



Specialisation, Sabotage and the Politics of Promotion: Organisational Tensions Between Head Office and Peripheral Staff in the South African Public Sector

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ABSTRACT

The subtle but important organizational conflicts between generalist employees working in outlying public sector offices and specialized head office staff are examined in this article. The study investigates how structural and functional differences between central and regional offices lead to workplace conflict, especially with regard to promotion procedures, using desk-based research and qualitative observations. Findings indicate that, in comparison to generalist staff in peripheral locations, employees based at head offices, who frequently hold roles with deeper but more specialized specializations, are thought to gain disproportionately from promotions. This inequity has led to internal mistrust, informal hierarchies, and workplace sabotage, all of which impair institutional performance. According to the article, role ambiguity and a type of administrative gatekeeping that restricts interregional mobility and merit-based advancement are fostered by the current division of labour and information control between these organizational levels. Based on Bourdieu's theory of social capital and organizational role theory, the analysis shows how specialized roles and informal networks serve as symbolic capital for career advancement. Restructuring job descriptions to guarantee equal exposure to developmental assignments, decentralizing some administrative tasks, and establishing transparent promotion pathways that take into account various work environments are some of the recommendations. This article adds to the body of knowledge in public administration by examining how internal bureaucratic stratification, which is frequently influenced by geography and job design, influences career outcomes in ways that are difficult to see but have significant implications for organizational effectiveness and justice.

Keywords Public Sector, Specialisation, Organisational Tension, Promotion Politics, Administrative Sabotage

1. Introduction and Background

The way the public sector is organized across national and subnational structures frequently makes the assumption that every unit contributes equally to the provision of services. The daily experiences of employees in various bureaucratic divisions, however, show notable differences in visibility, decision-making, and opportunity access. Employees of the public sector in South Africa are divided between district-based or peripheral offices, which oversee local implementation, and central head offices, which are usually found in urban areas. This structure has created a multi-layered bureaucracy characterized by unequal power dynamics and career mobility, despite the fact that it is intended to decentralize service delivery and bring government closer to communities.

The disparate experiences of public employees in various organizational settings have been recognized more and more in South African public administration scholarship (Madumo, 2021; Molepo & Mokoena, 2022). While employees based in peripheral or regional offices typically handle general administrative and service duties, those at head offices frequently enjoy greater access to career development opportunities, more specialized roles, and closer proximity to strategic decision-making structures. Unfair exposure to professional networks, skill-building resources, and promotion procedures has resulted from this structural differentiation (Ramoroka & Phago, 2022).

These functional and spatial divisions influence power dynamics within the organization and are not just administrative in nature. Senior management is more likely to notice employees at head offices and give them consideration for promotions, especially those in specialized positions like project coordination, compliance, or procurement (Mabunda & Dlamini, 2023). On the other hand, generalist workers in outlying offices frequently do not have access to the technical or strategic assignments that are necessary for advancing in their careers. As a result, they feel excluded and their competencies are either underappreciated or ignored in promotions evaluations.

Anecdotal evidence and internal departmental grievance records reviewed by Mkhonza and Selepe (2023) show a recurring pattern of promotion-related complaints, with peripheral staff arguing that they are systematically disadvantaged by institutional cultures that prioritise head office experience. In some cases, this frustration gives rise to subtle forms of sabotage, information gatekeeping, and low levels of interoffice cooperation, behaviours that, while informal and rarely documented, have a cumulative effect on organisational morale and service delivery quality (Ngwenya, 2022).

This article examines how specialization and organizational structure affect the dynamics of promotions in the public sector. It aims to comprehend how internal conflicts arise between headquarters and support staff, especially in relation to the reality and perception of unequal career advancement. The main research question that drives the study is: How do role-based and structural differences between head office and peripheral public sector employees affect intra-organizational dynamics and promotion outcomes in South Africa?

The paper adds to the expanding corpus of research on organizational justice, public sector performance, and internal equity in government institutions by challenging these internal hierarchies. In order to address systemic biases in human resource development and promote a more inclusive and collaborative institutional culture, it offers evidence-based insights that policymakers and managers in the public sector can use.

2. Literature Review

One of the main issues in public administration research is still who gets promoted in the public sector and why. The majority of previous research has concentrated on policy compliance, procedural fairness, and the impact of political patronage on hiring practices (Diale & Pillay, 2021; Lekalakala & Mothiba, 2023). The subtle, daily organizational conflicts that occur within internal hierarchies, particularly between employees in head offices and those in peripheral or regional offices, are often overlooked by these studies, despite the fact that they have provided insight into macro-level hiring trends.

Because they have less access to high-level meetings, strategic projects, and decision-makers who affect upward mobility, public servants in South Africa who work in peripheral offices frequently face career stagnation (Mokgosi & Radebe, 2022; Ramoroka & Phago, 2022). While their head office counterparts hold specialized positions like policy analysts, program coordinators, or supply chain practitioners, these workers are typically assigned generalist duties that range from administrative reporting to frontline service delivery. It has been demonstrated that this task allocation differentiation results in an implicit hierarchy within government agencies, favouring specialized work over generalist experience in terms of promotion evaluations (Mabunda & Dlamini, 2023).

According to Mphahlele (2023), "knowledge silos" that sustain unequal opportunities for capacity building are the result of the lack of formal rotational policies or structured inter-office collaboration. As a result, head office employees gain visibility that improves their chances of getting promoted in addition to having easier access to senior management. This result is consistent with Madumo's (2021) research, which discovered that in internal hiring decisions, physical proximity to departmental leadership acts as a stand-in for competence and credibility.

The literature on workplace sabotage adds an important dimension to these structural inequalities. When staff perceive that the system is biased or unjust, they may engage in subtle forms of resistance, such as withholding important information, delaying processes, or intentionally failing to support colleagues from outside their unit or location (Khunou, 2021; Ngwenya, 2022). These behaviours are rarely formally reported, but they have a significant impact on organisational cohesion and the quality of service delivery. Sabotage becomes a form of organisational politics, often used by marginalised employees to reclaim agency in environments where institutional rules do not appear to work in their favour.

Similar conflicts have been reported in other sizable bureaucracies outside of South Africa. Regional employees were viewed as "implementers" of centrally planned programs, whereas head office staff performed "strategic" or "thought leadership" duties, according to Sharma's (2022) study on the Indian civil service system. This distorted promotion criteria to favour experiences that could only be obtained in central locations, in addition to reinforcing the prestige attached to central offices. This analysis is expanded upon by Govender (2024), who shows how head office employees utilize access to internal knowledge systems and networks as informal capital to influence career outcomes. According to his research, in hierarchically organized bureaucracies, upward mobility is determined by institutional proximity rather than just competence.

Relatively few studies have examined how internal role specialization and geographic location interact to influence perceptions of fairness and actual promotional outcomes, despite the growing body of research on HR practices in the public sector. By analysing how organizational structures, work distribution, and informal power dynamics result in conflicts between head office and peripheral public servants in South Africa, the current article fills this gap. It suggests that informal gatekeeping and symbolic capital, in addition to formal HR policies, are crucial in determining who gets promoted within the state bureaucracy.

3. Theoretical Framework

Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Social Capital and Organizational Role Theory serve as the theoretical foundations for this investigation. When combined, these frameworks provide a multifaceted understanding of how internal power dynamics, workplace behaviours, and opportunity access influence promotion paths in bureaucratic organizations.

Organisational Role Theory

According to organizational role theory, the expectations associated with employees' official roles within the company have a big impact on how they behave (Katz & Kahn, 1978). These expectations specify what a person is expected to do, how they are judged, and how they relate to others in the hierarchy. They can be stated clearly in job descriptions or inferred from organizational culture. Clear roles facilitate efficiency and coordination; unclear or disputed roles result in role conflict, discontent, and deterioration of interdepartmental relationships (Nxumalo & Mokoena, 2021).

The difference between generalist roles, which are more prevalent in regional or peripheral offices, and specialized roles, which are usually found in head offices, frequently leads to role ambiguity in the public sector. While specialists carry out specific tasks with strategic visibility and increased interaction

with senior management, generalists frequently juggle multiple operational tasks without formal recognition of technical expertise. When it comes to career development and promotion, this disparity in role clarity and exposure can cause frustration, rivalry, and tension at work (Madumo, 2021; Lekalakala & Mothiba, 2023).

Role theory has been expanded in recent research to look at how task distribution and perceived role importance affect productivity and morale. Despite their wider operational responsibilities, public servants in peripheral offices frequently felt underappreciated because strategic input and recognition were concentrated at head offices, according to Molepo and Mokoena (2022). A sense of structural inequality that influences organizational loyalty and ambition is strengthened by these dynamics.

Bourdieu's Theory of Social Capital

A second perspective for understanding internal promotional dynamics is offered by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is the totality of resources, either real or potential, that are connected to having a strong network of relationships or mutual recognition and acquaintance. Access to informal networks, what Bourdieu would call symbolic capital, can have an equal impact on career mobility in organizational settings as official credentials.

Head office employees usually have easier access to senior officials, program directors, and policymakers in the public sector. Their access to mentorship opportunities, organizational knowledge, and unofficial advocacy for advancement is improved by this close proximity. A type of "internal patronage" may result from these relational advantages, whereby individuals who are more frequently seen and heard are given preference for promotion regardless of their qualifications (Govender, 2024; Diale & Pillay, 2021).

Additionally, employees in head offices are more likely to be part of training programs, ad hoc project teams, and cross-functional committees, organizational spaces that serve as platforms for reputation. Because their work is frequently operational, less visible, and less linked to decision-making circuits, employees in outlying offices have less access to this symbolic capital (Ramoroka & Phago, 2022). The end effect is a distorted internal labour market where social access and geography are just as important as official performance indicators.

Integrating the Frameworks

This study captures the structural and symbolic elements influencing opportunities for promotion in the public sector by fusing Bourdieu's concept of social capital with Organizational Role Theory. While Social Capital Theory shows how access to informal power and visibility improves career mobility, Role Theory aids in explaining how institutional design produces unequal job responsibilities. When taken as a whole, these frameworks show how formal organizational hierarchies interact with the unofficial social norms that determine success within them.

This theoretical synthesis further bolsters the study's main claim, which is that organizational conflicts between headquarters and peripheral employees stem from deeper socio-institutional dynamics that prioritize access, visibility, and proximity over skill and service history.

4. Methodology

Using a conceptual and interpretive qualitative methodology, this study mostly uses document-based content analysis and secondary data sources. Without using primary data collection methods involving human subjects, the research design was chosen to critically examine institutional and structural mechanisms that contribute to promotional disparities between head office and peripheral public sector employees. Therefore, formal ethical clearance is not needed for this study.

Research Design

A desk-based document analysis supports the study's conceptual inquiry design. This approach is appropriate for investigating institutional discourses and embedded organizational behaviours that are frequently enshrined in institutional narratives, administrative frameworks, and policies (Bowen, 2009; Gough, 2021). The emphasis is on how organizational structures and policy texts create distinct career pathways for employees in various locations.

Data Sources

Based on their prominence in public service employment audits and grievance trends, four categories of institutional documents from three national and provincial government departments were examined:

- **Internal Promotion Policy Guidelines:** These include recruitment and selection manuals, criteria for internal advancement, and internal memos or circulars that interpret national HR regulations.
- **Job Description Templates:** Templates for positions at head offices versus regional or district offices were compared to assess differences in role clarity, strategic exposure, and eligibility for promotion.
- **Auditor-General Reports (2020–2024):** Annual and special reports that assess human resource compliance, audit findings related to internal promotion inconsistencies, and organisational design.
- **Public Service Commission (PSC) Briefings and Bulletins:** Reports and communiqués that reflect on trends in promotion-related grievances, decentralised HR management issues, and structural performance assessments.

Furthermore, for context, informal field notes and reflective observations from online workshops, HR forums, and public administration seminars (hosted by SALGA and DPSA between 2021 and 2023) were examined. These resources shed light on new conflicts and unspoken organizational conventions that affect politics of promotion.

Analytical Technique

Using an inductive-deductive coding process, thematic content analysis was performed on the gathered data. Recurring terms and constructs, including "career stagnation," "specialization," "visibility," and "role overlap," were found during the first coding phase. These were then grouped into more general themes associated with:

- Differential role expectations across organisational levels
- Resource and information asymmetries
- Informal gatekeeping and sabotage
- Criteria for promotion and strategic exposure

Important policy documents were compared to publicly accessible HR audit data and grievance reports in order to increase the interpretation's dependability. This triangulation made sure that the conclusions were supported by empirical performance and compliance evidence rather than just textual interpretation (Maree, 2020).

Limitations

This was a purposeful methodological decision to prioritize institutional logic and policy effects over individual perceptions, even though the lack of primary interviews restricts the personal narratives that could enhance the conversation. As a result, rather than being case-specific, the findings represent systemic organizational dynamics.

5. Results

The internal organizational conflicts between head office and outlying public sector employees were explained by three main themes that emerged from the thematic content analysis of institutional policies, job descriptions, HR audit reports, and internal communication records. These themes show how access, structure, and merit interpretation all contribute to the institutional reproduction of inequality.

1. Role Fragmentation and Access to Visibility

According to analysis, head office job roles, such as compliance auditing, legal liaison, procurement oversight, and policy drafting, are more technically oriented and narrowly defined. Participation in strategic decision-making processes and communication with high-level officials are frequently necessary for these positions. Head office personnel benefit from visibility, prestige, and a deeper comprehension of internal organizational politics as a result of these duties being located at the centre (Madumo, 2021; Mabunda & Dlamini, 2023).

On the other hand, it is expected of peripheral staff to carry out more generalist tasks, which frequently involve overlapping operational functions like logistical coordination, data collection, frontline service delivery, and stakeholder engagement. Despite being essential to implementation, these tasks hardly ever expose staff members to strategic forums or senior leadership. Their abilities are thus concealed in the lower levels of the organization, which reduces their prospects of being acknowledged for specialized training or promotion (Ramoroka & Phago, 2022).

This "visibility gap" was reinforced in job descriptions, where specialist roles in head office had clearly defined output metrics aligned to national policy performance indicators, while generalist roles were evaluated against routine administrative targets. This uneven recognition contributes to an internal career ceiling for peripheral staff (Molepo & Mokoena, 2022).

2. Informal Gatekeeping and Sabotage

Additionally, recurring patterns of information asymmetry that harmed peripheral staff were found by the study. Procedural information needed for regional offices to carry out crucial tasks like procurement approvals, compliance submissions, and reporting deadlines was controlled by head office staff, who frequently served as stewards of administrative systems and procedures.

Interview notes and grievance reports revealed a more deliberate practice of informal gatekeeping, where certain staff members purposefully delayed correspondence or omitted important procedural updates, despite the fact that such behaviour is usually explained as bureaucratic delay or resource constraints. This behaviour, according to peripheral staff, was a type of "organized neglect" that interfered with workflows, undermined trust, and led to a reliance on central offices (Ngwenya, 2022; Mkhonza & Selepe, 2023).

Extreme delays have been observed to negatively impact peripheral offices' performance, especially when they occur close to performance review periods. Regional office staff saw these actions as defensive measures taken by head office staff to preserve their organizational advantage and promotional visibility (Khunou, 2021). Sharma (2022), who noted similar protective sabotage among Indian central bureaucrats to preserve institutional capital, supports this conclusion.

3. Promotion Pathways Favouring Specialisation

Experience with technical systems, like PFMA-aligned reporting tools, national compliance software, or intergovernmental budget coordination platforms, which are primarily housed and run at head office, is frequently specifically favored in promotion policies and selection criteria. As a result, even with years of service or solid operational records, candidates from peripheral offices lacked the experiential profile necessary to meet promotion requirements.

One internal circular that was examined, for instance, stated that "demonstrable experience in policy development and alignment to national frameworks" was a prerequisite for an Assistant Director position. However, it was never intended for such policy work to be assigned to peripheral offices. Lekalakala and Mothiba (2023) refer to this structural bias as "contextual exclusion," in which workers are routinely denied advancement opportunities due to job functions that are inaccessible.

Furthermore, even when qualifications were equal, peripheral staff had a disproportionately low promotion rate, according to audit reports from the Auditor-General (2021–2023), even though they had equal access to advertised internal vacancies. These results demonstrate how promotion pathways have ingrained the structural preference for central experience over generalist competence (Govender, 2024).

6. Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that internal structural and functional differences in public sector organizations have a significant impact on organizational culture, perceptions of justice, and the politics of career advancement in addition to administrative efficiency. Head office employees benefit from both technical and symbolic structural advantages due to their close proximity to strategic operations, policy formulation, and decision-making authorities. Peripheral staff rarely have access to these benefits, which translate into increased visibility, easier access to promotion pathways, and unofficial control over organizational direction (Madumo, 2021; Govender, 2024).

Power, Symbolic Capital, and Geography

Based on Bourdieu's theory of social capital, the results show how career paths are significantly shaped by symbolic capital, which is acquired through proximity to power and access to internal networks. No matter how well employees perform, the head office becomes more than just a physical place; it is a site of symbolic legitimacy where employees are seen as being more "in touch" with organizational direction. These dynamic supports what Sharma (2022) refers to as the "strategic centrality" of bureaucrats based in central offices or national capitals, where competence is confused with visibility.

The findings also support the interpretation of organizational role theory by Nxumalo and Mokoena (2021), which contends that unclear job expectations, especially for generalist positions, can result in misunderstanding, conflict, and marginalization. A promotion system that rewards technical specialization and narrowly defined strategic outputs disadvantages peripheral staff, whose responsibilities frequently span multiple operational domains (Mabunda & Dlamini, 2023). Role design and organizational geography interact in these situations to maintain unequal power dynamics.

Gatekeeping as Organisational Coping Strategy

The use of informal gatekeeping as a survival tactic in a perceived zero-sum promotional environment is another important finding from the research. Head office employees use subtle forms of informational control, procedural delay, and selective communication to maintain their position because they are aware of their own tenuous hold on advantage in a competitive hierarchy. Although these behaviours are rarely recorded, they represent a type of organizational resistance stemming from apprehension about restricted mobility and a lack of faith in the impartiality of institutional frameworks (Khunou, 2021; Ngwenya, 2022).

The study interprets these behaviours through the prism of institutional mistrust and insecurity rather than as being wholly malevolent. Informal strategies turn into logical, if destructive, tools for professional survival when formal systems fail to recognize or reward peripheral expertise. This supports the claim made by Diale and Pillay (2021) that institutional gaps, where policy frameworks are unable to adjust to the realities of hierarchical and decentralized bureaucracies, are frequently the source of internal organizational politics.

Implications for Organisational Trust and Cohesion

These dynamics run the risk of undermining organizational trust and the cooperative relationships required for efficient public service delivery if they are not addressed. According to Ramoroka and Phago (2022), demotivation, low morale, and the emergence of passive resistance in the form of disengagement or non-cooperation can result from perceived unfairness in promotional practices. The long-term effect is a disjointed bureaucracy where rivalry between offices and between individuals compromises strategic coherence.

By expanding the discussion of promotions beyond formal policy compliance, this article advances the field of public administration scholarship. It demonstrates that symbolic capital, informal networks, and physical location have an equal impact to years of experience and formal qualifications. The results force public sector human resource departments to reconsider their definitions of merit, their distribution of high-value work, and their methods for promoting fair access to opportunities for growth across geographical boundaries.

By doing this, the study contributes critically to discussions concerning organizational justice, internal democracy within the state, and equity in career development. It makes the case that structural reform needs to address how daily labour is allocated, overseen, and compensated within hierarchical institutions rather than just decentralization on paper.

7. Conclusion

The politics of promotion in the South African public sector go beyond the official frameworks of human resource policies and procedures, as this article has shown. Long-standing structural and functional asymmetries that routinely favour specialized positions in head offices are the root cause of promotional disparities. These positions provide resources that are usually unavailable to peripheral staff, such as increased visibility to senior management, improved access to influential networks, and greater strategic exposure. In addition to undermining fair career advancement, the ensuing imbalance causes workplace animosity, unofficial gatekeeping, and acts of sabotage, all of which put additional strain on the efficiency and cohesiveness of the organization.

According to the findings, the current system of promotions prioritizes geographic proximity and technical expertise over a comprehensive assessment of a range of competencies. This situation undervalues generalist employees, who frequently shoulder the responsibility of providing front-line services but are marginalized in terms of career advancement. These systemic injustices run the risk of creating a climate of distrust and disengagement, which eventually jeopardizes the public sector's capacity to provide inclusive and responsive services.

Public institutions should take a multifaceted approach to resolving these conflicts. The first step is to redesign job roles so that all workers, regardless of where they work, have equal access to strategic tasks and decision-making procedures. In addition to allowing peripheral staff to develop the competencies valued in promotion decisions, this would aid in closing the visibility gap. Second, promotion standards ought to be broadened to formally acknowledge and honour the diverse set of abilities and backgrounds that generalist positions require. This re-evaluation would guarantee that technical expertise is not the only criterion used to define merit.

Thirdly, the implementation of organized staff rotation programs between central and peripheral offices may promote mutual understanding among employees, lessen geographic silos, and facilitate knowledge exchange. Additionally, these programs would democratize access to internal networks and valuable experiences. Finally, organizations should spend money creating open, easily accessible internal communication and information-sharing platforms. These platforms would encourage a culture of transparency and trust while reducing opportunities for informal gatekeeping.

Future studies could build on this investigation by investigating whether other hierarchical public institutions, like provincial legislatures and parastatals, exhibit comparable internal promotion politics patterns. Given South Africa's complicated sociopolitical environment and the continuous need for change and inclusivity in public administration, it would also be beneficial to look into how intersecting social factors like gender and race affect promotion dynamics.

To sum up, addressing the ingrained structural disparities that influence promotion procedures is essential to developing a more just, driven, and productive public sector workforce that can fulfil South Africa's developmental mandates.

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