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Talent management challenges in the Gambian public sector: A qualitative literature-based analysis

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ABSTRACT

Talent management is a strategic human resource management (HRM) practice essential for attracting, developing, and retaining skilled employees. In the public sector of developing countries, systemic constraints often undermine effective talent management. This study examines talent management challenges in the Gambian public sector through a qualitative literature-based analysis. Drawing on peer-reviewed articles, government policy documents, civil service regulations, and institutional reports, the study employs thematic analysis to identify constraints across the talent management cycle. The findings reveal weak strategic workforce planning, rigid recruitment and promotion systems, inadequate training and development, poor succession planning, chronic retention problems, and institutional and political constraints. A multi-level typology institutional, organizational, and individual is proposed to structure these challenges. The study is informed by the Resource-Based View, Institutional Theory, and Public Service Motivation, which together explain how human capital underutilization, regulatory rigidity, and motivational limits interact to shape talent management outcomes. The study contributes a theory-informed synthesis of talent management constraints and offers policy implications for HRM reforms in the Gambian public sector, including increasing managerial autonomy, strengthening merit-based practices, and investing in leadership development.

Keywords: talent management; public sector; human resource management; employee retention, institutional constraints; The Gambia

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING



1. INTRODUCTION

Human resources are widely regarded as the most asset of any organization. In the public sector, policy implementation, service delivery, and institutional effectiveness depend fundamentally on the skills, dedication, and motivation of employees. Unlike private organizations, public sector bodies are mandated to provide essential services and formulate policies that directly affect citizens' well-being and national development. Over recent decades, governments globally have faced increasing pressure to enhance efficiency, responsiveness, and accountability pressures driven by globalization, fiscal constraints, rapid technological change, and rising citizen expectations (Yang et al., 2024). Consequently, strategic human resource management has become a central concern in public administration scholarship and practice.

Within this context, talent management has emerged as a key component of strategic HRM. Talent management refers to the systematic attraction, development, motivation, and retention of employees whose skills and capabilities are critical to organizational success (Phan, 2024). When effectively implemented, talent management fosters a committed and high-performing workforce, enhances organizational performance, and supports long-term sustainability. However, the institutional environment of public sector organizations particularly in developing countries often constrains talent management practices. Unlike the private sector, public sector talent management operates within bureaucratic structures characterized by standardized recruitment, fixed pay scales, centralized decision-making, and extensive regulation. These mechanisms, while intended to ensure accountability, transparency, and equity, can limit managerial discretion and hinder the adoption of innovative HRM practices (Noon & Ogbonna, 2021). As a result, public sector organizations often struggle to recruit, develop, and retain talented professionals, especially in competitive labor markets.

These challenges are amplified in developing countries, where public sector HRM systems are frequently under-resourced, institutionally weak, and susceptible to politicization. HR functions often remain administrative rather than strategic, focusing on compliance rather than workforce planning and talent development. This leads to systemic skills gaps, low employee motivation, and high turnover of skilled personnel.

In The Gambia, the public sector plays a central role in national development through policy formulation, service delivery, and economic and social regulation. Ministries, departments, agencies, local governments, and public institutions require skilled and motivated staff to function effectively. Yet human resource challenges in the Gambian public sector are acute: shortages of qualified professionals, limited training and development opportunities, low motivation, and weak succession planning (Jallow & Sanner, 2023). These problems undermine institutional performance and reduce the state's capacity to meet development goals. Moreover, the Gambian public sector operates in an increasingly competitive labor market; professionals are attracted to the private sector, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations that offer higher salaries, clearer career paths, and more flexible working conditions. This has resulted in high turnover of talented workers, particularly those with specialized skills, leading to a loss of institutional memory, continuity, and organizational capacity (Shon & Gilke, 2022).

Despite the growing emphasis on talent management in public sector reform agendas, scholarly research specifically addressing talent management in The Gambia's public sector remains scarce. Existing literature and policy reports have focused on broader governance, leadership, and public financial management issues, with limited attention to talent management as a distinct strategic concern (Darby, 2023). This evidence gap constrains the development of evidence-based HRM reforms and capacity-building initiatives.

To address this gap, the present study investigates talent management challenges in the Gambian public sector through a qualitative literature analysis. By synthesizing existing academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports, the study identifies constraints affecting talent attraction, development, and retention. It also offers policy-relevant recommendations for strengthening strategic HRM practices in the Gambian public sector, thereby contributing to institutional performance and sustainable national development. This study fills a specific gap by providing the first systematic,

theory-informed synthesis of talent management challenges in the Gambian public sector, combining insights from the Resource-Based View, Institutional Theory, and Public Service Motivation to offer a multi-dimensional understanding of the constraints at play.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Talent Management Conceptualization

Talent management is broadly defined as a set of integrated HRM processes designed to attract, develop, motivate, and retain individuals deemed valuable to organizational success (Dixit et al., 2026). It is not a discrete HR activity but a coordinated system encompassing recruitment, development, performance management, and retention. Strategic talent management emphasizes alignment between organizational goals and HR processes to ensure that organizations have the right people in the right positions at the right time (Milhem, 2025). In this sense, talent management is directly linked to long-term organizational performance and sustainability.

Literature distinguishes between exclusive and inclusive approaches to talent management. Exclusive strategies focus on a limited number of high-potential or high-performing employees identified for critical roles, whereas inclusive strategies aim to develop the entire workforce. Inclusive approaches are often preferred in the public sector because they align with principles of equity, fairness, and equal opportunity that underpin civil service systems (Humphrey et al., 2024). However, scholars caution that excessive inclusiveness can dilute strategic focus and reduce the efficiency of resource allocation for development. This highlights the need for balanced talent management strategies that respect public sector values while addressing urgent skill demands. Moreover, recent debates emphasize that talent management should not be reduced to a set of practices but understood as a mindset that integrates strategic foresight, organizational culture, and leadership commitment (Alhebsi et al., 2025).

2.2. Public Sector Talent Management

Talent management in the public sector is shaped by institutional, political, and regulatory factors that distinguish it from the private sector. Public sector organizations typically operate within civil service systems featuring standardized recruitment processes, fixed pay scales, centralized decision-making, and extensive regulation (Sievert et al., 2022). While these arrangements promote accountability and transparency, they often constrain managerial flexibility and limit the adoption of innovative HRM practices.

Consequently, public sector organizations frequently struggle to recruit, develop, and retain talented individuals. Recruitment processes are often bureaucratic and slow, rendering them unresponsive to labor market dynamics. Compensation and promotion systems are typically standardized, making it difficult to reward high performers or attract scarce skills. Recent studies also highlight challenges in employer attractiveness, as public sector organizations compete with private sector employers (Asseburg & Homberg, 2020; Prümer & Schnabel, 2023). Although non-financial benefits such as job security and the opportunity to contribute to society are often cited as advantages, they may not suffice to retain highly skilled employees who seek career development and competitive remuneration. Furthermore, the absence of flexible work arrangements and limited recognition for innovation further dampen motivation among talented professionals.

2.3. Talent Management in Developing Countries

In developing countries, talent management challenges are compounded by limited financial resources, weak institutional capacity, and governance constraints. HRM systems in these settings often remain administrative, focused on compliance rather than strategic workforce planning or talent development (Destriani et al., 2024). As a result, public sector organizations face systematic skill gaps, ineffective training, poor succession planning, and high employee turnover. The lack of reliable HR

information systems further exacerbates these problems, as decisionmakers cannot accurately forecast staffing needs or evaluate the impact of talent initiatives.

Political interference further complicates talent management in many developing nations. Patronage-based recruitment and promotion practices can undermine meritocracy, erode employee trust, and weaken HRM systems (Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2024). Such practices damage organizational capacity and contribute to the loss of talented individuals, particularly those with specialized skills. Moreover, frequent changes in political leadership often lead to discontinuity in HR policies, making it difficult to sustain long-term talent development programs.

2.4. Talent Management in Sub-Saharan Africa

Empirical research on talent management in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially within the public sector, remains limited. Available literature indicates that HRM systems in the region are characterized by centralized control, politicization, and limited managerial autonomy (Nzimande et al., 2025). Skill shortages are widespread in critical sectors such as policy analysis, public financial management, health, and education, and retention problems are exacerbated by competition from the private sector and international organizations.

(Makola, 2025) argue that addressing talent management challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa requires context-sensitive strategies that balance merit-based HRM practices with public sector values and institutional realities. Strengthening strategic workforce planning, investing in leadership development, and enhancing managerial autonomy are widely recognized as essential for improving talent management and organizational performance in the public sector. Additionally, regional initiatives such as the African Public Sector Human Resource Managers' Network have begun to promote peer learning and capacity building, but their impact remains uneven across countries.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is informed by three theoretical lenses: the Resource-Based View (RBV), Institutional Theory, and Public Service Motivation (PSM). Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for understanding talent management challenges in the public sector, particularly within the institutional context of The Gambia.

3.1. Resource-Based View (RBV)

RBV emphasizes that organizations achieve sustainable competitive advantage by managing resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Holz, 2026). In public sector organizations, human capital the knowledge, skills, and competencies of employees is a critical strategic asset that directly influences institutional performance and delivery service. Weak workforce planning, inadequate training, and poor retention undermine the effective utilization of human capital. From an RBV perspective, strengthening talent management systems is essential to enhance organizational capability and long-term performance. In the Gambian context, the failure to develop internal talent pipelines means that the public sector loses potentially valuable human capital to other sectors, thereby eroding its competitive positioning in the labor market.

3.2. Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory highlights the role of formal rules, norms, and political structures in shaping organizational behavior and management practices (Adam et al., 2025). In the public sector, HRM practices are heavily influenced by civil service regulations, administrative traditions, and political oversight. In The Gambia, strict regulatory frameworks and centralized decision-making constrain managerial autonomy and limit innovation in talent management. Institutional Theory helps explain why public sector organizations often struggle to adopt strategic HRM practices, even when their benefits are recognized. For instance, even when individual managers wish to implement more flexible recruitment or

performance-based rewards, they are bound by civil service rules that prioritize procedural compliance over strategic outcomes. This creates a decoupling between formal policies and actual talent management needs.

3.3. Public Service Motivation (PSM)

PSM refers to the intrinsic drive of individuals to serve the public interest and contribute to societal well-being (Kabber et al., 2025). PSM provides insights into employee motivation and retention in public sector contexts where financial incentives may be limited. While high levels of PSM can foster commitment and reduce turnover, supportive HRM practices and fair institutional arrangements are necessary to sustain motivation (Guan et al., 2025). In The Gambia, many public employees are drawn to the sector by a desire to contribute to national development. However, when they encounter bureaucratic obstacles, lack of career progression, and perceived unfairness in promotions, their initial motivation can erode, leading to disengagement or exit.

3.4. Integration of the Three Theories

Together, these theoretical perspectives offer an integrated framework for examining talent management challenges in the Gambian public sector, illustrating how strategic, institutional, and motivational factors interact to shape HRM outcomes. RBV directs attention to the strategic value of human capital; Institutional Theory explains the structural and political constraints that prevent its optimal use; and PSM highlights the motivational resources that can be leveraged if supportive HR practices are in place. This study applies these lenses to explain specific findings: RBV explains underutilized human capital; Institutional Theory accounts for regulatory rigidity; PSM highlights the limits of intrinsic motivation under weak HR systems. By combining the three, the study provides a holistic diagnosis that goes beyond describing symptoms to uncover root causes.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative literature-based research design, suitable for exploring under-researched contexts where primary data collection is constrained. The research relies entirely on secondary data sources: peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents, civil service regulations, and reports from international development organizations (e.g., World Bank, UNDP).

4.1. Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

A systematic search was conducted in Scopus, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and PubMed using keywords: “talent management,” “public sector,” “human resource management,” “developing countries,” “The Gambia,” “Sub-Saharan Africa,” “employee retention,” and “succession planning.” Boolean operators (AND, OR) were applied. The search was limited to publications from 2015 to 2026 to capture recent developments. Inclusion criteria were: (a) peer-reviewed articles, (b) official government policy documents or civil service regulations, (c) reports from reputable international organizations, and (d) direct relevance to talent management or HRM in public sector contexts. Non-English publications, opinion pieces, and sources without empirical or policy grounding were excluded. After screening titles, abstracts, and full texts, 45 sources were included (See Figure 1)



Figure 1. Flowchart of Document Review Process, the review process followed four stages:

4.2. Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Coding was manual, focusing on patterns related to talent attraction, recruitment, development, succession planning, retention, and institutional constraints. To enhance reliability, codes were reviewed iteratively, and themes were refined through constant comparison. The final themes were validated by cross-checking with the original sources to ensure they accurately represented the findings.

5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Results

The literature reviewed reveals interconnected challenges that undermine talent management in the Gambian public sector. These span the talent management cycle and are organized into a multi-level typology: institutional-level constraints (regulatory frameworks, centralization, political interference), organizational-level constraints (workforce planning, recruitment, training, succession planning), and individual-level outcomes (retention, motivation, skill gaps). This typology moves beyond descriptive synthesis to provide a structured analytical framework that highlights how macro-level rules shape organizational practices, which in turn affect individual employee experiences.

Table 1 summarizes the key challenges identified at each level, drawing directly from the literature reviewed.

Table 1. Multi-Level Typology of Talent Management Challenges in the Gambian Public Sector

Level	Category	Key Challenges (as found in the literature)
Institutional	Regulatory Rigidity	Centralized civil service rules; inflexible recruitment, promotion, and compensation systems; limited managerial autonomy (Gonod, 2025)
	Political Interference	Patronage-based recruitment and promotion; erosion of meritocracy; reduced employee trust (Bigirinama et al., 2025)
Organizational	Strategic Workforce Planning	Absence of forecasting mechanisms; reactive talent management; no alignment of HR capacity with organizational needs (Getha-Taylor, 2023)
	Recruitment & Attraction	Lengthy, bureaucratic hiring processes; non-competitive remuneration; weak employer branding (Gupta, 2024)
	Training & Development	Insufficient funding; poor design; lack of strategic alignment; weak internal talent pipeline (Molteni, 2025)
	Succession Planning	No formal systems; leadership gaps; loss of institutional knowledge upon retirement/exit (Bello-Gomez & Rutherford, 2023)
Individual	Retention & Motivation	Low wages; limited promotion; inability to reward performance; talent drain to private/NGO sectors (Doktorová et al., 2025)

5.1.1. Institutional-Level Constraints

Regulatory Rigidity and Centralization: The Gambian public sector operates under centralized civil service regulations that govern recruitment, promotion, and compensation (Gonod, 2025). These rules, intended to ensure fairness, often result in lengthy, inflexible procedures unresponsive to labor market dynamics. Managers lack autonomy to tailor HR practices to organizational needs, causing misalignment between staffing requirements and available talent. For instance, the time taken to fill a vacancy can extend to several months, during which critical functions may remain understaffed or be covered by temporary arrangements that do not foster long-term capacity.

Political Interference: Political interference in HR processes undermines merit-based practices. Recruitment and promotion decisions may be influenced by patronage rather than competence, eroding employee trust and weakening institutional performance (Bigirinama et al., 2025). This creates a disconnect between formal HR policies and actual practices, exacerbating talent management difficulties. The

perception of favoritism can lower morale and discourage high-performing employees from seeking long-term careers within the public sector.

5.1.2. Organizational-Level Constraints

Strategic Workforce Planning: Strategic workforce planning is not firmly established. Most government institutions lack mechanisms to forecast future skill needs and align human resource capacity with organizational objectives (Getha-Taylor, 2023). Talent management remains reactive, focused on short-term gaps rather than long-term capacity building. The absence of workforce analytics and succession planning hampers the sector's ability to address skill shortages, particularly in technical and managerial fields. Without a clear understanding of current and future competencies, training investments become ad hoc and fail to address strategic priorities.

Recruitment and Attraction: Recruitment processes are centralized, rigid, and lengthy (Gupta, 2024). Prolonged hiring timelines, lack of communication, and non-competitive remuneration packages reduce the public sector's employer attractiveness relative to the private sector and international organizations. Talented graduates and mid-career professionals often view public sector employment as a last resort rather than a first choice, further limiting the pool of applicants.

Training and Development: Training and development opportunities are limited by insufficient funding, weak institutional coordination, and lack of strategic alignment. Programs are often underfunded, poorly designed, and not systematically linked to organizational needs. This results in stagnant skills, reduced motivation, and a weak internal talent pipeline (Molteni, 2025). Furthermore, there is little emphasis on leadership development, which is critical for preparing future managers and ensuring continuity.

Succession Planning: Formal succession planning is largely absent. Departure of senior officials whether through retirement or resignation frequently leaves leadership gaps and loss of institutional knowledge (Bello-Gomez & Rutherford, 2023). The absence of systematic succession planning undermines continuity, disrupts operations, and increases reliance on external recruitment. This is particularly problematic in specialized areas such as finance, policy analysis, and ICT, where external candidates may require significant time to become productive.

5.1.3. Individual-Level Outcomes

Retention and Motivation: Low wages, limited promotion opportunities, and inability to reward high performance contribute to high turnover among talented employees (Doktorová et al., 2025). Non-financial factors such as job security and public service motivation may provide some counterbalance but are often insufficient to retain skilled professionals seeking competitive compensation and career growth. Consequently, talented employees frequently leave the public sector, resulting in persistent talent drain. The loss of such employees not only reduces organizational capacity but also increases recruitment and training costs for replacements.

5.2. Discussion

The findings confirm that talent management challenges in the Gambian public sector are not isolated but stem from interacting institutional, organizational, and individual factors. Applying the theoretical frameworks illuminates these interconnections.

5.2.1. Resource-Based View

From an RBV perspective, the Gambian public sector fails to leverage its human capital as a strategic asset. Weak workforce planning, inadequate training, and high turnover deplete valuable skills and competencies, limiting sustained performance (Logesh & Ebenezer Paul Rajan, 2024). The underutilization of human capital directly impedes service delivery and institutional effectiveness. Moreover, the lack of investment in developing internal talent means that the public sector cannot build

the unique, organization-specific capabilities that would give it a long-term advantage over other employers.

5.2.2. Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory explains how formal rules, centralization, and political dynamics constrain talent management. Civil service regulations, designed for accountability, create rigidities that stifle innovation and managerial discretion (Baniamin et al., 2025). Even when public sector leaders recognize the importance of strategic talent management, institutional pressures perpetuate compliance-oriented HR practices. The study also highlights how political interference creates an informal institutional environment that contradicts formal merit-based policies, further complicating reform efforts.

5.2.3. Public Service Motivation

PSM offers insights into employee motivation and retention. Many public sector employees are driven by intrinsic motivation to serve the community (Kabber et al., 2025). However, without supportive HRM practices, fair career development, and equitable rewards, even highly motivated employees may become disengaged or leave. PSM alone cannot compensate for systemic HR deficiencies. Therefore, reforms must simultaneously address the structural barriers that undermine motivation and create a work environment where intrinsic motivation can flourish.

5.2.4. Practical Implications and Reform Pathways

Together, these lenses underscore the need for integrated talent management reforms that simultaneously address strategic, institutional, and motivational dimensions. The proposed multi-level typology provides a practical tool for diagnosing constraints and designing targeted interventions. For instance, institutional reforms could focus on increasing managerial autonomy and revising civil service rules to allow more flexible recruitment and reward systems. Organizational reforms might include introducing workforce analytics, establishing clear career paths, and investing in leadership development. Individual-level interventions could involve recognition programs and non-monetary incentives that reinforce public service motivation.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined talent management challenges in the Gambian public sector through a qualitative literature-based analysis. The findings reveal persistent constraints across strategic workforce planning, recruitment, training, succession planning, retention, and institutional governance. These challenges are deeply interconnected and collectively impair the public sector's ability to manage talent effectively. By proposing a multi-level typology institutional, organizational, and individual the study contributes a structured analytical framework that can guide future research and policy design.

To address these issues, a shift from an administrative to a strategic orientation in HRM is necessary. Key institutional reforms should include increasing managerial autonomy, strengthen merit-based HR processes, and align talent management with organizational strategy. Building sustainable capacity requires sustained investment in training, leadership development, and succession planning. Talent management is not merely an HR concern but a broader governance and development imperative. By strengthening talent management, The Gambia can enhance public sector performance, improve service delivery, and contribute to sustainable national development.

This study contributes a multi-level analytical framework that synthesizes institutional, organizational, and individual factors, offering a structured approach for understanding talent management constraints in developing-country public sectors. Future research should complement these findings with empirical data, including staff and management perspectives on talent management practices and reform priorities. Comparative studies across different developing countries could also help identify which contextual factors most influence the success or failure of talent management reforms. Additionally,

longitudinal research tracking the impact of specific interventions would provide valuable evidence for policymakers seeking to strengthen public sector HRM.

Ethical Approval

Not Applicable

Informed Consent Statement

Not Applicable

Authors' Contributions

Not Applicable

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

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Notes on Contributors

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Lamin Saidy Jeng is a postgraduate researcher in Master of Business Administration at the Faculty of Business and Public Administration, University of The Gambia. His academic interests focus on human resource management, organizational behavior, cultural diversity management, and institutional governance, with particular attention to higher education and public sector organizations in developing country contexts. He can be contacted via email: laminsaidyjeng1@gmail.com/lsaidyjeng@utg.edu.gm

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