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TALENT MANAGEMENT IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICE:

Evidence from Provincial Departments of Health

new south institute

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A

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

1. **Auxiliary Nurse** - Also known as an Enrolled Nurse. The entry-level nursing category registered by the South African Nursing Council (SANC). An Auxiliary Nurse has completed a one-year accredited nursing programme.

2. **Enrolled Nurse** - A mid-level category nurse that provides nursing care under the supervision of a Professional Nurse. An Enrolled Nurse has completed a two-year nursing programme and is registered with the SANC. Also sometimes referred to as a Staff Nurse.

3. **Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA)** - The national government department in South Africa responsible for the organisation, management and improvement of the public service.

4. **Fiscal Sustainability** - A government's ability to maintain its current spending and budget policies in the long run so that it is able to meet its long-term financial obligations. This may mean cuts in expenditure and a focus on economic stability.

5. **PERSAL** - The Personnel and Salary System used by the South African Government to manage human resources data for public sector employees.

6. **Professional Nurse** - Previously referred to as a Registered Nurse, a nurse who has completed a degree or diploma and is registered with the South African Nursing Council as a Professional Nurse. This is the highest general nursing category recognised by the SANC and currently requires a four-year degree.

7. **South African Nursing Council (SANC)** - The SANC is the regulatory body responsible for overseeing nursing practice, education and ethical standards in South Africa.

8. **Specialised Post-Graduate Nursing Training** - Advanced educational and clinical training for nurses to qualify in a specific field of nursing practice such as Critical Care, Oncology, Perioperative or Primary Health Care Nursing.

9. **Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM)** - The process organisations use to align Human Resource Management practices with the organisation's long-term strategic goals. SHRM differs from day-to-day operational HR management and requires a proactive approach to HR that includes HR planning that spans a number of years and close cooperation with the senior leadership of the organisation so that HR practices support the business strategy and organisational goals.

10. **Succession Planning** - Succession Planning is a structured process to identify and, if necessary, develop and prepare employees to fill key leadership or critical positions that the organisation needs to achieve its medium to long-term objectives.

11. **Talent** - Talent are the employees who have critical skills or the potential to develop skills and expertise to fulfil critical roles over the longer term. Talented individuals have skills that are not easily found or may be difficult to attract and retain.

12. **Talent Bench** - A talent bench is a group of employees who are ready, or are being prepared, to fill key roles in the organisation. These employees are also referred to as talent. They are part of a succession plan and can move into critical and strategic positions when required.

13. **Talent Gap** - The difference between the skills and expertise available to the organisation at present and the skills and competencies required to fill the organisation's objectives. This gap is considered over the medium- to long-term in talent management and is an indicator of the risks of not achieving organisational goals due to a lack of appropriate skills and staff.

14. **Talent Management** - A systematic process used by employers to attract, develop, motivate and retain employees that are critical to the achievement of the long-term goals of the organisation.

15. **Talent Pool** - The group of employees who are being developed to be available for future roles. A Talent Pool is less targeted than a Talent Bench. Employees in a Talent Pool are being developed for future capacity, while the Talent Bench is those employees who are available to fill specific positions.

16. **Transformation of the public service** - The process of restructuring the public service to align with democratic principles and institutional integrity. The South African Government embarked on a wide-ranging transformation process after democracy in 1994.

01

INTRODUCTION

Talent management is the process that organisations adopt to anticipate future skills requirements and then develop and implement strategies for filling critical skills gaps. This requires organisations to identify the roles that are critical, which, were they not filled, would negatively impact the organisation and the services that it provides. These roles generally require continuity and are normally ones that cannot easily be replaced by recruiting in the wider labour market. This process requires organisations to identify individuals that have the talent to fill those positions in the future. Talent is defined broadly as knowledge, skills and abilities, together with personal attributes that are valuable to the organisation. The organisation then puts programmes in place to identify (internally and externally), recruit, develop and retain these talented individuals so that they are ready when required.[1] Research has shown that the benefits of effective talent management include motivation and retention of key staff, as well as improved performance.[2]

Talent management has been applied in the private sector for several decades and is an important component of contemporary strategic human resource (HR) management, but its use in the public sector is more challenging. Public sector HR policies are designed around the values of fairness and equal opportunities rather than identifying high-potential employees to be developed for future roles and positions. This focus on equal treatment creates a management culture based on procedures rather than results, which does not support modern public management practices that promote efficiency and value for money services.[3] In addition, the public service is expected to deliver outcomes that are more complex than those typically found in the private sector, and resource constraints and regulations limit the flexibility of the managers to implement modern talent management and other strategic HR practices and programmes.

The public sector context also influences the definition of talent in that environment. Kravariti and Johnston[4] conceptualise talent in the public sector as those individuals who not only possess exceptional knowledge and skills, but also have values that reflect the public sector's core principle to serve for the public good. Building on this definition and the public service context, talent management processes in the public service should enable the advancement of talented employees so that they are able to make a maximum contribution, and support these employees through their career progression. Talent management should be implemented as a coherent programme of specific procedures for the recruitment, selection, development, career progression and retention of such employees.[5]

This paper is the second in a series of essays by the New South Institute, funded by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, and follows from the first paper, 'Retiring the 1994 Generation of Public Servants'.[6] The papers draw from anonymised South African Government HR data (PERSAL) and this second essay builds on the startling findings from the first paper, that the public service is facing an imminent skills crisis due to age demographics. The paper found that, although the public service has undergone a tremendous transformation since 1994, it now faces the prospect of the 1994 cohort of public servants heading into retirement age, with little preparation for succession or evidence of a pipeline of new talent. The first essay makes the point that South Africa needs to begin training and preparing a new generation of public servants immediately.

Talent management strategies are used in the private sector to anticipate and prepare for HR disruptions that may impact the continuity and expansion of organisations, and provide pools of talent available to fill positions as they become vacant or as the organisational strategy requires.This perspective is a useful starting point for exploring the data that points to an upcoming HR disruption in the public service.

The focus for this paper is the public health service, and in particular the provincial health departments of Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and the Western Cape (WC), which are

[1] Collings, D. C. and Mellahi, K. (2009) 'Strategic Talent Management: A Review and Research Agenda', Human Resource Management Review, 19 (4), pp. 304–313. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2009.04.001.

[2] Kravariti, F., Tasoulis, K., Scullion, H. & Khaled Alali, M. (2023) 'Talent management and performance in the public sector: the role of organisational and line managerial support for development', The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 34:9, 1782-1807, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2022.2032265

[3] Kravariti, F., Tasoulis, K., Scullion, H. and Khaled Alali, M. (2023) "Talent management and performance in the public sector: the role of organisational and line managerial support for development", The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 34 (9), pp. 1782-1807. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2022.2032265

the most populous provinces. It is important to consider the situation in public sector health service delivery, as a large number of roles in this sector are on the 2024 'National List of Occupations in High Demand'[7], including nurses of all categories, from enrolled nurses to registered nurses and nursing educators. The list also includes a variety of health workers and medical professionals in intermediate and skilled entry levels.

02

TALENT MANAGEMENT AND THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Talent management is a contemporary management practice used by most large organisations in the private sector to ensure continuity and manage risks to the business when vacancies in mission critical positions arise. Talent management goes beyond the "HR planning" that is currently undertaken in the South African public service. By anticipating and planning for future needs a talent management process leads to the creation of a talent pipeline.

A talent pipeline is created through the development and implementation of a proactive strategy to attract, develop and retain individuals in anticipation that they will fill future roles that have been identified as critical or essential for the fulfilment of the organisation's purpose and strategies. This entails workforce planning, identifying talent within the organisation or sourcing, attracting and appointing from outside (the so-called "build or buy" approach), and developing and mentoring these individuals so that they are ready when needed as successors, to provide capacity to provide new services or to extend services as needed. This process builds what is referred to as a "bench" or pipeline of talent, which reduces hiring time, improves quality of replacements, supports long term growth and reduces turnover.

The filling of posts in the public service has to comply with the Public Service Regulations 2016.[8] These regulations require that all posts are evaluated at least every 60 months and that all vacancies and new posts have to undergo an elaborate review process before they may be filled. Since 2023, an advisor from Treasury has to be consulted about the filling of vacancies and either the Premier of the Province or Minister for Public Service and Administration (PSA) must give approval. All posts must be widely advertised and a short-list of candidates drawn up before interviews and assessments are conducted and someone is eventually appointed.

The regulations are intended to reduce the fiscal impact of unnecessary filling of posts and drive the demographic transformation of the public service, rather than reduce risk by preparing for future expansion. This is evidenced by a Directive issued by the Minister of PSA in April 2024, for control measures for Executive Authorities to manage "fiscal sustainability during the process of creating and filling vacant posts in the public service".[9] This Directive was aligned with National Treasury Guidelines on costing and budgeting for compensation of employees, and spelled out a complex and lengthy process for filling of certain posts. The process involves consulting with and obtaining advice and approval from a number of officials, including Treasury Budget Analysts, Offices of the Premier (for provincial posts) or the Minister for PSA (for national posts). Chief Financial Officers have to advise the departments on the financial implications of creating or filling critical posts and confirm availability of funding for the current year and MTEF period. The Department of Public Service

[4] Kravariti. F and Johnston, K. (2020) "Talent management: a critical literature review and research agenda for public sector human resource management", Public Management Review, 22(1), pp. 75-95. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1638439

[5] Kravariti. F and Johnston, K. (2020) "Talent management: a critical literature review and research agenda for public sector human resource management", Public Management Review, 22(1), pp. 75-95.Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1638439

[6] Chipkin, I., Coetsee, S. and Makhasi, Y. (2025) Retiring the 1994 generation of public servants: From a party-state public service to one ready for multi-party democracy, Johannesburg: New South Institute. Available at: https://nsi.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/VF-NSI-Report_Retiring-the-1994-generation-ofpublic-servants-Series-1-FA.pdf

and Administration (DPSA) or the Offices of the Premiers oversee and assess the motivations for creating or filling of critical posts, authorising the unfreezing (or not) of vacant posts and monitoring compliance with the Directive.

Attempts to implement talent management processes in the public service, as evidenced by the example above, may face many obstacles such as fiscal pressures to avoid creating surplus skills, the lack of capacity and professionalisation in HR departments, and a work culture that focuses on bureaucratic process compliance. Talent management does not apply to all roles and all employees. It focusses only on those roles deemed critical and strategic for current and future operations and growth, and those individuals who have the potential to perform those roles. This creates a tension because talent management focuses on developing the individual for a future role in the organisation, while the public service emphasises equal opportunities and open recruitment for positions.[10]

Talent management practices in the public service may also be hindered by managers who have a different perspective than managers in the private sector and who must manage a wider set of stakeholders. Additionally, over the last decade the influence of unions has played a role in inflating the public service wage bill and enforcing equal treatment of all applicants, rather than the placing of talented employees into roles that they have been developed for. Fiscal constraints and regulations limit the pace at which posts can be filled or talent pools created. Finally, public service strategic objectives are complex and include political objectives. Taken together, these factors can constitute what may be seen as insurmountable barriers to the practice of talent management.

Despite the complexity of the context, the public service needs to respond and anticipate the rapid changes in South Africa today. In Health Departments, the demographic crisis described in the first paper is complicated by the future implementation of National Health Insurance (NHI) and the changing political and economic landscapes in South Africa. The public service is also not able to escape the impact of technology such as AI and telemedicine on the workplace and must plan for unanticipated new professions and jobs that do not easily fit into its job grading system.

03

THE STATE OF THE TALENT GAP

The first paper in this series showed that the nursing complement in most provinces changes rapidly, with most provinces showing increases in nursing numbers during the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by a decline or stabilisation in the following years. Nationally in 2024, 37% of nurses were over 50 years old and nearing retirement. In contrast, nurses under the age of 30, with potentially many years of service ahead of them, accounted for only 15% of the total. These numbers do not distinguish between nursing levels and skills. When one looks at more detailed departmental statistics, the challenges become clearer.

One of the consequences of the focus on fiscal control is that vacant posts are automatically frozen and require a lengthy, complex process to be unfrozen. This means that all three of the Gauteng, KZN and WC provincial health departments have experienced skills gaps (either due to vacancies, or the expansion of roles for existing staff who may not have the required skills) and a lack of human resources that have impacted on their strategic programmes. These programmes are multi-year programmes that have been budgeted for, but the lack of capacity to deliver and implement them leads to departments deviating from their targets and revising their plans, with the inevitable impact on the delivery and quality of health services.

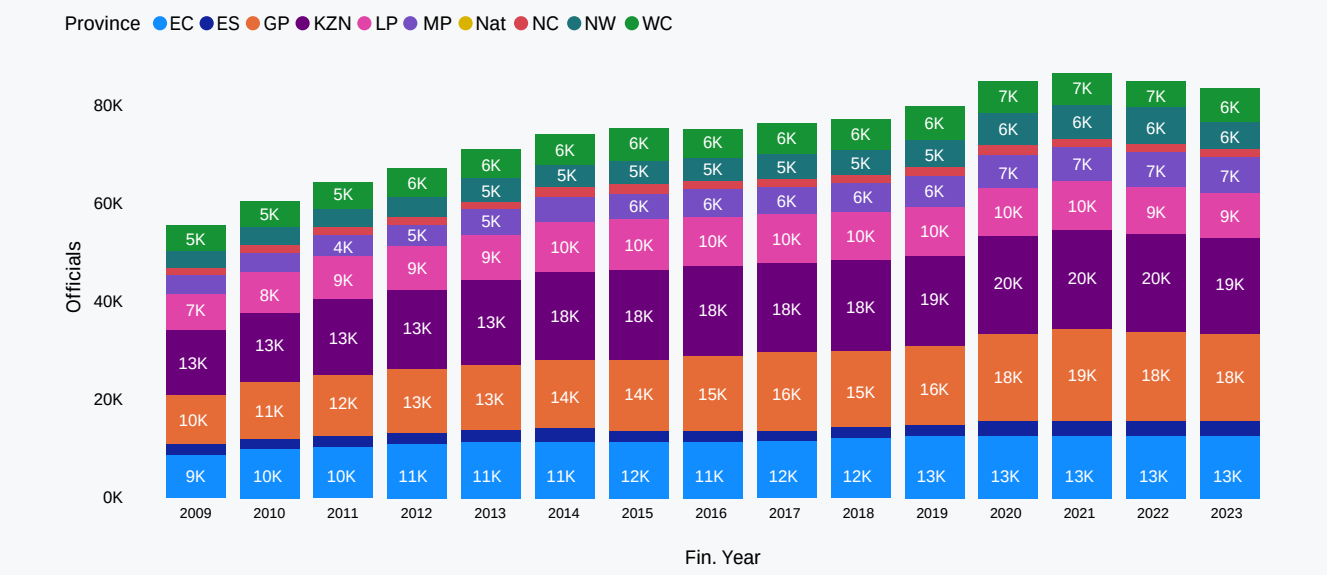
Figure 1[11] shows the number of nurses[12] employed across the nine provinces from 2009 to 2023 and Figure 2 shows the resignations over the same period. All provinces are included to illustrate that the trends affect more than GP, KZN and WC.

[10] Kravariti, F., and Johnston, K. (2019) 'Talent management: a critical literature review and research agenda for public sector human resource management', Public Management Review, 22(1), pp. 75–95. Available at:https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1638439

[11] Data for all Figures is derived from PERSAL, the PSA's HR data system.

[12] Professional nurses were selected to illustrate the trends as they provide direct health care, promote the programmes of the departments, manage complex conditions of patients, coordinate the provision of health care and provide leadership and support in health teams. However, the trends are similar with other skilled health professionals such as pharmacists and doctors.

Figure 1: Number of permanent and contract professional nurses employed per province 2009 to 2023



Source: NSI_PowerBI_Persal_Health
Data as of 25/05/16, 12:43
Filtered by Parameter_Period (is Fin Year), Parameter_Legend (is Province), Occupation classification (is PROFESSIONAL NURSE), NSI_Status (is Current)

This figure shows that the number of nurses employed gradually increased up to 2021, but since then has shown a gradual decline, despite an increase in the population.

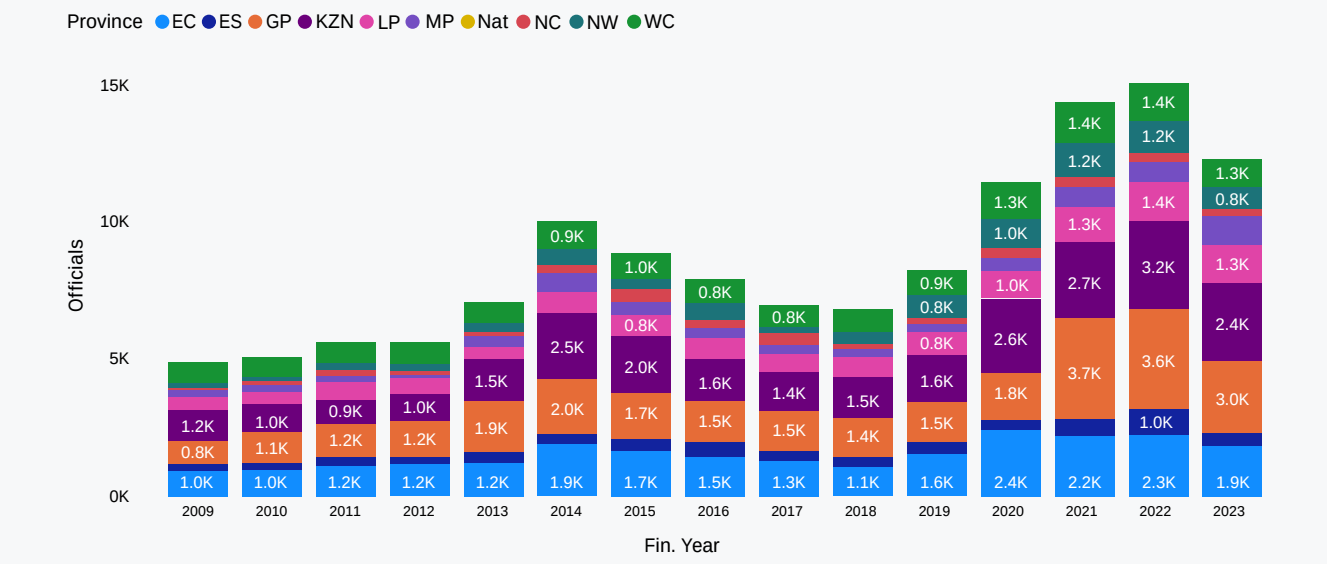
Table 1: Permanent vs contract professional nurses in Gauteng, KZN and WC in 2022 and 2023

	2023			2022	
	Permanent	Contract	Total	Total	Difference
Gauteng	16 740	1 429	18 169	18 535	-366
Kwazulu-Natal	18 545	1 208	19 753	20 007	-254
Western Cape	5 724	1 010	6 734	6 451	-283

Source: PERSAL data

An additional complication is the continued failure to anticipate the needs for skills, evidenced by the continuous employment of large numbers of contract staff. Since 2019 the provincial health departments across all nine provinces appointed 51 555 professional nurses, of which 37 339 were permanent and 22 751 (44%) were on temporary contracts. This high level of contract employment requires further investigation and could be avoided through the implementation of appropriate talent management strategies.

Figure 2: Professional nurse resignations per province 2009 to 2023



Source: NSI_PowerBI_Persal_Health
Data as of 25/05/16, 12:43
Filtered by Parameter_Period (is Fin Year), Parameter_Legend (is Province), Occupation classification (is PROFESSIONAL NURSE), NSI_Status (is Resignation)

There was a sharp increase in resignations in 2021 in comparison to 2020, and a further smaller increase in 2022. In 2023 total resignations dropped, but were still slightly higher than in 2020. Attrition will increase as more professional nurses reach retirement age or resign due to ill health and related reasons.

Nationally, over the period 2009 to 2023, 90 792 professional nurses left the employ of the provincial governments and only 51 669 were appointed. In 2023 alone, 12 258 resigned and only 5 301 were appointed. In KZN the 2024 annual report[13] reflected a 16,7% vacancy rate for professional nurses. For the same year, the WC health department reported a turnover rate of about 20%[14] for highly skilled supervision and production salary bands. Gauteng had vacancy rate of about 14% for these salary bands and 32% vacancy for senior management levels in the health department.[15]

It is not clear from the annual reports what, if any, attempts were made to retain professional nurses. For example, in Gauteng only 11 professional nurses were promoted in 2024 and 588 received a notch salary increase on their own level. There were no reported performance rewards for staff below senior management level in 2023. In KZN, only 85 professional nurses were promoted, but 5 685 received a notch salary increase within the salary band. There were no performance rewards for staff below senior management level in KZN. The WC did not specifically report on professional nursing promotions, but did promote 686 skilled and professionally qualified staff to higher posts in the health department. The department did not award any performance rewards in 2023/2024 either.

[13] KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health (2024) Annual Report 2024. Available at https://provincialgovernment.co.za/department_annual/1482/2024-kwazulu-natal-health-annual-report.pdf

[14] Western Cape Department of Health and Wellness (2024) Annual Report 2024. Available at https://provincialgovernment.co.za/department_annual/1541/2024-western-cape-health-and-wellness-annual-report.pdf

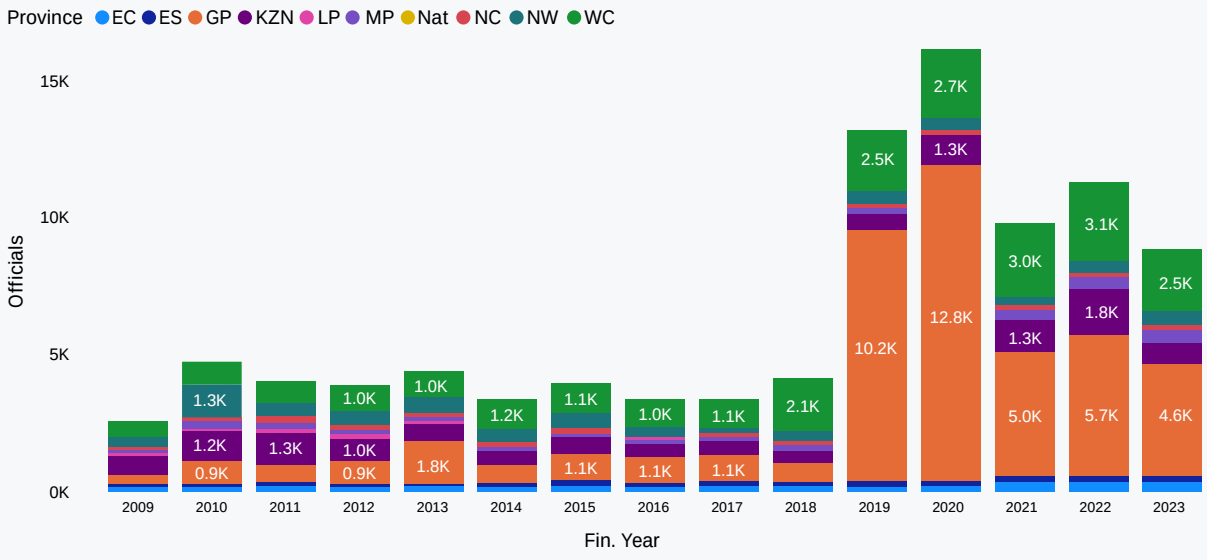
[15] Gauteng Province Department of Health (2024) Annual Report 2023/24. Available at https://www.gpl.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/G-DoH-Annual-Report-202324.pdf

04

NON-CORE RECRUITMENT

Not all roles in an organisation are critical or should be included in a talent management strategy. Non-core roles are not mission critical and can be filled from the general labour market. The PERSAL data in Figure 3 shows growth in administrative and clerical roles. These roles are not described as critical in any of the annual reports from Gauteng, KZN or the Western Cape. The ratio of core functions, such as nurses and health professionals to administrative and clerical roles has changed drastically over the past decade, most notably in 2019 as can be seen from Figure 3. In 2015 there were 28 644 administrative employees employed across the 9 provinces but in 2023 the number had grown to 44 393 according to the PERSAL data, an increase of 15 749 (35,5%). The number of professional nurses over the corresponding period was 74 447 in 2015 and 82 899 in 2023. This was an increase of 8 452, or 11,3% over the ten years. Despite the modest growth over 10 years, the number of professional nurses has been in decline since 2019 as shown in figure 1 above. This is not the case for administrative employees as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Numbers of people in other administrative and clerical roles 2009 to 2023



Source: NSI_PowerBI_Persal_Health
Data as of 25/05/16, 12:43
Filtered by Parameter_Period (is Fin Year), Parameter_Legend (is Province), NSI_Status (is Resignation or Appointed), Occupation classification (is OTHER ADMINISTRAT & RELATED CLERKS AND ORGANISERS)

Table 2: Administrative and clerical roles 2023: Permanent and contract

	2023			
	Permanent	Contract	Total	Proportion of contract roles
Gauteng	12 697	5 785	18 482	31%
KwaZulu-Natal	6 251	758	7009	11%
Western Cape	3 090	2 572	5 662	45%

Source: PERSAL data

The high number of contract administrative and clerical positions in comparison to permanent positions in Gauteng and the WC is notable.

Figure 3 shows that the Gauteng health department had the most dramatic increase in these roles in 2019, which preceded the COVID-19 pandemic. This type of employee was the second largest category of employee after professional nurses and outnumbered nursing assistants, staff nurses, medical practitioners and other support services by far.

05

ATTRACTION & REPLACEMENT OF TALENT

The attraction and replacement of talent is generally poorly executed for core and critical positions, and appointments in the provincial departments of health have generally slowed down since 2019. In the face of additional regulations and process steps (such as the DPSA Ministerial directive described above), efficiency will likely deteriorate.

The struggle to appoint professional nurses and other health professionals is already impacting on service delivery, and the difficulty in attracting talent as well as the laborious processes for filling vacant positions are frequently mentioned as reasons for deviations from Health Programme targets in Gauteng[16], KZN[17] and the WC[18].

The KZN health department reported that the ratio of professional nurses per 100 000 population decreased in the province in 2024 due to an inability to fill vacant posts. The target was 152.9 professional nurses per 100 000

[16] Gauteng Province Department of Health (2024) Annual Report 2023/24. Available at https://www.gpl.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/G-DoH-Annual-Report-202324.pdf

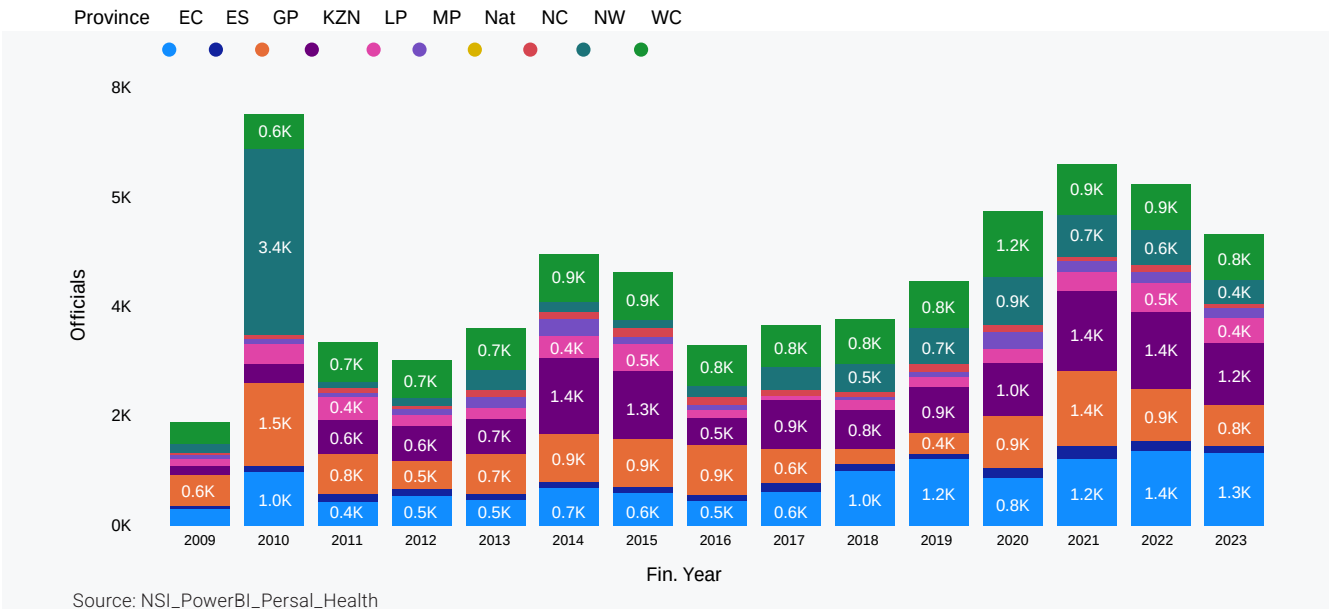
[17] KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health (2024) Annual Report 2024. Available at https://provincialgovernment.co.za/department_annual/1482/2024-kwazulu-natal-health-annual-report.pdf

[18] Western Cape Department of Health and Wellness (2024) Annual Report 2024. Available at https://provincialgovernment.co.za/department_annual/1541/2024-western-cape-health-and-wellness-annual-report.pdf

population, but the actual was 145.5 professional nurses per 100 000. The annual report also mentions the negative impact of the high vacancy rate on staff well-being, as staff have to take on additional workloads. In the WC annual report[19], it was frequently pointed out that the budgetary impact on human resource availability would negatively affect the delivery of services at the hospitals.

In the Gauteng health department annual report[20] it was noted that deviations from headcount targets make it difficult to meet the originally defined outcomes of multi-year programmes that are core to the functioning of the department. The health departments seem to expect and accept that headcount targets will be revised downwards and funds left unspent.

Figure 4: Professional nurse appointments per province 2009 to 2023



Source: NSI_PowerBI_Persal_Health
Data as of 25/05/16, 12:43
Filtered by Parameter_Period (is Fin Year), Parameter_Legend (is Province), Occupation classification (is PROFESSIONAL NURSE), NSI_Status (is Appointed)

The difficulty in attracting and replacing professional nurses is evident in the failure of the provinces to replace those who leave.

Table 3: Resignations and appointments of professional nurses in 2023

	2023		
	Resignations	**Appointments**	**Difference**
Gauteng	2 969	826	-2 143
KwaZulu-Natal	2 362	1 199	-1 163
Western Cape	1 293	830	-463

Source: PERSAL data

[19] Ibid

[20] Gauteng Province Department of Health (2024) Annual Report 2023/24. Available at https://www.gpl.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/G-DoH-Annual-Report-202324.pdf

06

ATTRACTION & REPLACEMENT OF TALENT

The South African Nursing Council (SANC) maintains a register of all qualified and practicing nurses in South Africa. There has been a marked decline in numbers of registered nurses since 2015, when the total number of nurses (all categories) was 278 617.There has been a net decrease of 12 740 nurses since then, despite population growth of about 14% between 2015 and 2024.[21]

Historically the public service was the largest trainer of nurses, with most enrolled and auxiliary nurse training conducted in the provinces. Professional nurses require a Bachelor's degree, generally acquired through study at South African public universities, with government providing some bursaries. Practical work for the qualification is done almost entirely at public hospitals. Postgraduate and specialised skills training is presented at both public institutions and the universities. Private medical providers such as LifeHealth and Netcare have more recently opened their own nursing colleges and train according to their needs.

The South African Nursing Council maintains a register of nursing colleges and their graduates and it is clear that the public service has reduced its investment in the training of nurses and relies heavily on universities and private nursing colleges for new recruits.[22]

The dilemma facing the public sector is that if there are no vacancies then there is no opportunity to place newly qualified nurses, who may then leave the profession or go into the private sector. However when a large cohort of public sector nurses retires, as will happen over the next few years, there will be no readily available supply of qualified professional nurses. As training takes four years, this is not a problem that can be solved rapidly. Complicating matters is the oversupply of enrolled nurses nationally and a shortage of professional and auxiliary nurses. This shortage is going to increase in the next few years according to a report compiled by the National Department of Health in 2024.[23]

The trend is also reflected in nursing student registrations with the SANC (nursing students are required to register).

Table 4: Nursing Registrations 2018 and 2023[24]

	2023			2018			Difference		
	Professional Nurse	Enrolled Nurse	Nursing Auxillary	Professional Nurse	Enrolled Nurse	Nursing Auxillary	Professional Nurse	Enrolled Nurse	Nursing Auxillary
National	15 098	1 468	1 895	21 280	3 502	2 310	-6 182	-2 034	-415

Source: PERSAL data

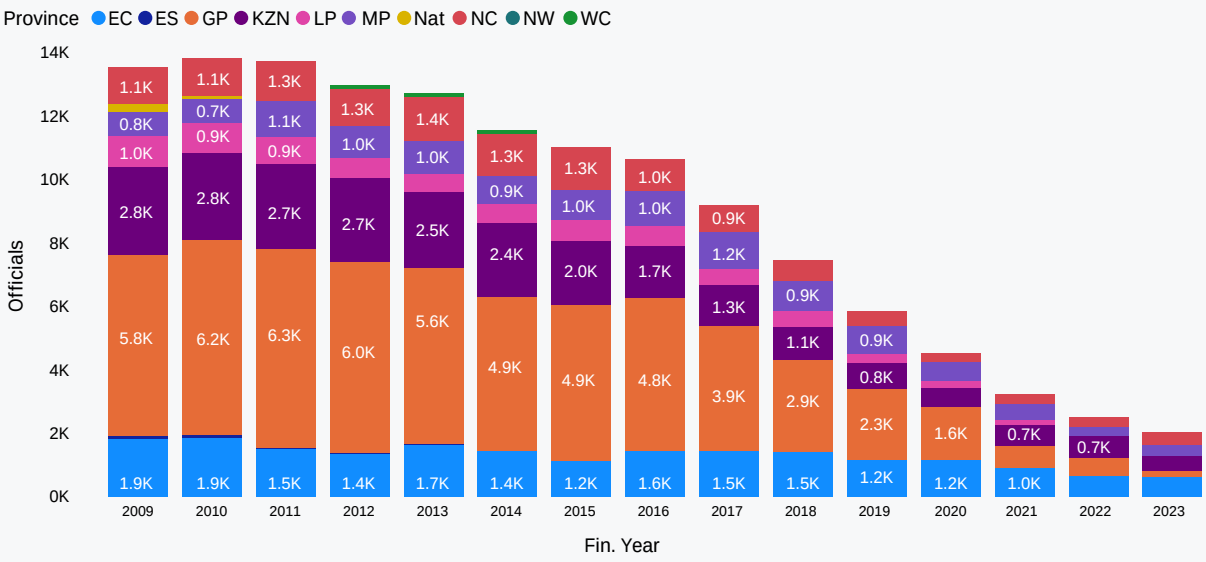
In 2023, the register of public nursing colleges showed that most did not enrol students at all.

[21] South African Nursing Council (2024) Growth in Registers and Roles 2015-2024. Available at https://www.sanc.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Growth-2015-2024.pdf

[22] Ibid

[23] Department of Health, Republic of South Africa (2024) Report on nursing workforce shortage: The nursing cluster perspective. Available at: https://www.health.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Report-Nursing-Workforce-Shortage-1.pdf

Figure 4: Professional nurse appointments per province 2009 to 2023



Source: NSI_PowerBI_Persal_Health
Data as of 25/05/16, 12:43
Filtered by Parameter_Period (is Fin Year), Parameter_Legend (is Province), Occupation classification (is STUDENT NURSE*)

The further development of nurses varies considerably across the three health departments and the reporting of training and development in annual reports is not uniform (see annual reports of Gauteng, KZN and WC health departments).[25] Development of employees is an important component of talent management and indicates the extent to which the organisation has anticipated its needs. The departments have historically provided post-graduate development, but in 2023 all were waiting for accreditation to deliver these courses. The WC diverted some of this specialised postgraduate training to the local universities, while KZN diverted the funding to awarding bursaries to 160 students to begin undergraduate nursing studies. The WC also funded the training of about 600 nurses and nursing auxiliaries with about 187 graduating in 2023. The Gauteng department spent just over R14 million on training (for all staff) in 2023, mostly on short courses and skills programmes.[26]

[24] South African Nursing Council (2024) Growth in Registers and Roles 2015-2024. Available at https://www.sanc.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Growth-2015-2024.pdf

[25] Gauteng Province Department of Health (2024) Annual Report 2023/24. Available at https://www.gpl.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/G-DoH-Annual-Report-202324.pdf

[26] KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health (2024) Annual Report 2024. Available at https://provincialgovernment.co.za/department_annual/1482/2024-kwazulu-natal-health-annual-report.pdf

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The public service is not unique in the challenges it is facing. To address these challenges it needs to overcome the problems of disjointed processes, lack of information and data for planning, and most importantly, a lack of line-managers skilled in running talent management processes. Line managers are the most important role-players in a successful talent management system, as they identify organisational needs, identify employees with potential and support their development. Line managers have to be trained to mentor and coach staff and take responsibility for continuity in critical roles. Successful public sector talent management programmes will support line managers to recognise and develop key people to ensure the availability of a strong talent pipeline. While there are some initiatives to take responsibility for filling critical vacancies, these are disjointed, and so is the governance of talent management strategies. The requirements of the regulations and directives drive a reactive approach, and result in long, drawn out processes for the filling of vacancies. Research has shown that the benefits of effective talent management include motivation and retention of key staff, as well as improved performance.[27]

A review of the public service approach to talent management should consider the following:

• Regular skills audits and gap analyses, supported by an appropriate HR information system and people competent to conduct the audit.

• Alignment of workplace planning more closely with local needs and conditions, which would require a more decentralised approach than is currently happening. National resources such as data bases of talent are essential but successful talent management requires talent identification, development and mentoring by line managers directly.

• A review of recruitment and promotions for all critical posts, with an orientation towards skills and values, rather than only equal opportunity.

• The development of a compelling employee value proposition for employees who want to make a positive contribution to the public service and achieve their true potential.

• Intervention in the labour market to develop skills that are not available so that there is a sufficient pipeline for growth and replenishing skills.

These would require a revision of current regulations related to career progression and promotion, proper performance management, transfer of skills where needed and bench marking of remuneration and working conditions to the private sector and international employers of skilled South Africans.

[27] South African Nursing Council (2024) Growth in Registers and Roles 2015-2024. Available at https://www.sanc.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Growth-2015-2024.pdf

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CONCLUSION

The public health service is struggling to execute its programmes due to material human resource constraints. Many of these constraints are due to HR practices that are not fit-for-purpose and a focus on present fiscal constraints. The regulations are slowing down the filling of important posts and there has been a steady decline in the number of nurses in the public sector. Health departments with an ageing complement of nurses cannot rely on the labour market to fill positions, as the number of nurses being trained has been steadily declining over the last decade, and provincial departments have been struggling to maintain accreditation for specialised nursing training.

Programme targets have to be reviewed when human resources are not available and those leaving cannot be replaced. The departmental workforce planning processes are not working. The public service can look towards best practices in the private sector and adapt them for the public service context. An exclusive approach to talent as in the private sector, where a small pool of talented individuals is identified, developed and retained, is anathema to the public service, but this does not mean that talent management is not possible. An approach could be implemented in which everybody has access to development opportunities, and those who meet the criteria for potential future critical vacancies are identified as talent and managed accordingly. This would require a mindset shift from public service executives and leaders, who should place as much focus on planning and executing for future outcomes, as they do on managing budgets and doing damage control in the present.

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Prof. Albert Wöcke is a professor and permanent faculty member at the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). He is Head of the Leadership, Human Resources (HR) and Organisational Behaviour (OB) Department at GIBS and heads up the GIBS Case Study Hub. He is also the lead faculty of the MPhil Programme in International Business. Prof Wöcke has been with GIBS since 2000, joining after a career as a trade union official. He was a founding member of the Public Service Bargaining Council and represented the labour movement in the public finance and Monetary Policy Chamber of the National Economic Development and Labour Advisory Council.

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