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**The Future of Work Study in the South African  
Context**

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## **The Future of Work Study in the South African Context**

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*To survive in the current competitive global environment, it is important for organisations to continually look at ways to improve efficiency and productivity. The field of work study seeks to improve the productivity and efficiency of humans, machines and materials. While work study is an important function in organisations, its future in South Africa is uncertain. The purpose of this study was to explore the future of work study by looking at the barriers and contributors of work study in the South African context. The study was exploratory in nature with a qualitative research method. Purposive sampling was used to include work study practitioners who were members of the Southern Africa Institute of Management Services (SAIMAS). Data were gathered from twelve volunteering participants through semi-structured email interviews. The interview transcripts were transferred to Excel sheets to facilitate analysis. Thematic analysis was applied to identify the different themes covering the barriers and contributors of work study. For work study to have a managerial impact, there should be a smooth flow of processes with minimum interruptions; the findings of this study could help achieve that. The study offered new knowledge about the barriers and contributors of work study.*

**Keywords:** *Barriers, Contributors, Future, South Africa, Work study*

## **Introduction**

Organisations in South Africa are affected annually by labour unrest, with employees constantly demanding increased remuneration (Labour Research Service, 2022). Sookdeo (2016) states that “strike season” seems to have become a norm in the South African calendar year but if there is an increase in remuneration, it must be combined with a simultaneous increase in productivity to allow for a win-win situation between the employer and employee.

To survive in the current competitive global environment, it is important for South African organisations to continually look at ways to grow efficiency and productivity. One of the most powerful tools to eliminate unwanted processes and increase productivity is work study (Gujar & Moroliya, 2018). Productivity improvement through work study techniques is necessary to increase profit and properly utilise labour in an industry (Bagri & Raushan, 2014). The field of work study seeks to improve the productivity and efficiency of humans, machines and materials. While there is concern about the future of work study in South Africa there is a lack of research on the topic. This called for exploration of the issue.

The future of work study in the South African context was compromised when it stopped being a distinct field and was incorporated into other units such as Human Resource Management and Organisational Development. So while work study is a key function in increasing the productivity in organisations, its future in South Africa is uncertain. At the same time there is limited research on the future of work study as well as the barriers and contributors of work study in South Africa.

The purpose of this study was to explore the future of work study by looking at the barriers and contributors of work study in the South African context.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was the contingency theory. This theory suggests that for firms to be effective, certain functions must fit with the organisation or external environment aspects to achieve organisational goals. According to Harney (2016), there is an external and internal fit of an organisational function. External fit means work study practices must fit with the organisational strategy and conditions in the environment. Internal fit means work study practices must work together to deliver the same message and the desired outcome. Delery and Doty (1996) state that by using contingency theory, organisations can promote employee behaviours that align with business strategy, because behaviour is the outcome of an employee’s ability and motivation. Therefore, the implementing of work study practices can impact employee behaviour and productivity.

## Literature Review

Work study may be defined as the analysis of a job for the purpose of finding the preferred method of doing it and also determining the standard time to perform it by the preferred (or given) method (Gujar & Shahare, 2018). Work study helps to improve job performance, optimise usage of plant and machinery and standardise work methods (Gujar & Moroliya, 2018). Work study techniques raise production efficiency and can be used as a scientific approach (Chisosa & Chipambwa, 2018). Thong, Zuraidah and Bhuvanesh (2014) accentuate the need to understand the benefits of work study in order to define organisational strategies and set strategic moves. Work study employs both method study and work measurement to comprehend the overall human work potential in terms of time spent on completing a task (Gujar & Moroliya, 2018). Moyo, Mangore and Chigara (2014) state that in cases where companies are characterised by cost and time overruns, work study allows for improvements.

Work study consists of method study, motion study, work measurement and time study (Chisosa & Chipambwa, 2018):

- Method study is a scientific process for enhancing job design as it analyses the existing procedures and proposes job processes for improved efficiency (Gujar & Moroliya, 2018). Through method study, existing and suggested methods of carrying out operations are logically recorded and critically analysed to develop effective methods and reduce costs. Greater efficiency is achieved through enhanced layout and workplace design; more efficient work procedures; effective utilisation of human resources, machinery and materials; and generally improved design or specification of the final product (Chisosa & Chipambwa, 2018).
- Motion study determines the best way to complete a repetitive job. Motion study improves production methods, as it measures the distance one has to move to do a job and how much one gets done within a certain period of time (Chisosa & Chipambwa, 2018).
- Work measurement is the application of techniques to determine the amount of time taken to do effective physical and mental work, producing units in specific tasks (Patel, Patel, Patel & Patel, 2015).
- Time study seeks to measure how long the average worker takes to finish a task at a normal pace (Chisosa & Chipambwa, 2018). Using an experienced or trained person, the time study procedure involves timing a sample of the worker's performance and using it to set a standard for the particular task (Heizer & Render, 2000).

Work study yields copious information about existing methods and this information helps to identify shortcomings in and determine possible improvement to existing methods. This is called better method and increases productivity, reduces worker fatigue, minimises losses and improves quality (Gujar & Shahare, 2018).

Sookdeo (2005) found that during the implementation of productivity improvement techniques by work study, the greatest resistance was experienced from groups. At all times, the work study officer must try to win and maintain the trust and cooperation of any group which is being investigated (Sookdeo, 2016). Work study officers can only keep the goodwill and respect of supervisors if they do not create the impression that they want to take over their positions (Sookdeo, 2005). Decision-making is an important part of work study (Archibald Huang, Chacon & Gaiger, 2018). In many organisations the head of the work study department is a member of top management and it is the duty of this head to keep top management informed of the possible uses of work study (Sookdeo, 2016). The work study officer must be able to rely on the support of top management to do his/her work successfully and management must constantly communicate the importance of the work study officer to the supervisors, foremen and workers (Kanawaty, 1995:26). Management needs work study because of its ongoing observation and analysis of the workplace to obtain the applicable facts. This means that management requires someone who is able to carry out investigations on a full-time basis without the interruptions of normal working duties (Sookdeo, 2016) – in other words, a work study officer. There is a paucity of previous studies on the barriers to the future of work study.

Work study officers are trained to handle workers who do not cooperate and they know how to overcome resistance. Prior to the start of work measurement, the work study officer must gain the confidence and cooperation of the workers and supervisors if he/she is to succeed. If the work study officer experiences too much resistance from the staff, management may be compelled to put a stop to the whole work measurement project (Sookdeo, 2016). Archibald et al. (2018) state that teamwork, critical thinking, communication, professionalism and collaboration are essential work study competencies. Sookdeo (2016) found that work study practitioners should meet the business's needs and add value to an organisation.

### **Research Methodology**

The study was exploratory in nature due to the lack of prior studies on the future of work study. A qualitative research method was used as previous questionnaires were not available and this study had an open-ended approach. This research adopted a constructive interpretive approach, which comprised the specific field experiences, perceptions, views and evidence as well as the multiple realities of experts in work study. Purposive sampling was used to select work study practitioners/specialists who were members of the Southern Africa Institute of Management Services (SAIMAS). Twelve members of SAIMAS volunteered to take part in this study.

The biographical information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Biographical Information of the Participants**

Participant	Age	Gender	Highest qualification	Present job title	Placement in the organisational structure
1	67	Male	Master of Business Administration	Private consultant	Self-employed
2	47	Male	Master of Business Leadership	Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	Office of the CEO
3	30	Male	BTech	Senior Manager Advisor	Organisational Development and Change Management Unit
4	63	Male	National Diploma	Deputy Head: Management Services	Organisational Development and Change Management Unit
5	59	Male	PhD	Senior lecturer	Department of Operations Management
6	61	Male	Masters Commercii	Private consultant	Self-employed
7	64	Female	Master's Degree	Deputy Director: Organisational Development	Chief Directorate: Human Resource Management and Development
8	64	Male	Master of Business Administration	Private principal consultant	Private consulting firm
9	43	Male	National Diploma	Chief Work Study Officer	Organisational Development Unit
10	56	Male	Certificate in Management Services	System Integrator	Directorate Technical Support Services
11	59	Female	BTech	Director: Interventions & Special Programmes Management	Group Human Capital Management Department: Organisational Efficiency Improvement Division
12	24	Female	BTech	Assistant	Institutional Effectiveness and Technology

Source: Authors' own compilation

It is clear from Table 1 that most of the participants were male. All participants had a post-school qualification. Their occupations varied from being part of management to being private consultants, system integrators, academics or assistants. They were employed in divisions such as organisational development, change management, human resource management, operations management, technical support services and institutional effectiveness and technology. Not one of them was employed in a work study unit per se.

Semi-structured email interviews were used to gather data from twelve volunteering participants. The open-ended interview questions were formulated as follows:

- Share the barriers you experience in your role as a work study practitioner.
- In your opinion, what are the contributors to being successful as a work study practitioner?
- How do you see the future of work study in South Africa?

The interview transcripts were transferred to Excel sheets to facilitate analysis. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Manual colour coding, as well as deductive and inductive coding, was used. The saturation of data, which means enough data had been collected to draw the necessary conclusions and any further data collection would not produce new value-added insights, was taken into consideration. Tesch's (1990) method of qualitative thematic data analysis was applied to analyse the data collected by way of the open-ended questions about the future of work study. The data were organised into Excel spreadsheets such as to facilitate analysis, and colour coding served to categorise the themes. Deductive coding derived from relevant theory was used. During data analysis other themes and categories emerged from the data and inductive coding was therefore also applied. Due to the fact that there was a lack of previous studies on this topic, inductive coding was mostly used.

In a qualitative study, reliability and validity are not required but according to Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole (2020), trustworthiness must be ensured. Trustworthiness involves the following elements: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. Credibility was established through peer debriefing and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study used a transparent coding process together with a systematic, comprehensive and exhaustive audit trail of the analysis of data to ensure that the research process followed was logical, traceable and clearly documented in the interests of dependability (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) state that confirmability is determined by checking the internal consistency of the research product. In the present research, this was done by checking the data, the findings, the interpretations and the recommendations. Transferability was obtained by having data sets and descriptions that were so rich that other researchers would be able to make judgements about the findings and transferability in different settings or contexts, as suggested by Elo, Kaarianinen, Kanste, Polkki, Utriainen and Kyngas (2014).

## **Findings and Discussion**

In this section, the themes are discussed by referring to the direct quotes of the participants. Discussions and previous studies, although limited, are added in this section.



### *Barriers of Work Study*

#### Theme 1: Lack of understanding of the role of work study

Various participants mentioned that clients did not understand what the role of work study practitioners was.

“... work study is used and not everybody understand it.” (Participant 3)

Sookdeo (2005) found that that during the implementation of productivity improvement techniques by work study, the greatest resistance was experienced from groups.

Participant 12 mentioned that there was a lack of understanding of what work study could offer.

“Lack of understanding/familiarity with work study and what it can offer.” (Participant 12)

At all times, the work study officer must try to win and maintain the trust and cooperation of any group which is being investigated (Sookdeo, 2016).

#### Theme 2: Manipulation of work study

The management of work study can sometimes be manipulated to suit personal agendas and gain. It is therefore essential to agree upon the impartiality of the work study practitioner to ensure the integrity of the outcome of the work study process.

“Before start of the investigation to be told what the outcome should be (especially in terms of organisational structure).” (Participant 11)

Sometimes work study practitioners were only used for job evaluations within the human resource management department and not fully utilised for what they were trained to do.

“Work Study are merely viewed as an extension of HR responsible for ensuring that jobs are evaluated on demand. What we observe from the outside is that work study practitioners are mainly used/misused to conduct job evaluations to inflate the post levels. This unfortunate situation normally results into top-heavy structures and overpaid.” (Participant 8)

Management sometimes ignored the work study report or tried to manipulate it because it did not suit its objectives.

“As a practitioner, somehow it is very simple to survive. In cases where the senior manager does not buy on your ideas, they tend to manipulate you if they can see that you are not giving them what they want or what you are doing does not favour them. In some instances, your submission might be put aside and gather dust been not signed by the executives.” (Participant 9)

Work study officers should gain the respect of the management so that their position is not wrongfully used (Sookdeo, 2005).

Theme 3: Lack of decision-making power

The work study practitioners sometimes experience that they do not have the authority to execute the findings in the report and so just do what the managers tell them to do.

“You do what the boss request, irrespective of the rationality of such instructions or direction given.” (Participant 6)

Work study practitioners also sometimes do not have a say in making decisions.

“Not afforded adequate voice in decision making.” (Participant 3)

However, Archibald et al. (2018) found that decision-making was an important part of a work-study practitioner’s job.

Theme 4: Lack of management support

In many organisations, the head of the work study department is a member of top management and it is the duty of this head to keep top management informed of the possible uses of work study (Sookdeo, 2016). Managers do not always give their support to work study practitioners because of fear that their shortcomings and weaknesses may be exposed.

“Managers afraid that work study exposes their shortcomings.” (Participant 5)

This may lead to a lack of management support to implement the work study report.

“The lack of support from management within an organisation if the terminologies of work study is used.” (Participant 2)

The work study officer must be able to rely on the support of top management to do his/her work successfully and the importance of the work study officer to the organisation should be communicated to the supervisors, foremen and workers by management (Kanawaty, 1995:26).

*The following contributors of work study were identified.*

Theme 5: Excellent competencies

In order for a work study practitioner to properly do his/her work, the necessary competencies should be acquired.

“Being independent, fearless, effective time management and continuous research and development for informed recommendations and mastering the ever-changing business needs.” (Participant 3)

Work study practitioners should also have interpersonal skills to work with people. If the work study officer experiences too much resistance from the staff, management may be compelled to put a stop to the whole work measurement project (Sookdeo, 2016).

“Having a personality to work with people.” (Participant 5)

Archibald et al. (2018) found that teamwork in work study was essential; this was confirmed by the findings of the current study.

“Show you are considerate. Have a positive attitude. Be honest. Be a team player.” (Participant 10)

“Ethical behaviour and professionalism are the cornerstone and foundation.” (Participant 5)

Archibald et al. (2018) also found that professionalism was critical for work study practitioners.

#### Theme 6: Meeting business needs

Work study practitioners should meet the business’s needs to ensure efficiency, effectiveness and productivity.

“You must understand the business you are working in and you should know the functional side like the back of your hand and understand all rules and regulations relating to your own field.” (Participant 7)

Future studies should be conducted to ensure that work study meets the ever-changing needs of a business.

“... continuous research and development for informed recommendations and mastering the ever-changing business needs.” (Participant 3)

Work study practitioners should proactively embark on their own projects to improve service delivery in an organisation.

“WS should take initiative and embark on their own initiated projects to improve service delivery. The more they proactively demonstrate the role they could play linked to the value they add, the more they will be used for the right reasons.” (Participant 8)

Sookdeo (2016) also found that work study practitioners should meet the business’s needs.

Theme 7: Adding value to the organisation

It is critical that organisations add value from the inside and not outsource all projects.

“.....that there is more than a need/requirement for WS services in South Africa. The WSS practitioners in government have to wake up, take the challenge and do something about the prevailing situation. The answer is not to outsource all the projects to private sector, but to start adding value from the inside.” (Participant 8)

Participant 11 mentioned that work study should add value by staying relevant and focusing on meeting customer needs.

“It is each OD/Management services unit within an organisation’s responsibility to ensure appointment of skilled practitioners (links to training), to actively market their service, to show with their work what value can be added within an organisation, to ensure they stay relevant and efficient, to focus on needs of your customers.” (Participant 11)

Sookdeo (2016) agrees that work study must add value to an organisation.

*Practical and Managerial Implications*

On a practical level, it is essential that think tanks be initiated by relevant stakeholders, such as industry, government and universities, to deliberate the implications of the future of work study in South Africa. Conceiving the potential value-add of work study should have a positive outcome in terms of future organisational performance. A practical implication of the future of work study is the fact that the areas for productivity improvement in organisations need to be identified. In a globalised economy, competitiveness means the ability to take the most advantageous position in a constantly changing market environment and work study is a practical way to achieve this.

This study can help management and work study practitioners to focus on the essence and value of work study and thus enhance management effectiveness. An awareness of the barriers and contributors can facilitate a smooth production flow with minimum interruptions as well as the optimal use of work study. The lack of management support, limited understanding of the role of work study, manipulation of work study and absence of decision-making power might negatively impact work study. On the other hand, competent work study practitioners who meet business needs and add value to the organisation might have a positive effect on organisations. South African organisations should therefore re-imagine the future of work study to remain competitive in a fast-changing world.

*Limitations*

A limitation of this study was that it could not be generalised to other countries, as a single qualitative study was conducted. Another limitation was that

only members of one professional body participated and the views of additional work study practitioners in South Africa were not obtained. Lastly, the paucity of literature on the future of work study limited both the exploration of relevant literature and the possibilities of comparing the findings of this study with those of other studies.

### *Recommendations*

It is recommended that management and work study practitioners be made aware of the barriers and contributors found in this current study to ensure that work study in South Africa not only survives but thrives. Management and employees must understand the role of work study and the manipulation of this field should not be tolerated. Work study practitioners should obtain decision-making power to ensure the implementation of their reports. It is also recommended that management support work study because it will help boost production and productivity. Work study practitioners should ensure that they are competent in time management and team work and have interpersonal skills. They should also be considerate, positive and honest. Ethical behaviour and professionalism are the cornerstones of the work study profession and must be evident at all times. Work study practitioners must meet the needs of the business and add value.

For future research, it is recommended that this research be extended to other countries to investigate the value that work study can add in the global context. A quantitative study can also be conducted to determine the demographic differences in how management, employees and work study practitioners perceive the future of work study in South Africa and globally.

### **Conclusions**

In this study, new knowledge about the barriers and contributors of work study were obtained. The future cannot be predicted but alternative work study futures can be forecast, envisioned and then invented. Work study can assist in giving South African organisations a competitive edge. Organisations should rethink the future of work study to remain competitive in the global sphere.

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