Challenges that Hinder Effective Implementation of a Talent Management System: A Case of a Public Electricity Utility Company in Southern Africa

Zama Mtshali¹, Cecile N. Gerwel Proches¹ and Paul Green²

¹Graduate School of Business and Leadership, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.
²Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa.

Abstract
The purpose of a talent management system is to provide, among other services, a defined talent management process to attract, grow, and retain top talent in core, critical, and scarce skills. This research was conducted to identify the challenges that inhibit the implementation of the talent management process at a public electricity utility company in Southern Africa. Owing to the social and complex nature of the study, a qualitative research approach was adopted because of its ability to capture perceptions and feelings of participants. Purposive sampling was used. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 respondents. The data was collected and analyzed in themes. The findings reveal the importance of implementation and leadership commitment to talent management.

Keywords: Talent Management, Leadership, Performance, Succession Management, Qualitative Research.

INTRODUCTION
The public electricity utility company in Southern Africa is a state-owned company that employs approximately 43 000 permanent employees. It is run by an Executive Committee, which reports to a Board. Within the existing structures there is a Human Resources (HR) Department which reports to the Chief Executive and the Board. The HR Department is accountable for a structure which includes a talent management function in its value chain. The purpose of the talent management system is to provide, among other services, a defined talent management process. Such a process aims to attract, grow, and retain top talent in core, critical, and scarce skills. Within the talent management system there are evident weaknesses inhibiting successful implementation of the talent management process. It is critical to attract and retain critical skills in this environment. This research was conducted to investigate the challenges that inhibit the successful implementation of the talent management system at the public electricity utility company.

Some of the challenges to the process have manifested themselves through the inability to build skills in critical areas. These areas are, for example, technical skills, the lack of a solid pipeline, the lack of retention of talent among core, critical, and scarce skills, and the inability to fulfill Employment Equity targets. Such targets are part of the talent management objectives within the organization.

The organization is one of the top 20 utilities in the world, rated by its capacity to generate electricity. It generates, transmits, and distributes electricity to customers in the industrial, mining, commercial, agricultural, and residential sectors, as well as to redistributors. The organizational structure consists mainly of line divisions, principally concerned with generation, transmission, distribution, and customer services, which interface with customers.

Talent management has been identified as a strategic imperative within organizations. It is considered an important tool in enhancing performance and attracting, growing, and retaining top talent [1, 2]. Failure to implement an effective talent management process has a direct impact on organizational growth and performance [3]. It is therefore critical for an organization to master the art of talent management implementation in order to realize the many benefits attributed to successful talent management implementation. These benefits may include a nurtured succession-management pool, the achievement of transformation goals, improved business performance, and the retention of core skills. The identification of barriers to successful implementation will present an important learning opportunity for the organization. The public electricity utility company’s vision is to become one of the top five performing utilities in the world. One of the critical focus areas is skills development.

There are a number of challenges that pertain to the talent management process [4]. The public electricity utility company has a talent management process that is followed rigorously. This process should ensure the availability of a consistent talent pool. Alternatively, it may apply effective talent management to minimize gaps that arise mainly out of business demands and talent attrition. The current context is, however, not reflecting the efforts that are being put into the process; instead, the following challenges are evident within the organization: a lack of a strong internal pipeline, the unavailability of succession plans to effectively deploy, grow, and retain core, critical, and scarce skills. Equally, enhancing of leadership capacity has been neglected, leading to absence of a leadership pipeline and development [5]. A review must constantly be made of organizational strategy, the talent management process, other related processes and leadership culture that ensure the required and desirable talent management impacts on career and leadership development, in order for the business to remain relevant and competitive [6]. It is especially critical to attract and retain critical and scarce talent in the engineering field [7].

The study therefore sought to determine the challenges that hinder the public electricity utility company’s talent management system from delivering on expected outcomes.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Talent management has appeared in many organizations as a central, deliberate, and strategic imperative for organizational development, growth, and performance. The framework of talent management has been contextualized as a manner of dealing with talent shortages faced by the demand created by business; with the quality of available skills and knowledge of workers; with growing the skills; and with how the critical skills may be retained within organizations [8]. Furthermore, talent management has been cited as a critical value-adding dynamic in certifying organizational success through performance [9]. This is supported by the research carried out by the Boston Consulting Group and the World Federation of People Management Associations [10]. These bodies found a fundamental correlation between excellence in talent management and excellence in organizational performance. The study showed that organizations that shine in key areas of the HR value chain, among which is talent management, have seen a revenue growth more than those organizations that do not pay attention to these areas. This is corroborated by [11]. These researchers further state that organizations with sound talent management strategies project higher profit margins, realize organizational objectives, and generate general attractiveness for the organization through customer satisfaction.

It appears that there is not a consistent definition of talent management globally, still less in Southern Africa. Research carried out by the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) highlighted that more than 75 organizations define talent management differently [12]. There is, however, consensus that a grounded talent management system can yield positive results on organizational performance and sustainability. There are multiple definitions of talent management [13]. It appears that among scholars and talent-management practitioners there is a common understanding that talent management is about organizational activities. Such activities are concerned with attracting, growing, and retaining skills in alignment with organizational strategy and attainment of set objectives [14].

For the purpose of this research, the researchers settled on the approach proposed by [15]. This approach defines the talent-management process as a deliberate, methodical approach to identifying critical positions and their impact on the organization. Talent management is responsible for creating a talent pool with the intention of developing and retaining the identified talent. The approach focuses on the ability of the talent management system to redeploy talent, and to create efficiencies with its available resources. In this way the organizational objective and the sustainability of the organization are secured through the supply meeting demand for needed skills in critical positions within the competitive labour market.

Talent management has surfaced as a strategic imperative within organizations and within the HR value chain. It has been identified as a process that can mitigate the unmet demand of skills and talents that are fuelled by the competitiveness of the market within which organizations operate. There appears to be a strong correlation between talent management and organizational performance [16]. There is also a strong view that effective talent management yields a competitive advantage [8]. Talent is a critical resource in any organization – management of it therefore being critical. Top talent has a major impact on business results; accordingly, management thereof cannot be underplayed [17].

The ability to attract, develop and retain top talent at the right time and value is the main aim of talent management. Failure to do so in a competitive market may mean that the organization concerned will fail to attract the right skills that are critical for the survival of the business. On the other hand, for an organization that is not developing the skills, that organization may be harbouring underdeveloped skills. The organization may thus at times lose critical and core skills. Ultimately, the attrition of staff numbers and the replacement of such skills may have a direct negative impact on profitability, damaging the competitiveness of the organization [18].

Leadership development may also be achieved through sound talent management processes within organizations. Moving professionals to supervisory, managerial, and leadership roles may also intensify other challenges within the organization [18]. The need, therefore, to systematically develop and nurture leadership should be at the top of the agenda of any talent-management programme for any organization.

There is a strong link between talent management and organizational performance. In the competitive environment in which organizations find themselves, employees’ skills and capabilities set one organization apart from others. This necessitates the proper investment in and management of talent. Talent management is the critical differentiator between the success and failure of an organization [19]. Talent management continues to be acknowledged as a tool and vehicle for managerial development. Also, it cannot be separated from organizational performance, having a major influence on the direction of the organization [20]. Talent management has also been identified as a cost-effective way of ensuring business performance and the necessary flexibility required by the business to create a competitive advantage [21]. A talent management agenda integrated with other business imperatives has a major influence on business results, competitive advantage, effectiveness, and efficiency [22].

Talent management is a critical system for securing competence of the organizational workforce and quality decision making that eventually leads to excellent and quantifiable business performance [8]. This, therefore, suggests that organizations need to give talent management space to unfold to its full potential. Organizations should be focused on embedding talent management as a critical business culture, driver, and gate-keeper.

Organizations seem to be succeeding in putting together talent management programmes. However, there is still a gap between the existing programmes and expected outcomes of such programmes. There is a gap between theory and practical application and the operationalizing of talent management within organizations, as found in previous research [23]. These researchers further state that, although there is consensus that talent management is critical for the competitiveness and survival of organizations, talent management remains unmanaged, and therefore its implementation remains a
challenge in some organizations.

Organizations continue with traditional practices which do not take into consideration the dynamics of the competitive environment; and which are defined by vagueness concerning talent demand, the evolution of the workforce, and varying generational interests [24]. An example of varying generational interests is a generation that prefers job security versus a generation that enjoys flexibility.

The uncertainty factor of changing consumer demands can also lead to organizations not knowing how to plan. Instead, they have to rely on other talent-acquisition mixes, like employing the services of third-party contractors, freelancers or casual workers. The unpredictable demand from consumers necessitates a different strategy from the traditional approach of creating succession pools where this may not be necessary. Previous research emphasized that employers are moving towards using service providers other than permanent employees; this indicates the employers’ inability to provide suitable candidates for a job [24]. The adverse result of the threat to job security is attrition, especially of core, critical and scarce skills. It is easy for those exiting to secure other employment from competitors or other industries, or to settle for self-employment.

Investment must be made in those employees identified as having potential and those who are high performers. This, therefore, means that performance management is a critical feeder to the talent management process. Previous research has highlighted the subjectivity of the performance-management system as a challenge [24]. The differentiation of talent by lenient or critical appraisers, and the subjectivity of that process, compromise consistency in identifying top performers. This may at times render the identification of high potential employees ineffective.

There are numerous other factors that may act as barriers to the successful implementation of talent management. Previous research expands on these challenges [25, 26]. Top talent identification, as discussed above, has a great impact on the realization of the talent management objectives. The utilization of a performance-management system as a tool may also have certain shortcomings: it may have bias towards technical competence, ignoring leadership competencies.

Hierarchical organizational structures may also reduce the accountability of senior management and commitment to the process; and, as a result, downplay the criticality of the process. The influence of personal relationships may also frustrate the objectivity of the process, leading to further challenges developing within the organization [23]. The above challenges necessitated further investigation of other barriers and impediments facing the organization.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design took an inductive approach, considering that the research process needed to allow engagement, and to derive meaning from the context, as presented by participants. The public electricity utility company’s talent management implementation was studied in the context of the participants who are exposed to the system. A qualitative research method was adopted because of its flexibility and ability to take into account participants’ subjective views on the research topic. The qualitative approach allowed for better comprehension of the fundamental challenges that hinder the organization in successfully implementing talent management. This was because the qualitative approach captures the genuine experience of respondents within the research context.

A non-probability, purposive sampling technique was employed. The selection of the respondents was based on the exposure to the talent management system within the organization. The sample included individuals from head office – two talent management advisors, two senior members in leadership within the organization, eight employees within the targeted segment of talent management, (managerial employees), and two human-resource business partners. In total, 14 people formed the sample.

During August 2014, open-ended interviews were used as a method of data collection. Interviews presented the respondents and the research team with the opportunity of engaging with and establishing the respondents’ perceptions on the area of research. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. An inductive approach was utilized for data analysis, to gain understanding and insight into the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following themes as indicated in Table 1 were identified:

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i. Theme 1: Talent management definition and understanding

One respondent stated that talent management is about identifying talent that will align with the business in meeting the strategic objectives of the organization. The respondent also gave an example: that the focus of the electric utility is currently to deliver on the new build programme. This implies completing the building of a new power station, extending the organization’s ability to supply reliable electricity. The
respondent was also of the view that talent management should be utilized to retain the identified talent, at least until the project is seen to completion. This may be achieved not only by financial reward, but also by affording employees opportunities to do meaningful work.

*It is a well-structured methodology of measuring your own employees’ development.* (R9)

Another respondent understood that employees could be retained by improving their working conditions and opportunities to grow within a defined space. Business needs and career paths facilitated by mentorship and coaching programmes would define such a space.

*The organization should not take it for granted that professionals always know what to do, especially young ones; talent management should be a guide for employee development...* (R6)

It was indicated that another way of retaining employees is to provide opportunities for development and career growth within the confines of the organization’s defined talent management policy. Another respondent argued that talent management is mainly about identifying the qualities employees have, exposing them, and nurturing them.

One viewed talent management as a process for effecting career guidance, career mobility, and planning, to ensure required skills development in critical positions.

*Talent management is about finding the right people for the right jobs at the right time to deliver on the business objectives.* (R4)

The above view was also shared by another respondent who interpreted talent management as a process by which skills and competencies required by the organization are identified, together with the suitability of the employees to deliver on the job.

*The talent management process allows the organization to understand its SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats).* (R5)

**ii. Theme 2: Responsibility of delivering a successful talent management programme**

A line manager stated that line managers have accountability for delivering talent management successfully in the business. On the other hand, a talent management advisor confirmed that talent management is currently left to HR and talent and skills advisors to deliver. This is mainly because delivery of such a key performance area is contracted to them. Other respondents felt that no one had taken accountability for delivering talent management. They recognized that talent management advisors have attempted to take accountability, but this has not yielded any results. The study findings were remarkably similar to the findings made by [27] in a Corporate Executive Board study, that found that less than a fifth of senior executives had the required levels of commitment to talent management. Neither did they have the effectiveness in delivering the talent management practices required to drive these outcomes. It was further identified that leadership does need assistance to make a shift from being business leaders to talent leaders [27]. They would then be capacitated to take accountability for their talent, enhancing their ability to deliver on business imperatives.

**iii. Theme 3: Performance as a critical feeder to talent management**

The view was expressed that performance management has a significant role to play in any organization. It is necessary to deliver the required output from the talent the organization has. This had not realized its full potential in the electric utility company. It was also acknowledged that, to a limited extent, the organization had seen some results. However, the talent management process and performance management are not integrated, and performance is not managed satisfactorily. The significance of performance management has been highlighted as one of the critical success factors in managing talent and ensuring an organization’s ability to meet its objectives and to maintain its competitiveness in the marketplace [16].

A respondent acknowledged that there are talent management and performance-management processes within the organization. The respondent also stated that the value of the systems will only be known if they are used properly. The respondent further commented that the input has not been remarkable, and therefore the results are yet to be achieved.

A talent management advisor agreed that performance management is a significant component of talent management. The respondent further elaborated that it is through performance management that one is able to distinguish and identify the top performers. By these means one may also differentiate decisions on succession planning, and even on retention strategies. It was argued that leadership is not bold enough to properly manage performance, for example by giving developmental feedback. As a result, the use of individual performance ratings has proven to be unreliable.

**iv. Theme 4: Career and leadership development**

A senior manager responded by saying that outcomes, such as career and leadership development, are dependent on the manager.

*Currently no one is policing... positive impact has been very minimal.* (R1)

One other respondent confirmed that there had been initiatives that the organization has embarked on to develop leaders, for example the Senior Leadership Programme and Supervisory Development Programme. No positive effects of the programmes have been evident, however, because of the misalignment of the processes. This respondent further maintained that the initiatives were not thought through and aligned.

Another respondent stated that there had not been any feedback on talent management and he was not even aware that the process was still in place. He further stated that the organization still lacks skills in critical areas. He also confirmed that
numerous leadership development programmes are offered, but the results have not been realized.

Even when people get trained, they are not offered opportunities to apply what they have learnt … (R5)

One manager stated that the organization is heading in the right direction. He said that the organization needs to accelerate the existing programmes to ensure that the talent management processes are aligned. The organization should facilitate meeting business objectives. He also said that initiatives like on-the-job training, which were used to effectively facilitate career development, are now undermined and the current processes are effected haphazardly.

v. Theme 5: Succession Management

A senior manager shared a view that succession management arises as a result of a deliberate effort that is made through talent management and dedication. He said that succession pools have, to a certain extent, been put together. However, he highlighted the point that the organization has not yet met its target. For example, in technical environments there are very few women, which indicates that transformational goals have not been met.

The organization should put in place other restrictive processes to mitigate against other risks that may arise. For instance, succession pools should not be used for promotion purposes. Instead, a full recruitment process must be followed, rather than relying on the succession pool.

If there was integrity in the system we would have been able to use the existing succession if we need to replace attrition in critical areas and for promotional prospects. (R12)

Another respondent agreed that if the organization had a succession plan that was working, there would be no need to go through a full recruitment process each time a vacancy arose.

Another manager admitted that the organization has not gone far with succession planning and management. She said that the organization had ideas and plans, but there had not been sufficient application of those ideas.

The research findings are congruent with the finding of [28] who ascertained that organizations lacked aggressive succession-management initiatives for various reasons. One reason is the lack of commitment from the senior leadership in organizations, and a culture that is dependent on buying skills, as opposed to nurturing the available resources. Leadership must enlist a culture that embraces growing skills [28].

The perceived practice in the organization also goes against the grain of the importance of succession management. Succession plans may be attained through visionary leadership and organizational commitment, among other things [29]. It is critical that leadership focus on the strategic talent management activities, at the least, such as succession management [27].

vi. Theme 6: Compliance with the talent management process

A senior manager confirmed that, although there was a talent management process in place, she was not confident that the process adds any value, considering how it was done. Another respondent cited the financial challenges and the many other critical expected deliverables that the organization was faced with. This was given as a reason for not complying with the talent management process.

Another respondent stated that, although there are pockets of excellence, there is limited evidence that compliance by the few business units has made the required impact on the organization. The talent advisor explained that there has been a limited level of compliance. It was highlighted that the level of compliance has not been beneficial to the organization.

The talent advisor’s view was further illustrated by another respondent’s comment that the recruitment process adopted does not follow the recommendations of the talent board. There is evidence that the current level of compliance is not advantageous. One respondent shared a different view. He argued that the business has complied with its talent management processes and that HR drives committees and pays specific attention to the development of people.

On the other hand, one manager emphatically stated that none of the talent management processes may be utilized to take the business forward at this stage.

Everyone is aware that these processes are not working. (R9)

Another respondent remarked that there is a degree of compliance within the organization, although the process has not been enabled. A HR business partner cited the view that the shortcoming of the current talent management process is that it is complicated and cumbersome in achieving the desired objectives.

One senior manager described the current compliance as a ‘tick-box’ exercise. He further explained that the organization had not yet reached the maturity levels required to make the talent management process work.

There is no follow through and more often the interventions are vague. (R7)

vii. Theme 7: Control over successful implementation of the talent management process

A respondent mentioned that leadership does, to a limited extent, have control over the successful implementation of talent management in their respective areas. It was established that employees have not been receptive to development intervention. For example, employees have found it difficult to learn new skills, mainly because they are in a comfort zone. One respondent expressed the view that, although leadership has the control required to deliver a successful talent management programme, it must move beyond a compliance stage to a proper implementation level.

Leadership does not seem to have control and talent management is seen as a waste of time. (R12)

The above-mentioned view was supported by that of another respondent who felt that management does not have any
control, mainly because this process cannot be used to influence anything. One respondent contended that line managers have control over the implementation of a successful talent management process, and they only need to commit to the process to make it work.

A respondent felt that there are various factors that prevent management from applying the talent management principles, such as the inflexibility of policies and rules against moving employees vertically, using talent management processes. One middle manager confirmed that management can do a great deal with the current talent management process; however, they take no steps to execute action.

The organization seems to have lost control over the current talent management system. This suggests that the availability of the talent management process of the organization does not guarantee successful implementation. Rather, commitment to the process and meticulous execution is required.

viii. Theme 8: Leadership level of accountability

One respondent at senior managerial level believed that employees have a greater role to play, especially when it comes to identifying individual gaps. Leadership’s accountability is that of ensuring that there is alignment with employees’ aspirations. The business needs assistance from the HR Department as an enabler of the talent management process.

A respondent highlighted that it is incumbent upon the leadership to secure succession plans within the business to ensure a continuous supply of skills, and to identify training interventions. Some level of responsibility, however, should also be apportioned to the employees themselves when it comes to commitment to the development programme. A few respondents held the view that talent management is a joint responsibility of leadership, the HR Department, and employees.

One of the talent management advisors expressed a strong sentiment that accountability for delivering a successful talent management programme within the organization should reside at the highest office of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Line managers should support the CEO, and the HR Department should take ownership of the process, guiding the business. Two managers proposed a different view. They saw the finance department as having a critical role in making the budget available for employee development.

Training is often seen as a cost by the finance colleagues; it is critical that they understand employee development as an investment and not as a cost. (R6)

One of the line managers remarked that the HR Department should also play a meaningful role in driving, monitoring, and assuring the process if it is to be successful. Line managers have numerous day-to-day operational responsibilities to fulfill: this undermines other human-resource processes. One other respondent felt that subject-matter experts, who are the talent management advisors, should take a lead in the process to achieve success.

ix. Theme 9: Leadership role

A senior manager stated that leaders of the organization should champion the talent management process, prioritising employee development. They should be prepared financially to invest in skills development that will contribute to meeting organizational objectives. It was argued that leadership needs to put structures in place, communicate about talent management to employees, and create awareness about the talent management process.

One respondent viewed the leadership role as including the identification of the skills gaps, supporting employees in bridging the identified gaps, and leading the talent management process. Managers have realized that there is a great need for the organization to progress from a marginal management style [30]. They must take transformational steps towards adopting a leadership style that recognizes its role as going beyond operational technical roles, moving towards empowering employees. The shift from the traditional approach to a transformational mindset does not come without its challenges [30]. It was emphasized that executives must champion and drive talent management through the leadership team.

As managers we need [to] put the best interest of the organization before ours and support talent management initiatives so that the organization will derive more value out of the process. (R6)

Respondents reflected on the numerous accountabilities and roles that leaders should play in talent management. It is evident that leaders are expected to have a significant place in talent management. The significant role of leaders cannot be overlooked [31]. Leadership has a vital role to play in selecting, growing, and retaining organizational talent [32]. Disregarding talent management can undermine the attainment of organizational objectives.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to determine the challenges that hinder the public electricity utility company’s talent management system from delivering on expected outcomes. The study drew on the qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews with key informants from head office who were most informed about the topic.

The findings of the study established that, although employees lacked a consistent definition, there was, however, an understanding that the process is necessary and critical for the organization to enhance its capacity to deliver on its mandate and objectives. The definitions converged towards acknowledging talent management as being a process that ensures that the right skills are acquired, nurtured, and retained by the organization.

The respondents were also able to identify organizational talent management objectives, with individuals placing emphasis on different objectives. For example, some focused on development and others looked at skills retention. The findings of the research revealed that there is some level of compliance with the talent management process.
The findings also exposed shortcomings in the implementation, such as leadership commitment, which was found to be lacking and therefore hindering delivery. Among the various stakeholders in the talent management process, leadership was viewed by respondents as being the key authority in driving talent management in the organization. This is mainly because talent management is seen as a critical success factor for the organization to deliver on its objectives.

Performance management was identified as an essential contributor to talent management, and the existence of areas that have excelled were acknowledged by some respondents. However, the majority of respondents identified a lack of leadership commitment and conscientious execution of performance management, this despite it clearly being incumbent upon leadership to deliver business results through talent that has been carefully selected, developed, and retained in suitable positions. Leadership’s involvement in performance management was mainly seen as compliance rather than commitment.

Perceptions of leadership’s role in career development were seen to be tarnished by the non-commitment of leadership. The absence of execution of talent management processes was also perceived to be negatively affecting the delivery of succession management within the organization. Failure of leadership to implement succession management in the organization was also attributed to a lack of coordination of other related processes. Examples of these are the recruitment policy which dictates that all selection should be conducted through a recruitment process that does not recognize succession pools. The fragmentation and misalignment of processes that are supposed to support talent management were seen to be the main factor contributing to management’s loss of interest in focusing on talent management.

The impact of leadership was also explored against the main talent management objectives, which were mentioned during the interviews and summarized as talent acquisition, talent development, and talent retention. Efficiencies, productivity, and flexibility in deployment of human capital were also mentioned as other objectives.

Leadership was perceived as not having taken up the responsibility and accountability to deliver successful talent management for the organization. The findings revealed that to efficiently operationalize talent management, leadership should pledge commitment to implementing talent management, especially to realize the goal of becoming a top electricity utility, globally. Alignment of processes, simplification of the talent system, and diligently embarking on talent management processes that will contribute meaningfully to career and leadership development, are crucial for the effective talent management process of the public electricity utility company.

The study was only conducted in the head office environment, using a small sample, and therefore excluded many other employees who may have experienced the organization’s talent-management system. These employees are located in smaller regions where there may be pockets of excellence, owing to size, mainly because of the manageable numbers and the fact that regions are technical- and process-driven environments. There is, therefore, an opportunity of widening the scope of a study to the entire breadth of the organization, this research only having been conducted in the head office environment. A mixed-methods research approach may be utilized to determine the attitudes of management and employees with scarce skills, who are tasked with contributing to the success of the public electricity utility company.

REFERENCES

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