

Employees, systems and processes

Department of Science and Technology

Sustaining the ‘Who’ behind Scientific Breakthroughs: The Department that Makes People Matter¹

The National Department of Science and Technology (DST) has been chosen by the Department of Performance, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) to share its experience and good practice with other departments. The DST stands out for its best practice in the field of Human Resource (HR) Management and Employee Systems. It excels in the field of HR Practices and Administration (specifically in recruitment and retention practice) as well as in HR Utilisation and Capacity Development (specifically in Performance Management).

This case study illustrates the way in which the DST recognizes that people are behind every one of its scientific breakthroughs and how it has taken concrete steps to prioritise and support these people. The Department makes people matter in four key ways. It has streamlined its recruitment and selection processes to be fast and effective at finding the right person for the right job. It has put in place a robust performance management system, which all levels of the Department have taken ownership to implement. It has strong staff mentoring and development opportunities, combined with a culture of trust in people’s ability to do their jobs. And finally, they maintain an engaged, communicative leadership which makes its decisions based on an informed understanding of what people are doing across the Department. While policies and procedures, coupled with compliance of these procedures, has gone a long way to ensure a strong foundation from which to build, taking it beyond the regulations to focus on these four areas of a People Matter approach has ensured that the Department is able to build a culture of excellence. This excellence is reflected across the board in its performance, and ultimately in its ability to fulfil its mission.

¹This case study was written for the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) by Ms Bridget Steffen, with the support of Mr Salim Latib, from the Wits Graduate School of Public and Development Management (www.wits.ac.za/Academic/CLM/PDM/).

Introduction

To illustrate the exemplary human resource management work within the Department of Science and Technology, this case study centres on Zanele, a recent recruit at the Department. Through her International Cooperation and Resources work, she contributes to expanding the Department's global opportunities for learning, leveraging expertise and funding for the benefit of the country and the continent. Her work impacts on the Department's ability to promote the sciences in South Africa, in turn engaging the country's youth to take a keen interest in studying and pursuing careers in science. Zanele is a high-performing, motivated individual who is able to carry out her work effectively. This is because she is the right person for the right job, her responsibilities are clear and measurable, and she is trusted and supported in her work by her colleagues and the Department's leadership.

Within the Department, Zanele is not an anomaly. When she left her previous government position to take up her post at the DST last year, her first impressions of her colleagues were of: *"a good team - it was a totally different feel to my previous workplace. Everyone was busy, it demonstrated the level of professionalism that the team has."*² DST takes its people very seriously because there is recognition, at the most senior levels of leadership, that to drive the Department's performance beyond basic compliance to a standard of excellence requires a total investment in people.

This understanding is reflected in the exemplary performance of its Human Resources (HR) Management, which impacts on the Department and the scientific community as a whole. The 'magic' that moves the Department beyond conforming to systems and regulations, towards developing a culture of excellence, are several critical success factors within the Department's recruitment, performance management systems, staff development support and exemplary leadership. These are all ultimately based on the simple premise that above all else, people matter.

Realising the potential of Science and Technology

The Department of Science and Technology is driven by innovation and a vision of societal transformation, in which South Africa emerges as a knowledge-based economy for the benefit of all. It is mandated "to realize the full potential of science and technology in social and economic development, through human resources, research and innovation by actively supporting the transfer and application of new technologies derived from cutting edge research to the benefit of South Africans."³

² All references to Zanele (not her real name) are based on an interview with a DST employee in April 2013.

³ Department of Science and Technology Human Resources Development Strategy 2009-2012

It is a young and energetic Department with a strong focus on learning, established as a stand-alone entity in 2002, having previously been part of the Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. In 2004, Cabinet approved a new Science and Technology Management Framework, providing a functional model for the classification of activities into cross-sectoral generic technology and associated human resources; focused, sectoral and relatively mature technology domains; and critical technology-intensive services.

Drawing its strategic goals from the National Research Development Strategy of 2002, the DST, under the Office of the Director-General and ultimately the Office of the Minister, delivers its mandate through five programmes: Corporate Services (Administration); Research and Development Innovation; International Cooperation and Resources; Human Capital and Knowledge Systems; and Socio-Economic Partnerships. Each programme is headed by a Deputy Director General who oversees several sub-programmes and units. The Human Resources sub-programme sits within the office of the Chief Operations Officer.

While large in mandate, scope and budget of approximately R4 billion⁴ its work is carried out by approximately 400 core members. The Department has been fondly described as a 'lion' by several employees because of its strength, its ability to stand alone, its goal-driven long-term vision and high degree of professionalism. Where it used to be the 'small animal'⁵ when it was part of the Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, in its new identity, the Department has established knowledge-generation and policy leadership in science and technology as a fundamental driver in how it thinks and works. Rather than fast and furious, it is perceived to be analytical and agile, with a highly educated workforce and a strong sense of integrity.

"We don't work with the public directly; these are all long-term programmes that will change the economy. DST works closely with other departments and institutions and they usually steal the fame! We are the think tank for most departments in terms of policy formulation for health or science, and then they deliver and implement it. Developing policies is a long process which needs consultation, buy-in, and benchmarking with science councils and organisations: you can't develop a policy today and implement it tomorrow."

The Human Resources Sub-programme "aims to be a strategic partner that helps the Department to achieve its strategic and operational activities by providing consistent and best employment practices, attracting and retaining employees, championing change and transition, setting and managing performance standards, and promoting a career-development environment in which all employees can reach their potential and contribute to a culture of service excellence"⁶.

The HR Sub-Programme is responsible for providing HR services through HR sourcing and maintenance, employee relations, special programmes, talent management and organisational development. HR works within clear legislative and policy frameworks as laid out in the Public Service Act, the Public Service Human Resource Development Strategic Framework Vision 2014 and the National Skills Development Strategy. This translates into

⁴Department of Science and Technology - Annual Report 2011/2012

⁵All comments made by interviewees from a focus group held in April 2013 are indicated with inverted commas. These are direct quotations from recorded discussions. All other quotations, including Zanele's, are sourced.

⁶Department of Science and Technology - Annual Report 2011/2012

implementation through various tried and tested policies and plans including the Human Resource Development Policy and Implementation Plan; Employment Equity Policy; Recruitment, Selection, Appointment and Transfer Policy; and Performance Management Development System Policy among others. High compliance to existing policies forms the foundation for taking a 'people matter' approach to the next level.

Making people matter cultivates excellence

Driven by its wish to use the benefits of science and technology to create a prosperous, equitable society, leadership with the Department of Science and Technology is serious about its people. This is because they recognize that *"people are the driving force who make or break the culture of an organisation"* which impacts on performance. The Department has developed a culture of going beyond compliance by placing a strong emphasis on the selection, development, and performance of its staff. Creating the ideal working conditions is reflected in a culture for top performance in the Department, as described by Zanele, a Department employee who enjoys coming to work because:

"You get a sense that what you are doing is serious, it has impact. You can see the performance of your programme and the Department and there's a standard that has been set. There is a culture that you must work to uphold that standard for the Department. You get caught in this culture of excellence and that you put your all into it and uphold the standards."

Figure 1: Creating a culture of excellence



Figure 1 illustrates how the Department has managed to develop a culture of performance in the management of human resources by going beyond an approach of minimum compliance to established government-wide HR policies and procedures. Central to the shift beyond compliance is a focus on the people who drive the Department forwards, which is carried out through four strength areas: The DST has developed rapid, relevant recruitment, a strong, coherent performance management system, diverse staff development opportunities and support, and a fully-engaged leadership that makes informed decisions based on consultation and information-sharing. These elements are explored in more details in order to build an understanding of the ingredients for success in the management of human resources.

Building foundations to last: recruiting the right person, right now

The DST has a very low turnover rate of 7.6% and it takes an average of 67 days to fill a position, something a newly-recruited employee said he had “never seen in 15 years of working in government”. Zanele was also impressed by the rapidity of her appointment:

“I saw an advert in the newspaper for a vacancy at DST so I emailed them my application. After four weeks they called me for an interview. I was interviewed by the Chief Director, two Directors and someone from HR. After about four days I received a call that I had been selected as the preferred candidate. I gave two weeks’ notice to my previous employer and started work at DST less than three weeks after.”

The HR unit strives above the bar in its recruitment. The unit has a long-term planning cycle that looks several years ahead to ensure that it plans ahead in a terrain where skills are scarce. This is balanced with the need to source for current needs and to promote diversity of the talent pool in the country. For example, HR has recently begun targeting universities’ career counselling services to make students aware of the kinds of opportunities that are available in science and technology. It focuses on e-recruitment as a key platform going forwards, and has established a roster which has already registered 30 candidates with disabilities on the system for when relevant positions open up. HR policy stipulates that the Department must recruit at least 2% of employees with disabilities; the Human Resources team is determined to reach 5%.

When DST identifies the need to fill or create a new position, the HR unit pre-empts the difficulties inherent in identifying specialist skilled staff by targeting advertising beyond the conventional vacancy pages of newspapers to include using wider networks and data-bases. This prevents lost time having to re-advertise for scarce skills positions and ensures the information reaches a wide range of potential candidates. Rapid turn-around time is achieved by a combination of using online systems where possible, and an HR unit which is highly supportive but also stringent, having established a culture of total adherence to HR deadlines. Candidates upload their CVs online; HR filters all relevant applications and then the manager of the position being advertised shortlists online. Interviews take place immediately followed by a recruitment report and informing of candidates. The interactions between HR and managers are characterized by clarity on manager’s recruitment needs, frequent communication, managers being supported and held to clearly defined, tight deadlines by HR and rapid follow-up of the whole process is carried out by a dedicated HR

team. Summed up in the words of one HR employee, *“People are our business; our business is people.”* Since her own recruitment, Zanele has found HR highly supportive when expanding her own team:

“My experience of recruiting staff has always been a very open process: HR consulted with our programme if we wanted to recruit, we work on the job spec so we’re in control but they give advice on HR issues. They advertise and they give you a selection of the top candidates who meet the requirements. Then I go through to select and say who to interview. They organize interviews and check candidate’s availability, and they are there during the interviews. They have clear turnaround timeframes that they expect you to respond by. They are a role model on keeping a rapid turnaround.”

Zanele described how effective recruitment systems have a major impact on the ability of the Department to be effective:

“The DST is a small department with a big mandate and a lot to do. When there’s a vacancy we try to fill as quick as we can: each individual runs with a specific area by him or herself so if someone leaves, there may be a problem it may fall behind track.”

Taking performance management seriously affects everyone

In her second week at the DST, Zanele was taken through an induction programme that began her immersion into the operational and organisational culture of the DST.

“It covered an introduction to government and how it works, how DST works with other departments, and then it focused in on the different programmes and what they do, including the opportunity to see how you fit in as a new employee. It was a useful experience and you build relations from there.”

This initial exposure to the whole Department is an important factor in introducing new employees to the people-focused culture of learning within the Department, the internalization of its corporate values, and a culture of striving to do better. The next stage for new employees is what drives Departmental performance by focusing individual efforts on strategic priorities and key result areas of the Department as a whole: this is managed through establishing adherence to the Performance Management and Development System (PMDS), set in motion when each employee signs an individualised Performance Agreement (PA) and the Personal Development Plan (PDP). The PA assigns specific performance objectives and targets to an individual, ensuring individual accountability in contributing to efficient performance at the organisational level. The PDP aims to identify current or anticipated performance shortfalls in the work of the employee and to reduce the gap in knowledge, skills or attributes through training, mentoring and support.

The philosophy of the Performance Management and Development Policy, as implemented through the PMDS, is: *“To form a common bond of ownership among all employees. This means creating an environment in which all individuals are developed, motivated and*

inspired to deliver a quality service based on effective performance management and evaluation".⁷ In Zanele's experience, the PDMS:

"covers the areas of work that the entire unit must deliver on and narrows it down to your own specific deliverables and key areas of focus. For example as a Deputy Director you'd have three key performance areas that you are expected to perform on and possibly one ad-hoc area. It is linked to the performance of your whole programme and it's linked to the DST's overall objectives".

Linking individual performance to the performance of the entire Department ensures that long-term strategies can be fully implemented, and builds coherence and alignment across all employees' work towards the same vision. In practice, it is challenging to create this alignment. A key success factor in strengthening this alignment of individual performance to organisational performance was the HR unit's establishment of Performance Standards Interpretation guidelines in 2012. It was developed out of a frustration that the system was not smart enough to function as it should, coupled with awareness that the Executives was pushing for the Department to tighten the bonus system through stronger alignment.

"The Department has moved drastically to make sure that what you have on paper is measureable and aligned to all operational and business plans and to the strategic objectives. It wasn't even introduced in our performance agreements or operational plan documents at the time but we moved on it. We are one of the only Departments to have taken it so far to involve even above SMS level... Now 90% of the Department is clued up in the principles of in knowing how to define Performance Management concepts that form a basis for how performance is managed."

The Department also introduced stretched targets, which Zanele believes has been important:

"They started using the new system of stretched targets. You set targets as per your deliverables, but they worked out of a scale up to five so you need to stretch yourself to five. If you need to deliver on a document in august and you do it, you are given a three because you've reached the standard. If you deliver it in June you might get a four because you've done very well ahead of time. But it's not just about a timelines: the quality of the work and the impact thereof is also a determining factor."

PMDS reviews take place bi-annually but in practice many do it quarterly, which HR encourages. The HR unit is in the process of putting in place a comprehensive review system that is carried out through a 270 degree feedback cycle process using a multi-rated tool. This involves a self-assessment as well as feedback from one's supervisor and colleagues. The Department does not include external feedback because it doesn't regularly interact with the public (hence it is not a 360 cycle). Establishing an element of team-based peer review is

⁷Performance Management and Development Policy 2011

in line with recently-introduced measurements of performance, such as ability to work in a team. Zanele described her experience of the interactive nature of the review process in the Department.

“During review, you score yourself individually for each key performance area. It has a weight depending on the amount of work involved and what you have contracted on and you must motivate for why you gave yourself that score. Then you’ll discuss with your manager who will put in their perceived score. You then agree on a score together based on the output achieved that contributes to the overall key result areas.”

Furthermore, the HR unit developed a unique moderation process that uses average scoring, which allows the Department to emphasize group, rather than individual moderation. This recognizes that it is difficult for a moderator who is not working directly with the person to know an individual’s performance, so by looking at the average of others in the group and comparing the individual score, one is able to assess whether the individual is achieving above or below this average. The HR team has been careful to ensure that all possible stakeholders were consulted in this process before it was implemented. This unique performance review process, while appreciated by most as essential, but according to Zanele it can also be time-consuming.

“Assessing staff can be quite challenging. You must reflect on work done within three months, and the reporting process requires details and motivation for why you deserve a certain score. There’s a lot to do, sometimes you just want to get on with your work, so it can be a stressful process.”

The completed review tool feeds directly into personal development plans and incentives. While the principles of PMDS are primarily developmental, it also “allows for effective response to consistent inadequate performance”⁸ allowing for a transparent process. Excellence in the workplace is rewarded with a year-end bonus and the Department has developed various other creative ways of recognising top performance that are scattered throughout the year, including an awards programme, recognition in DST publications, invitations to attend conferences, study tours, job rotation opportunities and even dinner with top management or meeting the Minister among others. Zanele believes that a strong focus on people’s individual performance and incentives are key to the DST’s performance overall.

“It’s a first experience for me, coming to a department where HR is taken so seriously. Previously where I worked we did performance reviews just because we had to. You’d sit alone and do it and you’d just email it to your supervisor, we didn’t even discuss it. In the five years I spent with my previous government department, I never received a performance bonus, there was no link. The review had no purpose ...you just did what was expected of you in your job and that was enough”.

⁸Performance Management Development System Policy 2011

"[At the DST, one's review] does impact on performance, even the performance of the whole Department. People take it very seriously. Everybody is checking on how far is his or her work because it will impact on their and my performance bonus. It does motivate people to work hard and perform knowing it will affect your supervisor's performance".

Developing people builds support and trust

Soon after Zanele was appointed, she discussed a Personal Development plan with her supervisor.

"I identified several courses I wanted to attend to improve performance areas I felt were lacking...There are also courses that we might request to attend as a whole programme. Our programme attended a writing course because we write a lot of documents and it has changed how I write reports and do my work".

Training and support is a key focus of the Department, which prides itself as being a learning organisation. Employees leaving the DST *"indicated that they were given ample opportunities for training and development. They appreciated the level of commitment that the Department put into developing them."*⁹

Human Resources has established various initiatives to promote personal development and support across the Department, including a mentorship programme, for which mentors are fully trained; an Executive Development Programme for SMS members; a well-established internship programme and bursary support for employees to study Masters and Doctoral degrees.

The HR team has also entrenched a proactive approach to building visibility for HR issues by empowering employees to understand the ways in which HR impacts on their work. They do this by organizing regular workshops and refreshers for individual programmes, units, or management levels in all areas of performance management and HR. This has included training Senior Management Service members in the use of Performance Standards Interpretation, how PMDS works, the scoring system and individuals' responsibilities, the implementation of new policies such as the Employment Equity Policy, and how the bonus structure works. HR also uses the internal newsletter to highlight important elements of HR policies, and helps employees organize their time by sending out 'save the date' emails well in advance for deadlines such as PMDS. Zanele's experience of HR workshops sometime borders on overload, but she believes they are important:

"We attend a lot of HR workshops, often when we have a unit meeting and we invite HR to presents on various policies they have, so we discuss the Performance Management system in line with our performance agreement or review. They're always up for one on one sessions as well for clarity on issues such as ethics, conduct or illness. We sometimes complain that they're scheduling too much. They make it compulsory so you can't run away from an HR workshop! But the benefit – afterwards you are glad you attended."

⁹DST Exit Survey Questionnaire June 2012

This support is provided by a dedicated HR team which engages with all programmes in the department: "Our HR officer is approachable which builds trust so you can open up about performance issues. It impacts on your performance, knowing you have that support" explains Zanele. When employees are empowered through personal development and have a clear mandate through their performance agreement, supervisors have greater trust in their employees to perform their work effectively. As highlighted by the Chief Director of HR "my team makes their own decisions; they know what they're doing." Evolving personal development plans combined with a trusting, supportive work environment and fair system of rewards all contribute to employee's wellbeing and effectiveness on a day-to-day basis. Furthermore, they form a strong foundation for the effective retention of talented and competent employees for the long-term benefit of the organisation.

Engaged leadership cultivates a common vision

The sustained focus on people within the Department is driven by an engaged leadership. The top-down support is required to elevate HR issues - particularly Performance Management and Development - to be recognised as highly important in the implementation of everybody's work. This support is required to ensure that the HR to unit's mandate is taken seriously in its interactions with all programmes, such as full attendance at HR workshops and full policy compliance to ensure fair and equitable treatment of all staff in the workplace.

Leadership at the DST prioritises HR issues at the highest level. Managers and Directors are actively engaged in HR issues before they reach the senior decision structures of the Department, for example with the Department's Employment Equity Plan and policy, which drives interventions to promote equal opportunities for all races and designated groups in the Department.

"You need buy-in from top management [for HR issues], which we have. We go to the DDGs just before each EXCO with the vacancy rates, and the new Employment Equity plan. We explain the status of female Senior Management Service, that we need to push it up to 50%, or the status of disability. So we already have the buy-in and they have a clear understanding, before it's discussed at EXCO. And this makes management able to take informed decisions."

Human Resources is required to present quarterly to the Executive Committee(EXCO) and Operations Committee (OPCO) meetings on vacancy and turnover rates as well as its exit reports which provide trends drawn from departing staff feedback about the Department. HR is a permanent agenda item in senior level meetings, allowing management to make informed decisions that are data-driven, and ensuring transparency regarding all major staff issues at the highest level.

"Performance can impact either positively or negatively on an organisation. This is recognized by leadership and so it is driven by EXCO: The DG will ask questions about PMDS and it is always a key element on agenda of reporting back in meetings. The DG refers to PMDS when the DDG asks for budget so it affects resource allocation."

Leadership promotes and exemplifies its strategy of strong communication and listening to drive the visibility of HR in all aspects of the workplace and to build a sense of unity in driving the Department forward. Managers make themselves available to be briefed and give the time to support HR systems. Leadership also supports HR in using consultative methods to changing HR issues, such as new target-setting and average scoring systems. For example, defining the moderation process for the PMDS policy was based on a comprehensive consultation process. This included consulting external lawyers as well as all Departmental staff, who were given multiple scenarios to choose from on how to approach the moderation process.

Once all employees have shared their views, such standards are set and upheld by leadership. This consultation establishes people's buy-in for changes and trust in the system that they have contributed to creating "*If they are being consulted, they begin to trust the system.*" In this way, leadership supports a bottom-up approach to grow and embed the culture of stretching one's limits. In Zanele's experience:

"Leadership has a big impact on issues of HR, we need to realize this. Take performance for example – they impact on the type of standards put in place. They made clear that these are the standards you must meet. If you're having problems, HR is always available to assist. But ultimately it's at a leadership level. Once the standard is set, then we understand what we need to deliver on."

Through its focus on strong policy implementation, and engagement beyond this to engage employees themselves in the processes of reflection and change, the Department's leadership is able to build a culture beyond compliance, where innovation and creativity can flourish, which for a Science and Technology in South Africa, is essential.

More to learn for the road ahead

The DST is a people's department. It is able to find, support and retain the right person for the right job by being strategic, communicative, agile, supportive, focused, innovative and above all, recognising that people matter. "*This is a Department where you wake up in the morning and you want to go to work*". Zanele's experience of joining and working at the DST is a lesson in the effectiveness of an approach that goes beyond getting the systems right to recognising and developing the people themselves; that by getting one's human resources right, one can build a culture of excellence.

However, there are many challenges that remain for the DST. The emphasis on staff training and development opportunities and career path project initiatives attempts to strengthen staff retention. However this is a constant battle in spite of the positive, supportive organisational culture, due to the limited nature of career succession or promotion in the Department. This also links to the challenge of ensuring that people who are being continually developed are then used to their maximum capacity, when promotion is not an option. Therefore promoting a culture of continuous improvement without offering adequate space to expand one's responsibilities within a role can have the negative side-effect of leading to an increase in turnover rates "*but there is rotation within the sector, so we get the people back, only more skilled.*" In Zanele's current position, she feels that:

“I am doing something which is challenging me. There is a lot I still need to learn and for the moment I’m satisfied, but I might reconsider later. Promotions are a challenge because it’s a small department so it’s not easy.”

The Department has been working on a tool that would establish a new approach to specialist career paths, but this is far from authorization at this stage. Other challenges stem from the fact that this is a small department with big ideas. HR has developed a whole raft of initiatives and ideas; the challenge according to Zanele, is in their full implementation, to ensure that initiatives are accessible or applied to everyone and are seen through to completion:

“There are certain things in HR policy, such as overtime that are not feasible. In writing they are there but not in practice. We do it [without the pay] but it’s a white elephant, you can’t reach it. Then there’s the mentorship programme: maybe we don’t know how to make use of that. And the idea of job rotation: for 2 weeks you go to another programme to learn from them, but I don’t think people are taking up these opportunities in practice.”

These challenges highlight the need for balance and strategic mindfulness, where focused HR and an engaged leadership are crucial. The DST has built a high-performing HR section that is willing and able to think of the most cutting edge tools for people development and yet people sometimes simply need to be given the space and time to deliver on their work. The challenge for such high-performing HR units is to prioritise and identify the HR interventions that are most important and can be used to leverage for top performance across the board.

The DST is in a position to hone their ‘people matter’ approach even further. This hinges on reducing the administrative and time-consuming burden of required HR practices, without losing the essential elements that make the Department a special place to work. This will enable the Department to be incisive in its approach, to still ensure that the right person is recruited for the job, to con prioritise personal development and performance management at implementation and policy level, to ensure decisions are data-driven and consultative. This will continue to increase the confidence from managers and top leadership to trust employees to do their work well. This will give Zanele and many other appropriate, skilled, supported employees like her the space and motivation to excel, to be the high-achieving specialist that she has become.