RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Conceptualisation and Application of Client Engagement Strategies to Optimise Administrative Information Management Processes in a Selected Public Sector Organisation

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Abstract

Rising client expectations and demands for high-quality services have intensified the need for meaningful client engagement strategies at the micro level of public sector institutions. Client engagement strategy is critical towards understanding clients' expectations for improving service delivery processes such as administrative information management (AIM) processes. This study explores how client engagement strategies are conceptualised and applied in practice to optimise the AIM processes in a selected public sector organisation. The study is based on a qualitative instrumental case study design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the managers of the selected public sector organisation. Additionally, relevant official documents were reviewed to complement the interview data. Thematic analysis was applied using both inductive and deductive logic in sequential order. The study's findings revealed multiple interpretations of the client engagement construct within the public service department. These interpretations included information-sharing and client-empowering initiatives, interactive engagements, and divergent viewpoints. The dominant perspective emphasised information-sharing initiatives, while the least advocated theme promoted interactive engagement with public service users. In contrast to the other two perspectives, the divergent views challenged the relevance of clients' knowledge in improving the service delivery processes. This study proposes an intensive intervention to elucidate the complexities and inconsistencies surrounding understanding the client engagement construct. Value creation for clients should serve as the primary catalyst for client engagement strategy initiatives to facilitate the effective integration of clients' insights into decision-making processes, thereby optimising AIM processes. The research integrates marketing theory with administrative information management theory to offer distinctive insights and critical implications for the phenomenon investigated.

Keywords: *administrative information management process; client engagement; citizen engagement; client's needs and expectations; value co-creation*

Introduction

Globally, the public sector is beset by various challenges and changes from both external and internal environments that make client engagement more important than ever. Prominent challenges include rising client expectations, the demands for high-quality service delivery, and emerging new technologies amid economic constraints. These technologies have intensified the interactions between public service users and service providers. They allow users to engage at all service points, providing suggestions and feedback on their experiences, as well as demanding services that align with their expectations (Rosado-Pinto and Loureiro, 2020: 167). Clearly, the future of public service organisations largely depends on continuous efforts to optimise the strategic and operational processes based on clients' expectations of service as espoused by public service policies (Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), 1997). According to the DPSA (1997: 12), the

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Batho Pele policy mandates public sector institutions to engage in ongoing consultation with clients to identify their needs and priorities. This continuous engagement serves as a critical source of insight, enabling institutions to enhance service delivery through informed and responsive improvement initiatives. More precisely, departments are required to reorient service delivery systems, processes, and public servants' attitudes to a client-oriented approach encapsulated in the name Batho Pele, 'putting people first'.

However, scholarly literature suggests that despite the policy's intended objectives, in practice, public service user engagement has largely remained peripheral to decision-making processes and continues to be an elusive ideal (Osborne and Strokosch, 2022: 181). Moreover, user participation in public service is often applied as an add-on rather than being integrated as a fundamental component of public service delivery processes (Osborne and Strokosch, 2022: 182). Some organisations find it challenging to develop effective strategies that foster innovation and to engage clients in efforts to streamline service delivery processes in their environments (Kuratko and Morris, 2018: 43). This challenge is primarily associated with the fact that clients are rarely a single individual, and their expectations are dynamic rather than static (Kurokawa *et al.,* 2017: 910). Though there are challenges in understanding and managing clients' expectations, clients' input is crucial for creating value in service encounters. Furthermore, the intricate nature of the AIM process further contributes to the aforementioned complexities, particularly in information-intensive organisations where information is central to core operations. The optimisation of AIM processes is crucial for enhancing workflow efficiency and mitigating bottlenecks that may hinder service delivery. However, the specialised nature of certain organisational processes often limits their ability to adapt effectively to clients' needs and expectations. Therefore, there is an uneasy coexistence between service delivery processes and public service user engagement (Eckerd and Heidelberg, 2019: 133).

Effective information management requires understanding that users require high-quality information that is relevant, current, accurate, and timely (Ferreira and Groenewald, 2021: 16). Information becomes ineffective when it lacks the essential quality attributes, resulting in user dissatisfaction. This notion denotes that in an information-intensive organisation, value is created when AIM processes are client-oriented and aligned with the actual requirements of clients rather than what the organisation assumes is necessary for clients. Thus, recognising clients' needs should be a fundamental aspect of strategic and operational processes of the administrative function. A prominent example of such an organisation is a public service department that manages vast amounts of information and client interactions yet often faces service delivery challenges. These challenges typically arise from inefficient workflow processes and uncoordinated client engagement strategies, resulting in public frustration that is sometimes expressed on social media. Given the direct impact of this situation on service quality, continuous improvement of operations is essential for enhancing value for clients.

It is important to note that administrative information management processes differ considerably from information technology (IT) processes. This paper focuses specifically on the administrative processes of information management. While extensive literature and copious frameworks exist on managing information through IT-related technologies and systems, research on the administrative role in information management remains underdeveloped. Therefore, more scientific studies in the administrative field are necessary to delineate the administrative-related processes involved in information management while recognising the essential roles of technology and people. This study explored the conceptualisation and application of client engagement strategies in improving AIM processes in a selected public sector organisation. Following this introduction, the next section will present the literature review, followed by the theoretical framework underpinning this study. Section 3 will outline the methodology approach, and steps followed to collect and analyse the data. Subsequent sections will present the study findings, followed by a discussion. The last section will provide the conclusions drawn from the results, summarising the key insights and implications of the research.

Literature Review

Information is essential for every organisation, as its overall success relies on effective information management practices. (Evans and Price, 2020; Ferreira and Groenewald, 2021). Although information is valuable, few organisations manage it with the same rigour and discipline as other organisational resources (Evans and Price, 2020). Problems associated with the management of information are not caused by a lack of information but by the abundance of it and the absence of established processes and protocols to effectively manage large sets of data (Munir *et al.,* 2020: 182). Information differs from other resources as it is intangible; only the methods used to convey information are tangible. Assessing the influence and benefits of effective information management can be difficult. The value of information is thus easily underestimated in the day-to-day operations of a business

(Ferreira and Groenewald, 2021: 27). This elusive nature of information makes it challenging to manage information effectively, leading most organisations to rely on and devote more efforts to information technology (IT) while overlooking the administrative processes involved in information management.

Though information influences almost all the organisation's activities, it is a complex construct to define. The different perspectives of information presented in the literature are usually influenced by the author's frame of reference or discipline in which this phenomenon is studied. The contributing disciplines of the information construct include but are not limited to business administration and management sciences, knowledge management, library and information sciences, management information systems, computer science, information technology and related fields (Dwivedi and Mustafee, 2010). Therefore, information is a multidisciplinary concept, and its meaning and interpretation depend on the context of the application. In administrative management, information is conceptualised as a multifaceted construct that is associated with processed and meaningful data (Detlor, 2010; Evans and Price, 2020; Ferreira and Groenewald, 2021; Munir *et al.,* 2020). Other perspectives regard information and knowledge as inextricably linked (Edwards, 2022: 01; Ehlers and Lazenby, 2023: 22). Several studies have explored the similarities and differences between the concepts of information and knowledge. While these two concepts differ considerably, they share certain commonalities. Notably, their management overlaps across key dimensions, which include processes, technology and people (Edwards, 2022: 02).

It is essential to contextualise the AIM construct within the scope of this study. The primary role of the administrative function is to manage information in all its forms. Coherent strategies and operational processes that outline how data should be handled from creation to disposal are developed (Oliverio *et al.,* 2019). In this article, AIM refers to managing the information resource from strategic to operational levels by leveraging relevant technologies, skilled personnel, physical assets and financial resources, and effective systems and processes to benefit users and decision-makers (Ndaba, 2023: 65). Given the limited literature on the application of client engagement strategies to optimise AIM processes in the public sector context, this article sought to understand this phenomenon by exploring both its contextualised meaning and practical application. The necessity of client engagement strategies in the public sector remains a topic of contention, as public services are primarily provided to citizens rather than clients. The services are generally provided equitably to all citizens, often as once-off transactions (Buttle and Maklan, 2019). The limited competition in public service offerings creates a monopolistic environment, highlighting the necessity of assessing the applicability of client engagement strategies in this context.

In the public sector context, the term "engagement" refers to various forms of citizen engagement that are commonly practised at the macro level. The terms public engagement, public participation, citizen engagement and citizen participation are commonly used interchangeably for this purpose (Eckerd and Heidelberg, 2019). At the macro level, citizen engagement is integrated within the political context, as citizens participate in the public policymaking processes, often associated with democratic practices (Marino and Lo Presti, 2019). There is still limited clarity about the conceptualisation of the client engagement construct at the micro level within public sector institutions, which is the focus of this article. Commonly, engagement in the public sector implies establishing, building and enhancing relationships through interaction with public service users and other stakeholders to understand their expectations (Cavallone and Palumbo, 2019). Siebers (2018) concurs that citizen engagement is the scope of activities the government uses to involve the community in public services. Marino and Lo Presti (2019) provided a more comprehensive definition, as they defined civic engagement as a multifaceted construct with a public and relational character that implies interest, emotions and interaction between two parties in a bidirectional exchange that generates the co-creation of knowledge. These different perspectives are similar to those found in private sector literature, where interaction, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural aspects are used to describe the concept of client engagement (Bilro and Loureiro, 2020).

Public service user engagement and participation have been researched for decades, yet their effectiveness remains unclear (Osborne and Strokosch, 2022). Literature suggests that public sector institutions often prioritise sharing information with service users to enhance engagement (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2015; Eckerd and Heidelberg, 2019). The practice of limiting user participation to information sharing has faced criticism for allegedly worsening inequalities. Critics argue that this approach mainly benefits educated and elite users, which could reinforce existing social and economic disparities (Brewis *et al.,* 2021). Moreover, a practical knowledge gap remains regarding how to better understand client expectations and utilise this knowledge to enhance the AIM processes. This gap was reaffirmed by the findings of eight studies conducted by the Public Service Commission (PSC) of the DPSA. According to the Batho Pele Revitalisation Strategy (2021: 7) of the DPSA, some public

service departments have failed to implement the Batho Pele policy due to several factors, including a lack of skills, absence of standards, and failure to integrate the principles into their departmental strategies.

As this article examined client engagement strategies in optimising the AIM process, two theoretical approaches and analytical lenses were used. The service-dominant (S-D) logic and Batho Pele policy framework were integrated to provide valuable insights into understanding the constructs investigated in this article. The rationale for integrating the frameworks was to ensure that the study benefits from the theoretical perspectives brought by each approach. The S-D logic approach postulates that value is co-created by both the service provider and client in a service encounter (Brodie *et al.*, 2019: 173; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Thus, the service is the basis of exchange where clients and the service provider are jointly involved in the value-creation process. The theory is based on four principles, two of which are applicable to this article: (1) value is not independently created by the service provider, and (2) value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the clients (Brodie *et al.*, 2019). This theory, conceptualised by Vargo and Lusch (2004) as a marketing approach, has now been applied to the public sector context and is referred to as the public service-dominant approach (Bryson *et al.*, 2017). Proponents of this theory believe that, by co-creating value, customers will derive more benefits through interactions, and deeper relationships can be established (Brodie *et al.*, 2019; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Thus, public service users cannot be seen as passive receivers of public services, a view closely aligned with the client engagement construct. Moreover, the first principle of the Batho Pele policy framework indicates that citizens must be consulted on the nature, quantity and quality of services to be provided, reflecting the client-oriented nature of the public sector institutions (DPSA, 1997). Therefore, public service organisations need to recognise that value creation for public service users is co-created, not solely the purview of public service organisations.

Methodology

The principles of the qualitative research approach, which emphasise viewing the phenomenon from a subjective rather than objective lens, were considered suitable for discovering rich meanings about how client engagement is applied to improve the AIM processes. The case study was applied as the strategy of enquiry, and the principles of an instrumental case study were used as the focus was on the processes of an organisation. The hallmark of a qualitative case study is the use of various sources of evidence, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the case under investigation (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Different data sources were used to foster an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews and reviewed the department's official documents to comprehensively understand the phenomenon. The disadvantage of the case study is that one cannot generalise the findings of a single case to the larger population (Yin, 2018). The aim of this article was not to generalise the conclusions to other similar public sector institutions but rather to provide theoretical explanations of the phenomenon.

As the article aimed to understand the processes of an information-intensive organisation, one of the two divisions of the selected public sector organisation in one district was selected as the population for this study. Services are provided through nine local offices within the selected district, collectively referred to as front offices. All nine offices were included in the population, along with the division's head office and central call centre unit. Purposive non-probability sampling was employed to select the key participants from the population. The sample of this study was comprised of managers at senior, middle, and lower levels of management, and the focus was on information-rich informants who were well-versed in the processes of the division investigated. Only one manager with at least five years of experience in their respective positions was targeted per office. A thematic data analysis process was followed to analyse the data, using both the inductive and deductive approaches sequentially. Codes were derived from the data inductively and phrased to capture the contextualised meanings conveyed by the participants. Thereafter, axial coding was applied whereby similar and closely related codes were grouped into categories, overlapping codes merged and redundant codes eliminated. Categories were further elevated into another analytical level of overarching themes by analysing the pattern of the categories and the meaning they convey, an approach proposed by Babchuk (2019) and Creswell and Guetterman (2019). The application of inductive reasoning aligns with the constructivist coding strategy, an approach suggested by Babchuk (2019). Subsequently, the deductive approach was applied to compare and link the categories and themes that emerged from the data to the extant literature using the analytical framework. The aim of using the deductive approach was to relate the findings of the study to the existing literature to enable the theoretical explanation of the concepts. The ATLAS.ti® version 23 program was later used to automate the coding process.

This study applied rigorous, coherent and methodologically congruent methods to counter the limitation of a case study design that is criticised for not following systematic procedures and to ensure the trustworthiness of the study outcome. This study addressed trustworthiness, credibility and transferability in various ways. Using different sources of evidence is the major strength of the case study research as it enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Saunders and Thornhill, 2019). To ensure internal consistency, an interview protocol with the same set of interview questions was used for all managers, irrespective of the management level. Moreover, to minimise the limitation of subjectivity and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the qualitative data analyst, also a certified trainer of ATLAS.ti®, was co-opted to assist in analysing the interview data. Lastly, the study did take into consideration all the ethical clearances required.

Findings and Discussion

A thematic analysis process was followed to analyse the data, using both the inductive and deductive approaches sequentially. The thematic analysis is commonly used to identify codes, categories and themes following an inductive and rigorous process (Babchuk, 2019). The inductive logic aligns with the interpretivist paradigm adopted for the study, which postulates that reality must be viewed and interpreted based on the contextualised experiences shared by the participants. Applying deductive reasoning was equally important in contextualising the study within the business and administrative management literature.

Conceptualisation and application of the client engagement construct

It was important to first gain insights into the contextualised interpretations and application of the construct from the participant's viewpoint. In this section, participants were asked to explain their understanding of client engagement and its application. The findings indicated multiple perspectives concerning the interpretation and application of this phenomenon. The superordinate themes and categories that emerged from the data, as outlined in Table 1, are information-sharing and client-empowering initiatives, interactive engagements and a divergent view.

Table 1: Themes and categories

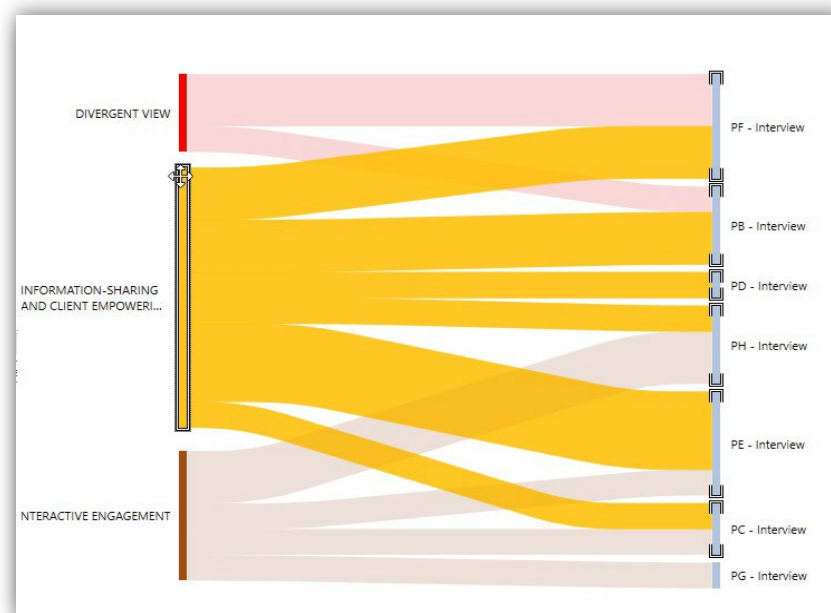| Themes	Categories
1. Information-sharing and client-empowering initiatives	• Information sharing
	• Educating clients
2. Interactive engagements	• Understanding the client's views
	• Proactive support
3. Divergent view	• Rigid systems
	• Role ambiguity
	• Nature of service offerings

Figure 1: The Sankey diagram of client engagement themes

Though widely diverse, all the aspects shared by participants about the meaning of the client engagement construct added to the richness of the findings. It was, however, imperative to identify the dominating aspect for a deeper understanding of the contextualised experiences of the phenomenon using a Sankey diagram. The Sankey diagram in Figure 1 illustrates the most and least advocated aspects of the meaning of the client engagement concept in this context. The nodes on the left side of the diagram represent the themes from the findings, and the nodes on the right-hand side indicate the participants who contributed to each theme. The nodes' width signifies the theme's substantial value relative to other themes. In this context, the predominant aspect of client engagement is the information-sharing and client-empowering initiatives, as shown by a thick yellow node in Figure 1. The following paragraph will explain the sentiments shared by participants about the meaning of each theme and the associated categories.

Information-sharing and clients empowering-initiatives

As per the experience of most managers who participated in the study, client engagement is a process of publishing, sharing information and updating public service users about the department's service offerings and turn-around times. The participants pointed out that the service charter is displayed at all service points and printed on posters and brochures to inform the greater public. Participants PB pointed out that:

> *"The level of engagement is when we provide information about the services that we offer. It is also about informing and updating your clients about new services, network problems or any other challenges our office is experiencing."*

Also, participant PC noted that:

> *"You need to provide information to clients because some people come to the department, but they do not know the services offered by the department."*

Educating clients' categories was shared across different levels of management, indicating different initiatives that the department is using to empower clients to better understand its service offerings, which participants understood to be client engagement strategies. These initiatives include various forms of public awareness campaigns, i.e. imbizos, collaborative outreaches with sister departments, high school awareness campaigns, etc. Participant PH mentioned that:

> *"The role of this office in client engagement is to make the public aware of the services we offer through public awareness campaigns."*

Interactive engagements

The client engagement construct is understood to be comprised of more than one aspect by some participants; hence, the lines in the Sankey diagram in Figure 1 extend from the information-sharing and empowering clients' theme to the interactive engagement theme. Though the interactive engagement theme was the least advocated aspect of client engagement, some participants emphasised it as important. Feedback was also cited as an important aspect in getting how well the department is performing with regard to the commitments made in the service charter. Participant PE noted:

> *"You need to understand the people and the environment of the community you are servicing, as well as the language they feel comfortable using to communicate. Because most of our clients do not understand and cannot fully express themselves in English, you must come down to their level."*

The category of proactive support was understood as initiatives the department took to assist clients before they sought help. To these participants, client engagement means being accessible through interactive engagements with clients, offering continuous support and guidance. Participant PG pointed out that:

> *"You need to pass by the waiting area frequently to check if the line is flowing. If you pass the client in the morning and come again, find the same client still there. Something is wrong; engage to find out why they are still waiting. So it is more about interacting with them while waiting in the queue, OK?"*

Divergent view

The views of some participants deviated from the common interpretations of the phenomenon as they challenged the relevance of client engagement practices in the public sector context. Their views implied that modifying systems and processes based on clients' expectations is practically impossible. However, public service is

expected to consult and engage clients to understand their views. Their opinions do not necessarily negate the necessity of client engagement but rather challenge their relevance in their context. In this divergent view, participants cited rigid systems, role ambiguity and the nature of service offerings to substantiate their views. The statement below from Participant PF clarifies this issue:

> *"The Constitution outlines what is required from the department. We deliver services based on the Constitution and the Bill of Rights requirements. Services that we deliver are mandatory, given that the department is the custodian of the public records. We do not require customer input, as the department's mandate is already established".*

> ### *Documents analysis – client engagement*

The information-sharing and client-empowering initiatives theme of client engagement seems to be the dominant approach in practice in this context, as evidenced by the department's official documents. As clearly explained in the Annual Performance Plan (2023-2024), Strategic Plan (2020-2025) and SDIP (2021-2024) of the selected public sector department, the communication strategy is used to drive the stakeholder and client engagements with the emphasis placed on media, outreaches and campaigns for advocacy and publicising the core functions. However, the department acknowledged a lack of consultation with the public service users about their service delivery expectations (SDIP, 2020-2021). Furthermore, among other priorities to improve engagements with public service users, the department intends to train front-office employees on customer engagement in line with Batho Pele principles. It is unclear what this customer engagement initiative involves, as no additional information was provided in any department-related documents. Moreover, the results of the customer satisfaction survey that was conducted recently (2021/2022) revealed that clients were satisfied with the department's effectiveness in providing the mandated products and services. However, clients were not pleased with the service delivery processes. The department made several recommendations to address the aforementioned challenges, some of which are relevant to this study. These recommendations include training the employees on customer engagement in line with Batho Pele principles and ensuring the entrenchment of a customer-centric culture. Client engagement is thus acknowledged in the department investigated in this study.

Application of Client Engagement Strategies in Improving AIM Processes

The previous section provided insights into the conceptualisation and application of the client engagement construct in the selected division of the public sector organisation. This section presents the results aimed at understanding how clients' knowledge obtained through engagements with clients is used to influence the decisions to improve AIM processes. The data of this section was analysed based on the client engagement themes and categories derived in the previous section. Some of the categories overlapped. However, the emphasis was not on the different categories but rather on the application of clients' knowledge in decisional processes. Though the client engagement methods used by the department are not limited to the ones discussed in this section, the findings of the study are based on the information provided by the participants and the documentary evidence. Tables 2, Table 3 and Table 4 present the findings of this section, with each table focusing on one category and the associated methods.

Table 2: Information-sharing and client-empowering methods

Categories	Methods used	Clients' knowledge consideration in decisional processes
Information-sharing methods	Media, posters, brochures, etc.	The data provided no evidence of how the client's knowledge is acquired in the process of sharing information and how this knowledge influences decision-making to improve processes.
Client empowering initiatives	Public awareness campaigns, etc.	Campaigns are considered valuable in reaching out to citizens in far-off areas and delivering services to the people. Public service users get the opportunity to enquire and raise concerns during these public awareness campaigns. However, there was no clarity on how such interactions helped the department acquire the client's knowledge and consideration in decisional processes.
Participant PC indicated that: *"We go to the communities with other sister departments for outreach programmes. We use the trucks parked outside to deliver services to people. By going to the communities, we provide services or information, making it easier for clients to access our services without coming to our offices."*		
Participant PD noted: *"Yes, when we go out on community outreach, many people come to lodge their complaints, and we follow up on those complaints."*		

Table 3: Interactive engagement channels

Categories	Methods used	Clients' knowledge consideration in decisional processes
Feedback channels	Clients satisfaction surveys	The survey results were used by the department in formulating strategic and performance plans, highlighting recommendations for improving service quality and enhancing client satisfaction. This method clearly delineates how client knowledge is leveraged to improve processes, specifically focusing on enhancing service quality.
	Suggestion-complaints boxes	The experience of some managers from local offices is that clients do not use suggestion-complaints boxes as they are always empty. Clients prefer to raise their concerns directly with managers to get a response immediately while the issue of concern is still fresh in their minds. Moreover, some clients cannot read or write; hence, they do not use the boxes.
Participant PE indicated that: *"The suggestion-complaints boxes were introduced in all local offices, and they must be opened daily to review whatever the clients are saying and address any issues accordingly. Currently, there are no procedures for handling complaints. However, when you are on the ground, interacting with clients directly, there will be no need to escalate the issue to the level of completing a complaint or suggestion form. We have noticed that they are often empty when we open the boxes. So remember that not all people can write."*		

Table 4: Interactive engagement channels *(continuation)*

Categories	Methods used	Clients' knowledge consideration in decisional processes
Proactive support initiatives	In-house contact centre	Reports on client's complaints and enquiries received over a certain period can be created using a business analytical tool. Reports may indicate several features, including the highest and lowest cases of complaints received per offering, per employee or division or a combination of all the factors. Business intelligence tools assist in analysing the reports to pinpoint problematic areas, trends, patterns and root causes of complaints. The department is aware of the trends and patterns of client complaints generated by this system. However, the most significant concern of the department over the years has been the issues of corruption, fraud, and security breaches; hence, some of the problems are still recurring, though they have been reported several times.
	Direct contact with managers at all levels of the department	This method is effective at an individual level as clients' concerns are likely to be solved on the spot. However, whether the concerns addressed are noted for further consideration in decisional processes is unclear.
Participants PF and PH noted that: *"Our contact centre has three tiers for addressing clients' issues. The first tier deals with concerns that can be resolved immediately and are related to the content of the service charter. The second and third tiers address more serious cases, such as when someone says, 'I applied three years ago, but I have not received any feedback".* *"Then the business intelligence provides the department's problem areas and offers insights into the underlying reasons for these challenges."*		
Public service framework	Service Delivery Improvement Plan (SDIP)	It is used as a detailed, department-wide situational analysis to identify problematic services which require improvement. According to the data, this framework helps identify problematic areas and service delivery gaps. Thus, situational analysis is conducted to identify problematic areas, the root causes of each problem are identified, and process mapping is illustrated. This framework pays considerable attention to internal assessment and the department's effectiveness in achieving its mandate. It, however, lacks the inclusion of input from the public service users in their assessment of the effectiveness of the service delivery processes.

Discussion

The findings revealed that the common disposition of the department regarding the meaning of client engagement is information sharing and client-empowering initiatives aimed at keeping clients informed about the core service offerings of the department and the requirements thereof. Although these methods are considered part of the

consultation principle, which emphasises client engagement, they are more closely related to other principles of the Batho Pele framework. When analysing the methods closely, one can deduce that they align more with the Batho Pele principles of sharing service standards and providing information to public service users, suggesting one-way communication. In addition to the dominating theme, providing proactive support and understanding clients' needs were shared as other aspects that form part of the client engagement construct. Although these latter categories were not widely recognised by all participants, they revealed evidence of interactions with the public service users, which is consistent with the element of client engagement and the consultation principle of the Batho Pele framework (DPSA, 1997).

Additionally, findings revealed no common understanding of the investigated phenomenon among managers of the same division, as some participants shared divergent views. Participants who shared a divergent view were adamant that engaging public service users to improve service delivery processes was irrelevant in this context. Rigid systems, role ambiguity and the nature of service delivery processes were the main factors cited as contributing to the complexity of accommodating clients' knowledge in decisional processes. These findings confirmed a long-standing tension in the literature between public service administration and the participation of public service users. Eckerd and Heidelberg (2020) highlighted that the involvement of public service users and public administration have an uneasy coexistence due to several factors, including the complexity of service delivery processes. They concluded that the participation of public service users in decisional processes needs to be formalised and reshaped to fit within the department's administrative processes (Eckerd and Heidelberg, 2020).

Furthermore, the findings of this study concur with those of Marino and Lo Presti (2019), who also found that information-sharing strategies that entail one-way communication still characterise public sector engagement activities. Similarly, other studies highlighted that the client engagement strategies of public sector institutions are more oriented toward propagating information rather than encouraging the active involvement of public service users (Brewis *et al.,* 2021; Denhardt and Denhardt, 2015; Eckerd and Heidelberg, 2019). Considering that the aspect of information-sharing is predominantly one-way communication, it raises concerns about whether the channels used by the department encourage the active participation and involvement of clients, particularly in efforts to understand their needs and priorities. Results showed limited evidence of how the accumulated client information and insights from interactive methods, such as client satisfaction surveys, suggestions, and complaint boxes, are utilised in decision-making processes. When used appropriately, the department can benefit significantly from these methods as they have the potential to stimulate interaction, as well as the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural aspects of client engagement, which aligns with the definitions of client engagement suggested in the literature (Bilro and Loureiro, 2020; Marino and Lo Presti, 2019).

Lastly, the SDIP framework proved that the public sector, particularly the department investigated, has a practical tool for conducting an internal analysis, pinpointing areas that require improvement, and mapping out service delivery improvement strategies. There remains a significant knowledge gap in understanding how external analysis, focused on acquiring client insights, can be utilised to improve processes, as confirmed by the PSC findings. (DPSA, 2021).

Conclusions

The differing interpretations of client engagement highlight the multifaceted nature of the construct and underscore the lack of consensus on conceptualisation within this domain. Predominantly, client engagement in this context revolves around unidirectional initiatives such as information-sharing and empowering initiatives. Findings also revealed limited methods for promoting interactive engagement with clients. Additionally, contrasting viewpoints challenge the necessity of client engagement in enhancing internal departmental processes, indicative of divergent perspectives. It is assumed that the delicate nature of the department's service offerings influenced the divergent view. Information-sharing initiatives are necessary for providing clients with information and could be used to encourage the active participation of public service users. One-way communication could be replaced with client-centred communication, one driven by the needs, to enable the interactivity and involvement of the service users. Thus, adopting a fundamentally new approach that shifts away from conventional inside-out thinking is essential when planning the department's strategic and operational processes. This study recommends that department managers prioritise developing a deeper and more unified understanding of client engagement strategies. There is a need to reconceptualise the prevailing perspective of client engagement to foster a shared understanding of how clients' knowledge can be effectively integrated into decision-making processes to optimise AIM processes.

The high failure rate of client-oriented practices is attributed mainly to insufficient knowledge and limited support from top management (Tait and Robert-Lombard, 2024).

Furthermore, value creation for clients should serve as the primary catalyst of client engagement strategies designed to enhance the AIM processes. To be effective, the department should consider integrating fragmented client engagement strategies to harness client knowledge as a valuable source of insight and decision-making. Noteworthy, the divergent aspect found in this study raises concerns about the understanding and readiness of this division to engage users in efforts to improve the service delivery processes. If not unravelled, this may hinder the department's aspiration to become a client-centred organisation. In conclusion, it is essential to integrate marketing strategies with administrative management to effectively understand and implement client engagement strategies to improve service delivery processes. The marketing approach offers valuable insights into clients' behaviours, while administrative management offers perspectives on information management processes essential for enhancing operational efficiency. The major limitation was that the study focused only on one district of the selected public sector organisation. No claim can be made to generalise the findings to the rest of the public sector. Thus, the findings only apply to the division of the public sector organisation investigated.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: The article demonstrates an interdisciplinary approach as it integrates marketing theory with administrative information management theory to offer distinctive insights and critical implications for the phenomenon investigated.

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