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Examining the Role of Trade Unions in Representing Members During Promotion Selection and Job Interviews

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Abstract:

Members of trade unions typically expect to receive equitable and effective representation from during promotion processes and promotional job interviews to promote long-term sustainable relationships and increase affiliations. This study examined the role of trade unions in representing their members during the selection of candidates for promotional posts and in associated interview processes. The stakeholder theory is adopted as a theoretical lens in the study. Qualitative research design was employed to address the research objective, and primary data were collected from permanently employed educators working in public schools. Primary data were analysed using content analysis, supported by Atlas.ti software. The findings indicated heterogeneous levels of satisfaction with trade unions' representation of members during promotion selection and job interviews. The study concludes by offering recommendations for relevant stakeholders and for future research.

Keywords:

Employee Relations, Job Interview, Promotional Posts, Public Schools, Stakeholder Theory

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Introduction

Trade unions are collective organisations established to advance the employment conditions and broader welfare of their members (Nel, Kirsten, Swanepoel, Erasmus & Jordaan, 2016). The primary objective of a trade union is to safeguard, strengthen and promote the socioeconomic interests of its membership within the workplace and build long term sustainable relationships with affiliated members. This function is exercised across diverse organisational contexts, including both private and public sector institutions. Nel et al. (2016) note that most trade unions operate independently of employer control and are guided by the principle that collective solidarity constitutes a source of power. In essence, the coordinated action of a group of employees is understood to be more influential and effective than the efforts of isolated individuals. The establishment of trade unions is therefore predominantly directed toward the enhancement of employees' terms and conditions of employment in a variety of institutional settings, including educational institutions such as schools. Furthermore, Collins (2013) contends that trade unions are established in the workplace to protect workers' interests and to improve conditions of service to contribute on enhancing workers' productivity and strengthen relations with members. Against this background, the question that needs to be answered is: What functions do trade unions perform in safeguarding and advancing their members' interests in the context of promotion selection procedures and employment interviews? This study examined trade unions' role in representing members during promotional posts' selection and job interviews.

Literature Review

This section describes relevant concepts to the research topic and reviews previous studies to demonstrate the gap to be addressed by this study.

Job Selection

Job selection is defined as the systematic process of assessing and interviewing candidates for a specific position with the aim of matching the most suitable individual to the corresponding job role (Abdalla Hamza et al., 2021). In essence, job selection represents a structured decision-making procedure through which individuals who are capable of effectively performing the required tasks and meeting organisational performance expectations are identified and hired (Prabhu, Nambirajan & Abdullah, 2020). The selection process typically comprises multiple sequential stages, including the receipt and review of applications, preliminary screening, one or more rounds of interviews, verification of references, and the formulation of final hiring decisions. Abdullah and Abdul Rahman (2015) similarly conceptualise job selection as a systematic process of evaluating and interviewing applicants for a given position with the objective of appointing the most appropriate candidate to the role. Following the

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determination of suitable recruitment channels to attract potential applicants, the subsequent critical step for the organisation is to select and implement the most appropriate and efficient selection methods to ensure optimal person–job fit. According to Sukawati et al. (2020), the process includes selecting applicants, conducting interviews and testing, predicting candidates' competencies, offering jobs, and preparing employee contracts. Job selection is fundamentally a decision-making process aimed at identifying and appointing the most suitable candidate from a pool of applicants.

Job Interview

Wingate and Bourdage (2024) conceptualise the job interview as a dialogic assessment instrument used to evaluate applicants' qualifications within both recruitment and internal promotion processes. Job interviews constitute one of the most frequently utilised selection methodologies in organisational staffing practices. When standardised and structured interview protocols are implemented, these interactions demonstrate substantial predictive validity with respect to subsequent job performance and related outcomes (McCarthy, Van Iddekinge, & Campion, 2010).

Promotional Post

Sukawati et al. (2020) conceptualise promotion as a transition from one organisational position to another that is characterised by higher hierarchical status and an expanded scope of responsibility. Promotion decisions are primarily determined by organisational interests, yet they simultaneously function as a form of recognition and reward for employees who demonstrate superior achievement in their performance evaluations. Furthermore, promotions inherently entail the delegation of novel and more extensive responsibilities to the promoted incumbent. The implementation of an equitable and transparent promotion system is expected to enhance individual employee performance, which in turn contributes to improved overall organisational effectiveness and performance outcomes. Therefore, organisations must have effective employee performance appraisal instruments so that promotions can be awarded fairly and decisions can be accounted for. Al-Hakim, Nazaruddin, Isfenti and Yossie (2019) argue that promotions to senior positions, mutations and organisational culture significantly influence employee job performance. Of these three factors, the most dominant one is job promotion. Companies should ultimately have a clear selection programme and career path so employees strive to continuously improve their job performance. According to Mathis, Jackson and Valentine (2013), promotion occurs when an employee is transferred from one position to a higher one, with greater responsibility in the organisation. Arifin, Nirwanto and Manan (2019) add that promotions in the workplace provide opportunities for employees' personal growth, greater responsibility, and increased social status. Job promotions also have the potential to ensure employees' work satisfaction (Haryono, Supardi & Udin, 2020).

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Trade Union

Trade unions are organised associations of employees who collectively seek to improve the employment conditions of their members (Nel et al., 2016). The primary objective of a trade union is to strengthen and enhance the welfare of its members within the workplace. This function is exercised across both private and public sector institutions, including educational institutions such as schools. As noted by Nel et al. (2016), most trade unions operate independently of employers and are founded on the principle that collective action yields greater power than individual effort. Their core purpose is to safeguard and promote the interests of their members, particularly through negotiations concerning terms and conditions of employment, such as remuneration and related benefits. This is achieved principally through consultation and formal negotiation processes with employers, a mechanism referred to as collective bargaining, through which unions articulate and advance the collective views and demands of their membership. Union members typically contribute a membership fee and elect representatives who are mandated to act on their behalf. These representatives provide support and guidance and advocate for members in the resolution of workplace-related challenges and disputes.

Stakeholder Theory

According to Freeman and Reed (1983), to achieve long-term sustainable relationships between the trade unions and members, a stakeholder theory becomes relevant. The term “stakeholder” was originally introduced by Freeman and Reed in 1983 as “any identifiable group or individual who can affect the achievement of an organisation’s objectives or who is affected by the achievement of the organisation’s objectives” Stakeholders are different parties, units and persons in the organisation as well as parties, units and persons from the environment around the organisation that have a relationship with the organisation. Stakeholders are groups who can potentially be affected by activities of the organisation, or who can potentially be engaged in the activities of the organisation. In the context of this study, trade unions representatives (shop stewards) and affiliated workers are stakeholders as they are affected by the activities of the respective labour unions. Stakeholder theory the emphasis is on building and maintenance of sustainable long-term stakeholder relationships within the organisation (Freeman, Dmytriyev, & Phillips, 2021). The theory emphasises the importance of stakeholder relations and the creation of value for them. The stakeholder theory is relevant and applicable to the study to examine the role of trade unions in representing their members during the selection of candidates for promotional posts and in associated interview processes as this has potential to strengthen and build long-term sustainable relationships.

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Review of Previous Studies

Previous research has predominantly examined salary and wage negotiations (Magruder, 2012; Card, Lemieux & Riddell, 2020). Card et al. (2020) estimated unionisation rates by wage interval for all workers, separately for the public and private sectors, applying smoothing techniques to enhance interpretability. Magruder (2012) further demonstrated that employment in an industry covered by a bargaining council wage agreement is associated with higher morale among employees who are not themselves union members. The study also showed that unionisation rates have increased among public sector workers in the lower half of the wage distribution.

In the South African context, additional studies have concentrated on labour market inequality and have documented exceptionally high levels of income inequality (Wittenberg, 2017a; Wittenberg, 2017b; Kerr & Wittenberg, 2021). Kerr and Wittenberg (2021) also analysed the evolution of the variance of log wages for all workers, distinguishing between unionised and non-unionised employees, as well as between public and private sector union members. Their findings indicate that overall wage inequality rose during the 1990s, declined throughout the 2000s until the second quarter of 2012, and then increased sharply thereafter. Moreover, the literature consistently identifies substantial wage differentials between union and non-union workers in both the public and private sectors. These wage gaps were very large and widened until the early 2000s, after which they began to narrow. Trends in wage inequality exhibit distinct patterns across the public and private sectors. While the wage gap in the private sector narrowed over the period under consideration, the wage gap in the public sector increased steadily. As noted in the preceding analysis, unionisation rates in the public and private sectors remained relatively stable from the early 2000s, at approximately 70% and 20%, respectively.

In a related study, Sánchez-Mosquera (2024) investigated the influence of workers' political attitudes on the likelihood of union membership in Italy, Portugal, and Spain over the period 2002–2018. The results demonstrate that political orientations constitute a significant determinant of unionisation in Southern European countries, with particularly strong effects observed in Portugal. However, the analysis also reveals that additional variables shape unionisation dynamics, most notably the detrimental effects of precarious employment arrangements, in interaction with the recessionary macroeconomic context and the implementation of neoliberal policy reforms during the Great Recession.

Another study based on South African data generally found that trade union members earn higher incomes than non-unionised workers across most organisations (Kerr & Teal, 2015; Ntuli & Kwenda, 2014; Bhorat, Lilenstein & Stanwix, 2021). In a related contribution, Ntuli and Kwenda (2015) analysed the public–private sector wage differential in South Africa using individual-level cross-sectional data. Whereas these preceding studies primarily concentrated on salary and wage bargaining processes, the

present study addresses a gap in the literature by examining the role of trade unions in representing their members during the selection processes for promotional positions and in job interviews.

Methods and Data

Qualitative research design was employed in this study to address the stated research objective. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), a qualitative approach is appropriate when the researcher seeks to deepen or clarify the understanding of a problem or phenomenon within a specific contextual setting. Furthermore, qualitative research strategies facilitate the generation of rich, nuanced insights into a research problem by engaging with relatively small, purposively selected samples. As Leedy and Ormrod (2014) note, such in-depth qualitative understanding can be produced through the intensive examination of a limited number of individuals, thereby enabling the exploration of their perspectives in substantial detail. The study sample comprised 15 educators affiliated with trade unions in the education sector, who were interviewed sequentially until data saturation was achieved. A purposive sampling strategy was employed in this study to select educators, as they were considered key informants possessing the information necessary to address the research question. The target population comprised educators and trade union representatives in public school; however, for the purposes of this investigation, the sample was restricted to educators who were affiliated with a trade union**.** Interviews were employed as the primary data collection method, using a semi-structured interview guide that comprised targeted questions concerning the role of trade unions in the selection of candidates for promotional positions and in job interview processes. The resulting qualitative data were subsequently examined using a systematic content analysis approach. Content analysis is conceptualised as a systematic, quantitative examination of qualitative data, entailing the rigorous identification of recurrent themes and the subsequent quantification of their frequencies (Saunders et al., 2019).

Findings and Interpretations

To address the study's objective, participants were asked the following research question: What role do trade unions play in safeguarding workers' interests during the selection processes for promotional posts and in the conduct of job interviews? Participants explained that trade unions for educators participate during promotion interviews in the school to observe and ensure that the process is handled appropriately. Participants 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, and 13 are cited to justify the findings in the attached Appendix A. All participants affirmed the involvement of trade unions in promotional posts selections processes and job interview. However, Participant 1 indicated that, notwithstanding this involvement, the process lacks transparency. Participant 8 indicated that when union representatives are involved in the shortlisting process, applicants whose documentation is incomplete are granted the opportunity to

submit the outstanding documents at a later stage. In addition, Participant 8 emphasised that maintaining vigilance is crucial, as instances of dishonesty may occur during the shortlisting and selection processes. According to this participant, panel members might remove other trade union members' documents during shortlisting for promotional posts. According to Participant 10, in certain cases educators are not appointed based on merit, but rather on their involvement in the trade union. These type of appointments of educators comes as compensation for their involvement in activities of trade unions and as disadvantage to qualified interviewees.

Discussions

The study confirmed that union members are afforded representation during the selection of promotional posts and throughout job interview processes. This finding concurs with Nel et al. (2016) indicating that trade unions are on the mission to collectively protect the interests of their members and improve employment conditions. Furthermore, the study makes a substantive contribution to academic literature by empirically identifying unethical practices within promotion procedures, thereby challenging the procedural fairness and integrity of these processes. The findings bring new insights into literature by uncovering unethical conduct by trade union representatives during selections for interviews. The findings identified another challenge related to salaries of promotional posts where it is sometimes difficult to make amendments as this requires that members of the interview committee to confirm. The study makes significant contribution by adopting the stakeholder to demonstrate the role of trade unions in representing their members during the selection of candidates for promotional posts and in associated interview processes.

Conclusions

The study recommends that trade unions implement targeted training programmes for onsite stewards and representatives, with a specific focus on the systematic verification of employees' credentials and other relevant documentation during promotion shortlisting procedures. Furthermore, it proposes the development and institutionalisation of comprehensive ethical and professional codes of conduct for selecting panel members, with the aim of minimising fraudulent, biased, or otherwise unethical practices in promotional posts selection processes and job interviews in to maintain trust and build long-term sustainable relationships. In addition, trade unions are encouraged to uphold and advocate for substantive and procedural fair principles in the representation of their affiliated members during promotional post selections processes and job interviews. Moreover, it is recommended that a departmental district officer and independent member of the community with integrity be nominated to serve as an observer during promotional posts' selection and job interviews. In addition, one or two

members of the community with integrity should be appointed to serve as observers during these promotional posts selections and job interviews.

The present study employed qualitative research design and was conducted in a single public school within one province. Future investigations should adopt quantitative methodologies and encompass larger, more diverse samples drawn from additional provinces and other sectors of the economy to enhance the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, comparative studies are recommended to enable systematic comparison and validation of results across different contexts. In addition, subsequent research should examine the processes through which promotion interviews are conducted in public schools, with the aim of developing a monitoring mechanism that minimises, and ultimately eliminates dishonest and unethical practices.

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Appendix A Participants Verbatims

"*Things are no longer the same as before, [there is] no transparency and they give positions amongst each other and considering members and as [a] recommendation, I think anyone who qualifies to be appointed for a position should be regardless of whether they are [a] site steward or not" (Participant 1)*

"Trade unions are there to check if things are done correctly in the interviews or short listings and checking if shortlisted people do have the required qualifications, sometimes unions don't present us well by choosing their members who are in [the] committee for the promotional posts". (Participant 2)

"During promotional post interviews we as union [members] have our own presentative in the process that are just observers, they go there to check if the members, if panellist goes in hand with the procedures we need to follow when conducting such interviews, so union reps are there to monitor if due processes are followed and then if they are not followed, disputes are logged by trade unions. If disputes [are] logged by trade unions and then they are found to be to be in order, then the process will be reversed and restarted again". (Participant 6)

"The department will issue a circular in the form of [an] advert, then people apply, the process should be shortlisting and interviews, and there are processes from the collective agreement on how to deal with it and who are the people qualified to do the process if on the collective agreement we are doing interview of deputy principal, the educators below deputy principal [level] can't interview the person, the Departmental head (HOD) they can never be part of the process, one was part of this process we care less whether the complainant worn the process or not we care less if the collective agreement was not followed that is a grievance, it is the responsibility of the SGB to constitute the panel with the collective agreement policy. All the unions are allowed in education if locally we have PEU, SADTU, NEPTOSA, SAWU all this should form part of the shortlisting committee and interview committee, all members who are going to applying are part of this unions they should be represented, we call them observers they observe the process". (Participant 7)

"We apply rigorous vigilance in the implementation of this process. The screening is conducted at the district level, and applicants with incomplete documentation are deemed ineligible for shortlisting. If [a] union member is not there to observe, other panel members remove other union members' documents, if also we want to go to bathrooms they remove documents from members of unions, during [the] interview process, unions observe". (Participant 8)

"To tell the honest fact, our rights are not protected as workers; the trade union is very much selfish, they only consider themselves first; for example, I acted on the school with [an] Honours qualification

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in Leadership management as principal, just because the school has got [a] high number of learners which means high learners number more money, trade unions only concentrate on schools on post level 4 is where the school has got many learners which means more money there, I was taken off from office with the same principal now, just because he's the treasury in the union he was given the posts. [The] same thing happened [when] I applied to the post level 4 schools as its in line with my salary; the very same thing happened, and the person I was competing with in the interview is the secretary of the union and was appointed for the position". (Participant 10)

"Trade unions go there as observers only to make sure things are done correctly. (Participant 12)

"Different Unions are involved in swifting of applications during promotional posts selections and interviews by sorting out CVs they ensure the smooth running of process". (Participant 13)