between what one wants from one's job and what one perceives it as offering'. Price (2001) defined employee job satisfaction as the affective orientation that an employee has towards his or her work. It may also be defined as the individual's perception and evaluation of the job (Sempane, Rieger & Roodt 2002). Oshagbemi (2003) conceptualised job satisfaction in simple terms as the degree to which people like their jobs. In addition, Lu, While and Barriball (2005) suggest that employee job satisfaction may also be perceived as a global feeling about the job or as a related cluster of attitudes about various facets of the job. A more recent definition is that employee job satisfaction is a positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences (Islam & Siengthai 2009). A common strand that connects these diverse definitions is that employee job satisfaction relates to the general feelings that people have about their jobs.

Liu and White (2011) divide employee job satisfaction factors into two strata, namely intrinsic satisfaction factors and extrinsic satisfaction factors. Typical intrinsic satisfaction factors include an individual's quest for achievement, recognition, responsibility and advancement, whereas supervision, pay, organisational policies and procedures, and working conditions exemplify extrinsic job factors (Yee, Yeung & Cheng 2010). Employee job satisfaction can also be divided into job satisfaction and environmental satisfaction (Agarwal & Ferratt 2001). The dichotomy between these two classifications is that job satisfaction concerns the degree to which an individual is satisfied with the actual work he or she does whereas environmental satisfaction pertains to the extent to which an individual is satisfied with factors such as management, colleagues, the physical work environment and work schedules (Duffy & Richard 2006).

There are a number of factors that influence employee job satisfaction. Fong and Shaffer (2003) link an individual's job satisfaction to the person-environment fit. These scholars underscore the view that an employee's job satisfaction is likely to be higher when his/her job environment is such that it fulfils his/her needs and matches the employee's values, or personal characteristics, while the opposite is also true. An earlier conceptualisation by Ellickson and Logsdon (2001) demonstrates that environmental factors and personal characteristics are the two most influential antecedents to employee job satisfaction. This implies that employee job satisfaction is determined by either personal attributes or work-related factors, or a combination of both (Homburg & Stock 2005). Judge, Thoresen, Bono and Patton (2001) consistently observed that personality traits such as a positive mood, extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness are positively associated with employee job satisfaction whereas neuroticism is inversely related. Zohir (2007) adds that financial benefits and social welfare, security and leave provisions have a positive impact on job satisfaction among employees. However, Jiang (2012) contends that even non-financial benefits such as cafeteria facilities, favourable working hours, transport facilities, fair leave conditions, job-related training, allowance for family life, the provision of living accommodation by the employer, and an adequate company health and safety policy also impact on employee job satisfaction. Adverse conditions in workplace environments that are manifested through poorly designed workstations, unsuitable furniture, insufficient ventilation, poor lighting, high noise levels, and inadequate safety precautions can also lead to a decrease in employee job satisfaction (Chandrasekar 2011). Generally speaking, employee job satisfaction appears to be a multi-faceted concept that is influenced by a cocktail of related and unrelated factors.

The importance of employee job satisfaction is based on its effects on various personal and organisational factors. Intrinsic employee job satisfaction factors have been linked to enhanced employee performance (Islam 2002). It has also been suggested that both organisational productivity and efficiency can be improved by satisfying employees and being sensitive to their physiological and socio-emotional needs in a holistic manner (Cole & Cole 2005; Schneider, Hanges, Smith & Salvaggio 2003). A meta-analysis conducted by Judge et al (2001) found a positive relationship between individual employee job satisfaction and factors such as motivation, job involvement, organisational commitment and job performance. In another study conducted by Harter, Schmidt and Hayes (2002) it was found that there is a positive relationship between employee job satisfaction and productivity, profit, turnover, employee accidents and customer satisfaction in nearly 8000 business units in 36 organisations across the five continents of the world. Furthermore, a study conducted by Peterson and Luthans (2006) reports that employee job satisfaction is negatively related to absenteeism, turnover, and perceived stress. Satisfied employees generally work harder and tend to exhibit organisational citizenship behaviours (Yoon & Suh 2003).

In the context of public organisations, Kim (2005) comments that good public servants are those who exhibit qualities such as high employee job satisfaction, high organisational commitment, high morale, and strong organisational loyalty. Employees who meet these criteria are likely to contribute to enhanced organisational performance (Wang & Lee 2009). In a recent study, Mafini, Surujlal and Dhurup (2012) also found positive and significant associations between employee job satisfaction and life satisfaction among South African municipal employees. In line with these findings, Yee et al (2010) opine that when employees have high levels of job satisfaction, their participation in organisations become healthy and constructive, leading to enhanced

organisational performance, which in turn has a stimulating effect on service delivery. This is an indication of the importance of people in organisations, since people are the promoters of excellent organisational performance (Jiang 2012). Ensuring that employees have high job satisfaction levels is therefore an indispensable tool in ensuring the prosperity of any organisation that is geared to high performance.

### **3 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research design**

After a review of related literature on job satisfaction, a quantitative design using the cross-sectional survey approach (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter 2006) was adopted for the empirical portion of the present study. The cross-sectional survey approach was selected because it makes it easy to collect data from large groups of respondents, is inclusive regarding the number of variables that can be studied, requires minimal investment to develop and administer, and makes it relatively easy to arrive at generalisations (Zikmund, Babin, Carr & Griffin 2009).

#### **3.2 Participants and sampling**

A simple random sampling technique was used to recruit 246 employees of a South African government organisation. Simple random sampling is advantageous in that it ensures an unbiased random selection of individuals, which is important in ensuring that the sample accurately represents the population (Yates, Moore & Starnes 2010).

The sample size used in the present study was determined on the basis of Avikaran's (1994) guideline that between 200 and 500 respondents are sufficient when dealing with multivariate statistics such as factor analysis. The sample size could not be determined haphazardly, since it is largely dependent on a number of factors such as the type of sample, the homogeneity of the population, the time, the money and the personnel available for the study (Surujlal 2004). In addition, there is no single sample size formula that is applicable to most samples (Hair, Bush & Ortinau 2002). It was therefore necessary to consult an authoritative source such as Avikaran (1994) when determining the sample size. Based on the foregoing insights, the sample size was initially pegged at n=400 respondents.

#### **3.3 Instrumentation and data collection procedures**

In the present study, a two-section questionnaire was used to collect primary data. Section A of the questionnaire was self-designed and measured respondents' demographic information such as gender, age, race and job position. Section B of the questionnaire elicited the respondents' job satisfaction using the Global Job Satisfaction Sub-scale that was adapted from the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire long-form (MSQ) designed by Spector (1985). The questions in Section B were configured in the form of a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). The Likert scale was used because it is relatively easy to construct and makes data easy to collect and analyse, thereby making them suitable for surveys (Kothari 2008).

Before the questionnaire was administered in April 2013, both permission to conduct the study and ethical clearance were granted by management at the government organisation. An employee of the department was deployed and trained to assist in the data collection process. Ethical considerations such as the participants' right to

anonymity, confidentiality, privacy or non-participation, informed consent and protection from discomfort, harm and victimisation were adhered to during the administration of the questionnaire. Although the initial sample size was pegged at 400 respondents, the researcher only managed to administer a total of 370 questionnaires to management and employees in the public organisation. Among these, 257 questionnaires were returned. Eleven questionnaires were eliminated in the subsequent screening process because they were either incomplete or else several questions had been answered more than once. Eventually, 246 questionnaires were used in the final data analysis, yielding a response rate of 66%. This response rate was acceptable because it satisfies Fincham's (2008) recommendation that researchers should aim for response rates approximating 60% for most research surveys.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The aim of this study was to determine the factors influencing job satisfaction among employees in a public organisation. Data analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 21.0). Simple descriptive statistics were employed to analyse the demographic characteristics of the sample. The factors that determine the job satisfaction of public employees were identified using exploratory factor analysis. The mean score ranking technique was used to compare the importance of the extracted factors relative to each other.

## **4 Results**

The findings of the study are presented as follows: First, a description of the sample composition is given. This is followed by an account of how validity and reliability were ascertained in the present study. This section is followed by a discussion of how the job satisfaction factors were extracted using exploratory factor analysis, and of the internal consistencies and the mean scores of the factors. The results are discussed next, and this is followed by a presentation of the limitations of the study and implications for further research. The paper ends with the conclusions and implications for management.

### **4.1 Sample composition**

The profile of the respondents is reported in Table 1.

Among the respondents, 65% (n=160) were male and 35% (n=86) were female. After collapsing the respondents' age categories, the largest percentage (58%; n=143) were found to fall into the under-35-year age group. Approximately 41% (n=101) of the respondents had been employed in the public organisation for periods of less than 5 years. With regard to race group, 80% (n=197) of the respondents were black, 11% (n=27) were white, 7% (n=17) were Indian and 2% (n=5) were of the mixed race, which is representative of the racial composition in the majority of the public service departments in South Africa. Approximately 47% (n=116) of the respondents were holders of a first degree, 13% (n=32) were holders of a postgraduate degree and 23% (n=57) were in possession of a diploma. Furthermore, approximately 67% (n=165) of the respondents occupied professional positions within the public organisation.

**Table 1**  
**Demographic profile of respondents**

Parameter	Frequency	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	160	65.04
Female	86	34.96
<b>Total</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Age group</b>		
≤25	21	8.54
26-35	122	49.59
36-45	68	27.64
≥46	35	14.23
<b>Total</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Employment period</b>		
≤ 5 years	101	41.06
6-9 years	64	26.02
≥ 9 years	81	32.93
<b>Total</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Race group</b>		
Black	197	80.08
White	27	10.98
Indian	17	6.91
Coloured	5	2.03
<b>Total</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Current position</b>		
Manager	33	13.42
Professional staff	165	67.07
General worker	48	19.51
<b>Total</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>100</b>

#### **4.2 Validity and reliability**

In the present study, validity was taken to be the degree to which evidence and theory support the interpretations of test scores (Alumran, Hou & Hurst 2012). To establish content and face validity, a panel of experts consisting of three faculty members at a South African university of technology, whose research focuses on organisational behaviour, were asked to review the survey items in order to evaluate whether their content is suitable for measuring the intended constructs. The questionnaire was also pre-tested on a convenience sample consisting of 20 respondents. Using feedback from the experts and the pretest, changes were made to the questionnaire. These took the form of the deletion or addition of items, and the rewording and rephrasing of questions. Construct validity was assessed through the reliabilities of the factors (refer to Table 3) and was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The standardised Cronbach's alpha reliabilities of the five factors were considered to be satisfactory because they were significantly greater than the recommended 0.7 (Malhotra 2011). In addition, construct validity was also assessed through exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The results indicated that there were no cross-loadings within constructs, leading to the extraction of five job satisfaction factors.

### 4.3 Exploratory factor analysis

In the present study, exploratory factor analysis using the Principal Components Analysis (CPA) method and Varimax rotation (Conway & Huffcutt 2003) was used to identify employee job satisfaction factors. Scale purification was conducted in which low factor loadings, cross-loadings and low communalities were eliminated with a view to enhancing "interpretability of the factor structure" (Malhotra 2010:643). The minimum cut-off point used on the variable loadings was 0.50, as recommended by Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, Tatham & Black (2010).

To establish whether the data were suitable for exploratory factor analysis, a Bartlett's test of sphericity (Tabachnick & Fidell 2001) and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (Johnson & Wichern 2002) were calculated. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was calculated at 0.863 (>0.50) and a Bartlett's test of sphericity at (Sig = 0.000) supported by an approximated Chi-square of 3292.295 at 528 degrees of freedom (df). This result indicated that the data were suitable for factor analysis. The results of the rotated component matrix, percentage of variance explained by each factor, cumulative percentage of variance and Eigen value criterion were assessed. Finally, a five-factor solution was developed as the items were logically associated with the underlying factors. The rotated factor loading matrix is reported in Table 2.

In analysing the responses of employees at the public organisation, five employee job satisfaction factors, namely *working conditions*, *ability utilisation*, *teamwork*, *creativity* and *autonomy* were identified through the exploratory factor analysis procedure. These factors accounted for approximately 60.4% of the variance, which complies with Maholtra and Birks' (2003:72) suggestion that the cumulative percentage of variance extracted by the factors should be at least 60%. The total variance explained, namely 60.4%, also indicates that 39.6% of the job satisfaction of public employees is accounted for by extraneous variables that do not constitute part of this study. In terms of reliabilities, it is noteworthy that all five factors showed acceptable levels of internal consistency, that is levels above the recommended 0.7 threshold (Hair et al 2010:385).

### 4.4 Internal consistencies and mean scores

The internal consistencies and mean scores of the scales used in the study are reported in Table 3.

The summated means for the five employee job satisfaction subscales indicate that teamwork was ranked highest ( $\bar{x} = 4.924$ ), followed by ability utilisation ( $\bar{x} = 4.812$ ), creativity ( $\bar{x} = 4.693$ ), autonomy ( $\bar{x} = 4.520$ ) and working conditions ( $\bar{x} = 4.443$ ). The results of the mean score ranking show that public employees were more satisfied with teamwork than with the other four factors. However, the fact that the mean scores for all the five subscales were between the 'agree' and 'strongly agree' positions on the Likert scale shows that employees at the public organisation seem to have satisfactory levels of job satisfaction.



**Table 2**  
**Rotated component matrix for job satisfaction factors**

Item code	Factors and variable descriptions: The human factor	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
		Factor 1 Working conditions				
B13	My pay and the amount of work I do	<b>0.762</b>	0.034	0.027	0.091	0.119
B17	The working environment	<b>0.720</b>	0.101	0.321	0.254	-0.189
B29	The adequacy of facilities for my job	<b>0.712</b>	-0.048	-0.073	0.217	0.103
B6	The competence of my supervisor in making decisions	<b>0.706</b>	0.301	0.146	0.124	-0.158
B23	The quality of facilities for my job	<b>0.590</b>	0.022	-0.413	0.210	0.140
B12	The way company policies are put into practice	<b>0.746</b>	-0.045	0.308	0.018	0.105
B5	The way my boss handles subordinates	<b>0.667</b>	0.106	-0.011	0.062	0.119
<b>Factor 2 Ability utilisation</b>						
B10	The chance to tell people what to do	0.097	<b>0.711</b>	-0.029	0.123	0.141
B9	The chance to do things for other people	0.178	<b>0.658</b>	0.264	0.274	0.137
B11	The chance to use my skills	-0.138	<b>0.647</b>	0.231	0.334	-0.072
B7	The opportunity to apply my knowledge	0.061	<b>0.883</b>	0.031	-0.182	0.144
B8	The chance to develop my abilities	0.238	<b>0.677</b>	0.032	0.261	-0.215
B14	The feeling of accomplishment I get from doing my job	0.149	<b>0.735</b>	-0.442	0.153	-0.078
<b>Factor 3 Teamwork</b>						
B18	The way my co-workers get along with each other	0.357	0.072	<b>0.642</b>	0.164	0.123
B21	The level of cooperation among my co-workers	-0.062	-0.051	<b>0.736</b>	0.336	0.341
B24	The opportunity to discuss work problems with my co-workers	0.310	-0.007	<b>0.651</b>	0.093	0.114
B30	The level of professionalism among my co-workers	-0.014	0.237	<b>0.632</b>	-0.156	-0.015
B35	The way my team strives for excellence	-0.009	0.062	<b>0.663</b>	0.314	-0.073
<b>Factor 4 Creativity</b>						
B31	The chance to learn new methods	0.372	-0.071	0.331	<b>0.657</b>	0.321
B24	The chance to do things differently from time to time	0.437	-0.065	0.204	<b>0.732</b>	-0.026
B34	Being able to do things that don't go against my conscience	0.241	0.279	0.174	<b>0.599</b>	-0.432
B25	Being able to suggest new ideas	0.385	-0.074	0.143	<b>0.547</b>	-0.229
<b>Factor 5 Autonomy</b>						
B2	The chance to work alone on the job	0.245	0.367	-0.277	0.131	<b>0.763</b>
B16	The chance to try my own methods on the job	0.069	-0.112	0.383	0.291	<b>0.624</b>
B19	The freedom to use my own judgment	-0.025	0.248	-0.050	-0.010	<b>0.563</b>
B20	The freedom to think independently	0.474	-0.118	0.132	0.227	<b>0.677</b>
<b>Eigenvalue</b>		6.155	5.400	1.420	1.198	1.017
<b>% of variance explained</b>		24.731	5.781	20.712	4.872	4.328
<b>Cumulative % of variance explained</b>		24.731	30.512	51.224	56.096	60.424
<b>Reliability (Cronbach's alpha)</b>		0.782	0.854	0.787	0.712	0.813
Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalisation. <sup>a</sup> a. 5 components extracted						

**Table 3**  
**Number of items, reliabilities, mean and standard deviation for the**  
**job satisfaction subscales**

Factor	Number of items	Reliability ( $\alpha$ )	Mean scores ( $\bar{x}$ )	Standard deviation	Position in rank order
Working conditions	7	0.872	4.443	0.743	5
Ability utilisation	6	0.853	4.812	0.701	2
Teamwork	5	0.758	4.924	0.704	1
Creativity	4	0.712	4.693	0.769	3
Autonomy	4	0.813	4.520	0.669	4
Entire scale	26	0.795	4.680	0.722	

## 5 Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine factors influencing the job satisfaction of employees in a South African public sector organisation. Factor 1, which was described as *working conditions*, consisted of seven items that accounted for 24.7% of the variance. Working conditions are the conditions under which an individual works; the provision of good working conditions involves promoting a working environment that is conducive to the satisfaction of employees' needs (Rethinam & Ismail 2008). As defined by Md-Sidin, Sambasivan and Ismail (2010), working conditions are a comprehensive construct that includes an individual's job-related well-being and the extent to which work experiences are rewarding, fulfilling, and devoid of stress and other negative personal consequences. Yavari, Amirtash and Tondnevis (2009) state that working conditions are meant to capture the extent to which the working environment, job requirements, supervisory behaviour and ancillary programmes in an organisation meet the needs the employees. Employee job satisfaction is taken to be one of the several outcomes of working conditions (Nurmala 2010). In line with this view, Krueger, Brazil, Lohfield, Edward, Lewis and Tjam (2002) describe employee job satisfaction as a product of one's evaluation of one's workplace and context. A report compiled by Kinzli, Knotzer, Traweger, Lederer, Heidegger & Benzer (2004) also reveals that the working environment can potentially influence employees' level of pride in themselves and the work they do. Moreover, the impact of working conditions spills over to a number of other life domains such as family life, leisure life, social life and financial life which invariably also impact on an individual's job satisfaction (Mubarak, Baba, Low & Quah 2003). In addition, working conditions in an organisation concern the participation of workers in problem solving and decision making, matters which also impact on employee job satisfaction (Md-Sidin, Sambasivan & Ismail 2010). This presupposes that an employee's perception of the workplace contributes to the level of job satisfaction that he/she experiences.

Factor 2, described as *ability utilisation*, consisted of six items and accounted for 5.78% of the total variance explained. Ability utilisation is concerned with the individual's opportunity to do something in the organisation that makes use of his/her skills and abilities (Flood et al 2008). The extent to which people's skills and abilities are utilised in the workplace affects organisational performance. It is therefore important to enable employees to make an immediate positive difference to their workplaces by applying the skills and abilities they have acquired in a productive way (Mason 2005). At macro level, employee skills and abilities usually make the biggest difference to the prosperity of a country when they are used effectively in organisations

(Payne 2008). In consequence, most policy makers are now aware that it is not enough to improve workforce skills and abilities: skills must also be *used* effectively and continuously developed if the full benefits in terms of improving productivity and raising living standards are to be realised (Philpott 2006). This suggests that employee skills and abilities are essential, but are not in themselves sufficient to create productive workplaces unless they are fully utilised (Tamkin, Cowling & Hunt 2008).

Ensuring that skills and abilities are fully utilised involves a wider set of changes within the workplace: changes that concern business strategies, the way production and employees are managed, and the nature of organisational culture (Trades Union Congress 2009). Bassi and McMurrer (2006) suggest that many employees are overwhelmed and dissatisfied because of situations in which they are unable to apply their skills and abilities, mainly because the work environment makes it impossible to be highly productive. It is imperative, therefore, that workplaces provide the right sort of context for people to successfully apply and further develop their skills and abilities (Stirpe, Zarraga & Rigby 2009).

Factor 3, described as *teamwork*, consisted of five items which explained 20.7% of the total variance. Teamwork is concerned with the prevalence of joint actions by a group of people, in which each individual subordinates his or her individual interests to those of the group (Acuna, Gomez & Juristo 2009). Teams may be formed when individuals with a common taste, preference, liking and attitude come and work together for a common goal (Bandow 2001). Every employee is dependent on his fellow employees to work together and contribute efficiently to the organisation (Burke, Stagl, Klein, Goodwin, Salas & Halpin 2006). It has been observed that the outcome is far better when employees work in a team rather than individually as every individual can contribute to the best of his or her abilities (Derby & Larsen 2007). Teamwork is also essential in organisations for better output and bonding among employees since tasks are accomplished at a faster pace when done by a team rather than an individual (Salas, Sims & Burke 2005). There is also usually healthy competition between team members in addition to improved relations among employees and a platform for team members to learn from each other (Morgan 2010). Empirical results from a study conducted by Acuna et al (2009) reveal that working in a team is closely associated with opportunities to learn new things as well as with job enlargement, elements which have been found to be associated with increased job satisfaction. It appears that for many employees social interactions at work through sustained teamwork are a critical factor in employee job satisfaction and must be encouraged if organisational goals are to be accomplished (Salas et al 2005).

Factor 4, described as *creativity*, consisted of four items that accounted for 5% of the variance. Creativity is concerned with the extent to which the individual is able to use his or her own initiative, innovativeness and methods in the tasks allocated to him or her (Cho & Pucik 2005). Creativity could also take the form of a product or response that is both a novel and appropriate, useful, correct or valuable response to the task at hand, and it must somehow influence the way business gets done, such as by improving a product or by opening up a new way to approach a process (Falk & Kosfeld 2006). Martins and Martins (2002) contend that creativity, which is considered by many to be of critical importance, provides the single greatest prospect for any organisation to improve its performance. Since ideas are conceived by individuals within an organisation, giving these individuals the freedom to unleash their creative abilities may enhance the organisation's chances of success and create competitive advantage. In fact, there seems to be consensus among management practitioners that intangible

resources such as a firm's capability to promote innovation and creativity are key drivers of both satisfaction at individual level and competitive advantage at organisational level (Amabile 2009).

Creativity enabled through organisational resource allocations leads to higher levels of employee job satisfaction, which is associated with better employee productivity. This eventually translates into higher organisational performance (Henri 2006). In line with this view, Kinzl et al (2004) emphasise that an individual's level of satisfaction will be high if his/her job is compatible with his/her creativity style. It is therefore important for public organisations to place a premium on employee creativity in order to excel in the unpredictable operational climate of today and tomorrow (Cho & Pucik 2005).

Factor 5, described as *autonomy*, was composed of four items and contributed to 4% of the variance. Autonomy is concerned with the level of freedom and discretion an individual enjoys in his or her job as well as an individual's ability to make decisions regarding the tasks allocated to him or her (Mola-Hosseini & Arsalan 2009). As suggested by Giannikis and Mihail (2011), jobs that permit a high degree of autonomy engender a sense of responsibility which contributes to high levels of employee satisfaction and motivation. Seibert, Wang and Courtright (2011) concur with this view and emphasise that for both individuals and teams, empowerment through autonomy drives employee behaviours and attitudes. Employees who are allowed to work autonomously are more satisfied and committed at work, and are less likely to experience stress and to think about leaving the organisation (Gibbs 2009). The findings of a study conducted by Brunetto and Farr-Wharton (2004) reveal that there was an increase in the level of job satisfaction among employees when they were given more autonomy in the workplace to determine their routines, and there was also a corresponding stronger need for frequent communication and adjustment. Overall, the critical behaviours driven by employee autonomy include organisational performance, innovation and organisational citizenship, which are all linked to employee job satisfaction in one way or another (Moqali, Hassanpoor & Hassanpoor 2009). It is an important assumption that the degree to which a job provides substantial freedom and independence and permits the employee to use his or her discretion influences the level of job satisfaction that the employee experiences. A practical implication is that organisations may have to consider recruiting employees who have positive self-evaluation traits to help establish a workforce that is more willing and able to show initiative by working autonomously and playing an active role in improving its own performance (Seibert et al 2011).

## **6 Limitations and Implications for further research**

The results of the present study must be interpreted within the context of the limitations of the study. First, the results of the study were restricted to a small group of respondents who were based in a single geographic context (Gauteng Province). In the light of this, caution should be exercised in generalising the results to other samples and contexts. Second, there are limitations associated with the modified instrument that was adapted from previous studies which were possibly designed to achieve different aims. In addition, common method bias could be a concern in this study in the sense that all the items were assessed using a common instrument administered to respondents at one time. However, to limit this potential bias, the researcher ensured that measures of the constructs used clear and unambiguous language as recommended by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff (2003).

Several implications for further research should be noted. Future research needs to examine job satisfaction factors across a variety of public organisations. Future studies could also investigate the interplay between job satisfaction factors identified in this study and other important behavioural factors such as quality of work life, job loyalty, employee commitment and life satisfaction. The findings of the current study could also be refined by conducting similar studies using the mixed method approach, which integrates both qualitative and quantitative paradigms. It would also be interesting to consider longitudinal research on the same subject, in order to understand developing trends in job satisfaction factors over an extended period.

## **7 Conclusions and implications for management**

The purpose of the present study was to examine the factors that influence the job satisfaction of employees in a public organisation. Using the exploratory factor analysis method, five factors, namely, working conditions, ability utilisation, teamwork, creativity and autonomy, were identified. Among these factors, it emerged that public employees were most satisfied with teamwork and least satisfied with working conditions.

The findings of this study have a number of implications for management. Although it has to be acknowledged that various kinds of managerial interventions could potentially enhance job satisfaction in public organisations, the present study suggests that public sector managers seeking to maximise their understanding of employee attitudes and behaviours should be encouraged to expand their thinking on these issues along the lines of the five dimensions proposed by this study. Labour relations practitioners seeking to improve the satisfaction of employees in public organisations could refer to the findings of the present study. This may be achieved by positively adjusting or optimising the five job satisfaction factors that were identified in this study.

Working conditions can be improved by optimising the various elements of which they consist, such as by providing meaningful employment contracts, acceptable work schedules and compensation systems and dealing positively with issues related to employee well-being (Mariwo 2008). Teamwork can be stimulated by nurturing a culture that emphasises team efforts rather than solo efforts throughout the organisation as well as providing sufficient support structures for such teams (Delarue, Van Hootegem, Procter & Burrige 2008). Simultaneously, the need for autonomy should be recognised by ensuring that public employees are given room to exercise individual discretion in their duties, while practices such as the micro-management of employees should be discarded (Federici 2013). Efforts should be made to ensure that the work allocated to public employees matches their skills (Zheng, Morrison & O'Neill 2006). In line with this, managers in public organisations could receive training to enhance their work allocation skills (Pfeffer 2005). It is also important to generate a culture of innovation and creativity in public organisations. This could be achieved by recruiting creative employees, promoting diversity among employees and rewarding the creative efforts of employees (Vlachos 2008). It is envisaged that adoption of these strategies and other relevant mechanisms could be a solution to facilitating high job satisfaction levels among public sector employees in South Africa. When such employees become motivated regarding their jobs, troublesome issues such as high labour turnover, industrial action, absenteeism, low employee performance and poor public sector organisational performance, all of which have gained prominence within the public sector in South Africa, will be drastically reduced, leading to a harmonious labour relations environment in the sector.

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