



BRAIN DRAIN: Hollowing out the South African Public Service?

The capacity of the state to do its work is weakening. Skills flight – what is referred to in popular parlance as brain drain – is hollowing out the public service. The public service is fast becoming the employer of last resort instead of its glory days when it was the employer of choice for many. There was a time when public service was the epitome of excellence. That was when it attracted the best. Working in the public service was, back then, a badge of honour. That is eroding, fast! Professionals and experienced public servants are leaving the public service for the private sector. A great number of skills leaving the country end up joining public services abroad. The question that begs for attention is what is the source of this exodus and how do we restore the integrity of the public service?

Pride of the nation

The South African public service has been a prestigious employer and a source of pride for those in the service. From teachers, police, doctors, nurses, clerks, *etc.*, many donned their uniform, each day going to work to serve with pride. They enjoyed the respect of the communities they served and were the envy of many. Many would brag about having served in the military or the police. The military and police force enjoyed respect amongst their peers in neighbouring countries for their discipline. Many neighbouring countries sent their new recruits for training with our national defence force. This is not a longing for the past. There is neither doubt nor apology to be served about the heinous crimes and atrocities of *apartheid* under apartheid the police and military brutalised and maimed people. However, the professionalism, discipline, and stoicism of the combined forces have been the pride of the nation post-1994.

Teachers would have pride in pointing out that so and so passed through their hands. Criminals knew that once inside prison cells, there was no way out. Today, they come in and out of prison as they please and run their syndicates from the comfort of prison cells. At the centre of this is the cancer of corruption that has eaten into the fabric of the nation. Everywhere, there are rotten apples who sully the image and integrity of the public service. From amongst border patrollers to prison warders, from clerks to water-meter readers in a municipality, there is a haste for a quick buck. The service that citizens must receive for free, they now get by paying a bribe. The PSA implores that all of us desist from the temptation to paint all public servants with the same dirty brush of corruption. What is of great concern, though, is that the absence of consequence management has created a sense of impunity. It is this sense of impunity that should be nipped in the butt for the collective progress and future of the nation.

Meanwhile, the country's medical schools produce the best in the global market. Human resources and placement companies target South African doctors and nurses for jobs abroad because of their quality and professionalism. Some of the country's best teachers are teaching in foreign countries whilst South African learners battle to read, write, and enumerate. It is widely accepted that South African trained managers and administrators do well in the world. Whilst the performance and achievements of South Africans abroad must be celebrated, the loss as a nation must be recognised.

The country is losing the skills that should propel the growth of the economy whilst strengthening other economies around the world. As it has been reported "South Africa's qualified and skilled workforce see the United Kingdom, Europe, North America, and Australia as greener pastures."ⁱ The people who leave the country do not do so out of a lack of patriotism. There are pull and push factors that make them look for alternatives. Until we take a deep breath and examine these factors thoroughly and soberly, South Africa's economy, especially the public service, will continue to experience the exodus of skills.

Pull and push factors

Emigration is a global phenomenon. There is a plethora of factors that push people away from their country of residence. Similarly, the factors that pull people into a foreign country are galore. The key drivers for people leaving South Africa for greener pastures abroad are, however, mainly crime and the ailing economy.ⁱⁱ The high rate of murder, rape, and car hijackings have made scores of people to consider leaving the country. The outbreak of COVID-19 and concomitant lockdowns, and Eskom's electricity blackouts have compounded the problems of the ailing economy. Businesses are closing as production processes are frustrated by an intermittent supply of electricity. The result of this is a high rate of unemployment and destitution. Thus, as soon as an opportunity for employment or business opens up abroad, those who have the means do not hesitate to leave.

Whilst the above are general factors pushing South Africans to leave their country for greener pastures abroad, there remains unique factors that affect people in the public service the most. Political interference and uncertainty regarding the next pay cheque are amongst the push factors fueling the public service exodus.

The public service has not been insulated from political interference. In fact, the biggest threat to skills attraction and retention in the public service is the slow pace of professionalisation or lack thereof. The public service is too politicised and is experiencing the dangers of cadre deployment. Experienced professionals in the public sector, people who have risen through the ranks, are often overlooked for promotion in favour of politically connected cadres. This leaves many public servants frustrated when they realise that their prospects for career progression are limited. This result is low morale and a lack of productivity. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that when faced with this situation, some start looking for options to ply their trade elsewhere where their skills are valued, and their expertise recognised.

The worsening fiscal crisis in the state has added fuel to the fire, threatening stability in the public service. State employees no longer have their salaries guaranteed. Reports about state-owned entities, departments and municipalities failing to pay salaries on time are abound. Denel, once a pride of the nation for its innovation, left its 3 700 employees in the lurch when it failed to pay their salaries in full in 2019. Train drivers at Metrorail and bus drivers at Transtate and Translux also left commuters stranded when they were forced to go to the streets after the two state-owned entities failed to pay their salaries. The public broadcaster, the SABC, almost blacked out when it failed to pay its employees' salaries. More than 30 municipalities have struggled to pay staff salaries on time.ⁱⁱⁱ The impact of this uncertainty on staff retention and recruitment is immeasurable. No worker, let alone a prospective employee, wishes to stay with an employer or apply for a job in a company or government department where there is no guarantee of salary on pay day.

Many talented individuals can no longer look up to the public service as an employment option. Even if they did have the desire, the fiscal crisis is discouraging. Government intentions to impose a moratorium on public service jobs is confirmation of the deepening fiscal crisis. Without filling the vacancies, state capacity will remain limited. The message to South Africans job seekers is, do not look up to public service as an option. Go elsewhere! It is this kind of messaging that will strengthen the position of South Africa as a large exporter of skills to more developed nations such as Canada, the United Kingdom, America, and Australia, at our own expense.

Who leaves and who stays?

It is not the unskilled and the poor who emigrate. It is mainly the middle and upper class who have that kind of option. It is the skills needed to boost the economy that we end up losing. The number of people who have emigrated has been on the rise over the years. Although there was a reversal witnessed following the 2008 global economic recession, with scores of people returning to South Africa during and after the 2010 World Cup, that trend was short-lived. The UN Department of Economic and Social estimated that the number of South Africans emigrating abroad experienced a "significant uptick" in 2015 and was already at 914 901 by 2020.^{iv} This rate of emigration not only affects the private sector; the public sector is not spared either. It continues to suffer from the exodus of critical skills.

The loss of skilled personnel to other countries also means a loss of tax base for South Africa. With the unemployment rate hovering above 40%, a shrinking tax base is the last thing South Africa needs. Limited tax collection means government cannot meet its social and welfare obligations towards the needy. Thus, everything possible must be done to attract and retain the skills needed to grow South Africa's economy.

What is to be done?

Without resolving the macro issues, such as growing the economy, resolving the electricity crisis, combating crime and corruption, very little can be done to retain and attract talent in the public service. These macro issues must be attended to urgently and aggressively to put the economy on the growth path.

However, to address the challenges in the public sector, a clear recruitment and retention strategy must be developed to stop the brain drain. However, a strategy that is not anchored on research would be fruitless. It is the PSA's view that any retention strategy oblivious of the concerns of those who have left and those who are currently in the employ of the public service may not adequately close the drain and leakages that are hollowing out the public service.

Hence, the PSA calls on the Public Service Commission to commission an independent study to analyse all exit interviews of senior managers over the past ten years to understand the overarching concerns that have incited most public servants to leave the public service. Similarly, a staff satisfaction survey must be conducted to gauge public servants' perceptions and views. Such a survey can start by focusing from Deputy Director level upward in the ranking of government employees. From this analysis, a comprehensive retention strategy can be developed to curb the skills flight.

It is clear that without a retention strategy that responds to the concerns of workers, the hollowing of the public service will continue until no modicum of prestige is left in the public service. To do nothing, is to accept that the public service can no longer be an employer of choice, but an employer of last resort! The PSA makes these proposals particularly because it wants to see the restoration of the public service as a professional space where talent comes in to thrive and shine: A true employer of choice!

References

ⁱ Professional Careers Service, *How to attract and retain SA's finest talent in a brain drain climate* <https://www.pcs-sa.co.za/how-to-attract-and-retain-sas-finest-talent-in-a-brain-drain-climate/>

ⁱⁱ Tax Consulting SA, *Featured on 702 Talk Radio*, <https://www.taxconsulting.co.za/south-africans-are-emigrating-abroad-in-record-high-numbers/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Eybers J. and Kumalo J., 2019, *State runs out of cash struggles to pay salaries* City Press, 1 July 2019. <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/state-runs-out-of-cash-struggles-to-pay-salaries-20190701>

^{iv} Fengu M., 2022, *1 million South Africans emigrate in five years*, City Press, 17 April 2022 <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/1-million-south-africans-emigrated-in-five-years>