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# Knowledge Management as a Catalyst for Sustainable Human Resource Management in South African Municipalities

**Authors:**

Harlan Cloete (cloetehca@ufs.ac.za)
University of the Free State, Centre for Gender and Africa Studies, Bloemfontein, South Africa

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**Abstract:**

Knowledge management remains under-researched in the South African local government sector, with limited empirical evidence on effective implementation practices. This study provides an overview of KM implementation across municipalities and municipal entities in South Africa, with the primary objective of assessing knowledge management across five key dimensions: leadership, culture, structure, processes, and technology. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, comprising a survey of 306 managers and 18 focus group conducted across 24 municipalities in nine provinces. The total population sample was 1054, including executive, senior, and middle managers. The findings reveal a limited understanding, application, and integration of knowledge management within local government institutions. Critical success factors such as leadership, organisational culture, structural alignment, supportive processes, and enabling technology were found to be inadequately developed or lacking. Based on these findings, the study recommends a stakeholder-supported, phased approach to knowledge management implementation. Key recommendations include the development of a national knowledge management blueprint, regular knowledge management assessments, establishment of communities of practice, adoption of knowledge management competency frameworks and alignment of knowledge management initiatives with digital transformation strategies. These findings offer valuable insights and practical guidance for enhancing institutional sustainability, governance, human resource management and service delivery in the South African local government context.

**Keywords:**

Knowledge Management, Local Government, Human Resource Management, Sustainability

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## Introduction

Knowledge Management (KM) has emerged as a critical enabler of organisational success and innovation, particularly within the public sector, where the effective management of knowledge (human resources) can significantly improve service delivery and governance (Drucker, 1998; Ahmed, Ghoneim, & Kim, 2009; Gorzelany-Dziadkowiec, 2008). In the South African local government context, the strategic implementation of KM practices offers a promising pathway to address persistent challenges such as service delivery inefficiencies, lack of transparency and limited stakeholder engagement. Despite the recognised importance of KM, a significant gap remains in understanding its operationalisation within the local government sector in South Africa (Barbier & Tengeh, 2022).

The Constitution of South Africa (1996) mandates municipalities to play a developmental role by assigning them specific responsibilities within the local sphere of government. According to the Constitution, the objective of local government is to:

- Provide democratic and accountable government for local communities;
- Ensure the provision of services in a sustainable manner;
- Promote social and economic development;
- Promote a safe and healthy environment; and
- Encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in local government matters.

These must be pursued with due consideration of (a) a municipality's financial, human resources and administrative capacity, and (b) the powers conferred upon it. These constitutional principles have been translated into various policies and pieces of legislation to standardise human resource management (HRM) practices across the public service (Municipal Systems Act No. 32 of 2000).

Municipalities vary in size, location, and complexity. These contextual factors shape and, at times, constrain human resource management and KM within these institutions. The Constitution allows municipalities to deliver services through internal or external mechanisms, including municipal departments, municipal entities, or service delivery agreements with third parties. A municipal entity refers to an operational structure through which a municipality delivers specific functions or services to its community. To realise their constitutional mandates, municipalities and municipal entities must manage their human resources effectively. The internal organisation is structured around a hierarchy of functionaries responsible for knowledge and value creation (Municipal Systems Act No. 32 of 2000).

Each municipality or municipal entity is led by an accounting officer, who serves as the administrative head and is responsible for fostering a culture of knowledge management. This includes oversight of

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monitoring and evaluation, navigating the political-administrative interface, and mentoring the managers under their supervision (National Treasury, 2007; LGSETA, 2023). Executive managers, who report to the accounting officer, head departments or directorates. They are responsible for high-level strategic interpretation and innovation, as well as coaching and mentoring senior managers (SALGA, 2015). Senior managers oversee divisions and report to executive managers. Their role includes interpreting organisational strategy, ensuring communication, and mentoring their teams (Chiwawa & Wissink, 2024). Middle managers, in turn, report to senior managers and oversee specific sections or units. They are responsible for operationalising strategies, gathering performance data, and generating reports (Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality & City of Gothenburg, 2023). They also play a key role in mentoring junior staff. At the bottom of the pyramid are junior managers often referred to as foremen or superintendents, who report to middle managers and are tasked with executing strategies and monitoring outcomes (National Treasury, 2007). This hierarchy is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

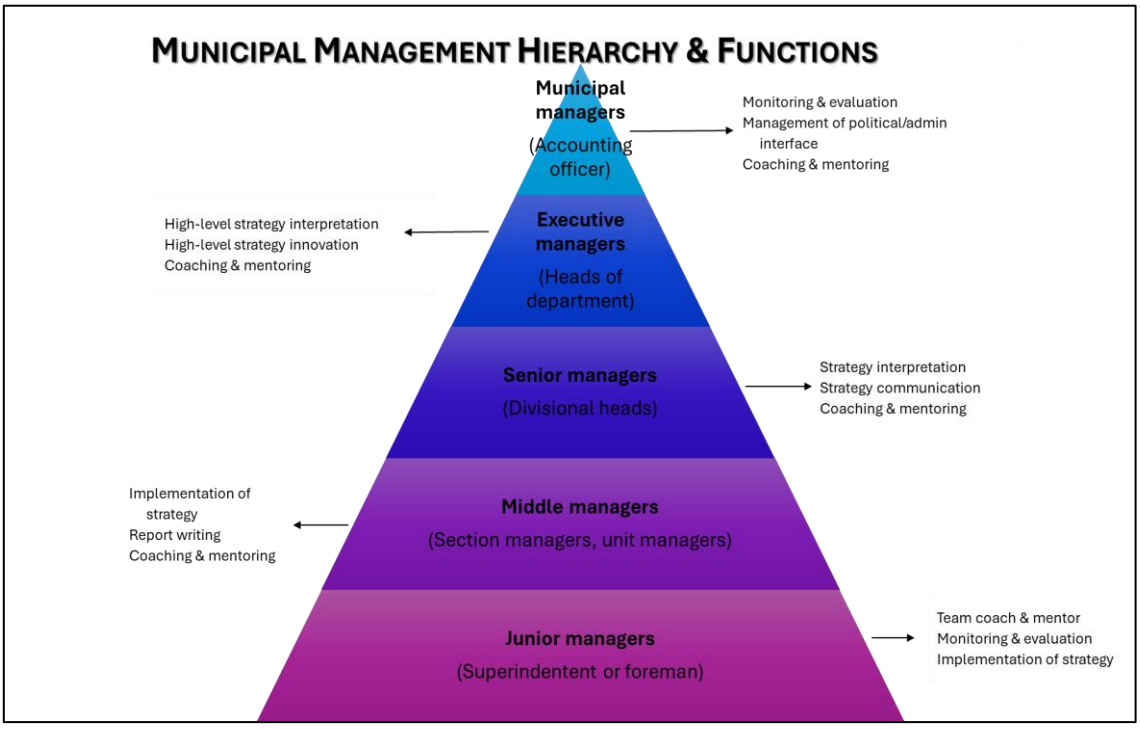


Figure 1: Municipal Management Hierarchy and Functions

## Research Gap and Purpose

Although some studies on Knowledge Management (KM) have been conducted in South Africa, the field remains underexplored, particularly within the local government sector. There is a notable lack of empirical research on how KM can be effectively implemented and the role it plays in promoting organisational sustainability through human resource management (Akuku, Oboko, & Waema, 2020;

Chawuke, 2018). By examining KM practices in South African local governance, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on KM in the public sector.

Through this investigation, the study aims to support the development of more efficient, effective, transparent and responsive local government services that ultimately enhances public administration in South Africa (Hajric, 2018; SALGA, 2018). Specifically, the research focuses on assessing the state of KM across South African municipalities and municipal entities, with particular emphasis on five key dimensions essential to successful KM implementation: leadership, culture, structure, processes, and technology.

The research seeks to generate valuable insights into the enablers and barriers to KM implementation, while proposing a strategic framework for municipalities and municipal entities to optimise the use of their knowledge resources. Furthermore, the study addresses a critical gap in the literature by offering empirical evidence and practical recommendations for strengthening KM practices within local governance structures. In doing so, the study aims to uncover the complexities of KM practices, identify the challenges impeding effective implementation, and highlight the factors contributing to sustainable KM initiatives within the local government landscape (Skyrme, 1999; Ronen & Pasher, 2011).

## Literature Review

Drucker (1959) defined employees as knowledge workers, as individuals within organisations who possess high levels of competence, the ability to apply that competence to solve complex problems and the capacity to create new products or services. Effectively managing knowledge workers entails coordinating and integrating the autonomous yet interconnected work of these highly skilled individuals. Such workers thrive in environments that foster trust, autonomy, flexibility, and continuous learning and development opportunities (LGSETA, 2023).

The challenge of managing and motivating knowledge workers who may either share or hoard knowledge is central to Knowledge Management (KM) (Armstrong, 2006). KM is broadly understood as the process of capturing, developing, sharing, and effectively using organisational knowledge to achieve defined goals. It rests on the belief that human knowledge is an organisation's most valuable resource (Kuraś & Kuraś, 2015; Barbier & Tengeh, 2022). Accordingly, KM pursues two core objectives: enhancing organisational efficiency and effectiveness, and fostering innovation to drive performance. Organisational performance, in this context, may be conceptualised as a progression from data (short-term deliverables) to information and knowledge (outcomes), and ultimately to wisdom (societal impact) (Greiner, Böhmann, & Krcmar, 2007; Iqbal et al., 2018).

Knowledge is best defined as the application of information. When information is applied, it brings about change—whether by guiding action or by enabling individuals or institutions to function more effectively

(Drucker, 1999). This application leads to improved decision-making, more efficient operations, and deeper insights into complex issues and relationships (Hajric, 2018; SALGA, 2018). However, as Ryle (1949, as cited in Armstrong, 2006) and Armstrong and Taylor (2023) argue, it is important to distinguish between knowing how (the practical ability to perform tasks) and knowing that (the retention of knowledge in one's mind).

This conceptualisation of knowledge integrates both individual and organisational dimensions. Knowledge is a critical strategic resource, particularly in sustainable organisations that view human resources as key assets in whom they invest to generate more knowledge and enhance competitive advantage (Drucker, 1998, as cited in Ahmed et al., 2009; Starmind, 2022; Gorzelany-Dziadkowiec, 2015). The strategic use of knowledge to gain competitive advantage and improve performance is often referred to as an organisation's intellectual capital (McInerney, 2002; Seyedyousefi et al., 2016).

## Knowledge and Sustainable Development

Knowledge can be considered a prerequisite for development (Ahmed, Ghoneim, & Kim, 2009). Both community and institutional development depend on the competence and quality of local government management, as municipal managers exert significant influence over local governance outcomes. However, this influence is dependent upon a municipality's ability to learn and adapt to an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. In a knowledge-based economy, knowledge itself is a critical differentiating factor for organisational performance (Reddy, 2016). It is, therefore, the primary resource for achieving competitive advantage. Regardless of their size, municipalities must systematically collect, store, use, and disseminate knowledge to fulfil their developmental mandates effectively and efficiently (Gorzelany-Dziadkowiec & Firlej, 2016). The global development agenda, crystallised in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reinforces this imperative. The seventeen SDGs are illustrated in Figure 2.

These goals are intended to be action-oriented, concise, communicable, limited in number, aspirational, global in scope, and universally applicable, while also recognising national and local capacities, contexts, and levels of development (Reddy, 2016).

Particularly relevant to this study is Goal 16, which aims to build inclusive, effective, and accountable institutions at all levels. This underscores the crucial role of local government—the sphere of government closest to the people—in realising the developmental aspirations of communities. Former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon highlighted the importance of this role, stating that "all development is ultimately local," and that local government directly influences global decision-making (Reddy, 2016). This emphasis on local governance is reflected in the concept of *localisation*, which

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refers to the process of defining, implementing, and monitoring strategies at the local level to achieve global, national, and subnational SDGs (Reddy, 2016).

Figure 2: Sustainable Development Goals (Source: Stockholm Environment Institute, n.d.)

One of the most important aspects of the present study is goal 16, which aims to build inclusive and strong institutions on all levels. This implies that local government, the sphere of government closest to people, has a vital role to play in realising the developmental objective and aspirations of communities. This was reiterated by Ban Ki-Moon, former Secretary General of the United Nations, who emphasized that all development is ultimately local and local government has a direct impact on decision making at the global level (Reddy, 2016). This concept of localisation is the process of defining, implementing and monitoring strategies at the local level for achieving global, national and subnational SDGs (Reddy, 2016).

## Critical Success Factors for Implementing Knowledge Management

Organisations such as municipalities that are committed to knowledge management (KM) must consider a range of organisational enablers—namely, strategy and leadership, culture, processes, technology, and politics—as critical success factors for establishing an effective KM system (Schmitt, 2022, p. 15). Implementing KM is inherently challenging, as its success or failure is influenced by multiple, interrelated factors (Winkler & Mandl, 2007; Sin, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2009). The successful implementation of KM, therefore, depends on the extent to which these critical success factors are recognised, understood,

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and integrated into organisational practice (Theriou et al., 2011). The critical success factors are discussed below.

## Organisational Leadership

The core aim of KM is to manage human resources in a way that facilitates the sharing and creation of relevant knowledge assets that support both operational and strategic goals. Achieving this objective requires the collaborative efforts of all organisational members (Yeh, Lai, & Ho, 2006, as cited in Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010). An effective knowledge management (KM) strategy must be aligned with the organisation's overall strategic objectives, a process shaped by leadership through the formulation and co-creation of strategy (APQC, 2023). The successful implementation of KM is largely dependent on the commitment of top management, who serve as key resource mobilisers. Furthermore, a sound KM strategy requires ethical and exemplary leadership committed to continuous organisational improvement (Al Amiri, Rahima, & Ahmed, 2020).

Organisational policies and programmes that operationalise the KM strategy are informed by this collaborative and strategic intent. For KM strategies to succeed, competent and experienced managers are essential—particularly those who understand and appreciate the value of knowledge as a driver of competitive advantage across all levels of the organisation (Hajric, 2018).

## Organisational Culture

Organisational culture plays a pivotal role in shaping employee engagement, influencing knowledge creation, and affecting resistance to procedures and processes (Yeh, Lai, & Ho, 2006, as cited in Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010). Within the context of KM and organisational learning, culture reflects the value placed on organisational knowledge, the importance attributed to it, and the perceived benefits of sharing it. This, in turn, impacts employees' willingness to share knowledge in pursuit of improved organisational performance (Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010). According to Sawan, Suryadi, and Nurhattati (2021), cultures that support knowledge sharing are characterised by transparency, continuous learning, innovation, open communication, and a strong commitment to collective reflection.

## Organisational Structure

Maphoto and Matlala (2021) contend that organisational structure refers to the way roles and responsibilities are arranged within an organisation to ensure optimal performance. In the context of knowledge management (KM), structure plays a critical role in determining how knowledge is created and shared. Nonaka (1994, as cited in Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010) argues that neither a top-down bureaucratic model, where only senior management is responsible for generating and controlling information, nor a purely bottom-up model where knowledge creation is confined to lower and middle levels is ideal. Instead, organisations should adopt a non-siloed structure that enables collective and

collaborative knowledge creation across all levels (Prabhakaran, 2025). In this model, no single group holds a monopoly on knowledge production. Rather, the organisational structure encourages open communication across and within boundaries, fostering interdependence among teams and enhancing the organisation's overall capacity for learning and innovation (Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010).

### Organisational Processes

Organisational processes encompass the activities and actions that enable an organisation to achieve its knowledge management (KM) objectives, which, in turn, support the broader organisational mission and goals (Hajric, 2018; South African Local Government Association [SALGA], 2018; de Bem Machado, Secinaro, Calandra, & Lanzalonga, 2022). Barbier and Tengeh (2022) identify organisational processes as a key enabler in the effective implementation of KM. These processes include identifying, creating, storing, sharing, and applying knowledge for the benefit of the organisation. Organisational processes also refer to how tasks are executed within the organisation, encompassing functions such as records and information management, file planning, registry operations, and records retention (National Archives of South Africa, 2007). The overarching goal is to ensure that information and procedures are simplified, accessible, and readily available when needed. Well-designed processes enable knowledge workers to access the right knowledge, at the right time, and in the right format (APQC, 2023).

### Organisational Technology

Technology can be described as the "tools of the trade"—encompassing the systems, tools, and platforms that align with an organisation's specific needs (Data.org, 2024). It plays a critical role in structuring and sustaining an organisation's knowledge management (KM) efforts. Specifically, technology enables easier access to, and retrieval of, information, which facilitates communication and collaboration among organisational members.

The technological tools used to support KM are commonly referred to as knowledge management systems (KMS) (Alavi & Leidner, 2001, as cited in Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010). These systems enable organisations to capture, store, and disseminate knowledge efficiently. However, organisations must be strategic in how they deploy KM tools to ensure alignment with their broader KM strategy (APQC, 2025). Equally important is understanding how these tools will be integrated into existing operational systems, and assessing the extent to which staff require support and training to use them effectively. Learning interventions such as coaching, mentoring, and action learning can play a vital role in this regard (Ali, Abu Bakar, Ahmad Tilwani, & Ajanil, 2022). The effective implementation of KM, supported by appropriate technology, can significantly enhance the sustainability of local government in the following ways:

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- Decision-making: by exploiting and harnessing global knowledge, lessons learned and good practice.
- Service delivery: by enabling innovation, productivity and problem-solving
- Efficiency: by sharing knowledge and learning through shortening the time between ideas and implementation, making information accessible and reducing costs
- Responsiveness: by increasing the quality and speed of communication between employees and managers as well as with the public
- Learning: by creating the opportunity for employees to develop their competencies, performance and experience and in the process building employee satisfaction and motivation
- Institutional memory: by preserving, developing, using, and sharing knowledge, which is not lost when experienced employees leave the organisation
- Democratic governance: by providing accessible information to the public, making them feel more connected and involved with governance systems
- Accountability: by ensuring transparent, open systems that reduce the potential for corruption and unethical behaviour (Kitchin et al., 2013; Helander, Paunu and Hellsten, 2022).

## Methods and Data

The study adopted an integrative mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure a comprehensive understanding of knowledge management (KM) practices in South African local government. Quantitative data were collected through structured surveys administered to a wide sample of municipal managers, while qualitative data were gathered through focus group discussions with selected participants. This design enabled triangulation of data from multiple sources, including both primary sources (e.g., surveys and focus groups) and secondary sources (e.g., policy documents, reports, and legislative frameworks) to enhance the study's validity and reliability.

The mixed-methods approach was particularly valuable in capturing both the breadth and depth of the research problem. The quantitative component provided measurable insights into key KM dimensions such as leadership, culture, structure, processes, and technology. Meanwhile, the qualitative component enriched these findings by offering contextual understanding, uncovering underlying perceptions, and exploring the nuances of KM implementation across municipalities.

Importantly, the focus group discussions were not merely supplementary but were intentionally designed to contextualise, explain, and elaborate on the survey findings, offering a more holistic view of the

challenges and enablers of KM in the local government sector. This integrative approach allowed the researchers to cross-validate the data, highlight areas of convergence or divergence, and develop a robust, evidence-based interpretation of KM practices in municipal contexts.

## Sampling

The research population for this study comprised 1054 individuals occupying all three tiers of management within the local government sector namely, executive, senior, and middle managers. These participants were engaged through both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus group discussion) instruments. To ensure geographical diversity and representativeness, a purposive sampling strategy was employed. A total of 26 local government entities were initially selected, covering a range of inland and coastal municipalities across multiple provinces. However, due to the withdrawal of one municipality during the data collection phase, the final sample consisted of 25 participating local government entities. From this group, a total of 306 completed questionnaires were received, resulting in a 29% response rate. This response level, while modest, is considered acceptable for public sector surveys and allowed for meaningful analysis across the key variables explored in the study.

## Measuring Instruments

The development of the research instruments was grounded in a comprehensive review of the existing literature. The survey instrument was adapted primarily from Botha's (2005) framework and the study conducted by Mange (2019), titled "Knowledge Management Practices in Local Government: The Case of the City of Johannesburg." To complement the survey, semi-structured interview schedules were designed for both the focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews with key stakeholders. These qualitative instruments were directly informed by the variables and items measured in the survey, ensuring alignment between the quantitative and qualitative components.

This integrated approach enabled the collection of complementary data, allowing for a holistic assessment of the research question. The quantitative survey data provided measurable trends and patterns across the study population, while the qualitative data offered rich contextual insights that facilitated a deeper understanding and interpretation of those trends. This strategy of gathering both numerical and narrative data was further elaborated in the data collection plan. Participants—including executive, senior, and middle municipal managers—were asked to complete the survey and subsequently engage in focus group discussions. These discussions explored the survey themes in greater depth, providing an opportunity to validate, expand, and contextualise the quantitative findings.

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### Research Procedure and Statistical Analysis

Survey data were initially collected using Google Forms and subsequently exported to Excel spreadsheets for preliminary organization and cleaning. Following this, the cleaned datasets were imported into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for comprehensive statistical analysis. This approach facilitated efficient handling of the data, enabling the application of various descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to address the research objectives. Data collection methods were adapted to accommodate participant preferences and logistical considerations across different municipalities. In some locations, respondents completed the survey electronically on digital devices, ensuring rapid data capture and immediate entry into the system. Conversely, other participants preferred or required the use of paper-based (hard copy) surveys, which were later manually entered into the electronic system to maintain data integrity and inclusivity.

## Results

The research findings were interpreted according to the respondents' levels of agreement with various statements. Responses indicating agreement with either positive or negative statements were considered positive indicators of awareness or practice. A response of "partially agree" was interpreted to mean that respondents had some awareness of the relevant policy, practice, or application, but that it was not consistently applied or fully institutionalised. Where respondents selected "don't know/not sure," this was taken to indicate a lack of awareness of the particular practice, policy, or application. Responses of "disagree" suggested that respondents were aware of the practice or policy but disagreed with its implementation or effectiveness. The presentation of findings follows the key dimensions of knowledge management (KM) identified in the study: leadership, culture, structure, processes, and technology. During analysis, related statements were grouped and assessed against the critical success factors for KM implementation as outlined in the literature review. The study employs data triangulation by integrating quantitative survey results with qualitative insights from focus groups, providing a comprehensive understanding of the KM practices within local government.

### Leadership

The statistical analysis of the survey, complemented by insights from focus group discussions, reveals significant gaps in the implementation and institutionalisation of knowledge management (KM) strategies and practices across municipal entities. A majority of respondents (59%) either partially agreed or indicated uncertainty regarding the existence of a KM strategy that recognises the importance of knowledge for achieving municipal objectives. This tentative awareness was echoed in a focus group, where one participant noted: "We may not consciously term it 'knowledge management,' but by default,

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if you were to combine all these things and consciously have a strategy now to infuse knowledge management in our municipality, it won't be difficult because we are doing it in bits and pieces."

A similar pattern emerged concerning the presence of a KM strategy aligned with operational objectives aimed at enhancing customer value, with 56% of respondents either partially agreeing or expressing uncertainty. This was corroborated by a focus group participant's observation: "The municipality developed a KM strategy ten years ago. However, the strategy is not applied." Several respondents highlighted instances where management failed to fully disclose information or adequately share knowledge, indicating challenges in transparency and communication. Supporting this, 57% of respondents partially agreed or disagreed that the KM strategy is effectively communicated across all organisational levels. These findings suggest a clear disconnect between the development and the practical implementation of KM strategies within municipal entities.

Additional qualitative feedback pointed to reactive management practices and frequent leadership turnover, which negatively impact organisational morale and hinder sustained KM efforts. One focus group described managers as "sometimes considered to be reactive and not proactive," while another noted that "the frequent change in management impacts negatively on organisational morale." Overall, the survey and qualitative data point to persistent challenges in the consistent application, communication, and institutional embedding of KM strategies and practices within South African local government. The findings highlight a critical need for more coordinated efforts to align KM initiatives with organisational objectives and to ensure effective dissemination and adoption of KM principles throughout municipal entities. These results strongly suggest that leadership and strategic execution remain major obstacles to effective KM, despite its recognition as a critical success factor in the literature.

## Culture

The statistical analysis of the survey, supported by insights from focus group discussions, indicates that municipalities face significant challenges in effectively communicating knowledge and information across departmental boundaries. Specifically, 31% of respondents agreed that knowledge and information are not adequately communicated between departments, while 32% partially agreed and 23% disagreed. This distribution suggests notable inconsistencies in cross-departmental knowledge sharing. Focus group participants corroborated these findings, with one stating, "A lack of inter-departmental sharing and the organisational silo mentality mindset is prevalent in the organisation." Another municipality similarly highlighted "a lack of cooperation between departments in terms of sharing information." Further, the findings reveal that joint knowledge development and sharing are not routinely practiced as standard procedures across departments. Only 26% of respondents agreed that such collaborative practices are standard, with 32% partially agreeing and 32% disagreeing. Regarding

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communication underpinned by mutual trust and respect, 31% of respondents agreed, 26% partially agreed, and 23% disagreed. These figures suggest that although some level of trust and respect exists in interdepartmental communication, there remains considerable room for improvement.

Overall, the survey results point to significant gaps in effective communication, knowledge sharing, and collaboration across departments within municipal entities. The substantial proportions of partial agreement and disagreement indicate inconsistencies in the application and institutionalisation of knowledge management (KM) practices within the local government sector. Additionally, the findings reveal that a culture of voluntary contribution to the municipality's or municipal entity's knowledge base is not well established among team members. This cultural deficit in the application, communication, and implementation of KM practices was confirmed in focus group discussions, where one participant described the culture as "quite sick" and not aligned with organisational goals. Despite organisational culture being widely recognised as a critical success factor in the literature, this study confirms that it remains a significant weakness within local government institutions.

## Structure

The statistical analysis of the survey, supported by insights from focus group discussions, reveals several key challenges related to knowledge management (KM) within municipal entities. Specifically, 31% of respondents agree that it is not standard practice for municipalities or municipal entities to fully exploit embodied knowledge across multidisciplinary, cross-functional teams. Additionally, 26% partially agree and 23% disagree with this statement, indicating mixed perceptions about collaborative knowledge use. When considering the involvement of cross-functional team members, only 22% of respondents agree that every opportunity is exploited, while 31% partially agree and 29% disagree.

Focus group participants echoed these concerns, with one participant posing a critical question: "If internal knowledge management is distorted, how then do you expect external to be going well?" This highlights a perceived breakdown in internal KM processes, which likely undermines external collaboration efforts. Survey data also indicate that shared knowledge objectives are inconsistently agreed upon across departments: 29% partially agree that such alignment exists, 23% agree, and 26% disagree. Regarding the formal definition of KM roles, 25% of respondents partially agree that these roles are not clearly defined, while 26% disagree. Only 32% agree that specific KM appointments are made and responsibilities allocated, with 27% partially agreeing and 25% disagreeing. This suggests a lack of clarity and formalisation in KM role distribution.

Concerning the institutionalisation of knowledge, 29% of respondents partially agree that managers do not take responsibility for promoting KM awareness, and 25% disagree with this. Similarly, 29% partially agree that KM topics are not regularly included on communication session agendas. Furthermore, only

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20% agree that incentive systems to sustain the knowledge base are institutionalised, while 32% partially agree and 35% disagree.

Regarding formal relationships with external partners, 35% of respondents agree that management has established such connections, 29% partially agree, and 23% disagree. A focus group participant linked the lack of knowledge sharing to diminished motivation, stating, “We are not motivated to achieve.” Collectively, these findings highlight significant gaps in the institutionalisation of KM practices within municipal entities, including inconsistent implementation of KM roles and responsibilities, limited management engagement, and inadequate supporting systems and incentives.

## Processes

The statistical analysis of the survey, supported by insights from focus group discussions, reveals several notable gaps in the effectiveness of processes for implementing knowledge management (KM) within municipalities. Regarding the engagement of core knowledge resources across departmental boundaries to address customer-centric challenges, only 23% of respondents agreed that such engagement occurs, while 29% partially agreed and 32% either disagreed or partially disagreed. This points to an inconsistent application of cross-departmental collaboration practices intended to enhance service delivery.

Similarly, when asked whether an ethical and institutionalised information-gathering process is in place to continuously scan the internal and external environment, 32% of respondents partially agreed, 20% agreed, and 29% either disagreed or partially disagreed. These findings suggest that environmental scanning practices—essential for informed, proactive decision-making—are unevenly implemented across municipalities.

The survey further revealed that 35% of respondents partially agreed that their municipality lacks adequate processes for the distribution of information, with 21% agreeing and another 21% disagreeing or partially disagreeing. When asked whether information distribution processes are designed to enhance knowledge creation, creativity, and customer care, 32% partially agreed, 20% agreed, and 35% either disagreed or partially disagreed. These results reflect not only the fragmented nature of current KM processes but also the lack of strategic alignment in their implementation.

Focus group discussions reinforced these concerns. One participant summarised the challenge by stating: “Everything is good on paper, but communication and management is a problem.” This comment underscores the discrepancy between formal KM frameworks and their practical application within municipal settings. Taken together, the findings point to significant inconsistencies in the processes that underpin KM implementation. While a variety of communication platforms and procedural mechanisms may exist, their effectiveness appears limited. Overall, the results suggest widespread uncertainty and

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a lack of institutionalised, well-functioning processes to engage knowledge resources across departments, establish ethical and responsive information-gathering systems, and ensure timely and strategic distribution of knowledge. These weaknesses ultimately constrain the municipalities' ability to make informed decisions and deliver efficient, knowledge-driven public services.

## Technology

The statistical analysis of the survey, supported by insights from focus group discussions, indicate that although many municipalities have implemented information systems, these systems are not being effectively utilised to support knowledge management (KM). Specifically, 37% of survey respondents agreed that their municipality had implemented systems aimed at enhancing access to information. However, the extent to which these systems are used to support decision-making is limited. Only 24% of respondents agreed and 33% partially agreed that the systems are actively used by relevant employees to enhance decision-making processes. This gap between implementation and utilisation was reinforced by focus group discussions, where one participant observed: "Information platforms are used for operational reasons and not for strategic decision-making."

In addition, 37% of respondents agreed that the use of knowledge management application tools is not regularly assessed, indicating a lack of monitoring mechanisms to ensure that these tools contribute meaningfully to KM objectives. These findings suggest that while the technological infrastructure may be in place, its strategic application remains inconsistent and underdeveloped. Further analysis reveals broader inconsistencies in system usage and integration, as well as a limited understanding among management regarding the strategic value of KM technologies. For example, while 30% of respondents agreed that the IT infrastructure is integrated to ensure efficient accessibility and connectivity, a notable 37% only partially agreed, reflecting uncertainty or partial implementation. Moreover, 29% of respondents disagreed and an additional 29% partially agreed that dedicated KM software applications are functionally integrated with the municipality's formal information systems.

Regarding system oversight and review, 37% of respondents agreed that no formal system exists to manage intellectual capital. Similarly, 35% disagreed that a structured reporting system for KM programmes and practices is in place. These figures point to serious shortcomings in the governance and evaluation of KM-related technologies and activities. Furthermore, only 32% of respondents agreed that top management understands the importance of aligning KM practices with broader organisational objectives, while 24% disagreed and 25% partially agreed. This indicates an overall lack of strategic leadership in the technological dimension of KM.

Focus group discussions reinforced the survey findings, consistently highlighting that existing information systems are predominantly used for operational functions rather than strategic knowledge-

driven planning and decision-making. This disconnect underscores a misalignment between available technological capabilities and the strategic intent of KM initiatives.

The research highlights significant gaps in the effective deployment, integration, and use of technology to enable and sustain KM practices in local government. While systems have been introduced in many municipalities, their potential to support strategic decision-making, foster innovation, and drive institutional knowledge sharing remains largely untapped. These findings underscore the need for enhanced leadership awareness, user training, system integration, and ongoing evaluation to bridge the gap between technological implementation and strategic KM utilisation.

## Discussion

The research results paint a sobering picture regarding the understanding, application, and integration of knowledge management (KM) in South Africa's local government sector. Both the quantitative data (questionnaire responses) and qualitative data (focus group discussions and interviews with key informants) consistently reveal limited comprehension of KM and its alignment with other core processes. While respondents demonstrated some awareness of KM as a concept, uncertainty prevailed regarding its strategic integration and institutional anchoring.

Although the literature identifies critical success factors essential for effective KM—such as leadership, culture, structure, processes, and technology—these factors were found to be notably absent or underdeveloped in the local government context. The findings underscore a pronounced leadership and management deficit in promoting and sustaining KM practices. Despite the existence of KM strategies in certain municipalities, they are inconsistently applied, poorly communicated, and insufficiently embedded within institutional frameworks. This has resulted in a crisis of confidence in KM as a transformative tool for public service (Ahmed, Ghoneim, & Kim, 2009; Botha, Kourie, & Snyman, 2008).

A weak organisational culture further compounds this issue. Many municipalities do not foster an environment conducive to knowledge sharing and learning. Focus group feedback suggests that while knowledge is sometimes created informally, the culture does not encourage systematic sharing or collective reflection—key principles for effective KM (Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010). In this context, knowledge hoarding and mistrust often dominate workplace dynamics, undermining collaboration and innovation.

Structurally, municipalities suffer from a lack of clearly defined KM roles and responsibilities. This ambiguity hinders cross-departmental collaboration and weakens accountability for KM initiatives. Organisational processes, particularly those related to knowledge distribution, also fail to adequately support knowledge creation, customer care, and innovation (Cloete, 2019; Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, 2022).

On the technological front, while municipalities have invested in information systems, these tools are primarily used for routine operational functions and not for strategic decision-making. Survey results revealed limited use of dedicated KM applications and weak integration with broader organisational systems. A lack of structured reporting and system review mechanisms was also noted. Consequently, technology is underutilised as a strategic enabler of KM (Knowledge Management South Africa, 2022).

Although seldom addressed in mainstream KM literature, political influence also emerged as a significant barrier. Politics, power, and personality often shape what knowledge is shared or suppressed within municipalities. Unwritten rules and informal directives can constrain formal KM processes. As Syed-Ikhsan and Rowland (2004, as cited in Msomi, 2015) argue, political dynamics profoundly impact the creation, transfer, and application of knowledge in public institutions.

These KM failures have broader implications for local governance and development. As Reddy (2016) argues, sustainable development is ultimately local. Yet, municipalities lack the technical and managerial capacity to access and use local knowledge effectively, particularly in aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 16—which focuses on building effective, accountable institutions—is especially relevant. Without institutional KM capacity, municipalities cannot adequately monitor progress, assess impact, or respond adaptively to local needs.

In many public institutions, knowledge remains concentrated at the individual level. Employees are often reluctant to share knowledge due to job security concerns. This reluctance is exacerbated by inadequate incentives, weak teamwork norms, and mistrust. Zhou and Li (2012) highlight how employees who view knowledge as a source of personal advantage may resist sharing it, further limiting institutional learning. A culture of mutual trust and collaboration is therefore essential to reduce such barriers (Kuraś & Kuraś, 2015).

## Recommendations

In response to these challenges, the study proposes the following key interventions:

1. Develop an Integrated KM Blueprint: Establish a national KM strategy tailored for the local government sector to provide guidance and promote uniformity across municipalities.
2. Conduct a Sector-Wide KM Audit: Assess current KM practices, gaps, and opportunities across all municipalities and municipal entities.
3. Establish KM Communities of Practice: Facilitate knowledge sharing and peer learning through regular forums where municipalities can share experiences and best practices.
4. Adopt a KM Competency Framework: Develop clear guidelines for KM-related skills and qualifications to inform training, hiring, and performance management.

5. Strengthen Collaboration Among Sector Stakeholders: The Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority (LGSETA), as the custodian of local government skills development, must lead the KM transformation in collaboration with the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA).

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Two key limitations were noted in the current study: (i) Municipalities often view community engagement as a compliance activity, failing to incorporate rich, context-specific knowledge contributed by local communities. Future research should explore mechanisms for harvesting and institutionalising indigenous knowledge (ii)The study focused exclusively on municipal officials. However, given the significant influence of political leadership on policy, planning, and implementation, future studies should incorporate political actors to obtain a fuller understanding of KM dynamics in local government.

## Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis of KM within South Africa's local government sector identified both critical areas of concern and significant opportunities for transformation. Drawing from the literature review, empirical data, and stakeholder insights, the study concludes that while there is general awareness of KM's importance and isolated examples of good practice, a substantial gap remains in the effective implementation, communication, and institutional integration of KM across the sector.

The implications of these findings are particularly relevant to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The relationship between KM and the SDGs—especially Goal 16, which focuses on building peace, justice, and strong institutions (through human resource management) is both immediate and multifaceted.

Firstly, addressing KM challenges in local government holds direct potential to enhance service delivery in key areas aligned with SDGs, such as good health and well-being (SDG 3), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), and sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11). When properly implemented, KM can improve decision-making, drive innovation, and ensure more efficient and equitable resource allocation—thus improving the quality and reach of public services. Secondly, Goal 16 emphasizes the creation of effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. Embedding KM into the institutional culture and structure of municipalities reinforces this goal by enhancing transparency, responsiveness, and citizen engagement. A culture of continuous learning and sharing of institutional knowledge is foundational for long-term institutional resilience and trust-building. Thirdly, the proposed adoption of a competency framework for KM professionals and the alignment of KM initiatives with digital transformation supports SDG 4, which advocates for quality education and lifelong learning

opportunities. By equipping municipal staff with KM-related skills and tools, local governments can enhance their ability to respond to complex development challenges and institutional demands. Finally, aligning KM with the imperatives of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) contributes to multiple SDGs, including SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). Harnessing emerging technologies for KM purposes can improve organisational performance, support data-driven policy making, and stimulate local innovation and economic development.

By addressing the systemic weaknesses identified in this study and implementing the recommended interventions, South African municipalities can reposition KM as a driver of transformation. Doing so will not only support national development priorities but will also contribute meaningfully to the achievement of the SDGs, demonstrating the critical and interconnected role of knowledge in enabling sustainable governance and inclusive development through effective and efficient human resource management.

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